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# Retention Issues of Mature Students: A Comparative Higher Education Analysis of Programs in the United States and Ireland

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## Abstract

Retention of students is an issue that challenges colleges and universities around the world and South Africa is no exception. A comparative look at Ireland and the United States shows that there are many similar tools used to retain mature students, and, at the same time, many different ones are used depending on particular situations. A brief retention literature review dealing with mature students is provided as well as examples of retention strategies used in both countries. While these strategies may not fit for South Africa, they may serve as a point of departure for similar activities there.

## Keywords

attrition; comparative higher education; non-completion; persistence; retention; non-traditional students, adult education

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Mature or non-traditional students in higher education are becoming an increasingly larger market for colleges and universities in the United States (U.S.) and in Ireland. This is not only true in these countries but is being seen elsewhere around the globe. The authors define “mature” students as those outside of the traditional college age cohort of 18-24. This student group brings many of the same needs to the institution as do traditionally aged students; however, they also come with some very different issues. The continued demand for increased skills in the labor force has led to a “silent explosion” with regard to adult learners (Belanger & Tuijnman, 1997). The Irish government is now being forced to look at non-traditional student populations as a critical mass in colleges and universities as well as in potential higher education recruits. There has been a call for widening participation throughout Ireland that encourages lifelong learning at all ages and viewing learning as a continual process (Hazelkorn, 2010; Jakobi & Rusconi, 2008; Osborne, 2003; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). This inclusion of mature students in Irish higher education, unlike in the United States, is a new phenomenon spurred on by increasing needs in the global workforce and desires by the population to gain more education.

Ireland is in a dire economic situation and the government is looking for answers to stem the fiscal emergency. Zemanek (2010) contended that due to the introduction of the Euro and consumer price and wage inflation has put Ireland, along with Portugal, Italy, Spain, and Greece in a debt crises. Known as the Celtic Tiger due to its strong economy, Ireland's gross national product (GNP) rose at an astonishing average of 5.7% per year between 1990 and 1998 (Allen, 2000) and Ireland became one of the wealthiest countries in Europe. By 2009, however, the International Monetary Fund predicted that “Ireland's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would shrink by 13.5% in 2009 and 2010 – the worst performance among all the advanced economies and one of the worst ever recorded in peacetime in the developed world” (O'Toole, 2010, pp. 8-9). As Hazelkorn and Moynihan (2010) so aptly stated:

Today, deteriorating public finances present a massive challenge. Ireland's binary system – lauded as a model of differentiation – has become a straight jacket; there is insufficient critical mass to ensure Ireland's participation in world science and underpin the government's drive for a smart economy. The Bologna Process and the new Irish Qualifications Framework have harmonized qualifications. (p. 195)

Ireland has turned to technology transfer to position the country as a top contributor to science and technology (Blumenstyk, 2010). This effort, coupled with a citizenry that is losing jobs to technology, has created a sense of urgency for increased education.

Retention of students until graduation, which challenges all colleges and universities to some extent, has become a primary issue for the Republic of Ireland, particularly in the last 15-20 years, and has critically been examined in the United States for the last 60 years. To date, there has not been one solution or cure-all to solve problems with retention, and it is doubtful that any foolproof solution or 100% retention will ever be achieved. However, many steps have been taken in both countries to increase retention rates of all students. This article discusses the situation in Ireland and the U.S. While this is true, we believe that the principles described here may be of use in South Africa and other countries around the world, though the political and historical contexts must also be considered.

## RETENTION LITERATURE

There have been many studies on retention from the United States. This subject has become more of a concern on college campuses in the United States and in Ireland, as well as around the world. Traditional retention literature has been focused on undergraduate populations, but this is slowly changing as traditional student, typically thought of as 18-24, are not necessarily coming to college or university directly after high school.

While there has not been a significant amount of research on nontraditional student retention and attrition, Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a model for nontraditional student attrition. They indicate that nontraditional students differ from traditionally aged students due to an environmental press. This includes less interaction with peers and faculty, as well as less involvement in extracurricular activities and campus services, class related activities, and greater contact with entities outside of the college environment. The model shows that the decision to drop out is based on four sets of variables: academic, background and defining, environmental, and social integration. The authors also outlined compensatory effects between social and academic interaction and academic outcome, GPA, and psychological outcomes. This model allows for the study of nontraditional students and their integration into college. Bean and Metzner posit that the difference between traditional and nontraditional students with respect to attrition is that nontraditional students are affected by their external environments as opposed to traditional students, who are more affected by social integration.

Tinto (1988) presented stages of institutional departure. Students transitioning to higher education must begin the first phase, separation, by disassociating from past communities (e.g., high school, hometown). This period of transition is one of excitement, fun, stress, and disorientation. This overwhelming amount of differing emotions is hard on students making such a significant transition, especially traditional students (age 18-22). For mature students, this is also a bewildering time. Tinto (1988) argues that mature or non-traditional students, and those staying at home while attending college, do not necessarily make the same disaffiliations as traditionally-aged students who go away to college. These individuals also do not take full advantage of the new communities to which they belong because the level to which they integrate into college and university is different.

The second stage is the transition to college. In this stage, students become familiar with the "norms and patterns of behavior appropriate to integration in the new communities of college" (Tinto, 1998, p. 444). However at this point, students face the difficulties of adjusting to their new environments which has significant implications on the students' willingness to remain in college. During this time, their sense of bewilderment and frustration can become insurmountable, or they are not fully committed to completing their education.

The final stage, incorporation in college, is the stage during which individuals become engaged in the university/college community and the various sub-communities, and should begin to adhere to the norms, rituals, and traditions of each. Students are largely left on their own to find their way and learn the norms of each society and community. If they cannot find ways to incorporate the chance of leaving the college/university increases (Tinto, 1998). Tinto's 1975 theory evolved further in 1993 when he identified academic difficulties, inability of students to resolve educational goals, and the failure to become or remain incorporated into the groups and communities of the institution as issues of concern (Tinto, 1993a).

Richardson (1994) and Richardson and King (1998) argued that adult learners also have challenges in addition to the ones noted by Tinto. These include the need to relearn how to study effectively and dealing with pejorative stereotypes such as age-related changes to intellectual capacity. Yorke (1999) found that mature students who left university prematurely in the United Kingdom had several impacting factors. They were more likely to have family responsibilities and/or financial problems that influenced their withdrawal. McAleavy, Collins, and Adamson (2004) identified three barriers that affect retention of adult students: situational (family structure, finances, culture), institutional (cost of education, availability of programs, entrance requirements), and dispositional (attitudes and values of a person towards learning).

Taylor and House (2010) examined student motivations, identity, and different concerns of adult students in different stages of higher education. They found that students who were classified as non-traditional related to being in that category. For example, lower socioeconomic students indicated financial concerns and mature students indicated concerns with relearning how to learn.

## Comparison of retention issues in the United States and Ireland

Retention issues affect institutions in the U.S. and Ireland. There are myriad reasons why students leave tertiary (postsecondary) education in both countries; some are similar across the board, some are applicable to only a particular country. The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development's (OECD) data on participation, degree completion, and survival rates (e.g. number of graduates divided by number of new students) of the U.S. and Ireland are listed in Table 1. In 2003, the U.S. had a higher participation rate and lower completion, and first time graduation rate. Ireland had a higher survival rate and completion rate (van Stolk, Tiessen, Clift & Levitt, 2007).

Country	College participation (young adults 18-24 enrolled in HE in %2003)	Completion rate (number of degrees awarded per 100 students enrolled 2003)	First-time graduation Type A courses 2004 (%)	Survival rate of all Type A HE courses 2000 (%)	Survival rates Type A HE courses 2004 (%)
Ireland	35	21	37.4	85	83
United States	35	17	33.6	66	54

**Table 1:** OECD Data on Participation, Degree Completion and Survival Rates Compared Between Ireland and the United States

*Note:* OECD 2003 taken from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and OECD 2006a, Education at a Glance, as cited in van Stolk et al., 2007). "The OECD defines completion rates as the number of degrees awarded per 100 students enrolled in a given year. Graduation rate refers to the ratio of tertiary graduates to the population at the typical age of graduation, multiplied by 100. Survival rate indicates the number of graduates divided by the number of new entrants in the typical year of entrance (tracking of a cohort). 'Type A' HE refers typically to theory-based university education." (van Stolk, et al., 2007, p. xii). Adapted from van Stolk et al., 2007.

Van Stolk, et al.'s (2007) conclusions with regard to Ireland and the U.S. are outlined in Table 2. Their findings indicated that, at the U.S. Federal and Irish State governmental levels, Ireland is doing more towards retention of students, even at the mature and non-traditional levels. The United States is targeting students in student success areas, but makes less concerted efforts towards mature students; U.S. institutions tend to examine students as one group. Both countries do more on the individual institutional level than at the national or macro level, as discussed later in this article.

### The United States

In the United States, the bachelor's degree is based on a four-year model; although it often takes students up to six years to complete their degrees, and retention reporting is based on the six-year model. There are over 7,000 colleges, universities, and vocational schools that are currently educating over 17 million students (U.S. Colleges and Universities, 2010). The United States has seen a large rise in the number of students in higher education in the last decade. In 1998, 13,284,002 students were enrolled in colleges and universities across the country. In 2007, that

number rose to 17,758,870.

Category	Ireland	United States
Macro-level initiatives	Monitoring of retention, access and participation rates against national targets for institutions and sub-groups	
	Funding for specific equity-group related projects and the institutional level	Funding for specific micro-projects in TRIO Student Support Services
	Scholarships for students from disadvantaged groups	
	Research on retention and attrition rates	
Micro-level initiatives	Improved information for incoming students	
	Specific university monitoring into causes of non-completion (surveys)	
		Peer Mentoring
	Specific transition courses/skills training	Tailoring courses to cultural contexts and needs of students
	Lowering of entry requirements for disadvantaged groups	
	Financial support to disadvantaged students	
	Raising staff awareness and providing guidance on retention issues	
		Creating smaller learning communities
	Creating living/learning environments for commuters	

**Table 2:** OECD Data on Participation, Degree Completion and Survival Rates Compared Between Ireland and the United States

Note: Adapted from van Stolk, et al. (2007).

Mature students have also increased significantly. Students aged 25-29 have increased from 1998 (1,851,250) to 2007 (2,412,525), the 30-34 age range has grown from 1998 (1,182,218) to 2007 (1,408,249), the 35-39 age range increased slightly from 802,495 to 850,348, and the 40 year and above range went from 1,379,439 to 1,900,535 (OECD, 2010).

**Retention Issues.** The United States has long struggled with retention issues. In fact, this problem was documented in the U.S. as early as 1880 (Tinto, 1982). 51% of students take six years to complete a four-year bachelor's degree. While the more elite institutions, such as Ivy League schools and top-tiered state universities, have retention rates in the 80-90th percentiles, most institutions average 30% (Tinto, 2002). Research on retention has examined individual factors (age, personality, ability, finances), institutional factors (selectivity, size of institution), and interaction factors (student-student, student-faculty, student-staff) (Astin, 1971, 1975; Healy, Carpenter, & Lynch, 1999; Suczek & Alfert, 1966; Summerskill, 1962).

As in other countries, retention is not well measured in the U.S., and is measured differently from institution to institution, thus making reporting mechanisms difficult. Efforts have been made to create a common reporting structure across institutions:

In 1990, the US Congress amended the 1965 Higher Education Act to require all institutions participating in Title IV student financial assistance programmes to report the percentage of students completing a degree within 150 percent of the normal completion time (i.e. six-year graduation rates for four-year programmes ... These reports could be used to create one measure of retention, but this would count as "successful" only those students who completed their degree at first institution of enrolment – students who transferred institutions and completed degrees would be counted as drop-outs (van Stolk, et al., 2007, p. 54).

Retention rates are measured and reported very differently with different institutions. With magazines like U.S. News & World Report that measure retention as part of their rankings, it is becoming increasingly more important for colleges and universities to report better retention rates overall. Colleges and universities in both the United States and Ireland are making attempts to increase their retention. Putting more emphasis on student academic success and social integration is the best way to create a holistic experience on campus for students so that they want to keep attending classes and graduate on time (Astin, 1971, 1975; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993b).

Table 3 illustrates how educational outcomes differ across different student characteristic groups as outlined by the retention literature. Mature students, economically disadvantaged students, and students whose parents are not college-educated, are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree. This validates the research on non-completion, persistence, and retention detailed earlier in this article.

(%)	Highest Degree Achieved			Still Enrolled (no degree)		Not Enrolled
	Bachelor's	Associate's	Certificate	At 4-year institution	At less than 4-year institution	
Age when first enrolled						
18 and under	44.1	9.7	5.4	10.5	4.5	25.8
19 years	19.6	15.6	11.4	10.8	7.1	35.5
20-23 years	6.9	9.6	20.4	8.6	9	45.4
24-29 years	4.1	6.6	32.2	2.5	8.3	46.4
30 or older	2.4	10	25.9	4.4	3.5	53.8

**Table 3:** Differences in Educational Outcomes across Different Student Subgroups - Students

Entering a 4-year Institution in 1995/6, Intending to Achieve a Bachelor's Degree

Note: Adapted from van Stolk, et al. (2007).

**Mature Students.** The history of adult learners dates back to the birth of the nation, however this population is just becoming a hot research topic for higher education. The United States views mature students in a much broader category than in Ireland: nontraditional students. One problematic factor is that there is no common definition of the term. Voorhees and Lingenfelter (2003) simply define adult learners as students over 25 years of age. The U.S. Department of Education defines nontraditional students as someone who has delayed enrollment, attends part time, works full time while enrolled, is considered financially independent, has dependents or is a single parent, and who may or may not have a high school diploma or GED (NPSAS, 2000).

Institutions in the United States continue to see undergraduate, traditional age students as their “bread and butter”, and continue to place high emphasis on recruitment and retention of that population, regardless of the fact that the nontraditional student population is growing faster than any other student population. However, more support services for nontraditional students continue to emerge, including adult degree programs, as well as evening and weekend course offerings (Puryear & McDaniels, 1990). Many support services that are offered in colleges and universities in the US, including tutoring, advising, mentoring, and help with academic skills, cater to all student populations.

Voorhees and Lingenfelter (2003) state that by the end of the decade, “more than half of American adults will take advantage of formal learning opportunities – courses and programs – made available by an expanding number of schools, colleges, training organizations, and other providers” (p. 4). They further indicate that in the U.S., currently 56% of the workforce needs education beyond the secondary level.

Distance learning is becoming a multi-billion dollar industry in the U.S. and it is particularly attractive to older students who may be place-bound or not able to take classes during normal hours. For-profit universities, like the University of Phoenix, are capitalizing on their ability to offer courses and programs that are attractive to working adults. For-profit institutions are the fastest growing sector in higher education (Kinser 2005; Roosevelt, 2006; Sperling & Tucker, 1997). Although for-profits have been around for a few hundred years in America, it was not until after World War II that the nation saw an increased need for skilled workers who were trained in trade and technical fields, which spurred the formation of private career schools. These schools were able to cater to industry and workforce demands that were desperately looking for specific skills. These were further made attractive to students because of fiscal incentives provided by the United States government (Lee & Merisotis, 1990). Today, for-profits still focus upon the same ideals on which they were founded. They provide education to an adult-centered population that is looking to find ways to become educated in the quickest and most efficient way possible. This population is one that is underserved by traditional not-for-profit brick-and-mortar institutions that primarily focus on students who are between 18 and 24 years of age. Students attending for-profit colleges and universities average between 35 and 41 years of age (Ruch, 2001). For-profit institutions are adult-centered but also serve minority students, as well as first generation college students, at lower costs. Customer service is of high value at these institutions, and student affairs at these institutions has been re-conceptualized to meet customer service needs. Student services are focused on career development and coordinating the academic environment (Kinser, 2006). Good student affairs divisions and customer service also lead to better retention of students. These are also significant factors in the success of for-profit institutions. The retention rate at for-profit institutions is approximately 60%, which is higher than the average of 40% of other colleges and universities (Lee & Merisotis, 1990).

The U.S. Department of Education has not put a focus on retention and widening participation in higher education except for its provision for student financial aid, however, the DOE does provide some assistance through the TRIO Student Support Services programs. These programs are “designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds” (TRIO Home Page, 2010, n.p.). The eight TRIO programs are available to students



with low income, first-generation college students and individuals with disabilities. Institutions must apply for TRIO grants that help fund training for university staff and support for TRIO-qualified students (TRIO Home Page, 2010).

The Association for Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education (ANTSHE) is “an international partnership of students, academic professionals, institutions, and organizations whose mission is to encourage and coordinate support, education, and advocacy for the adult learner” (Association of Nontraditional Students in Higher Education, n.d. n.p.). Nontraditional students who are seeking peers, support, and advice can go to this resource to find answers to their questions and a friendly voice.

## Ireland

In Ireland, there are seven publicly funded universities, fourteen institutes of technology, eight colleges of education, and some private independent colleges. Bachelor degrees are available after three or four years of instruction. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is responsible for funding each of Ireland's higher education institutions. Since 1995, full-time undergraduate students who are from Ireland and the European Union have not had to pay tuition, but the Irish government cannot continue to sustain this level of subsidy. According to Colleen Doyle, Student Adviser for the College of Engineering, Mathematical, and Physical Sciences at University College Dublin, “While the Irish education system is provided by a combination of State and private institutions, it is substantially State-funded and State-regulated. Primary and secondary education are largely free to Irish students and third level education is heavily subsidized” (Colleen Doyle, personal communication, February 17, 2010).

Like the U.S., Ireland has seen a rise in students in higher education. In 1998, 142,744 students were enrolled in colleges and universities across the country. In 2007, that number rose to 190,349. Mature students have also increased significantly. Students aged 25-29 have almost doubled from 1998 (11,549) to 2007 (24,822), the 30-34 age range has tripled from 1998 (11,377) to 2007 (36,283). Data for students aged 35 and older were inconsistent (OECD, 2010).

Ireland is also examining the idea of creating a Tertiary Education Authority that will increase autonomy of institutions while making them more accountable to the public and to keep their focus on strategic issues. Ireland has continued to increase its number of students enrolled in tertiary education, but like the U.S., the focus has been on traditionally aged students. Current forecasts for increases in mature student enrollment suggest that these new students will come from the middle and upper classes due to demand from the markets (Colleen Doyle, personal communication, February 17, 2010), but accessibility and affordability of education should be made more broadly available to students from all classes, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Retention Issues.** Ireland's retention rate is higher than the average for the United States. This is strongly correlated to the free tuition for most of its students. However, because of the global economic crisis and the state of Ireland's economy, universities in Ireland are now looking to retention methods employed by the U.S., and are molding them to the unique needs of their universities. Influences include changing from a socialistic, free education to charging subsidized (or non-subsidized) tuition and student fees, family issues, students not understanding which field of study they want to follow, or students being mis-advised to study the wrong field, and other factors yet to be determined.

In 1994, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) examined progression data of six of the seven Irish universities: Dublin City University (DCU), St. Patrick's College Maynooth (SPC), Trinity College Dublin (TCD), University College Cork (UCC), University College Dublin (UCD), and the University of Limerick (UL). This is illustrated in Table 4. The data showed that there

were high rates of non-completion across the board and “all institutions had courses 20% or more students did not complete” (Morgan, Flanagan & Kellaghan, 2001, p. 14). The report questioned whether non-completion had to do with field of study. The findings showed that retention was low in medicine, law, and dentistry and higher in the sciences and arts. The HEA also criticized the universities for not having common definitions and data gathering procedures (Morgan, et al. 2001).

University	Change in rates between 1985/6 cohort and 1992/3 cohort								
	Graduating on Time			Graduating Late			Not Completing Course		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
UCD	6.4	11.0	<b>8.8</b>	-2.4	-4.3	<b>-3.3</b>	-4.2	-6.7	<b>-5.4</b>
SPC	-8.0	2.8	<b>-1.2</b>	10.8	2.0	<b>5.4</b>	-2.8	-4.8	<b>-4.2</b>
UCC	3.4	6.3	<b>4.9</b>	-0.7	-1.0	<b>-0.8</b>	-2.7	-5.3	<b>-4.2</b>
UL	-2.8	5.1	<b>1.0</b>	3.2	.2	<b>1.9</b>	-0.4	-5.2	<b>-2.9</b>
TCD	-2.1	1.5	<b>-0.1</b>	-0.9	0.1	<b>-0.3</b>	3.0	-1.6	<b>0.5</b>
DCU	-3.4	-8.4	<b>-5.5</b>	-1.9	6.6	<b>2.1</b>	5.4	1.7	<b>3.4</b>

**Table 3:** Differences in Educational Outcomes across Different Student Subgroups- Students Entering a 4-year institution in 1995/6, Intending to Achieve a Bachelor's Degree

*Note.* Adapted from Morgan, Flanagan & Kellaghan (2001). “20% or more students did not complete” (Morgan, Flanagan & Kellaghan, 2001, p. 14). The report questioned whether non-completion had to do with field of study. The findings showed that retention was low in medicine, law, and dentistry and higher in the sciences and arts. The HEA also criticized the universities for not having common definitions and data gathering procedures (Morgan et al., 2001).

In 1998, the Commission on Points System explored the question of whether there was any relation between performance in the Leaving Certificate Examination and graduation. The overall graduation rate of 74% was high; however, 21% of students did not complete their course of study and the five percent remaining had either not yet graduated and/or failed in their final year (Commission on Points System, 1998).

In 2004, Ireland's Inter-Universities Retention Network, a subset of Irish Universities Association (CHIU) released a report to the OECD with 5 recommendations:

- Commit to the continuous initiation, maintenance and monitoring of effective interventions designed to enhance student experience and performance at third level.
- Broaden the concept of retention to include all issues that have an effect on students' ability to meet their academic challenges more successfully or in pursuit of their educational mission, continue to respect the freedom of the individual to choose how he/she functions within a system of academic demand and personal support.
- Recognise that non-completion rates cannot and should not be completely eliminated but

rather monitored and understood with a view to providing support to students who can benefit from such support and with a general focus on enhancing student performance.

- Continue to collaborate to provide a collective focus on effective student supports.
- Develop and facilitate more fine-grained approaches to student support and research to help address the related issues of student underperformance, student persistence, retention, and academic success. (Moore, 2004, p.3)

These recommendations clearly show that Ireland is committed to the retention of all students enrolled in Irish universities. The call for enhancement and support of students is a clear message to Ireland's universities that retention is a key factor, and that they will be held accountable if they do not rise to the occasion. Interestingly, Doyle stated, "in terms of retention, very few students cite financial hardship as reason for withdrawing" (Colleen Doyle, personal communication, February 17, 2010). The main costs incurred by students are university or college fees, and cost of living expenses.

Costello (2003) states "[t]he retention of students and the enhancement of their educational experience must serve as one of the core principles of any institution charged with fulfilling a national and international role in providing full-time and part-time programmes in higher education" (p.1). Dublin Institute of Technology's Strategic Plan (2001-2015) calls for providing retention support for students at risk of dropout. In 2001, a Student Retention Office was formed to research issues on retention, inform practices, create retention programs, and initiatives and to "improve retention figures in DIT by 3 points in 2 years, 6 points in 3 years and 15 points in 5 years" (Costello, 2003, p.3). Retention efforts need to center on affordability of education, particularly at the adult student level.

**Mature Students.** Mature students are defined, in Ireland, as being age 23 and over. Doyle indicated that most attend on a part-time or temporary basis because of short term or pilot grants. All Irish institutions have made it a focus to bring in more adult students into their institutions (Colleen Doyle, personal communication, February 17, 2010). In Ireland, as of 2009, there has been a visible increase in demand for adult education. "The number of mature new entrants increased by 8.8% between 2007/2008 and 2008/2009" (HEA, 2010, p. 12) and by 19.5% in the institutes of technology. AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation in Ireland, reports that the number of inquiries for adult education has doubled from 2007 to 2009 (6,038), the number of applications processed through the Central Applications Office (CAO) increased 19.5 percent from 2008-2009, and the Back to Education Allowance application rate increased from 11,646 in 2008 to 18,700 in 2009 (AONTAS, 2010). The HEA looked at full-time students at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels for 2008-2009 and found that out of the 91,226 students who were enrolled in Ireland's seven universities, 16,643 students were 25 years of age and older (HEA 2008/2009 Annual Statistics, 2009). In summary, the demand for higher education in the adult and mature student population is rising and will continue to rise for the foreseeable future as governmental entities struggle to keep deficits in check. The majority of mature students enter liberal arts programs. In architecture, the demand outstrips the supply and the CAO has expressly reserved spaces for mature students; the reverse is true for engineering fields – there are not enough students for the supply needed in Ireland (Colleen Doyle, personal communication, February 17, 2010).

Widening participation of adult learners and retaining them once they enroll in higher education often depends on funding. "Low educational attainment appears to be intimately entwined with household-level deprivation and the inter-generational transmission of inequality" (Gallagher, Shuttleworth & Gray, 1997, p. 97). Higher and continued education is moving towards a free market ideal.

There has been concern that the financial support available to adults, particularly those studying part-time, has not offered a sufficient incentive to study especially when compared with support for full-time students. Some part-time students

receive generous support from their employers. Others do not. Some are not working. Hence needs vary. (Clark, 2006, p. 53)

Mature students are a central focus with regard to retention in Ireland. Ireland's Network of Irish Mature Student Officers (NIMSO) was established in 2003 to provide support for older students who are thinking of entering or returning to higher education. This Network's goals are to increase participation of adult students, to act as informants on research and best practice, and to improve access to mature students (Mature Student, 2009). Each institution in Ireland has a designated person who is responsible for supporting mature students at their college or university. The national push is to aim for 16% of the population to be comprised of mature students (Colleen Doyle, personal communication, February 17, 2010). Trinity University's Director of Student Counselling indicated that instead of using the points system for mature students, they interviewed them individually for admission (Deirdre Flynn, personal communication, March 8, 2010).

Morgan et al. (2001) studied the retention efforts of Ireland's universities. University College Dublin has a dedicated Mature Student Officer located in the Admissions Office. The National University of Ireland, Maynooth is specifically observing pressures experienced by students. These include those affecting mature students, who sometimes "fail to devote adequate time to study because of (...) time consuming responsibilities" (p. 93) and students in mathematics courses. They further examine student background, with a particular focus on mature and first generation university students. Trinity College Dublin has a Mature Students Officer who "provides a specific support to the mature student group" (p. 95) and helps this population integrate to college and provides support mechanisms as they advance. Dublin City University's Student Services Unit completed studies on student retention and the factors that lead to non-completion. This has led to increased help with mentoring, counseling, orientation, tutoring, and return to study workshops for the mature student population (Morgan, et al, 2001). Dublin Institute of Technology has a web page dedicated to mature students, has Facebook and Twitter groups that students can join, as well as video from current students to help older students learn more about their programs (DIT, n.d.). Moreover, they have created retention and student success efforts including orientation, skills assessments, teaching and learning initiatives, and collaboration with other universities (Costello, 2003).

To increase access for adults, efforts are needed to increase the number of part-time students. One possible approach is to eliminate the distinction between part-time and full-time students in determining if fees must be paid or maintenance support will be granted. Arrangements could be made to include part-time student, on a pro rata basis to full-time, in the calculation of recurrent grants. Steps are also needed to generate greater demand for lifelong learning.

(Colleen Doyle, personal communication, February 17, 2010)

DITs retention rate depends on its programs, according to Dr. Frank McMahon, Director of Academic Affairs. Their four-year programs have 80% and higher retention rates, while their two- to three-year programs' rates are in the mid 70%. This is because these students are more mobile and their ultimate goal is to graduate from a four-year program (Frank McMahon, personal communication, March 8, 2010).

Trinity College Dublin (TCD) has also been examining retention of mature students as a particular concern. In 2000/2001 researchers found that 42 students who withdrew were mature students (Baird, 2002). The School of Clinical Speech and Language Studies' Learning Support Service reports that mature students, many of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds, used their services and has a Mature Students Office specifically designed to help the transition and continuance needs of this population (O'Connor, Richards, & Lumsden, n.d.). TCD has created a number of interventions including more contact and feedback from lecturers, peer tutoring

programs, and exit interviews (Flynn & Richards, n.d.). TCD, which has a high retention rate (88%), indicated that their strategic plan calls for a 90% retention rate, according to their Director of Student Counselling (Deirdre Flynn, personal communication, March 18, 2010).

UCD admits over 90% of students through the Leaving Certificate, but allows students admission if they are non-traditional: disabled, mature, or from a disadvantaged area (Mathews & Mulkeen, 2002). The university also provides a 49-page handbook for mature students who are thinking about entering UCD, a Mature Student Society to which students can come for camaraderie and support, Open Days for mature students, and provides academic support such as study skills, reading and note taking, and writing techniques (UCD Mature Handbook A5 06, 2007). Blaney and Mulkeen (2008) researched student retention at UCD from 1999-2001 and found that 20.3% left before the end of the first year and 15.6% repeated the first year.

A comparative investigation of mature students at three universities (Kenny, Fleming, Loxley & Finnegan, 2010), National University of Ireland Maynooth, Trinity College Dublin, and Dublin Institute of Technology examined first-degree destinations. The findings showed that state support was not sufficient to fully support mature students through their course of study; many had to obtain supplemental employment. Family support, student motivation, and the perceived value of a degree were also strong factors in success of mature students at these universities. Recommendations from this report include strengthening state support for mature and socioeconomically disadvantaged students in Ireland and increasing access to higher education, as well as creating more flexible entry into HE.

## CONCLUSION

Retention will never reach 100% at universities and colleges around the world. There are too many different needs of students of all populations that cannot be predicted or for which institutions cannot fiscally prepare. For instance, changes in the world economy, the change of focus within higher education to prepare the workforce for specific employment based on the economy of that country, and changes in governmental and political support for education may all have an impact. With mature students, there are added pressures of family, work, money, and time. Retention efforts in both Ireland and the United States should focus upon the best ways to retain the students who can be retained, and react accordingly. Administrators in charge of these efforts should seek ways to be proactive with student success, sense of belonging to the institution, and completion of degree plans.

While the involvement of mature students is relatively new in Ireland and the involvement of mature disadvantaged is even more recent, it is important to not only identify the progress already made, but to understand that the starting point for mature student involvement was from such a low base that any involvement becomes significant. (Kenny et al., 2010, p. 119)

Ireland is focusing recruitment and retention on all students, but has specific plans for mature students. Its new focus on technology transfer will help propel Ireland into new research fields, and could have a strong effect on mature students, but it is still too early to tell. The United States still focuses on traditionally-aged students, but students who attend American institutions all have equal access to student support services. Both countries, as shown in this article, are recognizing mature students as a vital part of the student landscape. With increased mobility in today's society, statistical agencies such as the U.S. Department of Education and the Higher Education Statistical Agency should also require common reporting structures from institutions of higher education so that governments can accurately report retention data.

There are some parallels that can be drawn, particularly with regard to the U.S. and South Africa. Both are nations that have had racial segregation on many fronts, including higher

education. The journeys of U.S. students in the 1960s and those of South African students in the 1990s are similar (Olzak & Olivier, 1998), to a lesser extent Ireland is also promoting “minority ethnic inclusion whilst maintaining social diversity” (Phillips, 2009, p. 213). The end of apartheid in the late 1980s and early 1990s brought a restructuring to South African education allowing Black students who were once denied an equal education to be educated along with their White peers (Asmal & James, 2001). However, even in 2011, there are disparities, “two worlds of education” (Books & Ndlalane, 2011, p. 92) between the different higher education institutions in South Africa, similar to educational institutions in the U.S. and Ireland. South African higher education is also growing for mature students, especially at the graduate level (Cooper, 2011). While this study examines implications that are related to Ireland and the United States, and we understand that there is not a directly transferable template used by U.S. and Irish institutions which can be used in Africa due to the different political and historical elements, its implications may help inform South African higher education administrators on retention practices in other countries.

This analysis provides an overview of two countries' retention efforts. While this study can provide somewhat of a baseline for retention of mature students, more studies can examine the efforts being made in other areas of the world regarding this critical and growing population. Future research can also observe trends for the enrollment and retention of mature students returning to college and delve more deeply into what other factors affect their persistence, progression, and graduation.

It is essential that institutions work towards effective student retention programs. These programs must center on student needs before the needs of the institution. Colleges and universities must place a strong commitment and adequate resources for retention programming so that all students are affected, not just some. Colleges and universities should strive to ensure that every student who arrives on a campus should feel valued and welcomed into the community.

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