A research project examining

‘The relationship between social class and mature student participation in a third-level course in AIT.’

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between social class, social supports and mature student participation in a third-level course at Athlone Institute of Technology. The author utilised explorative research, analysed relevant literature and employed a ‘Quantitative’ approach for the purpose of collecting primary data. A Structured questionnaire was used as the research instrument.

The results present a diverse perspective on social background and financial support. Mature student entry into AIT is primarily through mature student interview. Many students, particularly females, receive little support from their partners. Several students reported difficulty with essay writing and memorising. There is a general consensus that entry into third-level education changes the individual’s characteristics and effects relationships with family and friends. The primary research indicates that, the socio-economic group to which the mature student belongs has a significant influence on participation in third-level education.

This research is fundamental in supporting and retaining the expected increase (from 13% to 25%) in the mature student group by 2015, following the implementation of the ‘National Strategy for Higher Education’ and ‘The National Skills Strategy’. 
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the staff of the School of Humanities at the Athlone Institute of Technology for their guidance in the review and direction of this study. To my supervisor Dr. Vincent O’ Connor, I extend my gratitude for his immense support and tuition.

I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of the respondents whose participation enabled this research, gratuity prevails and their helpfulness is hereby acknowledged.

Lastly, I would also like to acknowledge and extend my gratitude to my family and friends, for their patience, help, guidance and support while preparing and writing this research paper.

Abbreviations

AIT                Athlone Institute of Technology
NDP                        National Development Plan
CAO                       Central Applications Office
FETAC                   Further Education and Training Awards Council
PLC                         Post leaving Certificate
TWG                       Technical Working Group
HEA                        Higher Education Authority
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Introduction
1.1 Introduction

This project investigates the relationship between social class, family support and mature student participation in a third-level course at Athlone Institute of Technology. The study utilises national and international research to compare and contrast statistics with those recorded in the survey completed for this project.

The focus of this information relates to the, mature student’s financial and social background. It explores some of the difficulties encountered in accessing and participating in a fulltime course in AIT. The project explores the mature student’s experience of change in their personality and the effects it has on relationships with family and friends. The importance of this research is to highlight the priority that needs to be given by the Higher Education Authority and AIT to facilitate the needs of the increasing number of mature students participating in third-level education in AIT.
1.2 The aim of this paper is to;

Examine the relationship between social class and mature students participation in a third-level course in AIT.

The objectives of this paper are;

1. To examine how socio-cultural factors influence mature student participation in third level education in AIT.

2. To explore the key lifestyle and personality modifications encountered by mature students in AIT.

3. To identify academic difficulties encountered by mature students in AIT.
Literature Review
2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review is an evaluation of current literature available on the impact of socio-economics, educational history and social class in mature student participation in higher education. It also explores the changes to the student’s identity in primary relationships with family, friends and society. The review opens with a definition of social class. The reports used in section 2.2 are all the work of recognised specialists in the field of socio-economics and higher education. The surveys reported in Section 2.3 and 2.4 used a large population in their research, providing an extensive range of valid information. The author noted a number of issues which may explore the implications of social class on adult participation in Higher Education.

2.2 Literature related to objective 1

Social class can be defined as “a set of meanings that structure individual actions and social space, the complex but invisible patterns of relationships between groups and individuals, and shared awareness of acceptance of a common style of life among members of a group”. (Breen and Whelan 1996 p3) In summarising Wright 1989\(^1\) class is explained through three key elements:

1. **Material Interests**: The means of maximising economic welfare, power, status, property, income and education.

2. **The daily lived experience**: Work, family values and expenditure.

3. **Capacity for collective action**: How people are together in a world based on membership in society social movement and activities related to material and social circumstances.

\(^1\) (cited in share et al 2007)
The purpose of this study evolved from evaluating the Walters (1997) report which states that the majority of mature students applying to third-level educational institutions come from middle class backgrounds with significantly fewer working class applicants. The key determinants in such inequalities in access to third-level are financial support and socio-cultural factors Walters (1997). This view is supported by Lynch (1997). The (TWG) Technical Working Group 1995 (cited in NDP 2001) reports that 22% of respondents are drawn from the four lowest socio-economic groups, this is particularly true if students are assessed on their own economic status. Lynch (1997).

Lynch’s (1997) theory states that class difference can only be explained in the context of what happens within other levels of the education system and in terms of socio-economic conditions of different classes in Irish society.

The Mc Sorley (1997) study also supports a connection between educational attainment and social background. While the study relates to secondary schools it emphasises that inequality in education starts in early education. The study reports major differences in academic abilities between students attending a school in Clondalkin, a Dublin suburb with high unemployment rates and social housing and a school in Rathgar a wealthy Dublin suburb. Reading abilities of students from Clondakin were rated 2-3 years behind the considered norm. None of the students in Rathgar were ranked below average. Mc Sorley contributes this to the curriculum being irrelevant to the lives and social environment of working class students. Whereas Clancy’s (2001) substantial survey relates to middle class pupils ability to make use of opportunities they are presented with. 63% of those unemployed in 1998 had not completed secondary education. NPD (2001).

Morris (1997) argues that there commonly exists an assumption that third-level institutions are open to all those with the intellectual capacity to avail and gain entry. Unfortunately the evidence presented by Lynch (1997) and O Connell et al (2006) show this to be incorrect. A National survey of new entrants in to higher education provides evidence that children from higher social classes are over
The HEA (2008) detected a relationship between student participation in third-level education and parental aspirations, particularly in terms of occupation and education levels. It reports that 37% of mothers and 39% of fathers attained third-level qualifications. According to O Connell et al (2006) a similar relationship emerges in relation to employment status of fathers:

- Over 45% were employees
- 5% were self-employed with employees
- 5% self-employee with no employees
- 8% unemployed
- 15% retired
- 10% fathers were deceased


- 65% from family
- 30% from Grant
- 65% from employment
- 12% from loan
- 9% from state scholar
- 4% from Social Welfare
The NDP (2001) reports that 63% of mature entrants in 1993/1994 had attained their Leaving certificate and 45% already had a professional qualification. Mature students found entry can be problematic in regards to accessing information and guidance of a general nature. This reflects the differences in resources and opportunities available to different social groups\(^2\) and maintains their advantage in a competitive system Lynch (1997). The Points Commission recommended that by the year 2015 each institution should allocate a quota of 25% of entry places for mature students NDP (2001).

Mature students tend to have more family commitments than traditional students. Taking timeout to pursue higher education puts a huge strain on family. A mother’s schooling experience is important in structuring the educational environment of the home. Research completed by the NPD (2001) indicates that children of poorly educated mothers do not perform as well at school and leave earlier than children of better educated mothers.

2.3 Literature related to objective 2

Gorard & Smith’s (2006) survey exploring barriers encountered in higher education was selected as it provided a broad range of reliable information which states that support or antagonism received from family and friends impacts on the student’s higher education experience. Bamber and Tett’s (2001) examination of participation in life-long learning, extends this theory to working class students stating that negativity can jeopardise relationships, and damage the students confidence leading to them questioning their entitlement to higher education.

A Bean Ui Chascaide (1997) investigation and survey on becoming a mature student, supports this theory stating that students might become uncomfortable and alienated from their partners, family, friends and social class as they fail to understand the students learning experience. Her survey found that 80% of mature students received strong support from their partners but this did not ensure

\(^2\) Students from wealthier backgrounds can afford to pay professionals for this advice
more, 33.3% felt their partners were not interested in their study, while 34.4% recorded only marginal interest.

Cregan’s (2003) report maintains that male students received more support from partners than females did from their partners. Third-level education had a greater negative impact on the lives of females in regards to relationships. Half of the women who had worked at home previous to study encountered relationship difficulties in contrast to a third of those who had been working. This group also experienced the greatest improvement in relationships. Role re-negotiation posed the greatest problems with relationships becoming less egalitarian. 9.4% of the female student’s relationships broke down. These students came from different social backgrounds.

Children posed another problem for mature students. Bamber and Tett (2001) reported that children felt abandoned by a parent’s decision to engage in third-level education. This often led to behavioural problems in some children. For other children, seeing a parent attend third-level education raised their own hopes and aspirations. Cregan (2003) reports that

- over 50% of respondents with children felt that going to college had a positive effect on their relationship with their children,
- 31% felt that relationships with their siblings had improved,
- 11% felt it had declined
- 26% experienced improvement in relationship with their parents.
- 30% of respondents recorded deterioration in relationships with friends.

Babbage’s (2006) 2nd Annual report at Bournemouth University showed 67% of mature students listed balancing family and course commitments as a high concern.
In evaluating many of the recent studies it could be said that the identity of mature students participating in higher education are being shaped and modified though their learning environment. Bean Ui Chascaide (1997) considers biographical factors as important in terms of goals, anxieties and expectations which adults bring into the learning situation. Their perceptions and ideologies are taken from their cultural environment. These predispositions will influence their integration into the learning environment. Challenges to adult status and adjustment to disempowerment can create feelings of confusion and neglect particularly for adults changing from a parent role of respect and responsibility to the student status of subservience and back to adulthood within a few hours. The student may find that new ideas and increased knowledge may change previous opinions and outlooks challenging their previously established beliefs, this can affect their confidence levels Bean Ui Chaside (1997). A MacKeracher (2004) Canadian investigation into adult learning, claims maintaining identity and integrity while re-establishing their sense of self is imperative.

2.4 Literature related to objective 3

MacKeracher (2004) found that mature students experience several developmental changes in identity during the learning process more notably in regards to achieving academic competence i.e. while mature students may already be very competent in skills relating to life and work activities they may need more assistance in developing academic skills. This theory is similar to Walters (1997) findings on mature student’s overcoming barriers to further education. He claims mature students lack confidence in their abilities such as writing essays, taking examinations, presentations and discussions. Walters relates these fears of failure and inadequacies to previous negative experiences in education.
2.5 Conclusion

The evidence produced by these studies leads the author to suggest there is a significant difference in social class and educational attainment at all levels. Mature students tend to have more family commitments than traditional students and taking timeout to pursue a course puts a huge strain on primary relationships. These changes in primary relationships appear to be the key elements that impact on adult participation in higher education. The author intends to expand the exploration of these theories and link social class and entry into third-level education in Athlone Institution of Technology.
Methodology
3. **Methodology**

3.1 **Introduction**

The methodology section is divided into six parts. The research method and the rationale for using this method. The sample group and procedure used to select this group, the procedure used to complete the study. It discusses ethical considerations and explores the limitations of the study. Finally it addresses the method of analysis.

3.2 **Research methods**

The research carried out by the author is ‘quantitative’. Questionnaires were used to collect the information required for the study. The issues to be explored are those outlined in the research aims and objectives. The rational for this research design was founded on the type of investigation, quantitative or qualitative that was required to explore the research topic. A ‘Quantitative approach’ was preferred based on its characteristics which “investigate the relationship between the phenomena in order to explain, predict and possibly control their occurrence.”\(^3\) Using the acquisition of a larger volume\(^4\) of information collected from the questionnaires to identify relationships between social background and aspects of personality and mature student entry into third-level education. The information gathered using this approach is expected to “express with numbers what is impossible to state in words. You cannot pile up words and deduce an average of them.”\(^5\) The quantitative tool used was a questionnaire. The questions are fixed and the same for each respondent making it more quantifiable.

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\(^3\) Walliman, 2008, p. 302

\(^4\) Larger volume refers to 20 respondents compared to only 3 – 5 respondents that would be used if using interviews or focus groups

\(^5\) Leedy, 1989, p 173
qualitative approach would be less comparable. Responses can be completely anonymously, allowing potentially embarrassing questions to be answered with a truthful response.

3.3 Sample group

A representative sample of 20 respondents was selected from the accessible full time mature student population. The sample composed of students in their 1st and 4th year of study, aged between 23 - 40+ years. Students attended the schools of Humanities, Science and Business. 40% of respondents were male, 60% female. A non-probability sample group was selected due to the necessity to access information from a specific population Denscombe (1998). A purposive sampling method was used to reach the targeted population6. Disadvantages of this method include the predicament of generalising the data collected Denscombe (1998).

3.4 Procedure

A pilot questionnaire was used, “to anticipate any problems with comprehension or any other sources of confusion” (Walliam, 2008 p.282). This involved the distribution of a pilot questionnaire7, which led to some subsequent alterations in the layout and wording of the questionnaire. The participants were contacted by the author through informal ‘gate keepers’8 Seidman (1998).

3.5 Ethical considerations

Sensitivity was considered in the study8 by ensuring, the structure and nature of the questions used did not cause transgression. Informed consent was attained, and provisions regarding invasion of privacy or deception involved in the research

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6 A sample which the author felt was a typical sample of mature students.
7 See Appendix E
8 (Seidman 1998) defined gatekeepers as “A few members who are widely respected and looked to for guidance when, decisions about whether or not to support an effort is made. An informal authority but holds moral suasion”
process were provided. Diener and Crandall (1978). The participants were informed prior to completing the questionnaire of their right to skip any question they deemed to be overly insensitive. They were also informed as to how their details would be utilised. Supervision was part of the research process.

3.6 Limitations

In order to meet the criteria for this research project twenty respondents completed the questionnaire, consequently the results may not be fully representative of all mature students in AIT. A further potential limitation was the use of non-probability sample, which may or may not be a true representation of the population. A selection of unknown respondents completed the questionnaire to prevent familiarity bias.

Steps were taken in the design of the questionnaire to reduce potential bias, through the composition of non-leading questions. The use of a questionnaire limited the range of information which could be provided in each area. Social desirability bias needs to be considered when analysing results.

3.7 Method of analysis

The results of this quantitative research were analysed systematically. Results were utilised to find a correlation between the variables. Results are presented in the form of graphs and charts in the results section of this research project.

3.8 Conclusion

The quantitative method used in this research project involved the use of literature employed in the literature review and a questionnaire completed by male and female, first and fourth year students from the schools of Humanities, Business

9 (Cited in Byrman 2001)
10 mature students were all over the age of 23, this eliminated students under 23 years from the study (Johnson & Christen 2000)
and Science. Results were complied and presented in the form of graphs and tables which were analysed in section 5 of this research project.

Results
4. Results

4.1 Introduction

The author looked for recurring patterns that emerged from the information collected. Themes emerged and are discussed under the research objectives as headings. All respondents were mature students participating in full time education in AIT. Sections 4.1.1 to section 4.2.5 deal with employment status and educational background of the respondent, their family and social environment. Sections 4.3.1 to section 4.3.4 deal with unusual difficulties experienced, in balancing academic commitments with family and work commitments. Section 4.4 is concerned with academic challenges.

4.2 Results under objective one

4.2.1 Employment status

Figure 4.1 shows that over half of the respondents were employees as were over a third of respondent’s fathers and almost half of respondent’s mothers. Figure 4.1.1
and figure 4.1.2 illustrate the individual results from the respondent and respondent's father's employment status.  

**Figure 4.1** Employment status of Respondent and respondents' parents (n = 20)

**Figure 4.1.1** Respondent employment status prior to entry into AIT (n = 20)

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11 Individual graphs were inserted as it was felt that fig. 4.1 was complex and contained a large volume of information figs. 4.1.1 and 4.1.2 allows the reader to access data in a less time consuming way.
4.2.2 Respondent’s employment categories

Over half of the respondents worked in sales and services with 15% employed in a higher salaried position as shown in figure 4.2
4.2.3 Respondents previous educational attainment

As shown in figure 4.3 almost half of the respondents completed their Leaving Certificate, with 40% having completed some form of further education. Only one respondent had no formal education, after completing his first formal state exam. 45% of respondents entered AIT by means of a mature student interview. 60% of respondents indicated that other family members had completed third-level education.

![Figure 4.3](image)

4.2.4 Sources of Income

Figure 4.4 demonstrates that over half of the respondents are reliant on Social Welfare payments for their primary source of income and Higher Education grants for their secondary income. 20% of students worked, while others were reliant on personal savings and family for financial support.

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12 Social welfare generally do not make payments to students but some mature students are entitled to payments for, One parent family, Invalidity pension, Disablement benefit and Back to education allowance.
4.2.5 Social environments where respondents resided

40% of the respondents grew up in social environments where most of the residents completed their Leaving Certificate but did not attend third-level education. 30% of respondents were raised in districts where proceeding to third-level education was customary. 30% grew up in neighbourhoods where the majority of residents did not sit the Leaving Certificate or equivalent.

4.3 Results under objective two

4.3.1 Balancing academic studies with family and work commitments

Figure 4.5 illustrates that over half of the respondents experienced unusual difficulties balancing their academic studies with family commitments and almost half of the respondents have difficulties balancing academic studies with work commitments however the respondents academic studies did not affect their social life.
4.3.2 Levels of support

Table 1 illustrates that respondents receive lots of support from their children and friends, but less support from their parents. One-fifth of respondents experienced a negative reaction from their partner.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of support received</th>
<th>1 = No support</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support from partner</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from children</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from friends</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from non-mature students</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from parents</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3.3 Effects on relationships

Figure 4.6 shows respondent’s entry into AIT generally invokes a positive effect on their relationships with friends and family. The greatest negative effect was encountered in relationships with partners where negativity was rated only 5% behind a positive effect.

4.3.4 Restrictions experienced by respondent

Figure 4.7 illustrates respondents found restrictions in time spent with their partner and friends, participating in recreational activities. Over a third of respondents occasionally had to take time from college to deal with family situations.
4.4 Results under objective 3

Table 2 shows how respondents experience fear of failure and have difficulty writing essays and memorising.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Scenarios</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worry about writing essays</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have Difficulty memorising</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Found study more demanding</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience fear of failure</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realised they were academically</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>better than expected</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.5 Summary of results

The results attained illustrate that over half the respondents were employed and worked in the sales and services industry prior to their entry into AIT. Parental employment details were similar to the respondents. Only one respondent had not completed the Leaving Certificate, a Fetac or Post Leaving Certificate course. Over 60% of respondents had other family members who had completed third level education. 40% of respondents were raised in neighbourhoods where it was customary to complete the Leaving Certificate but not continue on to third-level.

Respondents had difficulty balancing their academic studies with family and work commitments. Respondents received great support from friends and family. A small number of respondents received no support from their partner and parents. Over all respondents considered, that while occasionally they had difficulty allocating their time, their entry into third-level education had a positive effect on their relationships with partners, family and friends.

Respondents experienced some degree of difficulty with their academic studies, but occasionally realised they are academically better than they had expected.
Discussion
5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This section discusses the extent to which the findings of the primary research are consistent with the literature reviewed, and the aims and objectives of the research project. It is structured to reflect the thematic content of the results section and the aim and objectives of the research.

This research project used a quantitative method to collect data. This provided a wider scope which may not have been found using a qualitative method. The purposive sampling method\(^\text{13}\) which was used to reach the targeted population met the criteria of this research project satisfied the project limits implied by AIT.

The author used a number of pilot questionnaires to test the effectiveness of the questionnaire, some minor problems were subsequently toiled and the questionnaire improved. A number of rating questions were used to structure the information returned from respondents, consequently simplifying the analysis of their responses. A large amount of time was taken to structure the questions in a non-leading or biased manner. It was believed that the results were representative of the sample group.

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\(^{13}\) A sample which the author felt was a typical sample of mature students.
5.2 Discussion of findings under objective 1

Results from the questionnaire show that 40% of respondents resided in a social environment where the majority of residents completed the Leaving Certificate, but did not proceed to third-level education. This supports Wright’s (1989) ‘three key elements’ of social class, as discussed in section 2.1 of the literature review.

The Walters (1997) report states that the majority of mature students come from a middle class background, and the NDP (2001) recorded that 22% of mature students originate from lower socio-economic groups. If like Breen & Whelan (1996) one can assume that poorly-paid employment can be equated with low socio-economic grouping, then the information collected in AIT contrasts with the findings of Walters (1997) and the NDP (2001). It suggests that almost 80% of respondents had originated from lower socio-economic groupings as, the majority of mature students worked in lower paid employment in sales and service prior to their entry into AIT. This differential could be related to the time fame and the difference in the country’s economic growth and the recent economic down turn.

O Connell et al (2006) presents a relationship between student participation in third-level education and their father’s employment status. Results attained in AIT illustrated a similar pattern, showing that the majority of respondent’s fathers were employees. Almost half of the respondent’s mothers did not work outside the home. Gorard & Smith (2006) state that mature students mothers were probably educated during a social period where less emphasis was placed on women attending third-level education. The NDP (2001) substantiates the suggestion that a mother’s educational experience reflects the educational environment in the home and consequently the child’s academic achievement.

Lynch’s (1997) findings concerning the key determinants in accessing third-level education lists finance as a key factor. It may be recalled that lynch (1997) reports 65% of mature students were reliant on family support, 4% were reliant on Social Welfare payments and 30% were dependent on Higher Education Authority Grants.
The AIT findings reported that none of the respondents were dependent on family for their primary source of income. 15% report it as their secondary income. 55% of respondents reported that they were reliant on Social Welfare payments. 35% were dependent on Higher Education Authority Grants as a primary income and over 50% as a secondary income.

The difference between the findings in Lynch’s (1997) report and the results found in AIT are possibly due to the availability of the ‘Back to education’ allowance which was introduced in the 1996 budget, the rise in unemployment levels due to the recent economic down turn, and greater emphasis on up-dating skills, re-training and mature student entry to third-level education.

The NDP (2001) reported that in the year 1993/1994, 63% of mature students possessed a Leaving Certificate. The respondents reported that 70% of the respondents had completed the Leaving Certificate. Only 15% of respondents accessed AIT through the CAO points system. This supports the Points Commissions suggestion for a need to allocate a quota of places on each course to mature students. A target allocation of 25% is set for the year 2015. NPD (2001)

5.3 Discussion of findings under objective 2

It could be said that Bean Ui Chasaide’s (1997) hypothesis, regarding partners lack of understanding is validated as 20% of respondents reported that, they received no support from their partner on entry into third-level education. Cregan’s (2003) theory concerning, partnership becoming less egalitarian is upheld, as the respondent’s knowledge, opinions and confidence levels change. Cregan’s (2003) theory is further substantiated when it is considered that, the respondent has less free time to share with their partner, and the partner may have increased levels of responsibility (in relation to child rearing and domestic responsibilities).

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14 Depart of social welfare website (www.welfare.ie)
15 The most up-to-date statistics which could be accessed
Cregan’s (2003) evidence, that male mature students receive more support from their partners is upheld in the AIT study. The survey recorded that the 20% of respondents who reported receiving no support from their partner were female.

50% of the respondents reported that occasionally they felt they had not given enough time to their partner; this maybe one of the reasons why 35% of the respondents reported that entry into AIT had a negative effect on their relationship.

Statistics collected in relation to children shows them to be very supportive and having a positive effect on the relationship between the respondent and their children. When taking into account that 20% of respondents had no children then, three-quarters of respondents reported entry into AIT as having a positive effect on their relationship with their children. This upholds Cregan’s (2003) report, that going to college had a positive effect on their relationship but opposes Bamber and Tett’s (2001) report which claims it can cause behavioural problems in children. The difference could be related to the large number of respondent that participated in the Bamber and Tett (2001) study. 60% of respondents recorded, receiving positive support from siblings. This is double that recorded by Cregan (2003). Only 5% of respondents recorded a negative effect on relationships with friends even though 55% felt their friends resented their restricted availability. This contrasts with Cregan (2003) who recorded a 30% deterioration in relationships with friends. The difference in results reported by the respondents, Bamber and Tett (2001) and Cregan (2003) could be related to the smaller number of respondents that participated in the respondents study.

Babbage (2006) illustrated that 67%, of mature students experienced unusual difficulties balancing their academic studies with family and work commitments, the results collected in AIT reported that 60% of respondents experienced unusual difficulties balancing their academic studies with family commitments. 45% had difficulty balancing work commitments. 25% had difficulty balancing it with their social life, which poses the question whether time management is the problem rather than the strains of academic commitments.
McKeracher’s (2004) study relating to individual developmental changes experienced by the mature student is upheld, as mature students are often aware of changes in their personality, when moving to this new learning environment. These changes can contribute to sensations of disempowerment and reduced levels of confidence. This may cause difficulty integrating into the learning environment.

5.4 Discussion under objective 3

Delaney et al (2008) reports that over 69% of mature students experience difficulties writing essays. The AIT survey illustrates that over 70% of respondents often worry about their ability to write essays and the majority frequently experienced a fear of failure. The older the respondent, the greater the apparent decline in confidence. Walter’s (1997) concept, suggests that this fear is related to previous educational experience. This may explain why the respondent did not enter third-level education following their completion of their secondary education. The majority of respondents also found study more demanding than expected.
Conclusion
6. Conclusion

This research paper explored the implications of social class and social support on mature student participation in a third-level course in AIT. Combining the information sourced in the literature review and the survey completed by the respondents, the author has made the following conclusions.

Mature students in AIT come from the lower social-economic classes. Most, like their neighbours have completed secondary education but did not follow on to third-level education, instead choosing or having to work in lower paid employment. These mature students are now reliant on social welfare and third-level grants to finance their continued education.

Mature students experience difficulty balancing their academic studies with their family and work commitments. There is a general consensus that entry into third-level education changes the individual’s life, by effecting relationships with family and friends. Some female students experienced difficulties and little support from their partners as both adjust to their new circumstances.

Mature student entry into AIT is generally through the mature student interview. First year students experienced fear of failing exams, difficulty writing and worry about writing essays. This worry decreased by fourth year with many claiming that they were academically better than they expected to be.

The final conclusion reached from the findings of this research is the need for explorative research within AIT on a larger scale. This research should focus on financial and family support systems available to mature students, access to courses.
7. **Recommendations**

Higher priority to be given by HEA and AIT to provide assistance and information to mature students in relation to financial support available and entry/access to specific courses in AIT.

The provision of greater publicity regarding mature student information evenings. These Open evenings would cost very little and should provide information relating to the course structure, content and potential employment areas.

The Mature Student Office should host a social function within the college. Invites should be extended to the mature student, their partners and families. The objective would be to encourage support from family and friends through inclusion and to experience the institute’s environment.

Provision of onsite childcare facilities and more consideration in relation to work placement, course timetabling and internet usage may assist mature students to balance their academic and family commitments. This could be done at very little cost.

Regular feedback from assignments and presentation may assist in reducing apprehension associated with these activities.
Appendices
8. Appendices

Appendix A: Bibliography.


Ingis, T. & Murphy, M. (1999), *No Room for Adults: A Study of Mature Students in University College Dublin*, Dublin: Social Science Research Centre & Adult Education Office.


Appendix B: List of graphs and tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Employment status of the respondent and respondent’s parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.1</td>
<td>Employment status of the respondent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.2</td>
<td>Employment status of respondent’s father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Respondents employment categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Respondents highest level of educational attainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Primary and secondary sources of income</td>
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<td>4.5</td>
<td>Respondents experience of unusual difficulties balancing academic studies with their personal lives</td>
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<td>4.6</td>
<td>Effects on relationships following respondent’s entry into AIT</td>
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<td>4.7</td>
<td>Life scenarios</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Levels of support received</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>Respondents experience of academic difficulties.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Information and consent

My name is Carmel Naughton. I am a fourth year Social Care Practice student in the AIT. I am conducting a research project as part of my degree. The research project aims to ‘Explore the Implications of Social Class on Mature Students Completing a Third Level Degree in AIT.’

I would appreciate if you could complete the following questionnaire, which will provide information, to assist in the collection of information concerning social-background and experiences of mature students. The questionnaire should take approximately 10 – 15 minutes.

The information you provide will be completely confidential and this research will not be published. Your name or any information which identifies you will not be documented.

The selection of possible participants for this research project has been based on the criteria of been a full time mature student, participating on a course of study, within AIT.

I would like to thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

___________________                                                            _______________
Carmel Naughton                                                                     Date
Appendix D: Questionnaire

1 Please tick the appropriate boxes below

Age group 23-25 [ ] 26-30 [ ] 31-35 [ ] 36-40 [ ] 40+ [ ]

Male [ ] Female [ ]

2 Prior to your entry into Athlone Institute of Technology which of the following best represents your employment status? Please tick the most appropriate box below

[ ] Employee
[ ] Self employed with employees
[ ] Self employed with no employees
[ ] Unemployed
[ ] Retired

3 Please classify your previous employment according to the categories below by ticking one of the boxes.

[ ] Senior official/manager
[ ] Professional
[ ] Technician
[ ] Clerk
[ ] Service worker/sales worker
[ ] Skilled agriculture/fishery worker
[ ] Craft and related trades worker
[ ] Plant/mechanical operator/assembler
[ ] House work
[ ] Military.
[ ] Unemployed

4 What is the highest level of education you had attained prior to your entry as a mature student in A.I.T.? Please tick the most appropriate box below

[ ] Primary school
[ ] Junior/Intermediate/Group Certificate
[ ] Leaving Certificate
[ ] Fetac/Access
[ ] PLC
[ ] Third Level Certificate
[ ] Third Level Diploma
[ ] Third Level Ordinary Degree
[ ] Third Level Honours Degree
5 How many if any members of your family, i.e. brother, sister and parents, have completed third level education?

_________________________________________________________________

6 Under which of the following methods did you gain access as a mature student to A.I.T.? Please indicate by ticking the most appropriate box

☐ Cao Points system
☐ Foundation course
☐ Fetac Entry
☐ Mature Student Interview
☐ Other (please specify) ___________________________________________

7 Which of the following best represents or represented your Father's employment status? Please tick the most appropriate box below

☐ Employee
☐ Self employed with employees
☐ Self employed with no employees
☐ Unemployed
☐ Retired
☐ Home-Maker
☐ Other (please specify) ___________________________________________

8 Which of the following best represents or represented your Mother's employment status? Please tick the most appropriate box below

☐ Employee
☐ Self employed with employees
☐ Self employed with no employees
☐ Unemployed
☐ Retired
☐ Home maker
☐ Other (please specify) ___________________________________________
9 Please insert 1 for your primary income and 2 for your secondary income in the boxes which of the following best represents your primary and secondary sources of finance?

☐ Family
☐ Grant
☐ Employment
☐ Loan from a Financial Institution
☐ Scholarship
☐ Personal Savings
☐ Social Welfare
☐ Student Assistance Fund.

10 In the neighbourhood where you spent most of your life growing up, which of the following statements is most apt. Please tick only one box below

☐ Most of the neighbourhood continued on to third level education.
☐ Most of the neighbourhood sat the Leaving cert. but did not go on to third level
☐ Most of the neighbourhood did not sit the leaving certificate or equivalent

11 Have you experienced any unusual difficulties in balancing your academic studies with the following? Please circle Yes or No as appropriate

Family Commitments  Yes No
Work Commitments Yes No
Social Life Yes No

12 How would you rate the level of support you received from the following people? 1 = no support 5=very supportive. Please circle the appropriate number in each case

Support from partner 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Support from children 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Support from parents 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Support from non-mature students 1 2 3 4 5
Support from friends 1 2 3 4 5

Comment ___________________________________________________
To what extent if any do you think your entry into A.I.T. has affected your relationship with the following people? Please circle most appropriate answer below

With your partner  Positive affect  Negative affect  No affect  N/A
With your children  Positive affect  Negative affect  No affect  N/A
With your parents  Positive affect  Negative affect  No affect  N/A
With your siblings  Positive affect  Negative affect  No affect  N/A
With your friends  Positive affect  Negative affect  No affect  N/A

To what extent did you encounter the following scenarios? 1= Never  5=Always
Please circle the most appropriate number in each scenario.

Worried about writing essays.  1  2  3  4  5
Have difficulty memorising.  1  2  3  4  5
Found study more demanding than expected.  1  2  3  4  5
Experienced fear of failure.  1  2  3  4  5
Realised you were academically better than you expected.  1  2  3  4  5

How often did you experience the following scenarios in relation to your family life? Please circle the most appropriate answer in each case.

a) You felt you did not give your partner enough of your time.
   Never  Rarely  Occasionally  Often  Frequently  N/A

b) You felt friends resented your restricted availability.
   Never  Rarely  Occasionally  Often  Frequently

c) Study time meant cutting back on leisure activities.
   Never  Rarely  Occasionally  Often  Frequently

d) You needed time off to deal with a family situation.
   Never  Rarely  Occasionally  Often  Frequently
Appendix E: Analysis of Pilot questionnaire

Questions to ask pilot respondents

1. How long did it take to complete the questionnaire?
2. Was the questionnaire easy to follow and were instructions clear?
3. Were any of the questions ambiguous or unclear? If so, which ones and why?
   How can the question be restructured?
4. Were there any objections or hesitations to answering any of the questions?
5. In your opinion, has any major topic been omitted?
6. Any additional information

Questions to be considered by the author

1. Did the questions provide the information required?
2. What changes need to be made?
3. Any additional comments

Bell.2004; p 128
Pilot Questionnaire

1 Please tick the box which represents your age group

- 18-22
- 23-25
- 26-30
- 31-35
- 36-40
- 40+

2 Prior to your entry into Athlone Institute of Technology which of the following best represents your employment status? Please tick the most appropriate box below

- Employee
- Self employed with employees
- Self employed with no employees
- Unemployed
- Retired

3 Please classify your previous employment according to the categories below by ticking one of the boxes below

- Senior official/manager
- Professional
- Technician
- Clerk
- Service worker/ sales worker
- Skilled agriculture/fishery worker
- Craft and related trades worker
- Plant/mechanical operator/assembler
- Elementary occupation/house work
- Military
- Unemployed

4 What is the highest level of education you had attained prior to your entry as a mature student in A.I.T.? Please tick the most appropriate box below

- Primary school
- Junior/Intermediate/Group Certificate
- Leaving Certificate
- Fetec/ Access
- PLC
- Third Level Certificate
- Third Level Diploma
- Third Level Ordinary Degree
- Third Level Honours Degree
- Other (please Specify)
5. How many if any members of your family, i.e. brother, sister and parents, have completed third level education?

_________________________________________________________________

6. Under which of the following methods did you gain access as a mature student to A.I.T.
   Please indicate by ticking the most appropriate box,

   Cao Points system
   Foundation course
   Fetac Entry
   Mature Student Interview
   Other (please specify) ________________________________

7. Which of the following best represents your father's employment status?
   Please tick the most appropriate box below

   Employee
   Self employed with employees
   Self employed with no employees
   Unemployed
   Retired
   Home-Maker
   Other (please specify) ____________________________________

8. Which of the following best represents your mother's employment status?
   Please tick the most appropriate box below

   Employee
   Self employed with employees
   Self employed with no employees
   Unemployed
   Retired
   Home maker
   Other (please specify) ____________________________________
Which of the following best represents your primary and secondary sources of finance while attending A.I.T.? Please insert 1 for your primary income and 2 for your secondary income in the boxes below.

- Family
- Grant
- Employment
- Loan from a Financial Institution
- Scholarship
- Personal Savings
- Social Welfare
- Student Assistance Fund.

10 How would you best describe the area where you lived prior to entering A.I.T. as a mature student? Please tick the most appropriate box below.

- City centre
- City suburb
- Large town
- Small town
- Village
- Towns land
- Other (please specify) ________________________________

11 In the neighbourhood where you spent most of your life growing up, which of the following statements is most apt. Please tick only one box below.

- Most of the neighbourhood continued on to third level education.
- Most of the neighbourhood sat the Leaving cert. but did not go on to third level
- Most of the neighbourhood did not sit the leaving certificate or equivalent
Have you experienced any unusual difficulties in balancing your academic studies with the following please circle yes or no as appropriate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family commitments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Commitments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How would you rate the level of support you received from the following people? 1 = no support 5 = very supportive. Please circle the appropriate number in each case

| Support from partner   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   |
| Support from children  | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   |
| Support from friends   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   |
| Support from non-mature students | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Support from parents   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   |

Comment _________________________________________________________________

To what extent if any do you think your entry into A.I.T. has affected your relationship with the following people? Please circle the most appropriate option

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Positive affect</th>
<th>Negative affect</th>
<th>No affect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With your partner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With your children</td>
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<td>With your parents</td>
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<td>With your siblings</td>
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<tr>
<td>With your friends</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

To what extent did you encounter the following scenarios? 1 = Never 5 = Always Please circle the most appropriate number in each scenario

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worried about writing essays</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Have difficulty memorising</td>
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<tr>
<td>Found study more demanding than expected</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Experienced fear of failure</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realised you were academically better than you expected</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How often did you experience the following scenarios in relation to your family life? Please circle the most appropriate answer in each case.

a) You felt you did not give your partner enough of your time?
   never  rarely  occasionally  often  frequently

b) You felt friends resented your restricted availability?
   never  rarely  occasionally  often  frequently

c) Study time meant cutting back on leisure activities?
   never  rarely  occasionally  often  frequently

d) You needed time off to deal with a family situation
   never  rarely  occasionally  often  frequently
Appendix F: Declaration

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at AIT or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgment is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom I have interacted at AIT or elsewhere, is acknowledged in the report.

I also declare that the intellectual content of this report is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project's design and conception or in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged. I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis.

I certify that all the material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and acknowledged and that no material is included for which a degree has been previously conferred upon me.

I certify that the number of words in this thesis is between 5000 and 5500 words excluding footnotes and appendices.

I understand that any work outside these limits may be penalised.

Signed: ____________________________

Carmel Naughton

Date: 20th November 2009