SECTION THREE

Book Reviews

Irish Higher Education:
A Comparative Perspective

The book 'Irish Higher Education: A Comparative Perspective' will be of interest to a wide range of readers, from higher education (HE) researchers and practitioners looking for specialised knowledge on a variety of topics, to the general public inquiring about the history and current state of higher education in Ireland compared to developments in other countries. The analysis will be especially pertinent to those interested in adult and community education, since the issues of access and equity in HE are explored from many angles. While the author certainly succeeds in his stated objective for the study to be of relevance to policy makers and to stimulate dialogue about possible future options, all readers will appreciate this unique comprehensive analysis of almost every, if not all, aspects of Irish contemporary higher education. Clancy's extensive knowledge and experience in the field at national and international levels allows him to engage the reader with fascinating insider facts on various events that have shaped Irish HE in the recent decades. As a mature doctoral student transferring from USA to Ireland, this is an invaluable resource for me, as I am sure it will be for other scholars.

Organised into thirteen chapters, the first chapter provides an outline for the rest of the book and each consequent chapter covers a distinct area. While each chapter is self-contained there are a number of threads entwined through the different chapter contexts which results in a range of insights about lessons learned and their implications for future public policy. It is particularly interesting to note that one such 'thread' is the attention devoted in various chapters to issues of adult access and learning.

While Chapter 2 examines global trends in enrolments and diversification of HE systems, Chapter 3 explores patterns of participation in a comparative

analysis of 28 OECD countries. The study reveals that in 1999, comparative data placed Irish HE students among the youngest in the Western world. Public policy efforts followed to encourage greater participation by 'mature students' resulting in Ireland fitting the modal pattern among the OECD countries by 2011 with 20% of students being over 30 years of age (p.45).

Chapter 4 on inequalities in access to higher education occupies a centrally important place in the book. Drawing on comparative statistics, while significant inequalities remain, Ireland emerges as one of the countries in which some progress has been made. The author, however, warns that this should not lead to complacency as the study is based on highly aggregated data. Still, according to the 2011 EU study, Ireland appears to be one of the countries with most concrete policy objectives for the participation of adults in HE, focussing on arrangements for admission based on the validation of prior learning (both formal and non-formal), specific preparatory programmes and the extent of part-time study routes (p.81).

Furthermore, in Ireland the provision of part-time courses is now part of a wider trend towards open and distance/flexible learning. The primary motivation in this policy shift stems from an economic and social case aimed at raising levels of education and skills among a wider population.

For many adults, whether they require up-skilling and retraining, wish to change careers, or become unemployed and need to acquire new qualifications (p.299), engaging in further study needs to be combined with work or care responsibilities. MOOCs (massive open online courses) are mentioned as a promising development in HE, and one specific programme aimed at opening a higher education opportunity to people who are unemployed (Springboard) is cited as an important initiative. However, the author makes it clear a more fundamental reorientation of the education system is needed for wider access issues to be addressed.

Chapters 5-6 examine the issues of admission and retention in HE, as well as the curriculum and social conditions, while in Chapter 7 the author moves on to explore the academic profession – a relatively new area of higher education. The first official publication of staffing statistics in Irish HE in 2013 facilitated Ireland's participation in a major comparative survey of the academic profession examined by the author.

The themes of research, labour market, funding, and governance and steering are explored in the subsequent chapters. Chapter 10 on funding discusses the reduction in state support for HE, the increase in student contribution and the negative effect of recession on the availability of part-time employment that students might require while in college. Chapter 12 offers critical analysis of the proposals for the structural reform of the Irish HE system, and a review of the international experience. The author notes the conflicting interests of the stakeholders involved in the restructuring of Irish HE, and warns about the potential 'goal displacement' whereby a disproportionate amount of energy will be invested in the politics of restructuring to the detriment of the academic goals of resulting institutions (p.291). There are also concerns about possible academic and mission drifts.

The concluding Chapter 13 draws the various strands together, highlighting some of the immediate challenges ahead. The structural reform of the Irish HE system and providing for current and future funding demands are among the most pressing challenges facing higher education in Ireland. Others include flexibility of provision, expansion and inclusion, quality issues, steering and policy contestation, and the challenge of sustaining the mission of diversity.

This book is a major contribution to our understanding of higher education in Ireland and its place in the global arena. This comprehensive knowledge and research is made available to readers in a user-friendly form, and one can only wish for a wide dissemination reaching many who will be inspired to continue making a difference in access and quality in higher education.

TANYA ZUBRZYCKI
Research Assistant, Higher Education Research Centre
Dublin City University

Universities and Engagement: International perspectives on higher education and lifelong learning

In recent years, debates around the function and sustainability of higher education institutions (HEIs), in Europe and beyond, have been informed by an increased emphasis on public engagement, the need to explicitly demonstrate added value in terms of wider society and contemporary shifts towards 'open education'. Concomitantly, aging and healthier populations across the continent have created important yet complex opportunities for older people to make fuller and lengthier contributions to economic prosperity and civic society.

In such a context, a growing number of HEIs have prioritised strategic visions and adopted more pro-active stances, particularly around lifelong learning. However, the design, let alone the realisation of such strategies, is no mean feat given: (a) the breadth and diversity of lifelong learning approaches; (b) the specificities of institutional and regional requirements; and (c) political shifts across Europe and beyond towards the accelerated commodification of higher education.

Moreover, contemporary discourses frequently highlight the unique position and potential of HEIs to straddle the dual demands of professional frameworks and critical pedagogy by 'bridging academic knowledge with professional knowledge' (p. 239) and affecting social change, particularly in terms of: political economy; the links between citizenry and industry; the contribution HEIs make to community development and activism; and their role in facilitating the creation of organic intellectuals in disadvantaged communities. While there is a substantial body of literature around lifelong learning and the role of HEIs therein, to date, this canon of work has tended to focus on specific aspects such as CPD or widening participation.

'Universities and Engagement' is a timely and valuable contribution to this canon because it: (a) presents an integrated perspective of ULLL's application across a wide range of international and practice contexts and its social, economic and cultural contribution to civic society; (b) interrogates contemporary conceptualisations of ULLL as a 'form' of community engagement – a call to action for active-learner-citizenry; and (c) vividly demonstrates the critical contribution that HEIs can/should make to their communities and economies through lifelong learning by presenting an accessible theoretical background, drawing on contemporary research and examples from practice, and by ably illuminating a diverse range of conceptual approaches.

The scope of the book is ambitiously wide – the range of contributions mirroring the scale of the ULLL/university engagement through continuing education field – and covers the key topics of research into policy and practice, engaging the business and industry, engaging with communities, engaging with an aging society, active citizenship and regional competitiveness. Helpfully, the book is adroitly structured into four main sections. The first examines ULLL policy, practice and research with a particular focus on how praxis can inform/improve ULLL models and application. Section 2 is concerned with the opening up of HEIs/ULLL to 'new target groups' and business. Section 3 looks at specific models of community engagement and Section 4 explores the role of HEIs in terms of intergenerational learning with a particular focus on addressing the needs of older learners.

These four sections encompass 17 contributory chapters which, combined, provide a diverse range of perspectives in response to the question posed by the editors in the introduction -'What can be understood by University Lifelong Learning today? For this particular reader, the key strengths of this book are the scope of these conceptualisations and the patent expertise of these contributors in the fields of ULLL, adult learning and university engagement through continuing education. 'Universities and Engagement' is essentially a collation of the work of specialists from ULLL research and practice from across Europe and beyond – premised on the acknowledgement that while many HEIs embrace notions of external engagement, others view it as 'an unwelcome necessity'.

I enjoyed and was thoroughly engaged by all the contributory chapters. However, as someone with a long-standing interest in widening access to third level education for non-traditional students, I was particularly impressed with the practice examples (and their relationship to theory) outlined by Carmel Borg and Marvin Formosa in their (Section 3, Chapter 8) account of 'When

university meets community in later life: subverting hegemonic discourse and practices in higher education'. Borg and Formosa: examine, in a Maltese context, the relationship between a HEI and its surrounding community; focus on HEIs' attempts to 'de-marginalise and outreach' older persons; and persuasively advance a radical agenda for lifelong learning based on critical literacy and transformative action.

Similarly, but in an entirely different context, Rob Mark, Val Bissland and Lesley Hart (Section 4, Chapter 15) present a compelling case study from Scotland – 'Unblocking Potential for Later Life Learning: engaging adults in their own learning in a university setting' – which really unpicks the (frequently neglected) policy context for older learning; and, most valuably, outlines a university-tested model for engaging with older learners. Based on findings from neuroscientific research, these authors demonstrate the centrality of involvement and personal connection in terms of older learning; and make clear the patent benefits to older learners and their communities when their commitment to continuing learning is matched by social policy makers and HEIs.

The book closes with some important reflections around the provision and utility of ULLL – by highlighting: (a) that ULLL is more than 'courses' for individuals; the pressing need for 'an enhanced dialogue between educational research practice and policy development to foster ULLL' (p. 232); and a clarion call that lifelong learning should feature more prominently on educational policy agendas.

'Universities and Engagement' is an invaluable contribution to the wide and diverse field of lifelong learning. Moreover, this book will be a very useful source to all those professionally, politically or intellectually concerned with the role of HEIs in promoting lifelong learning, opening up HEIs to adults and older learners, encouraging learning in disadvantaged communities, and countering extant regressive narratives around higher education learning which assume such learning as the preserve of certain age groups, certain communities and certain sections of the social class structure.

DR ERIK COWNIE
Lecturer in Community Development
Ulster University

Adult Learning:
Linking Theory and Practice

Merriam and Bierema's (2013) accessible, yet valuable, text covers a lot of ground in its critical engagement of major adult educational theories, perspectives and their applications to practice. Ultimately, it encourages us to envision theory and practice as a process of reflective symbiosis rather than as separate fields of knowledge.

Merriam's previous, and rich, contributions to adult education are developed further in this collaboration with Bierema, whose experienced scholarship of adult learning comes from a Human Resource Development (HRD) perspective. For me, their partnership seemed, at first, a rather odd alliance. Human Resources have not always been regarded, or experienced, as obvious intellectual, ideological or professional allies for the many adult educators in Ireland existing in various states of contractual and occupational precarity that have been nurtured by educational organisations as the new anti-professional status quo (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015). Yet, it becomes clear that Bierema's positioning as a *critical* HRD scholar and practitioner sets a challenge for ethically and socially-minded education managers and HR professionals to consider conditions and cultures which, as has been pointed out elsewhere (Scales, *et al.*, 2011), locates adult educator well-being as foundational to the development of effective educational organisations (p. 251).

Like all good educators, Merriam and Bierema are clear about their task. Their central objective is to provide an 'overview of the major theories in adult learning in a language that those new to adult education can understand, and at the same time points out applications of these ideas to practice' (p. xii). What's more, the authors are unambiguous from the outset that their primary and secondary readership is students of adult education and professional practice in

North America. This focus is somewhat reflected in the scenarios and the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the implied reader invoked by an engaging, yet, critical writing style. However, the authors are also cognisant of the international context of adult learning and identify a tertiary global readership whose presence, albeit more marginal, is attended to by the critical threads of counter-hegemonic perspectives which are woven deftly throughout the text.

The book is divided into twelve, thoughtfully-constructed chapters. Chapter one starts from a broad contextualisation of adult learning in a social and global context moving in the second chapter to a broad, but very useful, overview of five traditional theoretical perspectives on learning (behaviourism; humanism; cognitivism; social cognitivism; and constructivism). Although there is no explicit introduction (or conclusion) to this text, these first two chapters establish the reader in an informed space to engage with the following ten chapters which offer more in-depth explorations of specific adult education theoretical perspectives and their import on practice.

Chapters three, four and five explore, as the authors see them, the 'major, foundational theories of adult learning: andragogy; self-directed learning; and transformative learning' (p. xiii) which are outlined and critiqued in turn. The five chapters following these explore various dimensions of adult learning: *Experience and Learning; Body and Spirit in Learning; Motivation and Learning; The Brain and Cognitive Functioning* and *Adult Learning in the Digital Age.*

Although adult educators are probably very familiar (some may even be numbed) by the notion of reflective practice, it was refreshing to read a discussion, in the chapter Experience and Learning, which problematises uncritical reflections on experience that can, as they point out, reproduce organisational inequities (p. 116-7). It was also significant to see a chapter devoted to embodied and spiritual ways of knowing (*Body and Spirit in Learning*) in a core text on adult learning. It would be heartening to think that Irish practitioners, adult education managers and policy makers would use this section to reflect on, and develop further, the educational and social justice potential associated with these creative and holistic theoretical and practice positions.

The chapter on digital learning may, as the authors acknowledge, be doomed to be out of date even as they write it, but I doubt this. Its value resides, not so much in identifying specific technological pedagogic resources, but more in the opening of a space to enable us to reflect on the ways in which we need to

position technology in our practice in an educationally-meaningful and equitable way.

Although there is no named conclusion to the text, the final two chapters (*Critical Thinking and Critical Perspectives* and *Culture and Context, Theory and Practice in Adult Learning*) feel like the reflective terminus for this book. These chapters, through considerations of critical and cultural perspectives on adult learning, seem to offer a retrospective frame on all that has come before.

As an educator sympathetic to critical pedagogy, I was glad to have ended my reading journey here. And yet my immediate reaction when I first saw 'Adult Learning' rather than 'Adult Education' in the title of the book was a fear that the text might be part of a retreat to individualism which can, as Murray shrewdly points out, restrain any socially transformative potential in our practice within the safe boundaries of the classroom (Murray, 2013). And, indeed, this fear seemed to be confirmed early on by what appeared like a humanist acknowledgement that the terminological shift from 'adult education' to 'adult learning' was a positive re-focusing on the learner and the classroom (p. 20). However, as I read these last chapters I felt, instead, that they offered both a critique of such narrow perspectives and a sense of radical hope which, although never explicit, hints at a reinvigoration and reclaiming of 'adult education'. In the preface, the authors suggest that this book can be read in any order – that there isn't a need to read the text in a linear fashion. Of course, many, if not most readers, will probably approach this book in that way; dipping in to the thematic spaces that catch their eye. My concern, though, is that in doing so, readers will miss the sense of theoretical and critical denouement which these final chapters offer when read as a whole.

Certainly, Merriam and Bierema's critical ideas permeate back into, and through, each chapter. However, without this final framing I wonder will readers miss the opportunity to critically engage with the conditions and contexts of adult learning more generally in a world that is, yes, more connected than ever but connected in ways inflected with power relationships that critical adult education perspectives have the capacity to reveal?

As well as revealing the fault-lines of power in our practice and our contexts, we must, as adult educators, also look for hope. And hope resides in books like this. Although this is a book that should, rightly, become a core text in adult educator training and development programmes, it also, more broadly, promotes

the importance of assuming a critical position in our work as educators. These positions are as significant in a North America troubled by Trumpian times as they are in Ireland and Europe as adult educators struggle to affirm ethical and socially-just values, theories and practices in the face of ideological, organisational and political realignments about the very purpose of education.

Jerry O'Neill
Associate Academic and Research, Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University

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Student Voices on Inequalities in European Higher Education
Challenges for theory, policy and practise in a time of change

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Student Voices on Inequalities in European Higher Education is the outcome of a European Commission Lifelong Learning project titled *Access and Retention: Experiences of non-traditional Learners in Higher Education* (RANHLE). Currently, the European Commission through its Europe 2020 strategy aims to increase HE completion rates of 30-34 year olds to 40% by 2020. Attainment of this objective is considered a prerequisite for the fulfilment of numerous other European 2020 objectives; particularly those relating to youth employment, educational attainment, long term employment, health, poverty and social exclusion.

What makes this book so pertinent is that it narrates, maps and explores the experiences of non-traditional students thereby delivering a 'root and branch' analysis of their journey. Concurrent with raising their voice, the book securely locates their experiences within the intellectual traditions of providers and the broader historical, political and social factors in which they are established. The central argument within the book is that policies and practises will have a better chance of working if we listen to non-traditional students as well as paying attention to the expectations and aspirations of those who work in the sector and the wider expectations of society. Of pertinence and note is the book's continued focus on why non-traditional students persist with their studies despite the financial, personal, cultural and institutional barriers they encounter (p.1).

What RANHLE have produced is a systematic exploration of their research questions on a European wide scale via a biographical narrative approach. The clarity of design and layout, and in particular the division of chapters in three connecting parts, is impressive from the start. Part 1 (Chapter 1) details and operationalises a theoretical framework which highlights the challenges for international research groups in developing shared analytical approaches. The

reader receives an insight into the thought provoking and rich debates that must have underpinned these developments with decisions clarified and expertly explained. Chapter 2 outlines the rationale for the adoption of a biographical narrative approach. In particular, the authors explain their desire to illuminate people's lives, to unearth the complexity of connections and tensions inherent in the interplay of self and institution. The methodological approach was welcomed by this reader as it ensured that in the following chapters the critical issues were neither shadow boxed around nor viewed from ringside. Instead, the biographical narrative approach allows the reader a first person account of a student body traditionally seen as outsiders.

Part 2 (inclusive of Chapters 3 – 11) is a European wide Tour de Force of national contexts across a wide a variety of key thematic subjects in a broad range of HE providers ranging from the formal to the informal. The struggle for agency and meaning and the interaction of learner and learning institution remains a constant throughout these chapters. The numerous methodological perspectives ensure that the reader will be challenged continuously though ultimately resulting in being inspired and excited rather than fatigued or confused. The biological narrative approach maintains a realistic richness that illustrates how findings manifest 'on the ground' across national contexts. As a practitioner working with non-traditional students it is heartening to so clearly hear the voice of the learner throughout these chapters. What is evident from the fieldwork and contexts in these chapters is the primacy of the person and the short sightedness of analysing these trajectories simply in numerical terms. Throughout these chapters the authors explore how the learning journey for non-traditional students relates to their sense of identity, family life, work life and social background: thereby effectively theorising and reframing their findings within the context of recognising the complexity of individual identity.

The third part of the book has two chapters, the first (Chapter 12) discusses conclusions drawn from the research through a transnational dialogue and the second (Chapter 13) looks at the implications for policy and practice. Chapter 12 consists of thematic disucssions (p.153) that are reflective, considered and thought provoking. Analysing social class, inequality, identity, student agency, transition and intersectionality within the transformative landscape of HE is both innovative and engaging. The multiple tensions, transformations and hierarchies explored within national contexts and institutions also raise numerous questions for further examination. In Chapter 13 the authors discuss what needs to be done to change policy and practise at the macro, meso and micro

levels. This chapter really gets to grips with the maelstrom of policies and institutional approaches across the European HE landscape whilst concurrently centralising the experience of the learner. The implications of this analysis are highly relevant to the far reaching European agenda as stated at the beginning of this review. As a practitioner working with non-traditional students I would highly recommend this book to all teachers, support staff, educational management, academics and policy makers who are working in this area.

Shane Cullinane
Youthreach Coordinator
Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board