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HEA

Increasing Third Level Provision for Mature Students in Ireland:
A Market Analysis of the Demand for Open Distance Learning

Kay MacKeogh
Iveta Orbanova

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Executive Summary

Chapter 1: Introduction

- Despite significant expansion in higher education enrolments since the 1970s, mature students constitute an insignificant 5% of first time enrolments, a figure out of line with other OECD countries.

- In 1998 just 21% of Irish adults had tertiary qualifications. Ireland ranked joint tenth in this regard among EU states.

- Open distance learning plays a significant role in extending access to higher education to adult students. It is estimated that approximately 10,000 adults are enrolled in distance education programmes.

Chapter 2: Research Methodology

- Oscail – the National Distance Education Centre was commissioned by the Higher Education Authority in 2001 to carry out an analysis of the market for distance education among mature adults in Ireland.

- The research methodology included analysis of the policy background through documentary analysis and interviews with key individuals; a postal survey which elicited a response of 640 (17.9%); and focus group meetings with potential applicants to higher education.

Chapter 3: The Policy Context – the Need to Widen Access

- The need to widen participation in education has been a major element in educational policy since publication of the *Investment in Education* report in 1965.

- A series of reports by the Department of Education and Science and the Higher Education Authority identified the inequity of low enrolment rates of adult students in higher education, together with the relatively low educational attainment of the adult population arising from lack of opportunities in earlier decades.

- To redress disadvantage and contribute to the upskilling of the population, the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness 2000-2003 recommended that a quota of 15% of places for adult students should be allocated by 2005, rising to 25% in 2015.

- A series of reports have identified strategies needed to support increased numbers of adult students in higher education, including funding, recognition of prior learning and credit transfer; access courses; alternative entry requirements; new forms of assessment to cover experiential learning;

improved status and recognition of vocational courses; linkages between public and private providers; involvement of the employment sector; financial incentives and supports for part-time students; and establishment of partnerships among providers for distance education programmes (Skilbeck 2000).

- In their response to the national plan the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities welcomed the investment in the system, stating that increased funding was needed to provide for flexibility of delivery, including outreach and distance facilities (CHIU, 1999). The university's role is to provide high quality education, including lifelong learning, flexible modular courses and distance learning. They called for transformation of a social welfare type of support for disadvantaged students to a more positive programme of investment in human capital (CHIU, 1999).

- The Irish Business Employers' Confederation, and the Chambers of Commerce in Ireland, have called on the system to make education more accessible and inclusive, without lowering standards. They also recommend that language study should be an integral part of business courses as well as the study of science and technology.

- Recent prosperity is creating demands on new groups to participate in the workforce, thus creating demand for skills among women and over 55s.

- Policy makers and employer representatives have called on the potential of ODL to extend access to education. There are dangers of increasing the digital divide through over reliance on the new technologies.

Chapter 4: Is there a demand for access to higher education from mature students?: Survey results
- 640 adults responded to a postal questionnaire about their interest in lifelong learning.

- The message about higher education opportunities reaches adults in a variety of ways. Word of mouth is the most commonly cited source of information, with the web becoming an increasingly popular medium.

- The Humanities and Arts/humanities is the most popular option with almost half (49.5%) stating that they would like to study this subject. Computing is the next most favoured option with over one third stating they would like to study this subject; there was strong support for social sciences (31.3%) education/teaching (30.4%) and health sciences (28.2%); there was less interest in languages (21.4%) and minimal interest in science (13.4%) and engineering (9.4%).

- More men than women are interested in studying job-related programmes.

- The most popular mode of study among respondents is distance education regardless of gender, age, educational attainment, employment or status. There are indications that there is a slightly higher preference for full-time on-campus education amongst those aged under 30 (18.6%) or unemployed (25.5%) or retired (22.2%) i.e. those less likely to be constrained by family or employment commitments.

- Almost half (45.6%) of non-applicants indicated that the cost of the programme was either very important or important in their decision not to apply. The other factors in descending order of importance were 'this isn't the right time for me to start a substantial programme of education' (40.3%); 'I wouldn't have enough time to study' (31.1%); 'the course content did not suit my needs' (26.2%). Less important factors were 'the study centre is too far away' (14.6%); 'there isn't enough information for me to decide' (11.6%); 'the level of the programme is too high' (9.5%); 'the distance learning method wouldn't suit me' (7.5%).

- With regard to mode of delivery, it is most unlikely that the institutions will succeed in filling their quotas of 15% if the only option available is full-time education. Most adults with financial, domestic, social and employment commitments are not in a position to put their lives and commitments on hold for four years while they pursue full-time study. Instead, they need the flexibility to combine these commitments while studying, and this means increased provision of courses through flexible modes of delivery, with distance education being the most preferred mode.

Chapter 5: Focus Groups – Views on Demand for Access

- Focus group interviews were held in Cork, Dublin and Galway

- The importance of role models in creating awareness of higher education opportunities was highlighted.

- If they were financially secure and had no personal commitments (e.g. all children have grown up and left home, and they could take leave from their job on full pay, or they won the lotto) some would choose full-time higher education. However, in their current circumstances, most participants favoured the flexibility of distance education suggesting that all degree level programmes should be offered both on-campus and in distance learning format as a way of increasing the choice of courses available.

- The barriers to participation include institutional barriers; lack of information and guidance; domestic/social commitments; personal fears, inhibitions,

attitudinal barriers; duration and timing of programmes; lack of study and IT skills; restricted provision of subjects available in flexible modes of delivery.

- Participants suggested that if Government is serious in meeting its target of attracting mature students to higher education they should establish a fund to enable disadvantaged and low paid adults to participate in higher education regardless of mode or timing of study, as well as providing special loan schemes. If students do not have enough money of their own, or if their employer won't pay, higher education is not an option.

- While institutions have developed policies to attract mature students in the last decade, involving the appointment of mature student officers, access programmes etc, nevertheless, the message that institutions welcome mature students is not necessarily being received by the target audience. Institutions need to provide clearer and more user-friendly access to information to attract applicants.

Chapter 6: Summary and Conclusions
- While there is a clear need for increased access to higher education the survey of enquirers indicates that while many adults have been brought to the point of expressing interest and investigating opportunities, a large proportion were not prepared to proceed to the stage of actually starting their studies, citing a range of inhibiting factors.

- The demand for disciplines more oriented to personal development appears greater than for job-oriented disciplines. This poses particular challenges in attracting adults to qualifications in demand in the workplace.

- While commitments have been made to providing 10,000 extra places in higher education and setting quotas of 15% of enrolments for mature adults by 2005, the low level of interest in full-time education options will mean that institutions will find it almost impossible to meet those targets. Full-time education is seen as an option only for those without family, domestic, employment or financial commitments i.e. a very small proportion of the adult population.

- There is little enthusiasm for eLearning approaches while more conventional forms of distance education receive substantial support. The digital divide is very real for many adults despite the ubiquity of PCs in the home and in workplaces.

- The financing of part-time and flexible modes of education must be tackled. It is inherently unfair that full-time students regardless of income do not pay fees, while those on low pay must pay fees. Educational credits can be used to ensure that those deprived of the opportunity to enter higher education at an earlier age may not be disadvantaged for a second time. Employers should be

encouraged, perhaps through tax credits, to support employees studying through payment of fees and study leave.

- Institutions must be flexible in reality, not just in rhetorical statements. Adult students need to mix study with their other commitments. To do this, they need more flexible modes of study: distance education; part-time study; modular courses; flexible pathways to degrees; greater freedom to control the pacing of their studies; multiple entry points during the academic year; recognition of prior education; credit transfer between institutions.

- Institutions need to expand the range of subjects offered, possibly by increasing the number of subjects offered both on-campus and in distance education mode.

- Institutions need to provide greater support to adult students both by providing access routes to further study and in convincing adults that they are welcome to the campus.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1   Background

In recent years, there have been increasing calls for expanding the participation of adult students in higher education in Ireland, on equity as well as economic grounds. A number of reports have called for setting quotas and targets for numbers of mature students (defined as those aged over 23 years on the 1st January of the year in which they first start their studies). The Report of the Review Committee on Third Level Places (HEA, 1999) recommended an additional 10,000 places in higher education to be set-aside for mature students. The Programme for Prosperity and Fairness 2000-2003 committed the social partners to achieving these aims. Clearly, there is no point in selecting an arbitrary quota without knowledge of what the demand is likely to be. Despite increasing awareness of the low participation rates of adults in higher education, and the generally low level of educational attainment in the adult population, mature student enrolment rates in higher education have continued to be low. It is acknowledged that measures to meet these targets should be soundly based on market research to establish the level and range of demand from adults for access to higher education. This report has been commissioned by the Higher Education Authority to explore the level of demand for access to higher education, and in particular the demand for open distance learning programmes. This chapter will review the current participation of mature students in higher education, before discussing the potential of open and distance learning (ODL) in extending access.

1.2   Mature Students - Participation in Higher Education in Ireland

According to Department of Education and Science statistics, some 900,000 students were in full-time education in 1999, of which 63,000 were in universities and 42,000 in the technical sector. Some 180,000 were in part-time and further education (Dept of Education and Science 2001). Less than 5% of full-time students were aged over 23 years. According to figures supplied by the CAO, of the 66,329 applicants to higher education in 2001, just 5,292 (8%) were aged 23 years and over. Of these, 967 accepted offers for degree level study (5% of all first entrants) and 747 accepted offers for National Certificate/Diploma level (also 5% of first enrolment), leaving a group of 3578 adults who were not accommodated in higher education. Figure 2.2.1 compares the age profile of UK higher education acceptances as recorded by UCAS with that of Irish applicants to the CAO in 2001. In the UK some 13.6% of all new entrants to higher education were aged over 23 years. One interesting feature of this chart is the clear evidence that Irish students enrol in higher education at a younger age than those in the UK. Almost four fifths (78.7%) of Irish applicants are aged 18 years and under, compared with less than half (48.1%) of UK first year entrants. This means that many Irish students will have graduated by

the time they are 21 years old whereas more UK students who start later will remain in the system to a later age.

Figure 1.2.1: Comparison of age profile of UCAS Higher Education Acceptances (UK) and CAO applicants (Ireland) 2001

Age profile of Higher Education Acceptances (UK & NI), Applications Ireland 2001
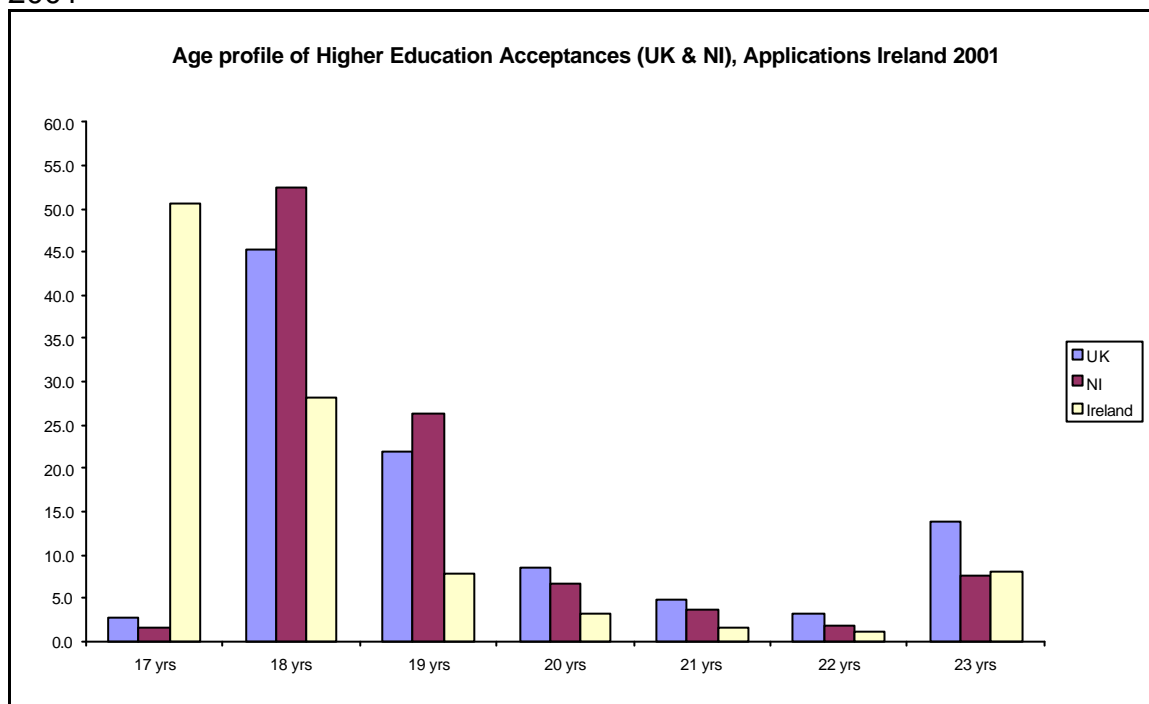
Clancy has tracked the characteristics of entrants to higher education between 1980 and 1998 and has produced a series of four reports. He shows that while the proportion of mature students entering higher education has increased from 2.5% in 1980 to 4.6% in 1998, the institutions are still a long way from meeting their target of 15% enrolments by 2005 (Clancy, 2001).

Table 1.2.1 Number of First-time enrolments in Higher Education, 1980-1998

	1998		1992		1986		1980	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Under 23	95.5	31066	97.4	24432	98.6	16912	97.55	13033
23-25	1.8	586	1.1	276	0.6	103	1.15	154
26-30	1.2	390	0.6	151	0.4	69	0.7	94
31-40	0.9	293	0.6	151	0.3	51	0.5	67
40+	0.6	195	0.3	75	0.1	17	0.1	13
Total	100	32530	100	25084	100.0	17152	100	13360
% of mature students	4.6	1464	2.6	652	1.4	240	2.5	327

Source: Clancy 2001: 18

While the proportion of school leavers continuing on to third level education has increased over the years, there is still a substantial cohort of adults who have not attained third level qualifications. One fifth of Irish adults had tertiary qualifications in 1998, and this places Ireland in the lower division of EU countries, with only Luxembourg, Greece, Austria, Portugal and Italy having lower levels of tertiary qualifications. Figure 1.2.2 illustrates Ireland's position in this league.

Figure 1.2.2 % Of Population with Tertiary Qualifications in the EU 1999
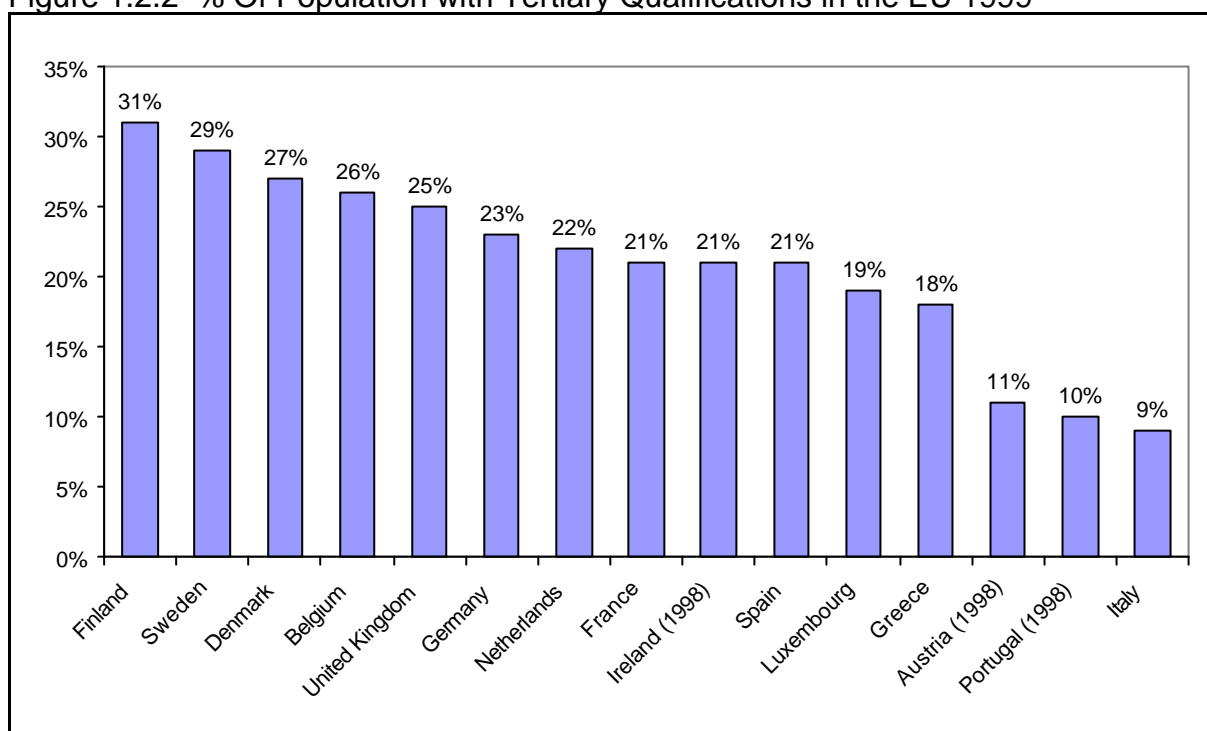
Source: OECD 2001 p 43.

As these statistics show, there is much work to be done in increasing the levels of participation of mature students. Open distance learning is frequently cited as an important strategy in extending access to higher education to adults. The potential of open distance learning will be discussed in the next section.

1.3   *Open Distance Learning and eLearning*
The EU's *Memorandum on Open Distance Learning* (CEC 1991) defined open distance learning as 'study not under the continuous or immediate supervision of tutors; planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organisation; materials substitute for the interactivity of face to face instruction; tutoring and guidance may take place at regional or local study centres; it is adaptable to the pace of the student; there is a strong autonomous component. With developments in the new technologies, the concept of eLearning is gaining wide support (CEC 2001). Defined by the

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EU as 'the use of information and communication technology, including the Internet to learn and teach' it is anticipated that eLearning will change the way we teach and learn, however, as we will see there is still a major digital divide to overcome.

The advantages of ODL for mature students are significant and substantial:

- Those adults who could not access education at an earlier age (for whatever reason) are offered a second chance. Education is available to all regardless of location, domestic, occupational or personal constraints.
- ODL programmes are flexible, allowing students to select a study workload, which allows them to meet their other commitments. Students can remain in their jobs while studying, so they do not lose income, and companies retain their workers.
- Students are not required to travel to a campus, so they can remain in their own community, providing leadership at local level, and avoiding the 'brain drain' which can occur when a mature student is forced to leave home to attend higher education institutions.
- Lifelong learning is facilitated as adults change careers throughout their working life and need to learn new skills.
- Courses are prepared by expert teams comprising subject specialists, instructional designers, and distance education specialists and are subject extensive peer review. Materials are in the public domain, ensuring transparency with regard to quality.
- ODL can be cost-effective where there are economies of scale, and where resources (such as tutorial rooms) can be accessed on a marginal cost basis.

The flavour of the distance education experience may be garnered from this quotation from one of the first graduates of Oscail's inter-university BA programme, writing of her experiences in an edited collection of experiences of mature students:

The great thing about distance education is that it has provided me with the opportunity to study for a degree from home. Home for me is Achill, an island off the west coast of Ireland, linked to the mainland by a bridge. There is a small closely knit population of about 2,500 people. Undoubtedly Achill is remote, but for me its stark, wild beauty is part of its addictive attraction. Staying in Achill allowed me to continue in my business, a necessity if I was to finance a degree courses. …by broadening my own horizons, I could enrich the lives of those around me. I also hoped that the example I set for my son will give him an appreciation of the importance of education…it was more economical to study at home with only course fees…the course has given me the ability to articulate ideas and opinions with greater confidence, be it at meetings, writing letters, or simply in social discussions…Last winter, studying works from Plato to Piaget at an open turf fire while listening to the continuous roar of the Atlantic outside proved to be a treasured experience and the very essence of distance education.' (O'Connor, 1996).

The Irish distance education system has evolved to meet the needs of a small peripheral economy with a relatively low population base (3.8m approx in 2001). Oscail – the National Distance Education Centre is one of the largest providers of lifelong learning in higher education for adults in Ireland, with over 3000 students in 2002 taking a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Set up in 1982, and based on the campus of Dublin City University, Oscail is funded directly by the Higher Education Authority to develop and deliver distance education programmes in cooperation with the universities and other third level institutions. All programmes have been designed and developed by course teams drawn from the participating institutions, and students attend tutorials in a network of study centres throughout the country. The Bachelor of Arts programme, initiated in 1993, was the first programme in Ireland to be jointly accredited by six of the universities. The main medium of instruction used is specially written ODL course materials and required standard texts supplemented by email, web resources and online virtual seminars. Students may also attend face-to-face tutorials in Study Centres, which take place usually once per month for each module. They also receive advice and support from their tutors by telephone or email. The Centre has carried out extensive research on the pedagogical and cost-effectiveness of the new technologies in education and the first full-programme delivered online, the MSc in Internet Systems was launched in 2001. While the number of ODL programmes offered by other institutions is relatively small, the range and extent of provision has increased in recent years. Other providers of ODL programmes include the Institute of Public Administration, University College Cork, University College Dublin, National University of Ireland Galway, and University of Limerick. NUI Maynooth provides a degree programme on an outreach basis at its Kilkenny campus. While figures for enrolments in ODL programmes are difficult to obtain on a consistent basis, it is estimated that the total number of adults participating in distance education programmes is in the region of 10,000. This number includes students taking courses from external institutions including the UK Open University, UK universities, and even Australian and New Zealand universities.

1.4   The Report
This report has been prepared at the request of the Higher Education Authority. Oscail carried out a market analysis of the demand for higher education using a range of techniques. An extensive analysis of policy documents, position papers, submissions, strategy documents, press releases, and statistical reports was carried out to identify the stakeholders and the policy context. The interests of the potential market for higher education were investigated through a postal survey, supplemented by a number of focus groups and interviews with individuals. Chapter 2 outlines the rationale for the methodology adopted. Chapter 3 summarises the

policy context driving the demand for greater mature student participation. The results of the postal survey are outlined in Chapter 4, which investigates respondents' preferences for subject areas, modes of study as well as the barriers encountered in returning to study. These findings are expanded on in Chapter 5, which summarises the outcomes of the focus group meetings. Finally in Chapter 6, the findings of the report are summarised, and conclusions are offered.

Chapter 2: Research Methodology

2.1 Introduction

Market research in education can be problematic. Commonly used market research techniques are often not appropriate in eliciting demand for new programmes and it is most unlikely that anything but vague generalisations will emerge from national sampling surveys. Instead, one needs a reasonable level of public understanding of the issue (or product – in this case new programmes) under scrutiny in order to obtain usable data. As in any market, the question of need and demand must be reconciled; indeed, both needs and demands can be created through carefully targeted campaigns. However education is not a commodity which can be marketed like any other product. With the exception of 'Degree mills', which sell 'qualifications' requiring purchasers to do no more than sign a credit card slip, educational qualifications cannot be attained without significant effort and commitment on the part of the student. While policy makers and employers have identified areas of skills shortages and demand for qualified personnel, and commitments have been made to increase the number of places in higher education for mature students, little is known about the actual demand for these places, what subjects, and what modes of study are mature students likely to want if they are to engage in further study and what are the conditions which will encourage or inhibit their return to study. The question is how best to uncover this vital intelligence to guide institutions in meeting their targets for increased participation of mature students. The methodology used in this study is designed to investigate the broad policy context which is both creating and responding to the need for increased participation in higher education, as well as the likely demand from the target audience. Accordingly, the study has used documentary analysis, interviews with key individuals, a survey questionnaire and focus groups in analysing the market demand in the mature student sector.

2.2 Documentary Analysis

An extensive range of policy documents issued by key stakeholders in higher education have been analysed to ascertain the drivers creating and identifying the need for increased participation in higher education. These include research and policy documents, press releases and statements issued by the Higher Education Authority; Government White papers, Green papers, press releases and other documents issued by the Department of Education and Science; as well as policy papers, annual reports and other publications produced by FÁS, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), National Economic and Social Council (NESC), Combat Poverty Agency, the Centre for Cross Border Studies, IDA, ForFÁS, the Expert Group on Future Skills, Enterprise Ireland; and the Information Society Commission. In addition, the views of employer group have been consulted as expressed in the documents produced by IBEC –

the Irish Business Employers Confederation, the Small Firms Association, and the Chambers of Commerce in Ireland. The policies of the university sector were also investigated. A summary of the outcomes of this analysis is given in Chapter 3 – The Policy Context.

2.3 Interviews

A number of telephone or face-to-face interviews with key individuals involved in higher education and training took place. These included representatives from the Central Applications Office, Mature Student and Access officers in some universities, as well as a representative from Skillnets. The views of the individuals consulted were helpful in providing a picture of existing participation by mature adults in higher education as well as in exploring the issues involved in expanding this participation.

2.4 Survey Questionnaire

As mentioned above, general marketing surveys are unlikely to lead to the level of detailed information required in planning new educational programmes and initiatives. This is because such surveys tend to target individuals who have not considered the possibility of higher education and who would therefore find it difficult to come up with meaningful and well-thought out suggestions about the subjects they might like to study, or the mode of study they would prefer. It was considered that more useful and reliable information could be gathered from those who have demonstrated some interest in pursuing higher education and who already have some information at their disposal about the types of provision currently available. In this context, it was decided to use Oscail's database of enquirers as the target population for a postal questionnaire. This database is compiled on a yearly basis, starting in January each year. Members of the public contact Oscail by telephone, email, letter, or personal visit, seeking information on the programmes available. Names and addresses are recorded on a database and brochures are posted to enquirers. Oscail's main advertising campaign, comprising newspaper advertisements, information meetings and exhibitions normally takes place in September, with some lower key advertising in guides for part-time study, newspapers and professional magazines taking place earlier in the year. Thus, prior to the main promotional campaign, some 3,731 names had been recorded on the database by August 2001. A short questionnaire was posted to all 3,731 enquirers in late August 2001, together with a letter explaining the purpose of the questionnaire and a reply paid envelope. The questionnaire included questions on:

- Where the respondent had heard about Oscail programmes
- Their intentions to apply for programmes in 2001, in later years or not at all
- Those who did not intend to apply in 2001 were asked to rate the importance of a series of factors in influencing their decision. These factors included cost, the suitability of the course content; the level of

the course; the appropriateness of distance learning to their needs; time to study; sufficiency of information; whether they were enquiring on behalf of someone else; the location of the study centre; whether now was the right time to start for them.

- Respondents were asked to indicate their level of interest in taking a list of disciplines at degree level i.e. business/management; continental languages; sciences; education/teaching; engineering; computing; social sciences; arts/humanities; health sciences. They were also asked to list subjects of interest to them and to others.
- Respondents were asked to rank their preferred mode of study i.e. full-time on-campus lectures; part-time on-campus lectures (evenings/weekends); distance learning (written course materials; tutorials in study centres); eLearning (extensive use of technology based materials; online tutorial support; occasional meetings in study centres); other.
- Respondents were also asked to provide personal information: gender; marital status; age group; occupational status; highest level of education; address.
- They were also asked to indicate if they would agree to being interviewed for a research project on third level provision of mature adults.

A copy of the survey form is attached as Appendix 1.

The survey elicited 640 usable responses, a response rate of 17.2%. Moser and Kalton (1979) point out that one of the disadvantages of mail questionnaires is the possibility of low response rates. They point out that the proportion replying to a mail questionnaire depends on the population, the subject of the survey, its sponsorship and the success of the covering letter. While the response rate is somewhat low, nevertheless the number of responses is sufficiently large to provide a basis for exploring the potential demand from adults for access to higher education at a distance. The data were coded and analysed using SPSS Version 10.1. The results of this survey are detailed in Chapter 4.

2.5   Focus Groups

Focus groups are commonly used in market research and provide a useful means of validating and explicating the findings of quantitative data. According to Morgan 'As a form of qualitative research, focus groups are basically group interviews…The hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group' (quoted in Field, 2000: 324). Field notes that while focus groups have been more commonly used in commercial and political market analysis, they have been less frequently used in studying learning markets (Field, 2000: 324). However, the use of focus groups by researchers studying post-compulsory education and

training in the USA is increasing and there are many benefits arising from combining focus group research with quantitative research on individuals. Field concludes that while there are drawbacks to the focus group method 'if used carefully, it appears that focus groups can be a highly effective means of studying post-compulsory education and training. Of course they must be supplemented by other sources, and there are a number of pitfalls and challenges which must be overcome' (Field, 2000: 327).

Focus groups are assemblies of interested persons who are brought together to discuss specific issues for a limited time. Such groups and their activities are structured by a facilitator. This is partly to ensure that the desired issue is addressed and partly to ensure that different groups function in a similar manner. It was decided to form three focus groups on a regional basis in Dublin, Cork and Galway. Accordingly, groups were selected from among those who had indicated on the postal questionnaire that they would be willing to be interviewed for the project. Approximately twenty respondents each from the selected counties were invited to attend a meeting in Dublin City University, University College Cork or National University of Ireland Galway. A small honorarium to cover expenses was offered. A total of twenty participants took part in the focus group meetings (8 in Dublin; 10 in Cork and 2 in Galway).

The meetings were facilitated by a member of the project team and followed a semi-structured format. Each session lasted 90 minutes and took place from 7.00pm to 8.30pm in a small meeting room on the university campus. The discussions centred on questions such as:

- What does higher education mean to you - what has higher education to offer?; why would adult students want to enter higher education? (personal development, career, other); what types of people would be attracted to higher education?; what is the return on attendance at higher education?; who benefits from higher education?
- What is the most attractive mode of study – to participants; Friends; Relatives; Employers; Fellow workers; Community organisations
- Which format would suit most adults? – full-time lectures; part-time lectures; distance learning with some face to face tutorials; online education/technology; what's the feeling about using technology for education?
- Funding - Who should pay? What is an acceptable fee for a degree course?
- What are the barriers to participation - What stops adults from attending higher education? Are the institutions approachable? Should there be more access courses?
- If you were Minister for Adult Education what would you do to attract adults into higher education?

A copy of the interview schedule is attached as Appendix 2.

The meetings in both Dublin and Cork were tape recorded, while due to technical problems the Galway meeting was not recorded. However, extensive notes were made at each meeting. The tape recordings and notes have been analysed and the findings are outlined in Chapter 5 in this report.

Chapter 3: The Policy Context – the Need to Widen Access

3.1   Introduction
This chapter will analyse the policy context in which the move to increase participation of mature students in higher education is located. The chapter will start by outlining the development of government policy, before discussing the role of the social partners, employers and other agencies in bringing the demand for access to higher education to the forefront of policy.

3.2   Mature Students – Official Reports
The need to widen participation in education has been a major element in educational policy since the *Investment in Education* report was published in 1965. While, at that stage, the major concern was with widening access to second level education, nevertheless a series of initiatives following publication of that report saw the development of new third level institutions and an explosion in enrolment in higher education from 18,197 in 1964 to over 100,000 in 2002 (White, 2001). The expansion in numbers was fuelled by the growing pool of young people completing second level education following the introduction of free education, while the participation of adult students has remained modest. Just 5% of full-time students in higher education in 1999 were aged 23 years and over, while mature students comprised just 8% of first time applicants to the Central Applications Office in 2001. In recent decades, as the link between education and economic development becomes ever more apparent and accepted, concern has grown that the educational levels of the adult population lags behind that of most of the OECD member states. Clancy notes that at the end of the twentieth century, tertiary education was replacing secondary education as the 'focal point of access, selection and entry to rewarding careers for the majority of young people' (Clancy 2001: 14). Some 49% of those aged 25-54 of the adult population left school at 15, while just 21% had obtained tertiary qualifications (OECD, 2001a). According to Clancy (2001) 'while the differences in educational attainment between the different age cohorts reflect the recency of the rapid expansion of post-compulsory education, they underline the particular challenge which we have yet to face in respect of the generational inequality in access to higher education' (Clancy 2001: 169).

Governmental interest in Lifelong Learning was reinforced during the Irish presidency of the EU in 1996 which coincided with the European Year of Lifelong Learning. At that time the OECD published its influential report *Lifelong Learning for All* which set out the rationales for lifelong learning which included: the economic argument; speed of change; traditional policies for redistribution of wealth which have ignored the life cycle pattern of the income of individuals; the need for promotion of psychological as well as physical well being of people during all of their lives; the need for social

cohesion which stresses that people who miss out in contemporary society …may experience social exclusion (OECD, 1996: 77).

This period was also characterised by growing prosperity and increases in exchequer funds, with unprecedented growth levels leading to massive increases in employment and demands for skilled workers at all levels. Since then, a number of reports, position papers, green papers and white papers linking lifelong learning with diverse aspects of social and economic development in Ireland have been published (see bibliography for a list of these reports). These reports highlight the need for access to learning on a continuous, lifelong and lifewide basis, while also highlighting the many barriers and obstacles to achieving this aim, not the least of which is the problem of finance, the cost of access, and who bears this cost.

The arguments supporting the widening of access to higher education are based both in equity and in economic terms. More recently, the demographic decline in the school leaver cohort arising from a drop of up to 30% in the birth rate in the 1980s is cited as providing an opportunity to fill the vacant places at third level with mature students.

While most reports have advocated increasing the number of places and setting quotas, it is recognised that this is not sufficient to attract mature students back to education. As early as 1984, the Adult Education Commission's *Report on Lifelong Learning* recommended that third level institutions should adopt new approaches to facilitate adult student participation, including modularisation, accreditation of prior learning, credit transfer, and distance learning. The HEA report of the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education (HEA, 1995) proposed that the number of mature students should increase from 1,100 in 1995 to 2,200 by 2000. In 1998 the Committee of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIU) stated 'we believe that third level education must be a realisable ambition for all sections of our society. Neither age nor income level should be a barrier to achieving this ambition' (CHIU, 1998). CHIU found the HEA report deficient in that it did not take into account changing demographic trends and argued that their plans to increase mature student places were less than ambitious, whereas CHIU would recommend increasing the proportion of mature students to 25% by 2015 (CHIU, 1998).

In 1999, the Commission on the Points System (1999) recommended a quota of 15% of places for mature students by 2005, rising to 25% by 2015. This report also noted that the blurring of the boundaries between full-time and part-time education made it difficult to justify differential fees (Commission on the Points System, 1999). Indeed, as Ryan and O'Kelly found, the full-time student without a job is now a rarity with 54% of students working during term time, of whom 32.7% were working over 10 hours per week (Ryan and O'Kelly, 2001). The Report of the Review

Committee on Third Level places (HEA, 1999) recommended an additional 10,000 places in higher education should be set-aside for adults.

In a report on cross-border cooperation in adult education, McGill and Morgan estimate that there are some 756,000 'nearly ready' adults in the Ireland between the ages of 25-64 who have completed secondary or further education but not proceeded to degree level; there is an even larger number of 'learning poor', 806,000 adults who have not gone beyond lower secondary or even primary schooling (McGill and Morgan, 2001: 10). However, they note that greater numbers of mature students do not necessarily extend participation to those who are disadvantaged, since mature students are predominantly middle class. The strategies suggested to attract the learning poor and the nearly ready to higher education include coordinated efforts to improve literacy and numeracy standards; greater investment in community education and creation of links between community groups and statutory resources; and increased use of open and distance learning and appropriate use of ICT (McGill and Morgan, 2001: 21).

Skilbeck (2000) argues that to improve access to education, adult students need recognition of prior learning and credit transfer; access courses; alternative entry requirements; new forms of assessment to cover experiential learning; improved status and recognition of vocational courses; linkages between public and private providers; involvement of the employment sector; financial incentives and supports for part-time students; and establishment of partnerships among providers for distance education programmes. With regard to finance, Skilbeck notes that funding policies may play a crucial role in advancing equity but that often those 'well endowed with cultural and economic capital' are best positioned to take advantage of support schemes (Skilbeck, 2000). In his most recent report *The University Challenged*, Skilbeck argues that mature student participation is highly significant for both social and economic reasons. Although he questions the 'practicality and value of everyone receiving tertiary education' nevertheless, as he points out, 'as participation rates increase, the benefits of tertiary education become more apparent and the issue of those not participating becomes sharper' (Skilbeck, 2001: 43).

3.3 National Development Plan – tackling disadvantage

By 2000, Ireland's stable macro economic environment, favourable fiscal and enterprise environment, well educated workforce, as well as the globalisation of trade, investment and technology and EU structural fund transfers, leading to a low unemployment rate of 3.7% appeared to set the conditions for implementation of lifelong learning policies for all. Increases in revenue have provided for the first time fiscal support for the implementation of new policies. The government announced a largescale investment plan - The National Development Plan (2000-2006) in

November 1999. The plan comprises four operational programmes of which one is dedicated to Employment and Human Resources. Among the key national priorities of the plan are:

- To tackle disadvantage through a range of interventions at different levels
- To promote and support a culture of lifelong learning with a clear emphasis on second chance education

A sum of €6.8bn (25% of total investment) is to be spent on education. Noting that 51% of short-term unemployed and 75% of long term unemployed have less than upper secondary education, spending will be concentrated on promoting social inclusion, greatly expanding second chance and lifelong learning opportunities and on modernising education facilities at all levels. €1378m will be allocated to funding lifelong learning, including €1304m for the Back to Education Initiative for those marginalised groups seeking access to second level, access programmes, training programmes etc.

In their response to the national plan the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities welcomed the investment in the system, stating that increased funding was needed to provide for flexibility of delivery, including outreach and distance facilities (CHIU, 1999). The university's role is to provide high quality education, including lifelong learning, flexible modular courses and distance learning. They called for transformation of a social welfare type of support for disadvantaged students to a more positive programme of investment in human capital (CHIU, 1999).

3.4 The Social Partners – promoting access to education

Much of the economic success enjoyed by Ireland in the last decade has been ascribed to a lengthy period of industrial peace, achieved through a series of programmes agreed between the social partners, including government, trade unions, employers, farmers, and the community and voluntary sector. Of some significance is the most recent agreement, the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness 2000-2003. One of the platforms of this programme is a commitment to increasing post second level participation, particularly among mature students. Framework IV of the programme sets out the following targets, reflecting the recommendations of the Points Commission and the Review Committee on Third Level Places:

- Increased investment in higher education to bring Ireland within the top quarter of OECD countries with regard to participation in post second level education (item 23)
- Provision of additional places for mature students allied with the promotion of 'adult friendly' policies (item 25)

- Establishment of a group to report on barriers to participation by mature and disadvantaged students in higher education (this group published its report in 2001) (item 26)
- Additional financial supports for disadvantaged students to be put in place (item 28)
- Colleges to aim to provide that by 2005 15% of intake each year will comprise students aged 23 years and over (item 31).

Of considerable relevance to this report is paragraph 30 which stated that 'The HEA has has been requested to undertake market research to establish the level and range of demand from mature students. In the light of the outcome of this research, measures will be designed to meet mature student demand and ensure flexible innovative responses to mature students needs for consideration by Government. These measures will be based on the recommendations of the Points Commission and the Review Committees Report'.

The Combat Poverty Agency has made a number of submissions citing educational disadvantage at all levels as a key concern and calling for research into how access can be promoted, as well as the removal of barriers to disadvantaged adults' participation in higher education (CPA 1998; 1999: 2001). AONTAS has also published a number of reports and position papers highlighting the unequal access to higher education, the continuing inequities posed by fees for part-time education especially for those on low pay (AONTAS, 1999)

3.5   *The employment perspective*
While governmental policies have been largely driven by concerns with equity, there is also a strong lobby arguing that increased participation in higher education is essential in narrowing the skills gap. FÁS and the Economic and Social Research Institute predict that degree or diploma graduates will in future form a much greater proportion of those in employment (FÁS/ESRI 2001). Almost half (45%) of those in work in 2015 will have third level qualifications compared with 30% in 1997. They also recommend that action is needed to bring educational supply and demand into reasonable balance (FÁS/ESRI, 2001). The Expert Group on Future Skills has reported on the decreasing numbers of school age students opting for sciences and technologies and recommends that companies should become actively involved in supporting their employees in upgrading their qualifications to make up the shortfall (ForFÁS, 2000). ForFÁS has established Skillnets – networks of companies addressing specific training needs on a cooperative basis. This initiative has led to the development of a degree in polymer science in Athlone IT which is supported by a network of companies who support their employees in taking part in the programme. The Industrial Development Agency, acknowledging that education and

skills have been key factors in attracting overseas investment, predict that because of Ireland's emphasis on knowledge based industries and the role of new technologies that third level institutions will need to be dynamic and more flexible in their responses in the future (IDA, 2001).

The Irish Business Employers Confederation (IBEC) notes that the boundary between education and training is becoming increasingly blurred, stating that investment in education is essential to future success (IBEC, 2002: 6). To date the system has been biased towards full-time third level students and IBEC calls on the system to make education more accessible and inclusive, without lowering standards (IBEC 2002: 6). IBEC favours an enterprise led approach to education and training for those in employment, citing the Skillnets Initiative as an example of employer led training networks which have been successfully piloted. They call for increased uptake of languages in third level, and also highlight the need to increase participation in science, mathematics, and technology both at second and third level as a priority at national level

The Chambers of Commerce in Ireland in their report *From Early Leaving to eLearning: Education for Training and Employability* outline the need for education and training to become more flexible and responsive to the needs of its consumers (CCI 2001). They acknowledge that business must play its part by collaborating with education providers and by investing more in the training of their employees. They also recommend that language study should be an integral part of business courses as well as the study of science and technology. In addressing disadvantage they note that provision of access programmes to third level is haphazard and there is no national co-ordinated policy in place. They emphasise the need for financial support. They comment 'If second-chance education and lifelong learning are to become a reality, education and training needs to be more customer oriented and responsive…[it] must become more flexible with more part-time modular courses (CCI, 2001: 15). They also agree with IBEC's demand that training should be more employer led.

Recent prosperity in Ireland is creating demands to increase participation by groups who previously remained outside the labour market, especially women and older adults. ForFÁS commissioned a report on participation of over-55s in the labour market in 2001 (ForFÁS, 2001). It was noted that many older workers are excluded from training initiatives, even though educational qualifications significantly increase the likelihood of being employed.

3.6 *The role of Open Distance Learning*
Most of the reports cited above almost routinely refer to the potential of open distance learning (ODL) in meeting the demand for widening access to third level education. A 1993 report on the market for ODL in Ireland

concluded that there was likely to be an extensive demand for ODL from those seeking a second chance to obtain a degree, or to update qualifications (MacKeogh and Hogg, 1993). The Information Society Commission published a report in 1999 on lifelong learning in an information society highlighting the potential of ODL and flexible learning in developing IT literacy in the general population (ISC, 1999). The White Paper on learning for life recommended that 'in the context of changing technology, constraints on physical capacity, the demand for localised access, the need for enhanced flexibility, adult-friendly policies and the need to provide for increased professional development of those in the workforce, a more proactive and strategic approach to the development of distance learning is an imperative' (Department of Education and Science 2000:75). A national symposium on distance education in March 2000, hosted by the Higher Education Authority and Oscail – the National Distance Education Centre, discussed such future strategic developments (HEA 2000). Noting that Oscail is the largest provider of distance education in Ireland, with over 3,500 enrolments in undergraduate and post graduate distance education programmes, the report concluded that the collaborative tradition as practised in the development of Oscail courses is a valuable national asset: 'Set up as a visionary, collaborative venture, it has worthwhile achievements to its credit and much useful experience of a technical, academic and organisational character has been attained' (HEA, 2000:69). In charting the future for ODL in Ireland the symposium identified a number of issues of concern, including: who are the potential learners for ODL and how are they to be prepared and motivated; how can ODL help in developing flexible curricula in existing and future on-campus programmes; what is the potential for virtual higher education in Ireland? and what is the potential of ICTs; and how to ensure that use of ICTs does not promote further social exclusion (HEA 2000).

Skilbeck quotes Trow's utopian vision of a new society where 'Information technology now forces a revision of our conception of the conditions making for universal access: IT allows and becomes a vehicle for universal access to higher education of a different order of magnitude, with courses of every kind and description available over the Internet to people's homes and workplaces' (Skilbeck, 2001: 50). While most reports have uncritically pointed to the potential of ICTs and eLearning, the digital divide is a matter of real concern. Referring to ICTs, the OECD notes 'Adults typically need options allowing them to progress at an individually determined pace, schedules that take into account such factors as work hours and/or children's school hours, easy access to transport facilities, and the availability of day-care facilities for children. The use of ICTs can be of great assistance in offering greater flexibility. Distance learning is an available option that can provide learning to people who would not otherwise have the chance. However, while ICTs can be of great help, participation should not be limited to those who have access to it.' (OECD,

2001b: 24). McGill and Morgan take the view that ICT can provide opportunities, but also recognise that skills in using IT is class and education related (McGill and Morgan, 2001). Surveys of Oscail BA students have found that while most students now have access to PCs and the internet (90% had access to PCs, and 80% had access to the internet either at home or in work in 2000) the quality and quantity of access was of concern as was differing levels of expertise in using ITs (MacKeogh, 2001).

The Chambers of Commerce in Ireland also recognise that ICTs offer the education system much greater scope in terms of flexibility in education delivery, with the Internet making education accessible in rural areas. Interestingly, they propose that tax relief be given to those who purchase PCs for educational use (CCI 2001).

3.7 Summary
The Higher Education Authority has commissioned a series of surveys on entrants to higher education every four years since 1980. The most recent survey of entrants in 1998 confirms that the enrolment of mature students remains minimal and the author of the report notes that on the basis of current trends it is unlikely that the ambitious targets set by the Points Commission and the Review Committee, or indeed the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness will be met with current policies in place (Clancy, 2001). Clancy concludes 'It should not simply be a matter of expediency that colleges are now willing to extend a welcome to mature students to offset the decline in the eighteen year old cohort. Social justice considerations should impel us to tackle the generational inequalities. By a happy coincidence such action is also justified by instrumental considerations since the speed of technological change dictates that we plan higher education as an integral part of life long learning with strong links to the community and the labour market as well as to secondary schooling' (Clancy 2001: 169). The Action Group on Access to Third Level Education agrees with this view noting that 'the specific actions to be taken under the National Development plan and the measures to be implemented under the White Paper on Adult Education *Learning for Life* will not in themselves enable mature students to be 15% of the total entrants to full time undergraduate higher education. The Action Group considers that to attain such an aim would require significant further resources and indeed wider social, cultural and workplace developments such as the introduction of full-time study leave for those at work.' (Department of Education and Science 2001: 98).

Ireland has often been compared unfavourably with the United Kingdom with regard to participation of mature students. Following a number of UK government access initiatives targeting non-traditional students, participation rates rose from 10% in 1980 to over 30% in 1990 (Reay et al, 2002). However, as Reay et al point out, more recent years have seen a

decline in the participation rates. This is largely a consequence of the imposition of fees and other changes which have had 'severe exclusionary repercussions for mature students' (Reay et al 2002: 17). In 1997/98 100,300 adult students enrolled, but this had dropped by 10% to 90,585 the following year (Reay et al, 2002). According to Reay et al 'policy initiatives since 1997 seem to have made it more, not less, difficult for individuals from lower social classes to attend university' (Reay et al, 2002:6). They conclude that "If the Government's 'New Learning Age' is not to replicate the educational inequalities of all the past learning ages, then the rhetoric on widening participation and responsiveness to local communities needs to move beyond rhetoric into policies which provide possibilities for realisation' (Reay et al, 2002:17). In the case of Ireland, it is only in the last decade that energy and commitment at a political level has been put into increasing the participation of mature students in higher education. However, as we have seen, the announcement of quotas and targets is insufficient to ensure that anything will be achieved in the absence, not just of funding, but also attitudinal and organisational changes on the part of third level institutions, as well as the development of a lifelong learning culture which extends beyond the current population of traditional higher education students. The next chapters will address the question of the demand for access to higher education for mature students.

Chapter 4: Is there a demand for access to higher education from mature students? Survey results

4.1   Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 2, postal questionnaires were sent to 3,731 enquirers on Oscail's database in August 2001, eliciting a response from 640 (a response rate of 17.2%). It was considered that this group constituted a reasonably informed sector of potential mature students, although potentially biased towards distance education. They may be regarded as members of the large group of 756,000 'nearly ready adults' identified by McGill and Morgan (2001) i.e. those aged between 25 and 64 who have not completed higher education but who have completed some form of secondary or further education. They had already demonstrated an interest in participating in higher education and possibly distance education by requesting details of courses available. While a number had continued on to apply for admission to courses, a significant proportion had not proceeded further. This pool of potential mature students provided a unique opportunity to investigate the interests of a large number of adults in returning to study. In particular, it provided the opportunity to investigate the types of subjects in demand, preferences for mode of study, and the barriers experienced in proceeding to further study. This chapter presents the findings of the postal survey. While the survey provided a wealth of data, in the interests of focusing on key issues, only a limited number of analyses are presented. We start by describing the profile of respondents, including the characteristics of those who did not apply for programmes. We also examine the sources of information used by respondents. Next we analyse respondents' views on the type of subjects identified as being in demand. This is followed by an analysis of the respondents' preferred mode of study. Finally, barriers to participation are analysed.

4.2   Profile of respondents

Table 4.2.1 summarises the characteristics of the 640 respondents. As can be seen the majority of respondents (59.4%) were female. All age groups are represented, however, some 60% were aged less than 40 years, with just less than one quarter aged less than 30 years. Almost half (46.7%) were married. Just over half (57.5%) of respondents fell into McGill and Morgan's 'nearly ready' category in that they had completed either second level (24.5% or non-degree further education (33.0%). 7.7% had incomplete second level qualifications. Almost three quarters (74.2%) were in the workforce, 9.1% were working in the home, 8% unemployed and 4.2% were retired. Further analysis of the data showed that, as in the total population, the higher the educational attainment, the more likely respondents were to be employed. With regard to location, respondents were grouped into planning regions according to their address. As Figure 4.2.1 shows, respondents were widely distributed in the regions, although as would be

expected, just over one quarter was living in the Dublin region. Only one respondent living in Northern Ireland was recorded.

Table 4.2.1 Profile of Respondents

a) Gender	Male	Female		No response	Total
N	231	380		29	640
%	36.1	59.4		4.5	100.0

b) Age	Under 30yrs	31-99	40-49	50-59	60+	No response	Total
N	156	228	149	66	19	22	640
%	24.4	35.6	23.3	10.3	3.0	3.4	100.0

c) Marital Status	Married	Single	Other	No response	Total
N	299	203	53	85	640
%	46.7	31.7	8.3	13.3	100.0

d) Highest Educational Achievement	Incomplete 2nd Level	Complete 2nd Level	National Cert/ National Diploma	Bachelor's Degree	Higher Degree	Professional Qualification	No response	Total
N	49	157	211	75	23	95	30	640
%	7.7	24.5	33.0	11.7	3.6	14.8	4.7	100.0

e) Employment Status	Employed Full-time	Employed Part-Time	In the home	Retired	Unemployed	No response	Total
N	365	110	58	27	51	29	640
%	57.0	17.2	9.1	4.2	8.0	4.5	100.0

Figure 4.2.1 Regional distribution of respondents

Regional Distribution of Respondents
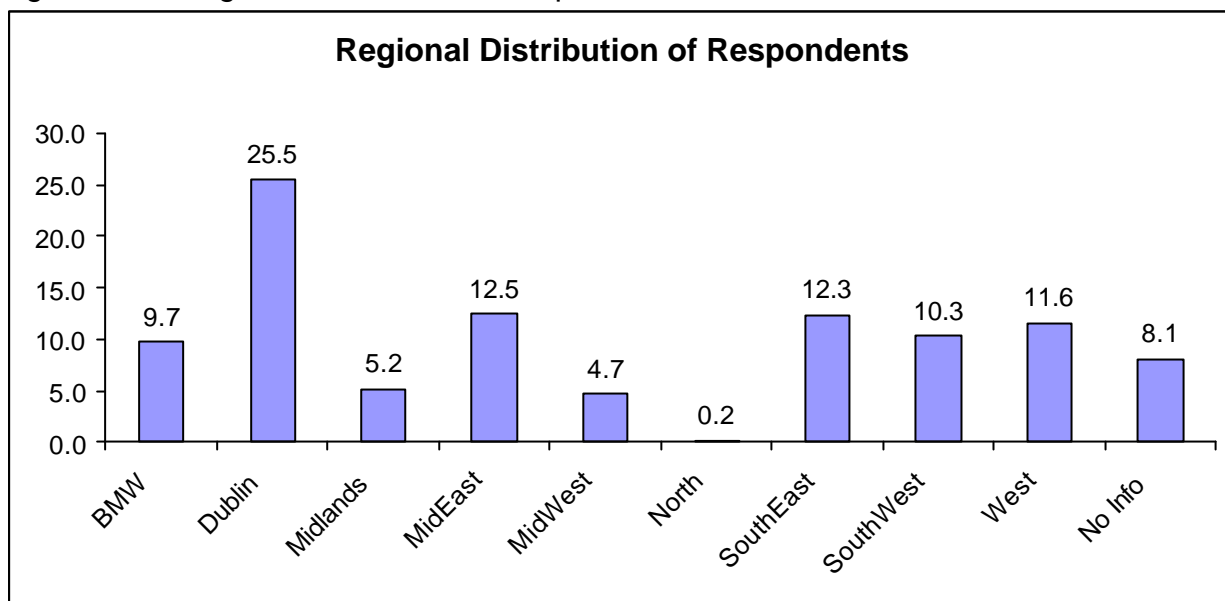
Note: Figures represent % of respondents

4.3   *Source of information on programmes*

As it is useful to know how the message about opportunities in higher education reaches potential participants, respondents were given a list of possible sources of information and asked to indicate from which of these sources they had heard of the programmes. Respondents could list more than one source. As Figure 4.3.1 shows, the most significant source of information is friends and relatives with 28.3% of respondents identifying this source. Another source of 'word of mouth' is employers (3.4%). Interestingly, almost one quarter identified the Oscail website as a source of information underlining the growing importance of the Internet as a search tool. While the low numbers citing newspaper advertising, as a source of information may seem surprising, it may not necessarily mean that advertising is ineffective. It would be necessary to investigate further the sources from which the friends/relatives and employers obtained the information, which they in turn passed on to respondents. It would appear that the message about opportunities in higher education reaches the mature student market from a variety of directions.

Figure 4.3.1 Source of Information on Programmes
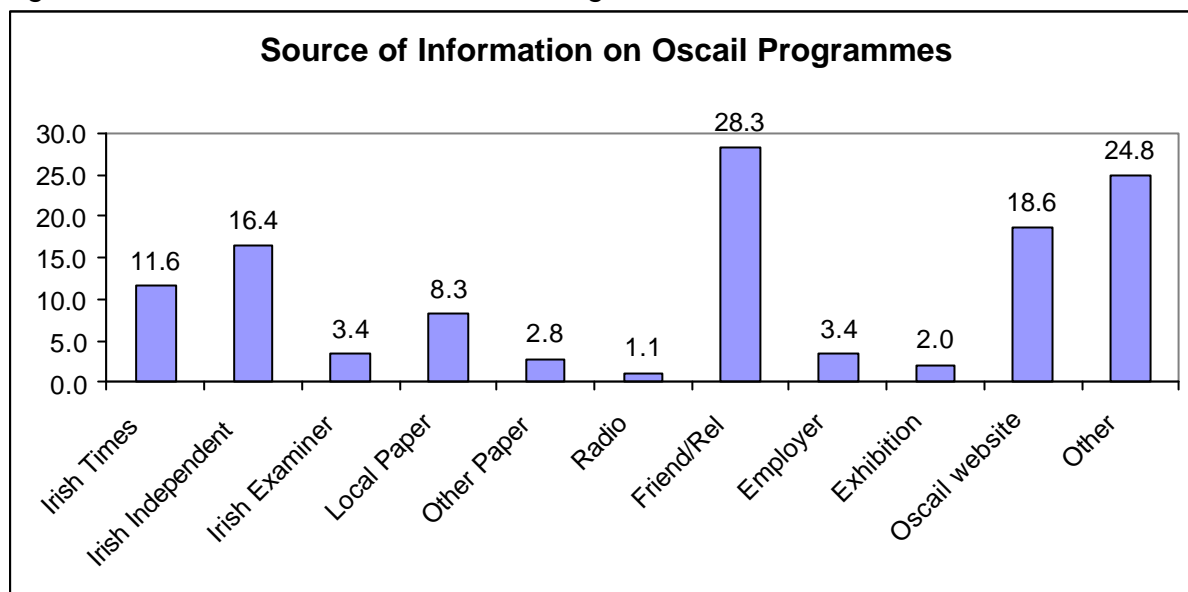
Note: Figures refer to % of respondents who identified this source.

4.4 Intentions to apply for higher education 2001

Respondents were asked if they intended to apply for any of Oscail's programmes in 2001. As Table 4.4.1 shows, 42.2% of respondents had already applied; a further 8.6% stated their intention to apply later that year. Almost one third indicated an intention to apply some time in the future while just 14.1% stated they did not wish to apply. In order to establish whether any particular characteristics were associated with intentions to apply for programmes, the respondents' intentions to apply were cross-tabulated by gender, age, employment status, educational level and region. The outcomes are summarised in Table 4.4.2. The main points to note in this table are:

- Gender is not a factor in decision to apply.
- Age appears to be a factor, with the younger age groups more likely to apply than the older. Intentions to apply declined steadily with increasing age. Almost half (49.3%) of those under 30 had applied, compared with just over one quarter (27.8%) of those aged over 60 years.
- There was no relationship between marital status and intentions to apply
- Employment status appeared to be a factor; over half (57.1%) of those full-time in the home had applied, compared with less than one quarter of retired respondents. Approximately 40% of unemployed as well as employed respondents had applied.
- Education level appeared to be a factor, with those with lowest qualification levels most likely to have applied. Almost three quarters (61.7%) of those with incomplete second level education and over half

(52.6%) of those with second level education had applied, compared with one quarter of those with Bachelor's degree qualifications.

In summary, age, education level and employment status appeared to be an important determinant in respondents' proceeding with their application, with younger, less educated and those working full–time in the home being most likely to have applied. The barriers preventing respondents from applying are explored further in this chapter.

Table 4.4.1 Respondents' intentions with regard to applying for courses

	Applied	Will apply 2001	Will apply in future	Won't apply	No response	Total
N	270	55	206	90	19	640
%	42.2	8.6	32.2	14.1	3.0	100.0

Table 4.4.2 Respondents' intentions with regard to applying for courses by Gender, Age, Marital Status, Educational Level and Location

a) Gender	Applied	Will apply 2001	Will apply in future	Won't apply	Total	N
% Male	46.1	11.8	28.5	13.6	100.0	228
% Female	42.0	7.1	36.0	15.0	100.0	367

b) Age	Applied	Will apply 2001	Will apply in future	Won't apply	Total	N
% Under 30 yrs	49.3	10.5	30.3	9.9	100.0	152
% 31-39	44.0	10.2	30.2	15.6	100.0	225
% 40-49	42.4	6.9	38.2	12.5	100.0	144
% 50-59	35.5	8.1	33.9	22.6	100.0	62
% 60+	27.8	0.0	50.0	22.2	100.0	18

c) Marital Status	Applied	Will apply 2001	Will apply in future	Won't apply	Total	N
% Married	44.8	8.0	35.1	12.2	100.0	288
% Single	46.2	10.1	31.2	12.6	100.0	199
% Other	37.7	9.4	30.2	22.6	100.0	53

d) Employment Status	Applied	Will apply 2001	Will apply in future	Won't apply	Total	N
% Employed full time	44.0	10.6	31.9	13.4	100.0	357
% Employed part time	40.6	7.5	34.9	17.0	100.0	106
% Full time in the home	57.1	3.6	32.1	7.1	100.0	56
% Retired	24.0	0.0	44.0	32.0	100.0	25
% Unemployed	42.0	6.0	32.0	20.0	100.0	50

e) Education Level	Applied	Will apply 2001	Will apply in future	Won't apply	Total	N
% Incomplete 2nd level	61.7	6.4	19.1	12.8	100.0	47
% Leaving cert	52.6	5.9	27.6	13.8	100.0	152
% National Cert/Diploma	44.4	5.9	40.0	9.8	100.0	205
% Bachelor's Degree	25.0	25.0	25.0	25.0	100.0	80
% Higher Degree	28.6	4.8	47.6	19.0	100.0	21
% Professional Qual	37.9	13.7	33.7	14.7	100.0	95

f) Location	Applied	Will apply 2001	Will apply in future	Won't apply	Total	N
% Borders Midland West	38.3	10.0	41.7	10.0	100.0	60
% Dublin	46.5	10.7	26.4	16.4	100.0	159
% Midlands	30.3	9.1	45.5	15.2	100.0	33
% Mid East	49.4	8.9	27.8	13.9	100.0	79
% Mid West	35.7	10.7	35.7	17.9	100.0	28
% South East	38.7	6.7	38.7	16.0	100.0	75
% South West	43.9	6.1	34.8	15.2	100.0	66
% West	50.0	8.3	34.7	6.9	100.0	72

4.5 *What subjects are in demand*

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of interest in taking a list of programmes at degree level. The subject areas presented were: business/management, continental languages, sciences, education/teaching, engineering, computing, social sciences, arts/humanities, and health sciences. They were asked to indicate whether they would definitely like to study the subject area, would like to study, unsure, would not like to study, or would definitely not like to study. Table 4.5.1 summarises the responses to the list of subject areas presented. Figure 4.5.1 also provides a graphical representation highlighting the varying levels of interest in the different disciplines. In an open ended question respondents were also asked to list specific subjects which would be of interest to them, as well as those which would be of interest to others. The subjects suggested by respondents are summarised in Table 4.5.2 below. The main points to note from the data presented are:

- Arts/humanities is the most popular option with almost half (49.5%) stating that they would like to study this subject.

Figure 4.5.1   Subjects which respondents would like to study
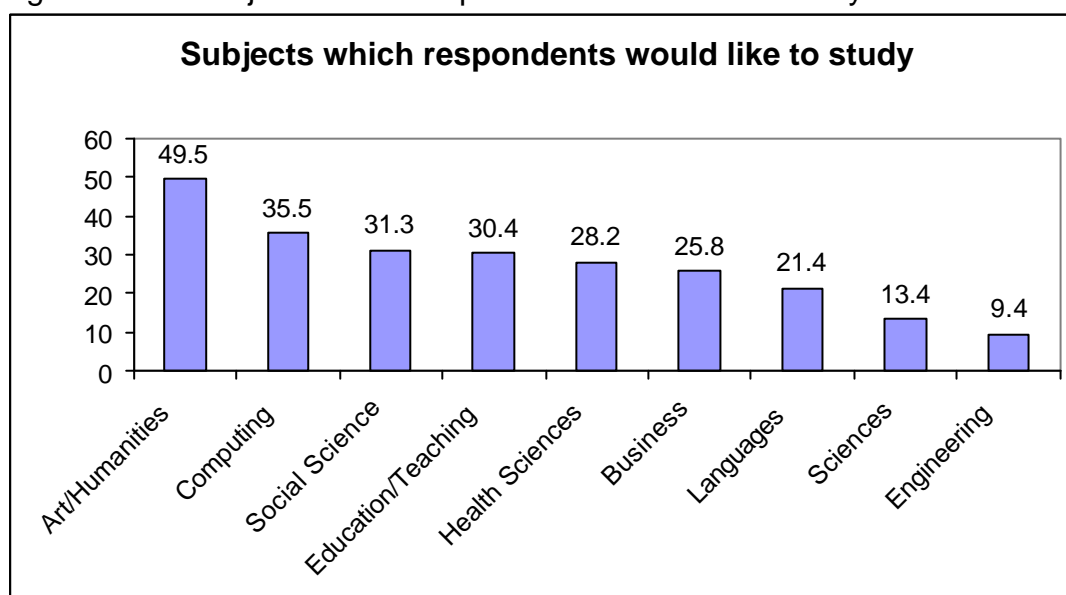
Note: figures represent % of respondents

- Computing is the next most favoured option with over one third stating they would like to study this subject
- There was strong support for social sciences (31.3%) education/teaching (30.4%) and health sciences (28.2%)
- There was less interest in languages (21.4%) and minimal interest in science (13.4%) and engineering (9.4%).

Table 4.5.1 Subjects which respondents would like/not like to study

Subject Area	Definitely like to study	Would like to study	Unsure	Not like to study	Definitely not like to study	No Response	Total
Art/Humanities	**242**	**75**	**44**	**45**	**41**	**193**	**640**
%	37.8	11.7	6.9	7.0	6.4	30.2	100
Business/Management	**69**	**96**	**68**	**65**	**83**	**259**	**640**
%	10.8	15.0	10.6	10.2	13.0	40.5	100
Computing	**128**	**99**	**66**	**47**	**69**	**231**	**640**
%	20.0	15.5	10.3	7.3	10.8	36.1	100
Education/Teaching	**111**	**84**	**65**	**57**	**58**	**265**	**640**
%	17.3	13.1	10.2	8.9	9.1	41.4	100
Engineering	**35**	**25**	**39**	**88**	**159**	**294**	**640**
%	5.5	3.9	6.1	13.8	24.8	45.9	100
Sciences	**27**	**59**	**66**	**84**	**107**	**297**	**640**
%	4.2	9.2	10.3	13.1	16.7	46.4	100
Health sciences	**97**	**83**	**71**	**57**	**74**	**258**	**640**
%	15.2	13.0	11.1	8.9	11.6	40.3	100
Languages	**51**	**86**	**71**	**72**	**82**	**278**	**640**
%	8.0	13.4	11.1	11.3	12.8	43.4	100
Social science	**104**	**96**	**72**	**47**	**49**	**272**	**640**
%	16.3	15.0	11.3	7.3	7.7	42.5	100

In order to obtain more detailed information on the type of subjects of interest, respondents were asked to list subjects they would like to study. They were also asked to list subjects, not necessarily of interest to them, which might be of interest to others. Respondents could list more that one subject. The almost 1,000 suggestions were categorised into broad discipline areas and the figures provide an interesting insight into the potential demand for specific subject areas. The main points of interest in Table 4.5.2 are:

- The demand for disciplines more oriented to personal development appears greater than that for more job-orientated disciplines.
- Humanities (211 mentions) emerges as one of the most popular disciplines, with most demand for history, english and philosophy.
- Social studies (218 mentions) is equally popular with the greatest demand for psychology and sociology
- Business (102 mentions) is the next most popular discipline with management and human resources management being the most frequently cited sub-disciplines.
- Computing and IT (99 mentions) is also in demand with 'computing' in general being most frequently cited.

- Disciplines which might form niche markets include health sciences (66 mentions); languages (56 mentions) in particular french; education and training (53 mentions); sciences (42 mentions) in particular environmental.
- Other disciplines which were mentioned by a relatively small number of respondents include cultural studies (23 mentions); engineering (19 mentions); law (18 mentions); and art and design (10 mentions).

In order to ascertain if interest in different subject areas was influenced by characteristics of respondents, the subject disciplines that respondents indicated they would like to study were cross tabulated by gender, marital status, age group, occupational status, education level and region. The findings are summarised in Table 4.5.3 below. The main points to note from this table are:

- Men are more likely to wish to study job-related programmes (computing 53.7%; business 34.6%) than women, however, for both genders, humanities was the most popular discipline, although women were more likely than men to wish to study this subject (55.3% compared with 44.6%); women were also more interested in health sciences (37.9% compared with 15.2%) and education/teaching (36.8% compared with 22.5%)
- There appeared to be no relationship between marital status and preferences for particular disciplines
- Interest in humanities programmes increased with increasing age (78.9% of those over 60 compared with 41.7% of those under 30); while interest in computing declined (48.7% of those under 30, compared with 21.1% of those over 60)
- There was no particular pattern of preferences related to education level with humanities being the most popular discipline, with the exception of those with professional qualifications. Almost half (47.4%) of those with professional qualifications would like to study the health sciences.
- Again there was no particular pattern of preferences on a regional basis.

In summary, humanities and social sciences emerged as the preferred discipline of the majority of respondents, although there were some differences linked with gender and age. It may be of interest to note that this is in some contrast to the findings of an electronic survey of visitors to the University of Ulster's website which indicated that 22.5% would like to see more e-courses in life sciences, and a further 20.1% would like to see courses in business. Of the remainder, 17.4% wanted courses in informatics; 15.1% in social sciences; 14.4% in engineering; and 10.4% in arts (University of Ulster 2002). This result may indicate that those who respond to online surveys are not necessarily representative of the wider adult population.

Table 4.5.2 Breakdown of Subjects of Interest to Participants and Others

Business

Business	Self	Other
Accounting	9	3
Finance	4	3
General	18	
Health and Safety	2	2
Human Resources Management	17	5
IT	6	12
Management	28	29
Marketing	5	4
Operations Management	3	
Project Management	6	3
Public Relations	2	
Quality Assurance	2	
Total	*102*	*60*

Law	Self	Other
	18	6

Art & Design	Self	Other
Art	8	8
Design	2	1
Total	*10*	*9*

Architecture	Self	Other
	3	9

Cultural Studies	Self	Other
Communications	5	2
Creative Writing	2	1
Drama	4	
Film	5	1
General	2	
Journalism		3
Media Studies	5	2
Total	*23*	*9*

Humanities	Self	Other
Classics	2	1
English	63	3
General	25	2
History	64	8
History of Art	10	1
Music	6	1
Philosophy	33	2
Religion/Theology	8	1
Total	*211*	*19*

Education	Self	Other
Adult Education/Training	12	
General	8	8
Guidance	5	1
IT	1	
Management	2	
Preschool	5	2
Primary	1	1
Remedial	2	
Teaching	17	
Total	*53*	*12*

Social Sciences	Self	Other
Anthropology	3	1
Archaeology	3	1
Counselling	8	2
Economics	6	1
Geography	14	2
Politics	10	4
Psychology	88	6
Social Studies/Sociology	81	6
Social Work	5	
Total	*218*	*22*

Languages	Self	Other
Dutch	1	
French	11	2
General	25	21
German	4	2
Irish	5	6
Italian	2	1
Russian	2	
Spanish	5	
Swedish	1	
Total	*56*	*32*

Engineering	Self	Other
Chemical	1	
Civil	2	3
Electrical/Electronic	8	1
General	5	22
Manufacturing	1	
Mechanical	2	
Total	*19*	*26*

Science	Self	Other
Anatomy	3	
Astronomy	1	
Biology	2	1
Botany	2	
Chemistry	1	1
Environmental	7	1
General	7	12
Geology	2	1
Marine Biology	2	
Mathematics	9	6
Pharmacology	1	1
Physics	4	2
Zoology	1	
Total	*42*	*25*

Health Sciences	Self	Other
Alternative Medicine	3	
General	25	11
Health Promotion	1	
Management	4	1
Nursing	30	4
Physiotherapy	1	
Promotion	2	
Total	*66*	*16*

Computing	Self	Other
Design	2	
Computing	36	23
General	22	9
Internet/Web	11	
Networks	6	
Software/Programming	19	
Systems	3	
Total	*99*	*34*

Other	Self	Other
Cosmology		1
Genealogy	1	
Horticulture	1	1
Personal Development	2	1
Sport Science	1	
Town Planning	1	
Total	*6*	*3*

Table 4.5.3 Subject Choice by gender, marital status, age group, occupational status, employment status, and region

a) Gender	Business	Languages	Humanities	Social Sciences	Education	Science	Health Science	Engineering	Computing
% Male	34.6	18.6	44.6	27.3	22.5	20.3	15.2	18.2	53.7
%Female	21.8	24.5	55.3	36.1	36.8	10.3	37.9	4.7	26.6

b) Marital Status	Business	Languages	Humanities	Social Sciences	Education	Science	Health Science	Engineering	Computing
%Married	24.7	20.1	52.2	31.8	36.5	11.7	30.8	5.4	33.8
%Single	31.0	27.1	49.3	34.0	27.6	18.2	26.6	16.7	43.3
%Other	20.8	26.4	54.7	28.3	26.4	13.2	30.2	1.9	30.2

c) Age Group	Business	Languages	Humanities	Social Sciences	Education	Science	Health Science	Engineering	Computing
%Under 30 yrs	39.1	26.3	41.7	30.1	33.3	19.9	31.4	19.9	48.7
%31-39	29.4	21.9	49.6	36.8	37.3	14.0	32.0	7.0	38.2
%40-49	18.1	17.4	54.4	32.9	30.9	10.7	28.9	6.7	29.5
%50-59	12.1	22.7	60.6	18.2	13.6	9.1	18.2	3.0	22.7
%60+	10.5	21.1	78.9	26.3	10.5	0.0	15.8	5.3	21.1

d) Occupational Status	Business	Languages	Humanities	Social Sciences	Education	Science	Health Science	Engineering	Computing
%Employed full time	34.0	19.7	44.1	30.4	27.9	17.3	28.2	13.7	43.8
%Employed part time	11.8	25.5	56.4	30.0	41.8	6.4	40.0	3.6	21.8
%Full time in the home	17.2	39.7	60.3	41.4	46.6	10.3	27.6	0.0	20.7
%Retired	3.7	14.8	70.4	18.5	14.8	7.4	11.1	7.4	14.8
%Unemployed	25.5	15.7	68.6	43.1	21.6	11.8	21.6	3.9	47.1

e) Level of Education	Business	Languages	Humanities	Social Sciences	Education	Science	Health Science	Engineering	Computing
% Incomplete 2nd level	18.4	30.6	57.1	28.6	18.4	10.2	12.2	10.2	44.9
%Leaving cert	26.8	21.0	61.8	35.0	34.4	12.1	24.8	9.6	38.9
%Nat Cert/Diploma	28.4	21.8	50.7	35.5	36.5	17.5	35.1	13.3	37.9
%Bachelor's Degree	32.0	26.7	45.3	26.7	26.7	14.7	14.7	8.0	34.7
%Higher Degree	17.4	21.7	47.8	26.1	26.1	13.0	17.4	8.7	30.4
%Professional qualification	21.1	15.8	38.9	30.5	27.4	10.5	47.4	2.1	28.4

f) Planning region	Business	Languages	Humanities	Social Sciences	Education	Science	Health Science	Engineering	Computing
%Borders Midland West	21.0	24.2	50.0	35.5	45.2	9.7	33.9	12.9	41.9
%Dublin	25.8	20.2	50.9	33.7	20.2	12.9	20.2	9.8	37.4
%Midlands	27.3	33.3	48.5	27.3	36.4	15.2	36.4	9.1	42.4
%Mid East	37.5	22.5	45.0	30.0	32.5	17.5	26.3	12.5	40.0
%Mid West	20.0	33.3	63.3	40.0	40.0	20.0	33.3	10.0	30.0
%South East	21.5	20.3	59.5	32.9	38.0	12.7	26.6	8.9	26.6
%South West	28.8	21.2	48.5	33.3	31.8	21.2	27.3	13.6	36.4
%West	27.0	16.2	51.4	32.4	33.8	8.1	44.6	2.7	33.8

4.6 Preferred mode of study

One of the major areas of interest in this study is the extent of the potential demand for distance learning from mature students. Respondents in this survey were requested to rank a number of modes of learning in order of preference. The modes listed were full-time on-campus lectures; part-time on-campus lectures (evenings/weekends); distance learning (written course materials; tutorials in study centres; eLearning (extensive use of technology-based materials; online tutorial support; occasional meetings in study centres) and other. The number of first preferences for each mode was calculated and the distribution of first preferences is given in Table 4.6.1 and illustrated graphically in Figure 4.6.1. It is clear that full-time on-campus study is not a particularly popular option, with only 13.1% of respondents listing this mode as their first preference for study mode. In contrast, distance learning is the most preferred mode of study, with almost half (47.8%) opting for this mode as their first preference. While part-time study was listed as the next preferred mode (18.9%) it is interesting to note that only 14.5% opted for eLearning. While access to PCs has increased over the years, nevertheless, there are strong indications that the digital divide serves to limit the accessibility and attractiveness of eLearning approaches to a relatively small proportion of the potential market.

Table 4.6.1 First preferences for study mode

Mode of Study	Number of First Preferences	%
Distance learning	306	47.8
Part-time, on-campus lectures	121	18.9
eLearning	93	14.5
Full-time, on-campus lectures	84	13.1
Other	7	1.1
No response	29	4.5
Total	640	100.00

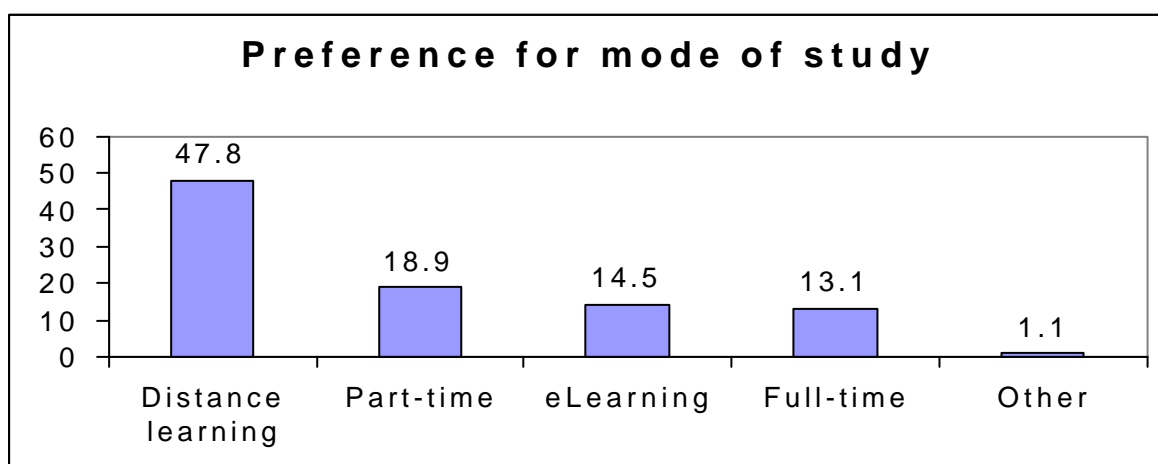Figure 4.6.1 Preference for Mode of Study

Table 4.6.2 First preferences for mode of study, by gender, age group, educational attainment, employment status and location

Gender	Full-time on campus lectures	Part-time on campus lectures	Distance learning	eLearning	N
%Male	15.6	21.2	46.8	15.6	231
%Female	12.1	17.9	51.8	14.7	380

Age Group	Full-time on campus lectures	Part-time on campus lectures	Distance learning	eLearning	N
%Under 30 yrs	18.6	21.8	41.7	15.4	156
%31-39	9.6	20.2	52.6	16.7	228
%40-49	12.1	17.4	50.3	15.4	149
%50-59	18.2	16.7	54.5	6.1	66
%60+	10.5	21.1	47.4	15.8	19

Educational Attainment	Full-time on campus lectures	Part-time on campus lectures	Distance learning	eLearning	N
%Incomplete 2nd level	16.3	16.3	44.9	18.4	49
%Leaving cert	15.3	15.9	55.4	11.5	157
%National Cert/Diploma	14.7	21.3	45.0	16.1	211
%Bachelor's Degree	12.0	14.7	48.0	17.3	75
%Higher Degree	13.0	30.4	47.8	8.7	23
%Professional qualification	7.4	21.1	54.7	16.8	95

Employment Status	Full-time on campus lectures	Part-time on campus lectures	Distance learning	eLearning	N
%Employed full time	12.9	21.9	45.8	17.8	365
%Employed part time	11.8	20.9	54.5	9.1	110
%Full time in the home	6.9	15.5	55.2	17.2	58
%Retired	22.2	18.5	44.4	7.4	27
%Unemployed	25.5	5.9	54.9	9.8	51

Region	Full-time on campus lectures	Part-time on campus lectures	Distance learning	eLearning	N
%Borders Midland West	4.8	16.1	58.1	21.0	62
%Dublin	17.2	24.5	40.5	12.9	163
%Midland	12.1	18.2	54.5	15.2	33
%Mid East	7.5	25.0	48.8	17.5	80
%Mid West	16.7	20.0	46.7	10.0	30
%South East	17.7	12.7	57.0	8.9	79
%South West	18.2	9.1	53.0	15.2	66
%West	15.8	21.1	48.7	14.5	76

In order to assess the impact of personal and locational factors on preferences for different modes of study, preferences were cross-tabulated by gender, age group, educational attainment, employment status and region. The results of this analysis are summarised in Table 4.6.2 above. The main point to note from this table is that the most popular mode of study remains distance education regardless of gender, age, educational attainment, employment or status. In all cases, distance education is the most favoured mode of study. There are indications that there is a slightly higher preference for full-time on-campus education amongst those aged under 30 (18.6%) or unemployed (25.5%) or retired (22.2%) i.e. those less likely to be constrained by family or employment commitments. It would appear from these figures that there is a significant number of mature students who are seeking the flexibility afforded by distance learning, but a far smaller number who can make the time and financial commitment required by full-time education. It is interesting to note that demand for eLearning approaches is low across the board. The reasons for the low interest in eLearning approaches is the subject of investigation elsewhere (MacKeogh 2001b). The explanation lies in a combination of lack of access to technical infrastructure, lack of technical competence and attitudinal barriers arising from concerns and fears about the impact of technology on the nature and quality of education. In the next section we investigate the barriers to participating in higher education identified by respondents.

4.7   Barriers to participation

In order to identify the types of barriers faced by mature students in accessing higher education, respondents who had not applied for Oscail programmes were asked to rate the importance of a number of factors in influencing their decision not to apply for courses. The responses are outlined in Table 4.7.1 and summarised graphically in Figure 4.7.1. The main point to note from Table 4.7.1 is that cost was the most significant factor. Almost half (45.6%) of non-applicants indicated that the cost of the programme was either very important or important in their decision. Given the respondents' declared preference for non full-time options, and the fact that only full-time courses attract free fees, this is perhaps not surprising. The other factors in descending order of importance were 'this isn't the right time for me to start a substantial programme of education' (40.3%); 'I wouldn't have enough time to study' (31.1%); 'the course content did not suit my needs' (26.2%). Less important factors were 'the study centre is too far away' (14.6%); 'there isn't enough information for me to decide' (11.6%); 'the level of the programme is too high' (9.5%); 'the distance learning method wouldn't suit me' (7.5%). Finally a small percentage of respondents (4.9%) indicated that they were enquiring on behalf of someone else (for example, personnel officers, relations etc).

Table 4.7.1 Factors influencing decision not to apply

Reason	Very important	Important	Not important	Not at all important	No response	Total
Cost was too high	**93**	**76**	**49**	**31**	**121**	**370**
%	*25.1*	*20.5*	*13.2*	*8.4*	*32.7*	*100*
Not the right time	**97**	**52**	**18**	**47**	**156**	**370**
%	*26.2*	*14.1*	*4.9*	*12.7*	*42.2*	*100*
No time to study	**50**	**65**	**43**	**53**	**159**	**370**
%	*13.5*	*17.6*	*11.6*	*14.3*	*43.0*	*100*
Course content did not suit	**66**	**31**	**45**	**63**	**165**	**370**
%	*17.8*	*8.4*	*12.2*	*17.0*	*44.6*	*100*
Study centre too far	**19**	**35**	**48**	**92**	**176**	**370**
%	*5.1*	*9.5*	*13.0*	*24.9*	*47.6*	*100*
Not enough information	**14**	**29**	**46**	**98**	**183**	**370**
%	3.8	7.8	12.4	26.5	49.5	100
Course level too high	**14**	**21**	**75**	**81**	**179**	**370**
%	*3.8*	*5.7*	*20.3*	*21.9*	*48.4*	*100*
Distance learning doesn't suit	**9**	**19**	**54**	**110**	**178**	**370**
%	*2.4*	*5.1*	*14.6*	*29.7*	*48.1*	*100*
Enquiring for someone else	**11**	**7**	**10**	**142**	**200**	**370**
%	*3.0*	*1.9*	*2.7*	*38.4*	*54.1*	*100*

Figure 4.7.1 Most important factors in deciding not to participate
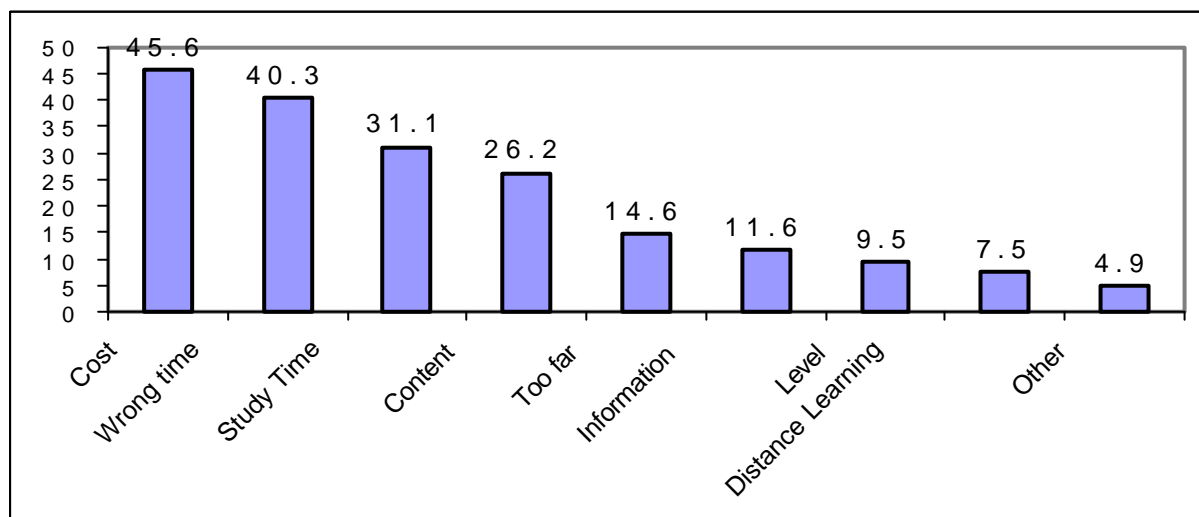
Note: Figures refer to % of respondents

The factors influencing the decision not to apply were further cross-tabulated by whether respondents intended to apply at a later stage, or had decided not to apply at all. Table 4.7.2 indicates the factors respondents identified as important or very important in their decision, broken down by future intentions. The key point to note is that when these factors are analysed in this way, while cost remained a significant inhibiting factor

regardless of whether respondents had intentions to apply in the future or not, it is interesting to note that the most important factor cited by those who intended not to apply was that the course content available did not meet their needs. Over half (51.1%) of this group cited course content as the most important factor. In contrast, those who were deferring application cited the fact that the timing was not right to start their studies (59.2%) with 46.1% claiming that they would not have enough time to study

Table 4.7.2 Relationship between importance of factors inhibiting non-applicants and intention to apply

Inhibiting Factors	Will apply 2001	Will apply in future	Won't apply	All non applicants
Cost was too high	**4**	**120**	**40**	**164**
% citing importance of factor	7.3	58.3	44.4	44.3
Not the right time	**1**	**122**	**21**	**144**
% citing importance of factor	1.8	59.2	23.3	38.9
No time to study	**0**	**95**	**17**	**112**
% citing importance of factor	0.0	46.1	18.9	30.3
Course content did not suit	**2**	**47**	**46**	**95**
% citing importance of factor	3.6	22.8	51.1	25.7
Study centre too far	**0**	**38**	**14**	**52**
% citing importance of factor	0.0	18.4	15.6	14.1
Not enough information	**1**	**29**	**13**	**43**
% citing importance of factor	1.8	14.1	14.4	11.6
Distance learning doesn't suit	**2**	**15**	**10**	**27**
% citing importance of factor	3.6	7.3	11.1	7.3
N (non-applicants)	55	206	90	370

The importance of factors inhibiting respondents from applying for courses was further analysed by cross-tabulating factors by gender, marital status, age group, employment status, educational attainment and region. Table 4.7.3 summarises this analysis. The main points to note from this table are:

- Male and female respondents appear to attach the same level of importance to the different factors.

- Married respondents and those in the other category are slightly more likely to rate cost as an important factor (57.6% in the other category - e.g. lone parents, divorced, separated, compared with 44.1% of single respondents).

- Concerns with cost and timing appear to increase with age, perhaps reflecting the increasing demands on income and time imposed by family and domestic commitments Some 52.0% of those aged under 30 cited the importance of cost, compared with 63.6% of those aged 30-39, 72.1% of those aged 40-49 and 95.5% of those aged 50-59. Again, just 41.3% of those aged 30 years had not applied, as the timing was not right to start, compared with 77.3% of those aged 50-59.

- Those working in the home or unemployed are more likely to be inhibited by cost than those in employment or retired. Over four fifths (83.3%) of

unemployed and almost two thirds (65.4%) of those in the home, compared with just over two-fifths (41.8%) in employment cited cost as important.

- Those with lower levels of educational attainment were also most likely to be inhibited by cost (60% of those with incomplete second level education compared with 45.5% of those with a Bachelor's degree).

- There was no clear pattern discernible on a regional basis with respondents in all regions citing cost as the most important factor.

- The distance learning method was not a significant barrier for any sub-category.

In summary, while other factors were cited as important, the major inhibiting factor for non-applicants was cost.

Table 4.7.3 Inhibiting factors cited by non-applicants by gender, marital status, age group, employment status, educational level, and region

a) Gender	Cost	Not right time	Study time	Content	Study Centre	Information	Distance Education	N
% Male	54.5	39.0	30.1	21.1	12.2	13.0	8.9	123
% Female	50.7	45.5	37.1	12.2	18.3	13.6	9.4	213

b) Marital Status	Cost	Not right time	Study time	Content	Study Centre	Information	Distance Education	N
%Married	52.4	41.8	34.7	28.8	17.6	12.9	10.0	170
%Single	44.1	43.2	36.0	25.2	13.5	11.7	8.1	111
%Other	57.6	48.5	27.3	27.3	15.2	12.1	9.1	33

c) Age Group	Cost	Not right time	Study time	Content	Study Centre	Information	Distance Education	N
%Under 30 yrs	52.0	41.3	37.3	29.3	17.3	13.3	8.0	75
%30-39	63.6	55.6	46.5	39.4	17.2	17.2	9.1	99
%40-49	72.1	60.7	45.9	37.7	27.9	19.7	14.8	61
%50-59	95.5	77.3	40.9	50.0	18.2	13.6	22.7	22
%60+	57.1	50.0	50.0	35.7	28.6	21.4	14.3	14

d) Employment Status	Cost	Not right time	Study time	Content	Study Centre	Information	Distance Education	N
%Employed Full-time	41.8	42.8	37.0	27.4	12.5	13.9	9.6	208
%Employed Part-time	49.3	35.8	34.3	32.8	19.4	14.9	10.4	67
%Home	65.4	50.0	42.3	38.5	19.2	7.7	0.0	26
%Retired	52.4	42.9	19.0	28.6	14.3	14.3	14.3	21
%Unemployed	83.3	36.7	10.0	20.0	26.7	3.3	3.3	30

e) Educational Attainment	Cost	Not right time	Study time	Content	Study Centre	Information	Distance Education	N
%Incomplete 2nd Level	60.0	40.0	30.0	20.0	10.0	5.0	5.0	20
%Leaving Certificate	53.2	40.3	39.0	24.7	14.3	10.4	9.1	77
%Nat Cert/Diploma	52.5	41.7	35.0	29.2	20.0	15.0	12.5	120
%Bachelor's Degree	45.5	36.4	30.9	43.6	10.9	12.7	5.5	55
%Higher Degree	47.1	41.2	41.2	17.6	23.5	17.6	0.0	17
%Professional Qual	37.3	47.5	27.1	25.4	10.2	13.6	6.8	59

f) Region	Cost	Not right time	Study time	Content	Study Centre	Information	Distance Education	N
%Borders Midland West	46.2	43.6	46.2	43.6	23.1	20.5	5.1	39
%Dublin	52.8	37.1	32.6	30.3	6.7	11.2	11.2	89
%Midlands	56.5	43.5	26.1	17.4	13.0	13.0	13.0	23
%Mid East	43.9	41.5	31.7	31.7	4.9	4.9	7.3	41
%Mid West	65.0	40.0	30.0	45.0	20.0	15.0	10.0	20
%South East	46.0	46.0	34.0	24.0	24.0	12.0	6.0	50
%South West	56.8	40.5	21.6	10.8	13.5	8.1	8.1	37
%West	47.4	44.7	39.5	21.1	15.8	10.5	7.9	38

Respondents who did not intend to apply for courses in 2001/2002 were asked to comment on their reasons. While the reasons largely reflected those outlined in the tables above, some of the comments help to illuminate

the real difficulties experienced by those who wish to access higher education. Some of these comments are reproduced below:

Table 4.7.4 Comments on factors influencing respondents not to apply

Financial reasons:	• Orthodontal care for one of my children had to take precedence this year.
	• My son has just commenced UCD doing law and the financial pressure is too much at the moment, as we do not qualify for any grants.
	• Due to the recent downturn in the economy I have now decided to save for it rather than borrow.
	• Two months is a little short notice to raise €1000. I will wait another year.
	• I would have considered an 'easy option' payment scheme per month rather than the lump sum.
	• Course sounds very interesting and I would love to apply this year, however it is expensive and Oscail do not offer the opportunity to pay in instalments which is a pity.
	• I am waiting for next year to apply because I am a lone parent and have missed the deadline for financial assistance.
	• As a mother of three young children I felt that I would have inadequate free time in which to study coupled with the cost factor and the fact that my ultimate aim is to teach primary school and accordingly have postponed by return to adult education for now.
Need for more information/ Guidance	• I am not sure of what direction to go or what subjects to pick.
	• I was undecided as to what exactly I want to study and this indecision made me hesitate too long and then other immediate commitments got in the way. I'm still very interested, but I need to refocus.
	• Found the combination of modules etc confusing, would need guidance before making a commitment.
Concerns about ability	• Unsure of my capability for the programme as I have been out of education for some years.
	• I think the level of maths might be too difficult for me at present.
	• I decided to learn some basic computer skills this year and buy a computer. May be a little easier then to do distance learning.
	• I have no IT skill which I think would be important for the course.
	• On reflection, I think I am too old to undertake prolonged study.
Duration of a degree programme	• Studying through the summer would not be possible for me (house full of children all day). I need to get qualified at something more quickly; this degree would take too long.
	• I feel that I would need longer than four years to complete a degree and would be very disheartened if it were to take 6. I am just unsure about distance learning.
	• It would take too long to complete the course as I could only afford 1-2 modules per year.
	• I would like a less demanding course, maybe an evening class.

In analysing the comments, cost again emerged as an inhibiting factor but mainly for those who were interested in pursuing the courses on offer. Cost was cited in the comments by 25.3% of those intending to apply later, whereas only 8.3% of those who state they did not intend to apply mentioned cost as a factor. Rather, this latter group were more likely to indicate that they were looking for other subjects not offered by Oscail (e.g. law, languages, education). Over one third of comments (35.4%) from those not intending to apply referred to the fact that they were interested in other subjects, compared with 8.4% of those intending to apply later and a further 16.7% stated they had chosen another course. Interestingly a small percentage, even though seeking opportunities at degree level, were deterred by the perceived duration of commitment in terms of time. Some 14.6% of respondents who did not intend to apply appeared to be seeking a 'quick-fix' qualification and were not prepared to or in a position to put in the time required.

4.8   Summary

A series of official reports has recommended establishing quotas for mature students in higher education. The Programme for Prosperity and Fairness stated that colleges should aim to have 15% of enrolments comprising mature students by 2005. The Points Commission (1999) recommended a quota of 15% by 2005, rising to 25% in 2015, and the Review Committee on Post-Secondary Education and Training (deBuitléir, 1999) recommended that an additional stock of 10,000 places in higher education should be set aside for mature students. The latter report and a number of subsequent reports have also acknowledged that before such places are provided it is important to establish if there is indeed a demand for this provision from mature students. It is also important to establish what subject areas are in demand, and what the likely preferences for mode of delivery will be. The findings of this survey outlined in this chapter may help to provide a picture of the likely market demand from mature adults as well as of the types of barriers inhibiting access.

It appears that significant numbers of adults are more interested in studying courses related to general personal development rather than more career focused and job related courses. Humanities and social sciences are likely to attract far greater enrolments than the sciences and engineering. This merely reflects the uptake of places in traditional on-campus education. If the needs of the economy dictate a greater uptake of science and engineering courses by adults, then a series of targeted initiatives with appropriate supports and awards will be essential. With regard to mode of delivery, it is most unlikely that the institutions will succeed in filling their quotas of 15% if the only option available is full-time education. Most adults with financial, domestic, social and employment commitments are not in a position to put their lives and commitments on hold for four years while they pursue full-time study. Instead, they need the flexibility to combine these

commitments while studying, and this means increased provision of courses through flexible modes of delivery, with distance education being the most preferred mode. Interestingly, while many commentators and policy makers cite eLearning as holding great promise for providing opportunities for mature students (for example McGill and Morgan, 2001; CEC 2001; Skilbeck 2001) according to the findings of this survey, this view is not widely shared by potential students. There is still much work to do to bridge the digital divide resulting not only from differential access to technology but also to differential competence and attitudinal barriers. As the survey demonstrates, there are still significant barriers inhibiting adults from participating in higher education. Cost is a major factor and funding issues must be addressed, however, it should also be recognised that cost is not the only factor. Because of the nature of adults' lives, their hopes and expectations, no matter what interventions are made, and even if the opportunities are there, the time may just not be right. In the next chapter we provide a more qualitative account of the reality of adults' hopes and expectations of higher education, and their perceptions of the barriers to participation.

Chapter 5: Focus Groups – Views on Demand for Access

5.1   Introduction

While the quantitative information provided by the questionnaire is, no doubt, useful in providing an indicator of the nature and level of market demand for access to higher education, it was also decided that there was a need for more qualitative data, to expand on as well as to validate the findings of the survey. To ensure regional coverage, a series of three focus groups was arranged in Dublin, Galway and Cork in May 2002. Participants were selected from those who had indicated on the postal questionnaire that they would be willing to be interviewed. Participants were invited by post, email and telephone and were given a nominal fee to cover expenses. Two participants (both female) participated in the Galway focus group. Eight (four men, four women) attended the Dublin meeting and twelve (seven men, five women) attended the Cork meeting. The age group ranged from late twenties to late fifties and participants included both students in their first year of study with Oscail as well as those who were not currently involved in study. Occupations included administrators, secretaries, an unemployed IT worker, an electrician, postal worker, and nurses. Three had completed a degree, seven had completed certificate/diploma course, two had nursing qualifications, seven had completed study at leaving certificate level, and one had finished school without certification. While most had taken some short courses, eight had had no experience of further study.

While the meetings were informal, the facilitators followed a semi-structured interview schedule which asked participants to discuss such questions as: what does higher education mean to you; what subjects would attract mature students; what is the most attractive form of study; what are the barriers to participation; if you were Minister for Adult Education what would you do to attract adults into higher education? A copy of the interview schedule is attached as Appendix 2.

The discussion with the Dublin and Cork groups was taped, however, due to technical difficulties it was not possible to tape the Galway meeting. However, extensive notes of all meetings were taken. The notes and tapes of the discussions have been analysed and are summarised in this chapter. Generally, the focus groups served to confirm some of the findings of the survey with respect to types of subjects, mode of study and financial barriers. However, the views of the participants with regard to higher education and the barriers which prevent mature students from entering higher education are illuminating. In particular, the survey questionnaire could not hope to expose the level of fears and trepidation with regard to third level education experienced by even highly qualified individuals working in senior positions.

This chapter starts by outlining the views expressed on higher education, followed by a summary of the participants' estimation of the types of subjects that would attract mature students as well as the modes of study that would be most suitable. The barriers to participation identified by participants are then outlined. The chapter concludes with a summary of suggestions for attracting greater numbers of mature students into higher education.

5.2 Views on higher education

Participants were first asked for their general views on higher education. The discussion focused on why adults in general might enter higher education as well as on the reasons why the participants themselves had considered this option. The influence of role models emerged as a key element in creating an awareness of the reality and potential of higher education.

5.2.1 Why do adults enter higher education?

The participants identified 'two camps' of mature students, those studying for job-related reasons and those seeking personal development. They suggested that adults enter higher education to improve their quality of life, to understand more; to gain wisdom; 'to exercise the brain like any other muscle'; 'the mind needs to be fed'. There was a fear of being sucked into life – of 'turning into a cabbage'. Some who had started studying had felt fed up 'watching too much rubbish on television' (one participant indicated that he felt more fulfilled now that he has taken up study). There might be some career element, but also there is the need to broaden horizons.

A number of participants felt they had 'missed out' at an earlier stage. While the majority of Leaving Certificate students now consider entry to higher education as an inevitable step before commencing employment, even in the mid-1970s it was common for students to leave school, sometimes even before completing the leaving certificate, to seek employment. Higher education was not an option for many who are now seeking to make up for what they see as lost opportunity.

Some adults are motivated by job and career development and the need to enhance their employability in more volatile times. One participant had lost his job in the economic downturn after the events of September 11th. Participants discussed feelings of inadequacy in the work situation. For some 'there is no future without a degree'. There is a new need for credibility nowadays. A degree is accorded the same status as a leaving certificate was twenty years ago, and it is not possible to progress without a degree. Some companies foster a culture of education and training (one participant cited the hospital in which he worked as being particularly supportive of employees studying) but other participants pointed out that in their experience companies only support courses which are applicable to

employment. They are not supportive of courses taken purely for personal development.

It was agreed that everyone benefits from higher education, starting with individual students through to employers and society. More educated people bring faster development of the country and a highly developed country can in turn offer a better life to its people.

5.2.2 *Role models*

Participants mentioned a number of role models in higher education and how important these are in stimulating the desire to study (or in some cases, not to take on the pressures of third level study). Among these were; a mother who did her degree in her 50s and who inspired her daughter to do the same, albeit at a somewhat earlier age; a father who studied for two years with the Open University and who left his daughter with the impression that she would prefer to study by more conventional methods; a friend who was succeeding in studying a degree full-time while working shifts in a state company; a wife doing a full-time degree in education – the institution had held an evening for partners which helped to include family in the students' new world; a brother-in-law successfully studying an Open University course; fellow workers studying banking courses part-time who come into the office to study from 7am to 9am before working a full day; a participant from a family of twelve children of whom ten had obtained degrees and who admitted to feelings of 'mad jealousy' of these siblings who appeared to be enjoying the student lifestyle while she slogged in the workforce; a married friend with children commuting to Dublin every week to take a degree course who was the object of admiration for her persistence but who did not evoke desires to emulate her example; work colleagues taking work-related qualifications with Oscail who were finding it hard going, but enjoying the challenge. It was agreed that the presence of colleagues, friends and family studying for degrees tends to create an awareness of the benefits as well as the pressures of third level study. This in turn has a powerful influence in stimulating others to consider taking on the challenge of higher education for themselves.

5.3 What subjects would attract adult students?

Participants were asked to suggest subjects which not only they personally would find attractive, but also their friends and relatives. The subjects mentioned could be classified as work-related, subjects aimed at those working in the voluntary and community sector and those geared towards personal development, albeit with a potential to enhance employability in some non-specified way. Work-related subjects included computers and IT; training and development; personnel development and other management topics; nursing management; and alternative medicine. It was pointed out that thousands of people work in the voluntary and community sector who have specific needs. For example, courses in sports science could be

provided for many people working with local teams, covering such topics as motivation and coaching players; another suggestion was for courses aimed at equipping those working in community development with skills (e.g. motivation, communications, leadership, fund-raising). By far the greatest interest expressed by participants with regard to their own needs was in topics which would help them to 'interrogate' their own world, to understand what makes humans tick. One participant (an electrician) now studying literature, was most enthusiastic about this subject as a way of broadening his understanding of the world. Among the other subjects mentioned were social sciences; psychology (as a standalone degree programme); languages; arts and drama; theology; philosophy; politics; and communications.

5.4   What mode of study is most desirable?

A proportion of participants agreed that if they were financially secure and had no personal commitments (e.g. all children have grown up and left home, and they could take leave from their job on full pay, or if they won the lotto) they would choose full-time higher education. Nevertheless, in their current circumstances, most participants favoured the flexibility of distance education. In fact, some participants suggested that all degree level programmes should be offered both on-campus and in distance learning format as a way of increasing the choice of courses available.

With regard to eLearning, many expressed fears of ICT because of their lack of skills. One commented that it was 'hard enough to get around studying!'.   But it was agreed that keyboarding skills were useful and a participant who learned these skills for a previous course stressed that IT would be an advantage to studying. Fears of wasting time on IT were expressed. On the Internet 'you spend time chasing down alleys'; others don't like reading from the screen. One participant noted that she was fed up working with screens all day and wouldn't want to study on screen in the evening. However among the benefits are that students can download assignments and other resources off the web and contact tutors by email. Another participant who had completed the ECDL was positive about the benefits of working at your own pace, with multimedia materials including voice and text.

Concerns were expressed that using technology might isolate students from the learning group and lead to lack of human interaction. However one participant referred to the difficulty he had encountered of developing rapport with fellow students in a face-to-face tutorial whereas online discussion groups taking place over a more extended period might help to foster a sense of community.

5.5 Barriers

5.5.1 Introduction

When participants were asked to discuss the barriers preventing adults from accessing higher education, a range of issues emerged. Among these were the widely recognised barriers of funding and domestic and social commitments, however other barriers which were identified included institutional barriers presented in the form of difficulties in acquiring information in an accessible and easily understood form as well as a number of largely self-imposed attitudinal barriers arising from personal fears and inhibitions. One somewhat surprising barrier, which was widely discussed, was the fact that while participants wanted a degree, nevertheless the duration and level of commitment involved was seen as a significant deterrent. Participants also pointed to the need to develop study and IT skills to enable them to succeed in modern forms of higher education, while the relatively restricted number of subjects available in flexible modes of study is also seen as a disincentive. Finally the lack of agreements on credit recognition and transfer in respect of prior learning restricts the ability of students to accumulate credits and obviate the need to repeat blocks of study.

5.5.2 Institutional Barriers: Information and access

Participants spoke of the barriers, real and imaginary, thrown up by the institutions themselves. One participant who had come to the campus for the first time for the focus group meeting spoke of her confusion and inability to find her way even to the room where the meeting was taking place. Participants reported that finding information on what is available from the institutions in an accessible and understandable format is difficult. They found information brochures confusing and complicated; the amount of information was too daunting and difficult to take in. There was confusion about terminology because of unfamiliarity with concepts such as modules, credits, assessment, prerequisites etc. While Oscail brochures stress that enquirers are welcome to contact course advisors by telephone, email or personal meetings, a number of participants spoke of their fears of contacting strangers to seek information, their reluctance to believe that help would be forthcoming. Some felt that information meetings were more helpful in breaking down these fears as individuals were more approachable face to face. Participants suggested that information meetings, and open days should be organised at accessible places such as public libraries and shopping centres. Another suggestion was to open normal lectures in institutions to adults so that they can 'taste' the reality before making commitments. The information materials and web pages of the higher education institutions should take into account the needs of those inexperienced in the ways of higher education. Many websites are not friendly to such users; they are complicated to navigate and do not provide links to required information in a clear and accessible way. For

example some university home pages do not provide contact addresses and telephone numbers or emails.

5.5.3 *Funding*

It is no surprise to find that participants found lack of funding to be a barrier. Participants suggested that if Government is serious in meeting its target of attracting mature students to higher education they should establish a fund to enable disadvantaged and low paid adults to participate in higher education regardless of mode or timing of study, as well as providing special loan schemes. If students do not have enough money of their own, or if their employer won't pay, higher education is not an option. It was mentioned that there is 'funding apartheid' in third level. Students who leave employment to start full-time education cannot receive a grant, as they must have been unemployed for six months before becoming eligible for the Third Level Allowance. Students on part-time or distance education courses are not eligible for any support and must pay full fees. While tax relief on fees is available, one participant regarded this as 'harmless'. Participants would also welcome a more flexible scheme of payment of fees. As one participant commented '€1000 was just too much to acquire just after Christmas, I had to let the course go for another year'.

5.5.4 *Domestic/Social Commitments*

Lone parents find it particularly difficult to participate in higher education because of financing and childcare. Those with young families also experience difficulties. For many, it is not feasible to leave home to travel to full-time education in institutions located long distances away. The disruption, both financial and emotional, is seen as not worth the investment of effort involved, and adults are prepared to forego the opportunity to study until a later, more propitious, time. Even with the flexibility of distance education, there is a perception that mature students need to be 'selfish' to succeed in higher education, to be focused on their own needs to the detriment of family; some participants mentioned their feeling of 'stealing time' from others

5.5.5 *Fears, inhibitions and attitudinal barriers*

It was suggested that entry to higher education is 'a huge step into the dark' especially for those who have no role models. Higher education is seen as a minefield for the uninitiated. To be successful in navigating the minefield, adults need to be self-confident and have high self-esteem. As mentioned earlier, some participants found that even coming into the university campus for the first time had been an intimidating experience. There is a need to take the mystery away from institutions. Poor signage and lack of awareness on the part of authorities of the problems experienced by those new to the campus served to increase feelings of intimidation and inadequacy. Some students hesitate to contact their tutor even though they are informed that they may do so. Even in an era where adults are used to

transacting business by telephone, some individuals are hesitant about ringing strangers to ask for help.

Another fear, which was mentioned, was a feeling of being too old, and a reluctance to mix in with the 'young ones' in full-time education. Gender differences were also highlighted. It was felt that men may feel more intimidated in accessing higher education, receiving little support from their peers, whereas women are more likely to do something for themselves, and receive encouragement from their friends to do so.

While participants recognised that some of these concerns are self-imposed barriers they are nonetheless real to the individuals concerned. Individuals need self-confidence to ring up and ask for help. Strong motivation and self-belief is essential for success.

5.5.6   *Duration and timing of degree programmes*
Some participants, while wanting to do a degree programme, find the prospect of commitment over four years (and possibly more) a daunting prospect; one Oscail module requires 10-12 hours study per week over a period of forty weeks and twelve modules are required to complete a degree. One participant spoke of the fear of being 'locked up in a room for four years' and of having flashbacks to the pressures experienced in studying for the Leaving Certificate. Participants suggested giving people the opportunity to start small with shorter modules in the form of 'little bites'. There is also a strong interest in studying single modules without having to take prescribed progression routes. It was suggested that students should be able to choose modules from programmes in accordance with their own interests, time and financial capacity.

Finding time to study was also seen as a barrier even where the flexibility of distance education allows students more control over the timing of their study. Some participants felt that in their case they would find it easier to learn by attending lectures on a day release basis than in organising and blocking out time to study for themselves.

It was also suggested that the practice of having one intake per year (and in some universities every four years) to part-time programmes is a significant disincentive to some. It should be possible to have more frequent starting points. As one participant commented 'you only need slight discouragement and you're gone'.

5.5.7   *The importance of preparation for study*
All agreed that returning to study is very daunting initially. An induction module, which would give students an example of what they should expect during their study, is crucial. Such a module should give students not only an overview of the content of the chosen programme but also should give

them the 'flavour' of study itself (how to write an essay, how to manage time etc). If they choose distance education they need to know how to communicate with tutors, what they can expect and require from them, as well as where to search for the help they need. One participant noted that Oscail's Introductory Module was the 'best value for money ever spent'. (This module introduces students to study skills and distance education within a disciplinary context.) It was agreed that students need to be trained in study skills and ICT; practical introductory sessions to computers prior to starting would be helpful.

5.5.8 *Recognition of prior learning*
The importance of recognition of prior learning in the form of exemptions and advanced standing in courses has been recognised elsewhere. However, not all institutions allow recognition of prior learning. One participant who had completed a diploma course in one NUI College mentioned that the credits obtained were not recognised for the purposes of exemption in another NUI college. It was suggested that institutions should allow for credit transfer from one course to another.

5.5.9 *Provision of subjects*
Despite the multitude of courses and programmes provided by the higher education institutions, the fact that the vast majority are only available on campus, and entry is strictly limited on the basis of leaving certificate points, is a barrier to the wider participation of mature students. The limited number of subjects available in flexible part-time or distance education mode means that potential applicants are deterred from higher education or are constrained to take whatever subjects happen to be available and which are not of primary interest to them. Alternatively, participants feel forced to take courses offered by institutions outside Ireland, whereas the strong preference articulated was to obtain degrees through recognised Irish institutions.

5.6 ***Summary - What is needed to attract more adults to higher education?***
Participants made a number of suggestions for actions to attract more adults to higher education. These are summarised below:

5.6.1 *Employer support*
Employers are limited in their support for higher education study; for example, banks only allow time off for banking exams. Employers must be brought onside. If there is a commitment to parental leave, why not study leave – even at a reduced salary?

5.6.2 *Funding*
Government should extend the eligibility for grants and scholarships. The Third level Allowance Scheme should be applied to part-time and distance

education courses. Institutions should introduce easy pay options to enable students to pay by instalments.

5.6.3 *Provide flexible education*

There is scepticism about attracting 15% of mature students to full-time education with a feeling there are not that many adults waiting to be invited in; most people need to earn money while they are studying. Therefore the focus should be on extending more flexible forms of education to minimise financial, work and domestic disruption for students.

5.6.4 *Need for awareness raising*

There is a need to create greater awareness of higher education with a view to stimulating demand as well as stripping away the image of higher education as an impenetrable obstacle course designed to exclude all but the fittest. Some suggestions include marketing campaigns; creating a profile through television programmes - for example, have a character in *Fair City* embark on a distance education degree; promotional videos; information sessions and open days in accessible venues which are not intimidating to those who are unused to higher education, such as local libraries and shopping centres; target support from large enterprises such as the banks, electronics companies, state companies, as well as smaller enterprises.

5.6.5 *Institutional support for mature applicants*

While institutions have developed policies to attract mature students in the last decade, involving the appointment of mature student officers, access programmes etc, nevertheless, the message that institutions welcome mature students is not necessarily being received by the target audience. Institutions need to provide clearer and more user friendly access to information to attract applicants. They should also provide feedback to mature applicants who are not accepted. The husband of one participant had been rejected by a university but he received no feedback on the reasons and how he could improve his chances. For adults encountering the fears and inhibitions described above, such rejection can be devastating both personally and to those surrounding them. Institutions could remove some of the mystique of on-campus study by encouraging adults to 'taste' existing courses by attending normal lectures in the institutions.

5.6.6 *Credit recognition and transfer*

Institutions should set up a series of credit transfer mechanisms to enable students to obtain accreditation of prior learning.

5.6.7 *Flexible access to existing programmes*

Institutions should consider making existing courses available on a more flexible basis to adult students.

Chapter 6: Summary and Conclusions

6.1   Introduction

This chapter will summarise the findings of this report. We attempt to answer a number of questions concerning the demand for open distance learning in Ireland, the subjects which adults wish to study, their preferences for mode of study, and finally, what needs to be done to facilitate adults participating in higher education at a distance.

6.2   Is there a demand for access to higher education in Ireland?

There is a clearly demonstrated need for increased provision of higher education for adults in Ireland. Data on the relatively low participation of mature students in higher education and the low levels of educational attainment in the adult population outlined in Chapter 2, together with the views of the stakeholders analysed in Chapter 4 are testimony to the extent of this need. Arguments for increased participation are based on a number of premises. On the basis of equity there is a need to redress previous disadvantage. On economic and instrumental grounds the knowledge economy requires skilled workers who are in increasingly short supply. There is also the need for personal fulfilment and the realisation of individual potential. The question addressed by this report is, given the consensus on the need for additional higher education places and extension of tertiary qualifications to a broader proportion of the adult population, what is the actual demand among Irish adults for these opportunities - to what extent will adults take up places in the system if they are created? It is not possible to quantify the exact size of the potential market for higher education, however it is reasonable to suppose that not every adult is equally capable of succeeding in demanding degree level programmes due to literacy, numeracy and other skills deficits. Nor is every adult interested in or ready to take the step into higher education. The process by which adults come to an awareness of a desire to study higher education is complicated, and the routes and pathways taken vary considerably.   As Chapter 5 showed, participants in the focus groups identified many influences stimulating interest in returning to study. Some found a growing dissatisfaction with their existing lives and a feeling of having missed out; others were confronted at work with the need to obtain qualifications without which they could progress no further. Colleagues, parents, relatives and friends inspired others. Some just wanted to prove themselves. The survey of enquirers analysed in Chapter 4 indicates that while many adults have been brought to the point of expressing interest and investigating opportunities, still a large proportion were not prepared to proceed to the stage of actually starting their studies, for a variety of reasons which will be explored below.

6.3 What subjects?

Another element of the analysis of market demand is the subjects which adults wish to study. As mentioned in Chapter 3, business and industry representatives have called for increased uptake of languages in third level especially when combined with business subjects. They highlight the need to increase participation in science, mathematics, and technology both at second and third level as a priority at national level (IBEC 2001). However, these are not the main areas of interest identified by the adults surveyed in this report. Instead the demand for disciplines more oriented to personal development appears greater than for job-oriented disciplines. Arts/humanities was the most popular option favoured by almost half of respondents. Computing is the next most favoured option with over one third stating they would like to study this subject. There was strong support for social sciences (31.3%), education/teaching (30.4%) and health sciences (28.2%), while there was less interest in languages (21.4%) and minimal interest in science (13.4%) and engineering (9.4%). While these figures are not surprising they indicate the challenge which may be encountered in attracting adults to the type of subject areas in demand by employers. The question will be what supports will be required to encourage adults to take these subject areas.

6.4 What modes of study?

While commitments have been made to providing 10,000 extra places in higher education and setting quotas of 15% of enrolments for mature adults by 2005, it appears from this analysis that the level of interest in full-time education options will mean that institutions will find it almost impossible to meet those targets. The Chairman of the Higher Education Authority, Don Thornhill (2001) points out that 'mature and part-time students are not a homogeneous category. They include students and learners involved in second-chance or 'catch-up' education as well as individuals who have already secured third level qualifications and who are taking further courses either for professional reasons or for personal development. They have different requirements and face different constraints but they share one common feature. Their needs will not be addressed efficiently by an inflexible model of day-time teaching based on the traditional academic year' (Thornhill, 2001: 22).

Full-time education is seen as an option only for those without family, domestic, employment or financial commitments i.e. a very small proportion of the adult population. For everyone else, more flexible modes of teaching and learning are essential. Almost half of the respondents expressed a first preference for the distance learning mode of study, compared with just 13.1% who opted for full-time on-campus education. While it should be pointed out that enquirers to Oscail would be likely to be biased more towards distance education, nevertheless, the figures are indicative of the likely uptake of opportunities. Another interesting finding in view of the

widely advertised potential of the ICTs in extending access is the relatively low preference (14.5%) for eLearning approaches. The digital divide is very real for many adults despite the ubiquity of PCs in the home and in workplaces. This quote from an email message from an Oscail student to the authors illustrates the reality:

> *From speaking to a number of my fellow students, it seems that some people are a little alarmed and intimidated at the amount of computer expertise they think college requires them to have. This is an ongoing theme at the moment. It can be easy for tutors and students with reasonable word-processing and internet skills to forget they did not learn these in a matter of days or weeks, or that others may not have had the same opportunities or access to computers, or even the same ability to pay for things like internet access bills. Is there anything Oscail can do to narrow the gap in this Digital Divide? Perhaps a workshop, or at least a list of the basic skills required (some people may be at the stage of not knowing how to save, highlight, cut and paste, basic things), perhaps a list of some useful technical texts, like Internet or Windows for Dummies? (actual name, not an insult!) Sorry for troubling you with this, but it seems to me to be unfair that some people will have more difficulty doing assignments than others because they do not have skills that are not required for entry to the course.*
> Oscail student, email message 25 May 2002

6.5   What barriers?

The survey found that cost was the most important factor inhibiting participation in higher education. Another important factor was the fact that respondents were not in a position to start a course at that particular time. However the importance of providing students with subjects they actually want to study is underlined by the fact that a quarter of those who did not apply found that the choice of subjects on offer did not meet their needs. Participants in the focus groups confirmed the importance of cost and lack of financial support for part-time study to be a barrier. Participants suggested that if Government is serious in meeting its target of attracting mature students to higher education they should establish a fund to enable disadvantaged and low paid adults to participate in higher education regardless of mode or timing of study, as well as providing special loan schemes. If students do not have enough money of their own, or if their employer won't pay, higher education is not an option. The main barriers identified were:

- Institutional barriers and lack of information
- Funding
- Domestic/social commitments
- Fears, inhibitions and attitudinal barriers
- The duration and timing of degree programmes

- The need to prepare for study
- Lack of recognition of prior learning
- Limited provision of subject in flexible modes of study

6.6   *Strategies to develop and stimulate the market*

From the findings of the research carried out for this report it is clear that much needs to be done if the participation of mature students in higher education is to increase.   Some strategies for increasing demand and meeting the needs of adult students include:

- The financing of part-time and flexible modes of education must be tackled. It is inherently unfair that full-time students regardless of income do not pay fees, while those on low pay must pay fees. While the White Paper ruled out payment of fees for part-time education for fear of signing a blank cheque, more creative ways in the form of educational credits can be used to ensure that those deprived of the opportunity to enter higher education at an earlier age may not be disadvantaged for a second time. Employers should be encouraged, perhaps through tax credits, to support employees studying through payment of fees and study leave.
- Institutions must be flexible in reality, not just in rhetorical statements. Adult students need to mix study with their other commitments. To do this, they need more flexible modes of study: distance education; part-time study; modular courses; flexible pathways to degrees; greater freedom to control the pacing of their studies; multiple entry points during the academic year; recognition of prior education; credit transfer between institutions.
- Institutions need to expand the range of subjects offered, possibly by increasing the number of subjects offered both on-campus and in distance education mode.
- Institutions need to provide greater support to adult students both by providing access routes to further study and in convincing adults that they are welcome to the campus.

Implementation of these strategies will go a long way towards helping adults over the threshold of higher education.

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APPENDIX 1 POSTAL SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

SURVEY ON LIFELONG LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES WITH OSCAIL
We would be very grateful for your cooperation in completing this questionnaire.

Where did you hear about Oscail? (*please tick all which apply*)

[   ]1. Irish Times   [   ]2. Irish Independent   [   ]3. Irish Examiner   [   ]4. Local paper   [   ]5. Other paper

[   ] 6. Radio   [   ]7. Friend/relative/   [   ]8. Exhibition   [   ]9. Oscail website   [   ] 10. Employer

[   ]11. Other

12. Was your enquiry to Oscail made on behalf of (*tick whichever applies*)
[   ]1. Yourself   [   ]2. Friend/relative   [   ]3. Employee   [   ]4. Organisation   [   ]5. Other

13. How did you contact Oscail? (*tick whichever applies*)
[   ]1. Telephone   [   ]2. Email   [   ]3. Post   [   ]4. Called to Oscail   [   ]5. Other

14. Which programme was of interest to you?
[   ] 1. BSc IT   [   ]2. BA Humanities   [   ]3. BNS (Nursing)   [   ]4. Postgraduate   [   ]5. All

15. Do you intend to apply for any of Oscail's programmes?
[   ]1. I have already applied   [   ]2. I intend to apply for this year   [   ]3. I intend to apply in later years   [   ]4. I do not intend to apply

If you *do not intend to apply this year*, please indicate below the importance of the following factors in influencing your decision

Reason	Very important (1)	Important (2)	Not important (3)	Not at all important (4)
16. The cost was too high	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
17. The course content did not suit my needs	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
18. The level of the programmes is too high	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
19. The distance learning method wouldn't suit me	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
20. I wouldn't have enough time to study	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
21. There wasn't enough information for me to decide	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
22. I was enquiring on behalf of someone else	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
23. Study Centre was too far away	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
24. This isn't the right time for me to start a substantial programme of education	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

25. Other reason (please give details):

Please indicate your level of interest in taking programmes at *degree level*

	I would definitely like to study this subject area	I would like to study this subject area	Unsure	I would not like to study this subject area	I would definitely not like to study this subject area
26. Business/Management	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
27. Continental Languages	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
28. Sciences	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
29. Education/Teaching	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
30. Engineering	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
31. Computing	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
32. Social Sciences	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
33. Arts/Humanities	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
34. Health Sciences	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

35. Please list specific subjects/disciplines which would be of interest to you	36. Please list specific subjects/disciplines which you consider would be of interest to others, although not of personal interest to you:

37. Please list in order of preference your preferred method of learning (1 indicates your most preferred method etc):

[   ] Full-time on-campus lectures

[   ] Part-time on-campus lectures (evenings/weekends)

[   ] Distance learning (written course materials; tutorials in study centres)

[   ] eLearning (extensive use of technology based materials; online tutorial support; occasional

meetings in study centres)

[   ] Other (please specify:

Personal Information

42. Gender:	[ ]1. Male	[ ]2. Female	43. Marital Status	[ ]1. Married	[ ]2. Single	[ ]3. Other
44. Age Group	[ ] Under 30 yrs	[ ] 31-39	[ ] 40-49	[ ] 50-59	[ ] 60+	

45. Occupational Status	1.Employed full time [ ]	2. Employed part time [ ]	3. Employed full-time in the home [ ]	4. Retired [ ]	5. Unemployed [ ]
46. Highest level of education	1.Incomplete 2nd level [ ]	2.Leaving certificate [ ]	3.National Cert/ Diploma [ ]	4.Bachelor's Degree [ ]	5.Higher Degree [ ] 6.Professional qualification [ ]

Would you agree to being interviewed as part of a research project on third level provision for mature adults? Yes [   ] No [   ]

Name: _____

Tel (home) : _____

Address: _____

Email: _____@_____

Thank you for completing this questionnaire – please return it using the reply paid envelope to Oscail, NDEC, DCU, Dublin 9

APPENDIX 2 Focus Group – Interview Schedule

Focus group – Demand for Access to Higher Education for Mature Students
Introductions

Outline of Oscail programmes and overview of distance education

Views on Higher Education – what does higher education mean to you?
- what has higher education to offer?
- why would adult students want to enter higher education? (personal development, career, other)
- what types of people would be attracted to higher education?
- what is the return on attendance at higher education?
- who benefits from higher education?

What subjects would attract?
- Participants
- Friends
- Relatives
- Employers
- Fellow workers
- Community organisations

What's the most attractive form of study? (flexibility in time and place?)
- which format would suit most adults?
- full time lectures
- part time lectures
- distance learning with some face to face tutorials
- online education/technology
- what's the feeling about using technology for education?

Funding?
- Who should pay?
- What is acceptable fee for a degree course?

Barriers?
- What stops adults from attending higher education?
- Are the institutions approachable?
- Should there be more access courses?

Finally, if you were the Minister for Adult Education what would you do to attract adults into higher education?