



TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN  
COLÁISTE NA TRIONÓIDE, BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH

THE  
UNIVERSITY  
OF DUBLIN



# Ripples of Hope

The family and community  
impact of Trinity College Dublin  
access graduates

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The full text of this publication is available on the internet at:

<http://www.Trinity.ie/Trinity-Access/research>

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April 2013



## Foreword

The Trinity Access Programmes (TAP) celebrate their twentieth anniversary in 2013. This report highlights how TAP has succeeded over the past twenty years. It describes the efforts made by Trinity College – its staff, its students and its funders – to broaden access to higher education; to date 1,300 TAP students have come through the College and by 2020, we hope that 2,020 TAP students will have experienced the benefit of a Trinity Education.

This informative report reinforces why the opportunities of higher education should be open to all who can benefit from it. It focuses on the graduates' pathway to and through Trinity and the impact of their degree on their family, community and personal identity. It makes it crystal clear that our society will do best when all its talents can find their route to contribute. However, broadening access to higher education is not easy to achieve – not easy at all – even though many advances have been made in recent decades. It requires a willingness to consider the benefits for us all by the public at large. And it requires continuous innovation by universities.

At the launch of Trinity's feasibility study on holistic admissions at the Royal Irish Academy, I quoted the famous words of Archimedes, *"Give me a place to stand, and a lever long enough, and I can move the world"*. In our contemporary world, that lever which moves the world is education. It's the one thing that unlocks a person's potential, opens up opportunity, gives a person the means to go out and fulfil their ambitions in the world. TAP has succeeded over twenty years in being one of the levers for change in Irish higher education. I wish to congratulate Cliona Hannon, Director of TAP and all involved in this report for the work undertaken. I look forward, in excitement, to the future of the Trinity Access Programme and the stories from the future graduates in 2020.

**Dr Patrick Prendergast,**  
Provost,  
Trinity College Dublin.

## Summary

### Introduction

In 2013 the Trinity College Dublin (Trinity) Trinity Access Programmes (TAP) mark their twentieth anniversary. To coincide with this event TAP commissioned the Children's Research Centre, Trinity to conduct a research study of graduates who had entered Trinity via a higher education access route. The study focused on graduates' pathway to and through Trinity; and the impact of their degree on their family, community, and professional identity. The Terms of Reference were to examine:

- How TAP alumni experienced TAP primary and second level activities before joining Trinity
- The experiences of TAP alumni of programme involvement and of Trinity
- How alumni have navigated professional, social and cultural conflicts (if any)
- Where alumni live and work
- How alumni who are parents perceive their role as their children's educator, and the extent of parental involvement in their children's education
- Volunteerism amongst alumni, including involvement as TAP ambassadors
- How the TAP experience has impacted on family members
- How and to what extent has TAP actively brought about community change

While the study is not an evaluation of TAP, the findings may provide useful and insightful information that can inform the strategic development of TAP during its next phase.

### Background

TAP's broad mission is to work in partnership across the education sector and with families, communities and businesses to widen participation in higher education of students who for social, economic and cultural reasons have not yet realised their educational potential. Its strategic vision over the next seven years to 2020 is to:

- develop a university campus that mirrors the diverse composition of Irish society
- build a broad 'coalition of the converted' interested in highlighting and systematically addressing the causes of educational disadvantage and low progression rates to higher education (TAP, 2012).

The work of TAP is consistent with national and international policy on social inclusion and widening participation in higher education.

Third level participation in Ireland has historically and disproportionately been an achievement of higher socio-economic groups (O'Connell, Clancy & McCoy, 2006; Lynch & O'Riordan, 1996).

The national picture is mirrored amongst the student population at Trinity. In 2012, students from non-traditional backgrounds comprising low socio-economic status (SES), mature age and disability comprised 19 per cent of the Trinity student population. Of these students from low SES backgrounds that accessed Trinity via TAP comprised 5 per cent of the undergraduate entrants.

In its work with schools designated as disadvantaged under the Delivering Equality of Education in Schools scheme, TAP strives to change the balance in terms of the number of students progressing to Trinity.

TAP has demonstrated increased entry to Trinity through its access programmes. In 1998, 10 TAP students progressed to Trinity undergraduate programmes; by 2012 this had risen to 234.

TAP aims to achieve its mission through an approach that is inclusive, innovative, lifelong, adaptable and collaborative. Its Strategic Plan 2020 identifies four themes: outreach, admissions, progression and evaluation.

TAP plays a major role in the delivery of the Trinity Access Policy and in the Engagement with Society theme of the Trinity *Strategic Plan 2009-2014*.

## Methodology

The Terms of Reference were addressed through a mixed methods research strategy that involved documentary analysis and literature review; a quantitative survey; and qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews. The study commenced in June 2012 and data collection was completed in January 2013.

The study objectives and data collection methods are detailed below:

### Study objectives and methods

|                          | Objectives   | Sample   | Method   |
|--------------------------|--|--|--|
| TAP/Trinity Alumni       | To examine: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• extent to which TAP graduates of Trinity perceive the impact of their qualification on their families and communities</li> </ul>  | Alumni database sample frame N=252<br>68% response (n = 137)<br><br>(n = 20) | Online survey<br><br>October<br>November 2012<br><br>Qualitative in-depth interviews |
| TAP/Trinity Stakeholders | To examine: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• role of TAP within Trinity; changes over 20 years</li> <li>• how it works with communities</li> <li>• how TAP address educational inequalities; strengths and weaknesses</li> </ul>                         | (n=5)  | Semi-structured one-to-one in-depth interviews                                       |
| Alumni family members    | To examine: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• family member's own educational background</li> <li>• recollections of alumni family member's time at Trinity</li> <li>• how attendance at Trinity impacts on alumni, their family and community</li> </ul> | (n=12)   | Semi-structured one-to-one in-depth interviews                                       |



## Profile of TAP Trinity alumni

- The majority of TAP Trinity alumni had parents/guardians that were early school leavers. The majority (75%) were the first generation of their family to undertake a degree at Trinity. Furthermore, many were the first in their family to achieve the Leaving Certificate.
- The alumni mainly come from areas of Dublin under-represented in higher education and from socio-economically disadvantaged suburbs.
- There was evidence of third level participation among their wider family, particularly cousins. Amongst a minority there was evidence of a second-generation influence as siblings, notably sisters, progressed to TAP and to undergraduate programmes at Trinity.
- Those with partners were likely to be in relationships with people who held similar or higher qualifications.
- The majority of TAP Trinity alumni were employed in traditional higher or lower professional roles that included social workers, solicitors, teaching, and healthcare professionals.
- Graduates with children play a strong and active role in their children's education. Their aspirations and expectations for their children exceed those of their own parents. They expect their children to progress further in education than they did, pursuing at least Level 8 and 9 qualifications.
- Many graduates remain living in their community of origin.

## The pathway to Trinity

TAP Trinity graduates entered Trinity through a range of access routes:

- Mature age participants' pathways to Trinity often comprised incremental steps through adult education courses.
- With younger students, particularly entrants through the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) or the Foundation Course for Young Adults, completion of Leaving Certificate was commonplace.
- Participants from Trinity link schools may have had some familiarity with Trinity, but these schools had not yet established a 'tradition' of students going to Trinity.
- When they were at school all alumni had been academically able with a strong interest in learning.
- Many participants, in particular those of mature age, had negative experiences of the second-level educational system.
- Alumni that participated in TAP Foundation Courses found these to be an enjoyable and rewarding experience that had prepared them well for academic work.
- Some Foundation Course participants felt empowered from their experience in TAP; it renewed their belief in their learning abilities, particularly if their school experience had led them to believe otherwise.
- The Foundation Courses provided a supportive environment for learning; a strong collegiate network was formed among students and staff.

## Life in Trinity

### *Fitting in*

The transition to undergraduate programmes was challenging for the vast majority of participants:

- Many who had entered their degree programme via the TAP Foundation Courses gravitated towards the students they had spent time with in TAP.
- Some participants found it difficult to fit in where they were the only or part of a very small minority of access students.
- Some students felt the pressure of their accent and their working class identity.
- Where small groups of access students were in the same programme, they tended to stick together and made little connection with the majority student group.
- Many alumni did not participate in Trinity activities and societies. Most had other responsibilities such as family, part-time employment, child care.
- Most separated their home and college lives while retaining friendships from home and community.

## *The teaching and learning environment*

Participants that had entered Trinity via a TAP Foundation Course had become used to student-centred, small group and interactive teaching and learning methodologies. The transfer to their undergraduate programme was challenging:

- The move to large lectures was daunting after their small group teaching and learning experience in TAP.
- Some, particularly mature age students, had a fear of failure and felt the pressure of their classmates' Leaving Certificate points.
- Though they experienced challenges in their first two years, participants employed a range of strategies to get through that included seeking support through TAP and other TAP students.
- By their third and fourth years participants were more comfortable in the teaching and learning environment when there was greater emphasis on small group work and projects.
- The smaller classes in third and fourth year opened up possibilities for new friendships and connections among non-access students.
- They were able to bring their knowledge and experience and enrich the teaching and learning environment.
- This could work to their advantage when it came to leadership and organisational skills required in their group projects.

## Life after Trinity

### *Family and community*

Life after Trinity has been positive in terms of the impact of their degree on family and community connections:

- TAP Trinity alumni perceive that they have a strong influence on their families and communities, particularly in providing information about third level education.
- TAP Trinity alumni act as ambassadors for access in their extended and immediate families, and in their communities.
- Connections with community organisations and voluntary groups is more likely to occur for mature age students who are parents and for those alumni with jobs such as teacher, community development worker or political advisor.

### *Professional identity*

There was a mixed perspective in terms of how participants viewed their professional identity since graduation:

- Those who were employed in a position directly relevant to their Trinity degree reflected on the esteem it garnered from their employer.
- Not all participants were comfortable about revealing to their employer that they achieved their degree through an access pathway.
- Some access participants were comfortable about revealing this information to their employers and used this as 'other capital' in their jobs. They brought their life experiences to their employment and had an edge that other traditional graduates appeared to lack.
- The minority who were unemployed, particularly those whose friends had left school early and gone on to employment, had mixed feelings about their professional identity.
- Though they recognised that they graduated in a period of economic recession, their Trinity degree that had been held in such high regard did not match with their current social welfare status.
- Graduates who were unemployed had expectations that they would achieve employment with their undergraduate qualification and had not realised that a post-graduate qualification might also be required. Some lacked knowledge about and access to assistance that was relevant to their own circumstances.
- They articulated that information in terms of careers advice and study opportunities was geared to younger and traditional Trinity graduates.

## Conclusion

The following conclusions are drawn from the study that may be useful for the future development of the access programmes at Trinity.

### *Access versus accessibility*

TAP has been highly successful in reaching many who were the first generation of their family to attend third level education. The graduates' experiences indicate a heightened awareness and understanding of third level education and led to the progression of other family members. TAP has been instrumental in breaking down the barriers to progression to Trinity for non-traditional entrants. This enhances their intra and intergenerational social mobility.

While access programmes do much to prepare first generation students for entry to university, transition from access to Trinity, and accessibility within it remains difficult owing to the dominance of a system established for traditional school leaver entrants. While access is supported, issues remain about how accessible undergraduate life is for these students.

Access students benefited from learner centred interactive teaching and learning in their TAP Foundation Courses, but are distanced by the depersonalised nature of the large group teaching in first and second year. The lack of an orientation programme that involves them with other non-access students makes it difficult to fit in and get to know other non-access students.

Accessibility is also difficult for access students that undertake degree programmes where they may be the only, or part of a very significant minority of access students.

There is a dissonance between what some TAP Foundation Course participants have described as the emancipatory experience of their Foundation Course prior to their undergraduate experience; the latter being more teacher-centred with a largely passive approach to learning in large lecture theatres. In terms of social inclusion and widening participation, addressing such aspects of the current undergraduate teaching and learning environment is beneficial not only for access students but also for all undergraduates.

### *Family and community connections*

A ripple effect occurs within families when the first generation of a family participates in third level education. There is a clear indication that those who are parents transmit to their children knowledge about the education system, how to access and succeed within it. They also affirm that their parental involvement in and aspirations for their children's education is high. This indicates the clear benefits for students who are parents and their families in terms of intergenerational social mobility.

After graduation from Trinity, Foundation Course students in particular tended to remain within their communities of origin. They have the potential to play an important role as ambassadors within their local areas for access to third level education. This finding confirms the importance of grounding access in the community (Diamond, 2002). As there is evidence of a ripple of change within families because of the first generation graduate's educational experience, there is a potential to expand this at a community level through the promotion of access at a more grass roots level with organisations that are firmly located within communities with lower rates of progression to higher education.

### *Widening participation – moving beyond barriers to access*

Access students have overcome many barriers in their progression to, through, and beyond Trinity. While there are many success stories and much pride amongst graduates and their families about their achievements, intertwined are stories that show they had to navigate a system that was culturally different to their own educational and life experiences. They experienced their Trinity undergraduate education in a system established for traditional students that enter on high Leaving Certificate points. In this system educational provision tends to be geared to the majority group. This is an important consideration for any HEI in the context of policy that endorses lifelong learning.

While there has been considerable progress in the diversification of the student body, students from lower socio-economic groups remain a small part of this diversification. In terms of increasing diversity among the undergraduate student population

it is important to consider that their 'student experience', was largely not that portrayed as the 'Trinity student experience'. They mainly operated as 'day students' where they separated their college and home life. Apart from their connection to TAP, many graduates had little or no connection to Trinity since graduation. These Trinity graduates, though they constitute a very small group are potentially very important alumni that can represent Trinity as a socially inclusive and diverse institution. There is a challenge to move access beyond entry to consider broader issues related to diversity in student experience, in education and service provision, and how access students are embraced as Trinity alumni.

After twenty years in the provision of access programmes at Trinity it is timely to consider the vision for access for the next two decades. Similar to all Irish HEIs, Trinity faces the challenges of reduced public expenditure for education. There is pressure on many fronts: to maintain academic excellence; compete in a global higher education market place; to ensure that graduates are prepared for the demands of a knowledge economy; and to become more socially inclusive and diverse through its widening participation agenda.

Schemes such as HEAR and the move towards restructuring university admissions systems have the potential to generate a more diverse student body. It is also worth considering access to Trinity in the context of its local community. As demonstrated in the present study, targeting access in local communities in the immediate locale of Trinity can impact on enhancing social mobility amongst groups that are marginalised. As Trinity embraces globalisation and engages in national access programmes how will its next phase of access make a difference in the community in which it is located?

## Acronyms and Abbreviations

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| DEIS    | Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools |
| CAO     | Central Admissions Office                     |
| DARE    | Disability Access Route to Education          |
| ESRI    | Economic and Social Research institute        |
| FCMS    | Foundation Course for Mature Students         |
| FCYA    | Foundation Course for Young Adults            |
| HE      | Higher Education                              |
| HEA     | Higher Education Authority                    |
| HEAR    | Higher Education Access Route                 |
| LCA     | Leaving Certificate Applied                   |
| HEI     | Higher Education Institution                  |
| LC      | Leaving Certificate                           |
| LCVP    | Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme      |
| NFQ     | National Framework of Qualifications          |
| SES     | Socio-economic status                         |
| TAP     | Trinity Access Programmes                     |
| Trinity | Trinity College Dublin                        |

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2013 the Trinity College Dublin (Trinity) Trinity Access Programmes (TAP) mark their twentieth anniversary. To coincide with this event TAP commissioned the Children's Research Centre, Trinity to conduct a research study of graduates who had entered Trinity via a higher education access route. The study focused on graduates' pathway to and through Trinity; and the impact of their degree on their family, community, and professional identity. The Terms of Reference for the research outlined by the TAP Steering Committee were to examine:

- How TAP alumni experienced TAP primary and second level activities before joining Trinity
- The experiences of TAP alumni of programme involvement and of Trinity
- How alumni have navigated professional, social and cultural conflicts (if any)
- Where alumni live and work
- How alumni who are parents perceive their role as their children's educator, and the extent of parental involvement in their children's education
- The level of volunteerism amongst alumni, including involvement as TAP ambassadors
- How the TAP experience has impacted on family members
- How and to what extent has TAP actively brought about community change

The Terms of Reference were addressed through a mixed-methods research study.<sup>1</sup> It commenced in June 2012 and data collection was completed in January 2013. It involved:

1. Qualitative interviews with TAP Trinity Alumni (n = 20)
2. Quantitative surveys with TAP Trinity Alumni (n = 137)
3. Interviews with family members (n = 12)
4. Interviews with TAP Trinity stakeholders (n = 5)

While the study is not an evaluation of TAP, the findings may provide useful and insightful information that can inform the strategic development of TAP during its next phase.

This chapter provides background on the historical development of TAP and its position within Trinity. It draws on published research that has been undertaken by TAP; TAP and Trinity internal reports; and the interviews conducted with TAP stakeholders in Trinity.

### The Trinity Access Programmes

TAP's broad mission is to work in partnership across the education sector and with families, communities and businesses to widen participation in higher education of students who for social, economic and cultural reasons have not yet realised their educational potential. Its strategic vision over the next seven years to 2020 is to:

- develop a university campus that mirrors the diverse composition of Irish society
- build a broad 'coalition of the converted' interested in highlighting and systematically addressing the causes of educational disadvantage and low progression rates to higher education (TAP, 2012).

TAP aims to achieve its mission through an approach that is inclusive, innovative, lifelong, adaptable and collaborative. Its Strategic Plan 2020 identifies four themes: outreach, admissions, progression and evaluation. These are delivered through the programmes outlined in Table 1.1.

<sup>1</sup> Further details on the research methods, data collection and analysis are in Appendix 1

Table 1.1: Overview of TAP activities and strategies

| School and Community Outreach | Primary   | Secondary   |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
|                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School visits</li> <li>Treasure chests</li> <li>Bookmarks programme</li> <li>Maths and science exploration week</li> <li>Maths and science scholars</li> <li>Parents' evening</li> <li>Transition from primary to secondary</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School visits</li> <li>Med day</li> <li>Challenge days</li> <li>Exploring options</li> <li>Honours maths revision programme</li> <li>Ordinary level maths revision programme</li> <li>Educational achievement awards</li> <li>Bridge21</li> <li>Summer schools</li> <li>Pathways to the Professions</li> <li>Health Day</li> </ul> |
| Higher Education Access Route | Socio-economically disadvantaged students may compete for a quota of places in the colleges that run HEAR. Students that receive a place also receive personal, academic and social supports while they are studying at third level.  |   |
| University access programmes  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TAP/CDVEC Partnership Access Courses</li> <li>Foundation Course for Young Adults</li> <li>Foundation Course for Mature Students</li> </ul>   |   |
| Post entry progression        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Orientation programme</li> <li>Academic support</li> <li>TAP Ambassadors</li> <li>Financial and personal support</li> <li>Career development opportunities</li> </ul>  |   |
| Research and Evaluation       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Researching innovative teaching and learning methodologies</li> <li>Evaluating existing models of partnership with corporate supporters</li> <li>Researching new models of widening participation</li> <li>Evidence-based approach using existing evaluation data for the development of learning philosophy and associated annual plan</li> </ul> |   |

In terms of governance within Trinity, TAP is situated in the Office of the Vice-Provost. TAP is supported financially with Trinity core funding and the contributions of corporate and private donors. Its mission is aligned to the civic engagement theme within the Trinity Strategic Plan, and it operates as a key driver for this aspect of the plan.

TAP has reached this position through a developmental process and because of strategic appointments in Trinity such as the Civic Engagement Officer and the Community Liaison Officer. In addition, TAP works with Trinity academic staff who have a strong interest in social justice in education, some of whom are, themselves, first generation university graduates. Working with TAP allows them an up close experience of how lecturers can support and encourage learning, of different learning needs, and how learning can be achieved in different ways that are relevant for the wider student population:

In fact I think that the experience of teaching on TAP has been highly beneficial for the whole teaching experience because you see in greater relief I'd say what are the learning challenges being faced by kids in general. (Stakeholder)

Nevertheless, while TAP and Trinity benefit from developments in programmes and processes, the personalised response to access, formerly part of TAP, becomes more difficult to deliver:

I can remember having conversations and it was tough because ... I could count on one hand the number of students that we had. Now we have reached the situation - I mean it's enviable in some ways - but you can't have the absolute personal touch. Because with 600+ students in our undergraduate programmes and for the school and community outreach links... about 4,000 individuals each year ... the scale has grown. I'd love to have more staff so you could have that absolute personalised touch but I'm afraid that's not where we're at right now. (Stakeholder)

While the work of TAP is consistent with national and international policy on social inclusion and widening participation, this is now the remit of all Irish higher education institutions (HEIs). Therefore, it is important to consider TAP in the context of Trinity as an elite HEI, ranked first in Ireland and, until recent times, in the top 100 of the world's universities.

As Ireland's oldest university, Trinity prides itself on its high-achieving alumni. Access to undergraduate programmes through the Central Admissions Office (CAO) is highly competitive: 'points' for Trinity courses are amongst the highest in the country. There has been much debate amongst policymakers and in HEIs about the 'formulaic admissions process' (Geoghegan, 2012) and how it reinforces social inequalities.

Research indicates that third level participation in Ireland has historically and disproportionately been an achievement of higher socio-economic groups (O'Connell, Clancy & McCoy, 2006; Lynch & O'Riordan, 1996). The national picture is mirrored amongst the student population at Trinity. Geoghegan (2012), in a discussion paper in support of greater diversification in admissions, reports that only 3 per cent of fee-paying schools in Ireland do not send students to Trinity, compared to 37 per cent of non-fee paying schools; while 63 per cent of DEIS schools (categorised as disadvantaged) send no students to Trinity, compared to 23 per cent of non-DEIS schools.

In its work with DEIS schools, TAP strives to change the balance in terms of the number of students progressing to Trinity. Despite evidence of individual successes of students progressing to Trinity from inner city DEIS schools, TAP acknowledges that changing the university progression balance in these schools remains a significant challenge:

In terms of our school communities there's great ups and downs. We have become much better at maintaining and keeping data so that we profile our school communities much better now and we ... can kind of pinpoint the progression rates in the schools that we are working with and part of that is very encouraging and the flip side is that it can be quite discouraging because schools that you've done, you know, huge amounts of work with and you understand that there are some really remarkable stories, that it hasn't necessarily translated into developing, you know, a pervasive college going culture. (Stakeholder)

TAP is not alone in this challenge. Homogenisation in undergraduate entry trends is common across all HEIs and is reflected in national data from the Higher Education Authority (HEA). It shows a positive relationship between students' participation in higher education and their parents' education. In 2010, 44 per cent of Irish third level students' fathers had a third level degree, compared to 25 per cent of the national population of men aged 40-59. Similarly, 48 per cent of students' mothers had completed a third level qualification compared to a national figure of 28 per cent of women aged 40-59. Furthermore, the majority of students enrolled in HEIs come from families in which fathers are categorised within the Senior Manager and Professional occupational categories (HEA, 2010).

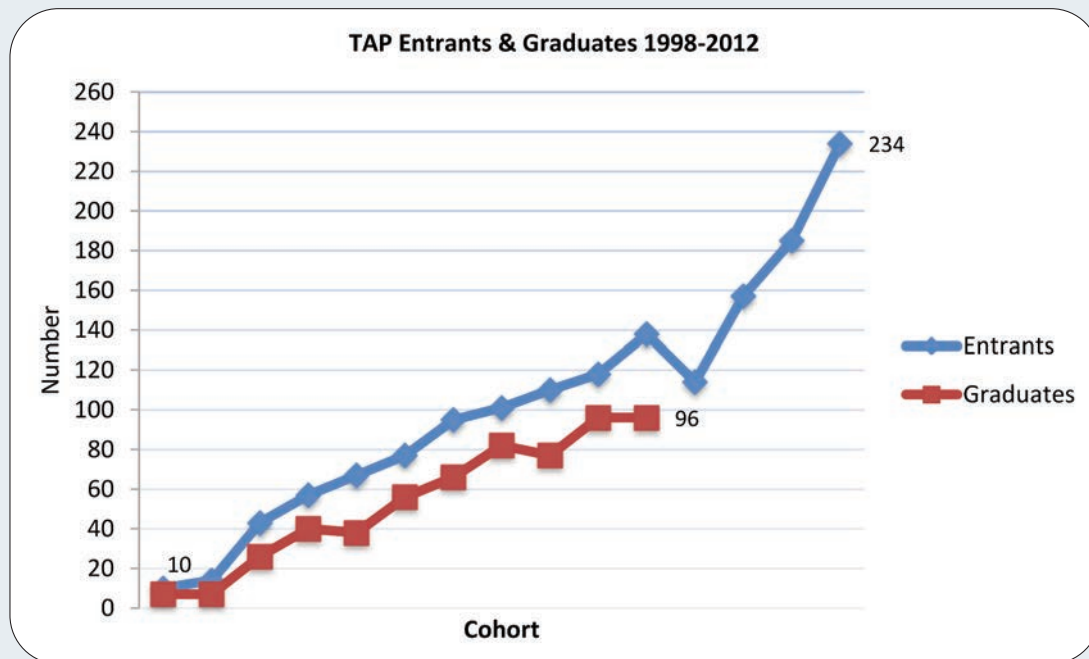
Undergraduate admissions to Trinity are in line with the national picture. In 2011-2012 just under half (44%) of TCD's new entrants came from 'Employer and Managers' or 'Higher Professional' groups, based upon father's occupation (TAP, 2011). In 2012, students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, mature age students, and students with a disability comprised 19 per cent of the Trinity student population<sup>2</sup>. The target set by Trinity for 2013 is that 22 per cent of students will come from non-traditional backgrounds. In 2011 students that entered Trinity from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds via the Trinity Access Programmes comprised just 5 per cent of the undergraduate population. There is currently a government national target to achieve 30 per cent enrolment of underrepresented groups amongst new entrants to HEIs. This category encompasses all students within mature age, disability, and lower socio-economic groups. These targets, and Trinity's status as an elite HEI, should be considered in the context of Chowdry et al.'s (2010) research on widening participation to UK higher education. This research notes continuing strong socio-economic differences in the likelihood of students attending high status HEIs.

<sup>2</sup> These categories of students comprise the 'non-traditional' student group.



As part of its ongoing programme of monitoring, TAP has demonstrated increased entry to Trinity through its access programmes. In 1998, 10 TAP students progressed to Trinity undergraduate programmes; by 2012 this had risen to 234 (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: Entrants and graduation to/ from Trinity via access 1998-2012



The TAP strategy is driven by evidence-based practice. It has been informed by TAP research studies that provide important information on experiences and outcomes for TAP Trinity students in terms of their progression and employment.

TAP students that enter Trinity undergraduate programmes are represented across all Trinity faculties, but the vast majority progress to programmes in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social sciences (74%). Just 15% were in the Faculty of Engineering, Mathematics and Science, while approximately one tenth (11%) were in the Faculty of Health Sciences (TAP, 2010). The class of degree awarded to Trinity TAP graduates is in line with Trinity graduates in general, with 55 per cent of Trinity and 52 per cent of TAP graduates achieving 2:1 honours degrees. Some disparity between Trinity traditional graduates and TAP graduates has been observed at the higher and lower levels: with more of the former receiving a first class honours degree (15% versus 5%) and more TAP graduates receiving a 2:2 degree (37% versus 22%) (TAP, 2010). In terms of progression to employment graduates that have entered Trinity via the Trinity Access Programmes (2002-2008) have fared well, with 75 per cent having attained employment (TAP, 2010).

TAP has also examined the experiences of students that participated in the Foundation Course for Mature Students over the period 1997-2007 (TAP, 2007). This research identified a number of challenges for mature age students in their transition from the foundation course to undergraduate studies. These included the challenges of engaging in academic discourse; for some, the stigmatising effect of their accent; and fear and anxiety about engaging in everyday student activities such as using the library, computer and other systems within Trinity.

As noted above, research and evaluation forms a strategic element of TAP's work. Though it can point to many success stories, there is a strong realisation that this is insufficient in itself, particularly in an institution that strives to retain and improve its world ranking. There may be a commitment to social inclusion, but for some there is a fear about what this might mean in practice. It is important therefore to demonstrate robust evidence about how access is working, particularly for those who may perceive a 'dumbing down':

A lot of the cultural resistance is around the equality versus quality debate: "if we let more people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in that might be a nice thing to do but it will affect our world - our global - rankings because they're not going to achieve as well as the standard student cohort". That's a perception issue that you try and break down through providing evidence that contradicts it. (Stakeholder)

During its 20-year history TAP has evolved in Trinity. It now plays a major role in delivery of the Trinity Access Policy and in the Trinity Strategic Plan 2009-2014. The Plan 'offers equality of access and opportunity to all, seeking out and recognizing talent wherever it exists'. One stakeholder acknowledges that academic potential is not always shown through the points system and that some students by virtue of their class location do not get to realise their full potential:

What we've learned is that academic excellence isn't just the exact same thing as high points in the Leaving Cert. I think we have certainly come to recognise that and that accrued points total doesn't tell the whole story and that we become much more aware of the importance of potential and looking at the wider – looking at the context in which the results were achieved. (Stakeholder)

Table 1.2 below outlines milestones in the development of TAP.

Table 1.2: TAP 1993-2013

| Year | Milestone  |
|------|--|
| 1993 | Trinity Access Project' established with six second level schools  |
| 1997 | HEA 'Targeted Initiative Fund'<br>Expanded schools programme<br>Foundation Course Mature Students  |
| 1999 | Foundation Course Young Adults   |
| 2000 | Primary schools programme  |
| 2001 | Collaborative 'Higher Education Access Route' reduced points admissions scheme   |
| 2002 | First TAP graduates from Trinity   |
| 2003 | <i>Getting on: the experiences and aspirations of second-level students in schools linked to the Trinity Access Programmes – research report</i>   |
| 2004 | Trinity/CDVEC Partnership Courses in Liberal Arts<br>University reserves 15% of its first year quota for 'non-traditional' students  |
| 2005 | 'Business to Higher Education' access partnerships established through the 'TAP 20' initiative   |
| 2007 | University Access Programme for Travellers<br>Nissan Whole Programme Evaluation and Research Projects<br><i>A Reflection and Evaluation of Foundation Course Mature Student Experiences – research report</i>  |
| 2008 | 22% student target for 2013<br>Bridge2College initiative launched<br>First TAP graduate awarded a PhD from Trinity   |
| 2009 | Developing a College Access Plan – new targets<br>Exploring other admissions routes, such as FETAC progression<br>ICAP – Inner City Access Programme   |
| 2010 | <i>What happened next?</i> - graduate destinations research report<br>National launch of Higher Education Access Route (HEAR)<br>Pathways to Law   |
| 2012 | Pathways to the Professions<br>TAP is a finalist in the World Innovation Summit in Education (WISE) Awards<br>FETAC entry to Science and Nursing<br>DARE/HEAR scheme win a Taoiseach's Award for Public Service Excellence<br>Extended TAP Ambassadors Scheme<br>234 undergraduate entrants to Trinity |

TAP has evolved considerably since its inception in Trinity's School of Education. Key figures in that School felt the need to support talented students of nearby secondary schools with access to university. They did this through an award system which, for some students, meant access to physical supports in the form of study desks. As the following excerpt indicates, TAP has built upon this simple system of support to develop a wide range of pre-university educational programmes for children and young people in Trinity link schools:

At the time the students were interviewed by Trinity College staff and they were awarded with a TAP educational award and for some of the students it was an actual desk that they were given so they could do work in their homes because it had been identified at the time that, you know, many of the homes . . . actually didn't have a designated place where they could study and it seems quite simplistic but now it's actually quite symbolic, you know, it's about carving out a space in the home and showing the value of the reinforcement of education and study. That was sort of the origins of the TAP educational awards. . . . a summer programme whereby students would come in and there would be guest lecturers here in Trinity . . . so essentially a taste of college and we have built on that since, you know, . . . through an extensive range of primary and secondary school activities and pre-university courses that capacitate students to undertake fulltime undergraduate studies. (Stakeholder)

In its foundation stages TAP clearly identified with specific schools and community organisations, mainly in the areas adjacent to or close to the campus. In line with programme expansion, the TAP Trinity community has also broadened. This has been in response to national higher education access initiatives such as HEAR and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) and through collaborations with other HEIs; and international collaborations. It is also the case that since TAP's inception there have been major demographic shifts in the Trinity catchment area and in the inner-city link schools served by TAP, such as declining enrolments in some; reductions in careers and special education support teachers; and expansion of immigrant communities. TAP thus faces new challenges:

Well you'd see school numbers shrinking in some of the schools we're connected to and that affects the range of subjects students can choose from. Then often in those schools where the numbers have shrunk, foreign nationals came in around 10 years ago in higher numbers and that was very difficult for them and for their teachers because they really had no multicultural training, they'd very little preparation for it and just the capacity to deal with that in terms of English language support was difficult, very challenging. But a lot of the schools now, 10 years later, would say that in fact it was a very positive thing because it raised the aspiration levels of a lot of other kids in the schools and we would certainly see that the progression rate of those . . . from Nigeria or Eastern Europe is very high, they're very capable students. (Stakeholder)

Well I suppose the biggest change would be with students who are non Irish-born and, you know, I can remember quite clearly the first student who entered, he came in on one of our summer programmes, and he was from Bosnia. He just recently finished his degree in medicine in Trinity and, you know, I can remember us sitting down and it was the first time that we had to think about our summer school and how our summer school would be perceived by students whose first language wasn't English. What sort of training staff needed in order to facilitate this student to make sure that the programme was as beneficial for him as it was for all the other 60 students on the programme. (Stakeholder)

In earlier years TAP supported students in local secondary schools through award schemes, to help them in their pathway to university. The community served by TAP today has broadened and diversified. Stakeholders view this positively as it has wider benefits for Trinity and the students' own communities:

I think the college benefits. I think everyone benefits, staff and students benefit from having as diverse a campus as possible and that is not just people from different economic backgrounds and social backgrounds but different regions as well. That is why we are anxious to have students from all over the thirty-two counties, from around Europe and internationally as well and staff as well. I definitely think everyone benefits from having that diversity in the classroom and then I think it also has been inspirational for the socio-economic communities themselves because it might be the first person ever in the family who went to college and that is inspirational for the younger members of that family and it can also be inspirational for the community then when they see that someone has gone into Trinity and has succeeded there. (Stakeholder)

So far we have illustrated TAP's development in terms of what it does with schools and communities to widen participation to Trinity amongst socio-economically disadvantaged students. A criticism of widening participation measures is that they often fail to consider how the HEI itself should change to meet the needs of students who have a different history and culture than the majority group.

Such measures tend to take a deficit view of the access student, who must fit to the system rather than vice-versa (Thomas & Jones, 2005). As noted earlier TAP seeks to establish innovative teaching and learning methodologies and considers that it has made inroads into established practices in Trinity. According to stakeholders the teaching and learning approach of TAP is being noticed and the influence is being spread through Trinity policy on undergraduate teaching:

I mean Trinity is a very big, old institution and it would be naïve to think that we have transformed Trinity. I think without question there's a lot of support, there are a lot of academics who believe in what we do and who are involved in some aspect of delivering what we do and a lot of them who have been very impressed with our students but ... there's probably a core of people who are converted and then a lot of people who have no interest or very little information. Sometimes it's a question of disseminating the information and it getting to the right people and so in the earlier stages we would have done huge numbers of kind of face-to-face meetings with decision makers to try and get them to change what they were doing. A lot of the bigger policies are there now and, generally speaking, if we go back with a set of policy changes. . . they are approved. (Stakeholder)

Other Trinity stakeholders acknowledge that TAP's 20-year legacy has introduced more educational innovation in Trinity and is helping to change practice, as affirmed by TAP's success in attracting awards for excellence. In addition, changes within Trinity occur from the presence of a more diverse student body that results in altering traditional values on what constitutes academic excellence:

I think it's affected us in different ways. I think we're only now really beginning to appreciate the educational innovation and the things that we can learn from what has been going on at TAP. I think definitely it's helped change the mind-set about what academic excellence means because we certainly haven't change in that being our objective. We're not saying we only believe in academic excellence but we're also prepared to; everything is based around academic excellence and we're saying that we believe that you can be academically excellent and get in a range of traditional and non-traditional students. (Stakeholder)

I think that TAP in a sense is a laboratory for pursuing innovative ways of learning and I think it is good that it is being done there rather than within the university because the emphasis within the university has tended to be on improving the teaching methods of the individual . . . and although that is a good thing in itself I really think we should be paying more attention to the learning needs and it is in a place like TAP that you see that. (Stakeholder)

Another stakeholder considers that it is important for academic staff to be exposed to mature age students as they bring other forms of knowledge to the teaching and learning environment:

They bring a lot more experience yeah absolutely. I mean I find it fantastic because these people who have proudly served on some committee or other so they know something of the warp and woof of decision-making and it is great to have them in the mix. (Stakeholder)

Similar to recent policy recommendations on higher education access in the UK (Milburn, 2012) one stakeholder considers that the TAP Foundation Course model is relevant for all students:

Ideally it would work very well nationally and if the resources were there I think it would be the kind of thing that - it's a model that I think works and there is elements of it that could even be built into the general frame for traditional students because it also gives you an opportunity to think about what you really what to do, seeing sample lectures and everything before you then go on and specialise in it. (Stakeholder)

This chapter has set the scene in which the Trinity Access Programmes have evolved over its 20-year history. It demonstrates the considerable growth in terms of the numbers of students that enter and graduate from Trinity via an access route and the increase in and diversification of supports and services provided by TAP that have contributed to this growth. TAP is a key player in the delivery of the Trinity Strategic Plan 2009-2014 that aims to offer access and opportunity to all.

Although access targets have been set nationally and within Trinity, and considerable progress has been made in widening participation over the last 20 years, students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds remain a distinct minority where almost half of Trinity new entrants students come from professional/manager family backgrounds. Given that the current government target is to have a participation rate in HE of 54 per cent for all social class groups by 2020, widening participation, particularly in an elite university, will remain a challenge.

## Structure of report

**Chapter 2** that follows provides a review of literature that places TAP in the context of research and policy literature on widening participation, access programmes, and the experiences of first generation higher education students.

**Chapter 3** presents the findings from the quantitative online survey of 137 graduates of Trinity that entered via an access route. It presents key demographic descriptive information of the survey participants before outlining attitudes of this group of alumni to the impact of their qualification and Trinity experience on their family, community, and professional identity.

**Chapter 4** presents the findings of the qualitative interviews undertaken with 20 Alumni that entered Trinity via an access route. A thematic analysis is presented that traces their pathway to, through and beyond Trinity. This chapter also draws upon the key themes from the stakeholder and family interviews and are used with the alumni findings to present composite case studies that illustrate different alumni types.

**Chapter 5** discusses the study findings in the context of previous research and draws some conclusions.

## Chapter 2: Literature review

### Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of literature that places the Trinity Access Programmes and the current study in the context of national and international literature on widening participation and access. The review comprises three sections:

- Widening participation in higher education
- Evidence on higher education access programmes: implementation and student experience
- First generation higher education students

### Widening participation in higher education

There is extensive national data that highlights the differential participation rates and academic outcomes in higher education of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (McCoy et al., 2010; O'Connell, Clancy & McCoy, 2006; Clancy, 2001). Participation is also influenced by gender, disability, ethnicity and age (Lynch, 1999; HEA, 2008). The Irish government, through a range of policies related to equality, social inclusion and education, aims to enhance the educational attainment of the whole society. Such policies tend to reflect two discourses for enhancing educational attainment: the human capital argument centred on enhancing Ireland's competitiveness in a globalised knowledge economy; and a social inclusion response framed in a discourse of equality and justice.

Efforts aimed at broadening the socio-economic profile of students in the third level sector are commonly described as a 'widening participation' agenda. Christie, Munro and Wager (2005: 5) consider that usage of this term normalises the middle-class traditional student in the university and positions 'non-traditional' students as problematic partners who must 'fit-in' to university life. Such a discourse focuses on the student as the agent of change without any indication of how institutions themselves should change within the widening participation agenda (Christie, Munro & Wager, 2005).

In Ireland a key strategy for widening participation to higher education is the *Higher Education National Action Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013* (HEA, 2008). Its aim is to have all socio-economic groups with entry rates of at least 54 per cent by 2020. While the admission rate to full-time third level studies had improved between 1998 and 2004 for all socio-economic groups, the data still indicates an over-representation of children from professional and farming groups compared to those from semi-skilled, unskilled and non-manual backgrounds (O'Connell, Clancy & McCoy, 2006). In particular, while improvements in admissions to HEIs were observed across all social groups in the period 1998-2004, McCoy et al., 2010 noted a decline among children of fathers classified as non-manual. McCoy et al., point to the serious challenge of the 54 per cent entry rate for all social groups, when the 2004 data revealed entry rates of 27 per cent and 33 per cent for non-manual and semi- and unskilled respectively.

A considerable body of research has attempted to uncover the many factors that contribute to the disparity in educational access among social class groups (Smyth & McCoy, 2009; O'Connell, Clancy & McCoy, 2006; Whelan & Hannan, 1999). Some studies reveal that the underrepresentation of disadvantaged students in higher education relates to educational disparities that are evident as students progress through their primary and second-level education (O'Connell et al., 2006). As noted earlier, there is a greater representation of students from non-DEIS schools that enter university than DEIS. Students who attend DEIS schools can be affected by lower expectations about their likelihood to progress and may have limited higher level subject choices (Byrne, 2009; Smyth & Hannan, 2007). Although there has been much policy focus on access to higher education for such groups researchers argue that policies that aim to increase access and participation of disadvantaged students should focus more on improving school achievement than changes to admissions policies (Chowdry et al., 2010). This is also reflected in Irish research that shows that students from semi-skilled and unskilled backgrounds are significantly more likely to take the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCAP) or Leaving Certificate Vocational (LCVP) programmes than students from Professional, Employer/Manager socio-economic backgrounds. The LCVP and LCAP programmes, established in 1995, are specifically aimed at preparing students with life skills and for employment, and generally do not meet university entry requirements (McCoy et al, 2010). However, in the UK, while closing the attainment gap at second-level is a priority in

widening participation and access to third level, there is also a firm acknowledgement that higher education admissions systems need to change (Milburn, 2012). Milburn (2012) considers that universities could improve the transparency of admissions processes and diversify admissions criteria to broaden the intake of potential applicants. One way in which this could be achieved is through foundation courses being embedded in mainstream education and recognised as another valid level of prior attainment (Milburn, 2012: 5).

Other studies that attempt to explain social class differences in higher education participation are influenced by Bourdieu's cultural capital thesis (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), which may be viewed in terms of the intergenerational transfer of skills and attitudes, tastes and preferences, and credentials and qualifications (Reay, 1998; Thomas & Jones, 2003) that serve to influence individuals' life trajectories and educational opportunities. Lareau (2000), for example, has shown how middle-class children's cultural competencies are fostered by their parents through the provision of multiple opportunities in which they can use language for reasoning and for learning. Middle-class parents provide ongoing training for their children that reflects the learning environment of the school. By contrast children of working class parents tend to support natural growth and competencies. Some have been critical of the deterministic nature of Bourdieu's thesis, arguing that it fails to capture other forms of capital that operate as a form of resistance to dominant middle class cultural values (France et al., 2012; Giroux, 1982) and the contradictory character of families' relations with education, and their interplay with changes in educational institutions and labour markets (Connell, 2004).

## Higher education access programmes – what do we know about them and how do students experience them?

The National Access Plan for 2005-2007, *Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education*, set out the national framework for access policies and initiatives in HEIs, including the development of student and institutional funding programmes. In 2006 the HEA undertook an evaluation of HE access programmes in order to advance the framework for access programmes nationally in terms of policy, targeting, partnership and practice.

Based on self-evaluations from HEIs, the 2006 report identified some gaps in current practice. These included:

- disparities within institutions in terms of courses and departments that support access, although institutional-wide support was evident
- programmes that operate to integrate access students within the institution rather than an inclusive response in which programmes are adapted to students' needs
- lack of resources for the effective operation of the access programme
- limitations of existing careers services to provide necessary advice and support for graduates transferring to employment or for those who wish to continue their studies to post-graduate or doctoral level
- limited availability of access programmes for ethnic minorities and Travellers (HEA, 2006).

Murphy (2009) provides further evidence in an overview of 37 access courses across 5 Universities, 2 Colleges of Education and 10 Institutes of Technology. Her report identified that the range of HE access programmes was making a significant contribution to the government's policy objective of widening access to higher education for underrepresented groups and was further stimulating demand for higher education among new groups of students. While there were positive educational outcomes for participants who undertook HE access programmes in terms of progression and graduation, the report identified a barrier to students' progression in the lack of formal accreditation of programmes within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Though programmes differed across the institutions, good practice was noted in terms of targeting, collaboration within the sector, innovative practice, and evaluation.

As indicated earlier, the government rationale for widening participation to higher education simultaneously reflects priorities based on increasing the supply of qualified graduates for the labour market, and for a more socially inclusive society in which education is accessible to all. As noted by Kenny et al. (2010) Irish policy on widening participation to higher education reflects other national and European policies aimed at labour market enhancement. Despite widening participation agendas that cite rationales of social inclusion, there is limited evidence of this in HE policy.

Jones and Thomas (2005) undertook a critique of the UK government's 2003 HE policy and its impact on widening participation. They identified two main strands: academic and utilitarian. The academic strand encourages participation in higher education of high achieving socio-economically disadvantaged groups, but does not address structural barriers of ethnicity or class. They argue that such an approach constitutes a 'deficit model' of access and may be considered as 'cream skimming'. The second strand, the utilitarian approach, is often construed as a 'bolt-on service', driven by an employability agenda. It does not make structural changes to degree programmes, but offers a range of supports such as access, vocationally oriented programmes, guidance and study skills, and specialist student services. Jones and Thomas call for a transformative approach to access where institutions change from within to meet the needs of under-represented groups. Institutions would value diversity as a strength to be harnessed to inform learning and activities, and they would review their processes of knowledge production and transfer.

## First generation students

The preceding section was concerned with policy and practice issues in HE access programmes. Other research considers how non-traditional or first generation students experience university life. First generation students are defined as those whose parent(s) have not attained an undergraduate qualification (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 2004). Though many first generation university students do not attend access courses, their experiences are similar to those of students that enter university by an access route.

Forsyth and Furlong (2003) report the difficulties that first generation university students can encounter in fitting into a new cultural landscape. First generation university students can arrive unprepared for student life and face difficulties with managing structured and unstructured time. Loxley (2004), in a study of disadvantaged mature age students in higher education, notes how the physical environment of university can contribute to feelings of difference and of alienation, and of the burden of physical and temporal space.

Lehmann (2007) found that first generation university students overcompensate because of their perceived disadvantage. They work harder and feel they have to achieve at a higher level. Jones (2006), in the case of social work students who have entered university via an access programme, reports they felt insecure about their academic abilities. Nonetheless, they faced their learning with determination and in 'bite sized chunks' (Jones, 2006: 493).

Christie, Munro and Wager (2005) report that first generation students in older prestigious HEIs can operate as 'day students' in so far as they subscribe to the academic course requirements but, because of family and /or work demands, do not engage in informal and cultural pursuits. While this may limit their overall educational experience and the possibilities to participate in networks that can enhance employment and social activities, for some this may be a deliberate choice. Christie, Munro and Wager note that some students did not view the 'typical' student life as desirable or meaningful for them and they projected an alternative student lifestyle that should also be deemed valid, acknowledged and supported by the institution. Even when HEIs do not fall within the elite category and have a high proportion of 'non-traditional students', the dominant student culture projected by HEIs is that of a young, white, middle-class and male student (Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003).

Thomas and Jones (2003) point to the financial challenges faced by first generation students. These include concerns about debt, lack of money, guilt about not being able to contribute to the family income, a need to supplement income through part-time employment and, for some, difficulties and hostility regarding the transition from welfare benefits to being a student.

Issues about family identity also feature in the accounts of first generation university students who do not follow their assigned family role. London (1989), in case studies of US first generation university students, illustrates how they can simultaneously experience the difference and isolation of the new university environment yet are unable to discuss with their family or friends any aspect of their new experiences (London, 1989). This is in contrast to some first generation university students who recall the pressure on them to proceed to university and not to follow their parents' route to employment (Hicks, 2009). First generation students can carry the baggage of intergenerational family dynamics that impacts on their sense of belonging and causes confusion about role assignment in their families (London, 1989). For some students this results in 'survivor guilt' (Wray, 2009) when they compare their own opportunities for progression with that of their parents and other family members before them.



Although family issues can present dilemmas for first generation students, Gofen (2007) demonstrates that families can also be a key resource rather than a constraint. Family supports are an important dimension not only when going to college but of remaining there. This is echoed in research on Irish mature age students' experience of HE that points to the centrality of family support to their success. Such support ranged from finance and childcare to more affective supports (Kenny et al., 2010).

## Summary

This chapter provided a brief review of what we know about access programmes in Ireland and the experiences of students that become the first generation of their family to attend higher education. Considerable progress has been made with access programme delivery and outcomes in terms of the numbers of non-traditional students that achieve higher educational qualifications. Yet there remains a competing discourse about what and whom access is for, and the role of higher education institutions in providing an educational experience that is truly open and accessible to all. Chapter 3 that follows outlines the quantitative findings of the TAP Trinity Alumni survey. A rich picture of these alumni is presented in terms of their own education, employment and living circumstances, and the educational qualifications of their parents/guardians. It also outlines how these TAP Trinity alumni perceive the impact of their qualification on their family and community.

## Chapter 3: Survey findings TAP Trinity Alumni

### Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the quantitative survey of TAP Trinity alumni. The main aim of the survey was to examine the extent to which TAP graduates of Trinity perceive the impact of their qualification on their families and communities. Participants provided a range of contextual demographic information that related to themselves and their families and for those who are parents their expectations for their children's educational progression. Survey questions encompassed the following dimensions:

- TAP Trinity Alumni educational backgrounds, including parents/guardians, partners/spouses
- Graduate education and employment profile post Trinity
- Second generation progression to third level education
- Expectations about children's educational progression

### Characteristics of survey participants

Two-hundred-and-fifty-two graduates of Trinity College Dublin that had entered Trinity via an access programme were invited to complete an online questionnaire. Two-hundred consented to participate in the research. Of these, one hundred and thirty-seven completed the survey resulting in a 68% response rate.

Just under one third of graduates were men (29%: 40); 71% (97) were women. As Table 3. 1 below shows approximately half of the graduates were in their twenties (55%), and a quarter were in their thirties (26%); the oldest graduate to participate was 76 years old.

Table 3.1: Participant age categories

| Participant age categories | %   |
|----------------------------|-----|
| 20-29 years                | 55% |
| 30-39 years                | 26% |
| 40-49 years                | 6%  |
| 50-59 years                | 9%  |
| 60-69 years                | 2%  |
| 70+                        | 1%  |

Approximately one third of graduates were parents (31%: 42). The data indicates that the majority of these children were of primary and secondary school going age, and within the '0-5' (16) and '11-15' (10) year old age categories.

The vast majority, 91% (120) were resident in Ireland. Of those who live abroad, 77% (10) indicated that they do so for employment, with others pursuing further study or travelling. Just under half were graduates of the Foundation Course 'Young Adult' (42%: 48), followed by Foundation Course 'Mature Student' (22%: 25) and graduates of the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) (24%: 28) (see Table 3.2 below).

Table 3.2: Access route to Trinity

| Access route                              | %   |
|---|-----|
| Foundation Course: Young Adults (FCYA)    | 42% |
| Foundation Course: Mature Students (FCMS) | 22% |
| Higher Education Access Route (HEAR)      | 24% |
| University Access Courses/Referrals       | 12% |

Graduates were predominantly from the 2009-10 (18%: 21) and 2010-11 (17%: 20) cohorts. Table 3.3 below demonstrates that rate of participation in the research declines with length of time since graduation with participation amongst the early cohorts, quite low.

**Table 3.3: Graduation cohort**

| Graduation cohort | %   |
|-------------------|-----|
| 2011-12           | 14% |
| 2010-11           | 17% |
| 2009-10           | 18% |
| 2008-09           | 9%  |
| 2007-08           | 15% |
| 2006-07           | 7%  |
| 2005-06           | 14% |
| 2004-05           | 3%  |
| 2003-04           | 1%  |
| 2002-03           | 2%  |
| 2001-02           | 0%  |

Three-quarters of graduates (75%; 53) were the first in their family to attend Trinity. Eight out of 10 (83%; 44) were also the only member of their family ever to attend Trinity.

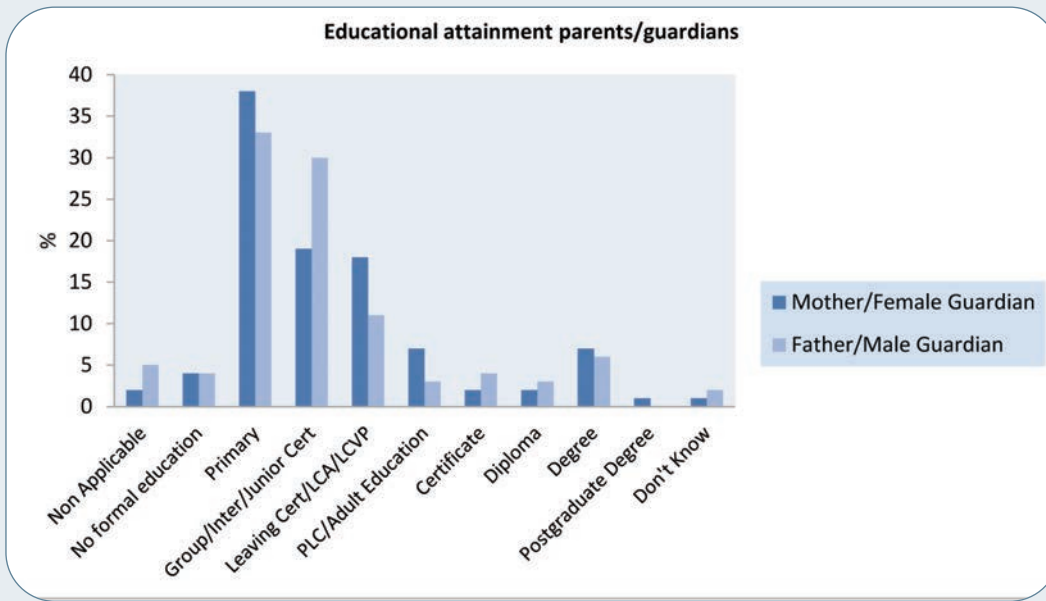
However, the attainment patterns for the partners/spouses of graduates differs in this regard. As Table 3.4 below shows, TAP graduates of Trinity tended to report that they were in relationships with individuals with similar educational qualifications ranging most frequently from degree (29%: 27) to postgraduate (23%: 22) followed by 14% (13) who have a diploma. Approximately 20% of graduates' spouses/partners have educational levels lower than that of Leaving Certificate study.

**Table 3.4: Partner/spouse level of education**

| Partner/Spouse: Level of Education | %   |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| Degree                             | 29% |
| Postgraduate                       | 23% |
| Diploma                            | 14% |
| Group/Inter/Junior                 | 10% |
| Leaving Certificate                | 9%  |
| Primary                            | 6%  |
| Certificate                        | 4%  |
| PLC/Adult Education                | 3%  |
| No Formal Education                | 2%  |

As Figure 3.1 shows the majority of participants' parents (61% mothers/female guardians and 67% of fathers/male guardians) were early school leavers, having left school before completion of the Leaving Certificate. Thirty-eight per cent reported their mother's highest level of education as primary, and one third of participants' fathers/male guardians also completed their education at this level (33%).

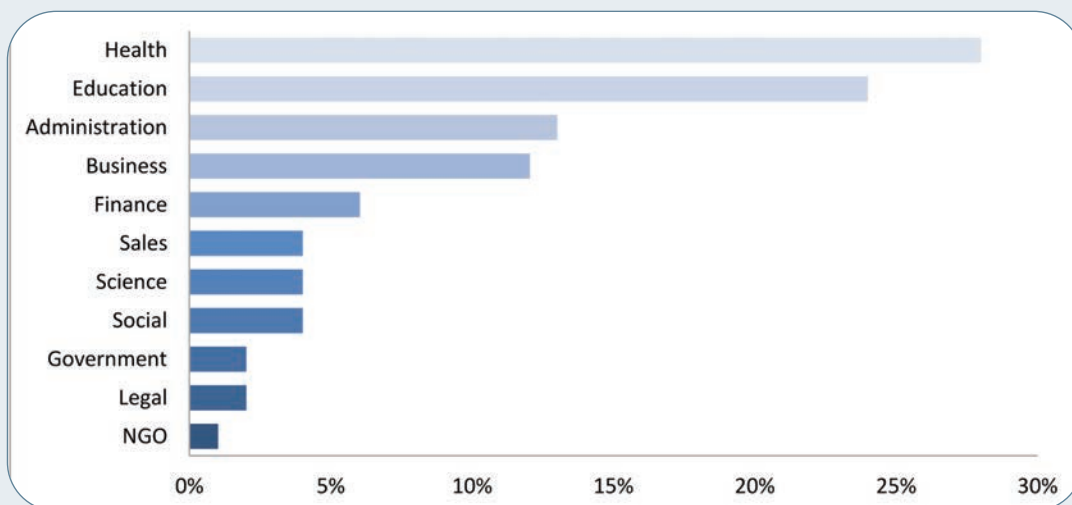
Figure 3.1: Educational attainment, parents/guardians



### Professional Status

At the time of the survey the majority of participants (69%; 92) reported that they were employed. The majority work in traditional higher or lower professional graduate roles as social workers, solicitors, researchers, lecturers, physiotherapists, psychiatrists, healthcare professionals and bank officials. As Figure 3.2 demonstrates, the health sector is the major category (28%) in which TAP Trinity graduates are employed, followed closely by education (24%). Employment in legal and government sectors was quite low at 2%. Consistent with previous TAP research (TAP 2010) some TAP graduates work across sectors as administrators, clerical officers and personal assistants, and as such continue to be represented within the 'non manual' occupational category, despite their third level credentials. When employment status is viewed by the graduate's access route, more FCYA graduates were employed (83%) than HEAR graduates (79%), and mature students (48%)<sup>3</sup>

Figure 3. 2: Graduates' employment sector

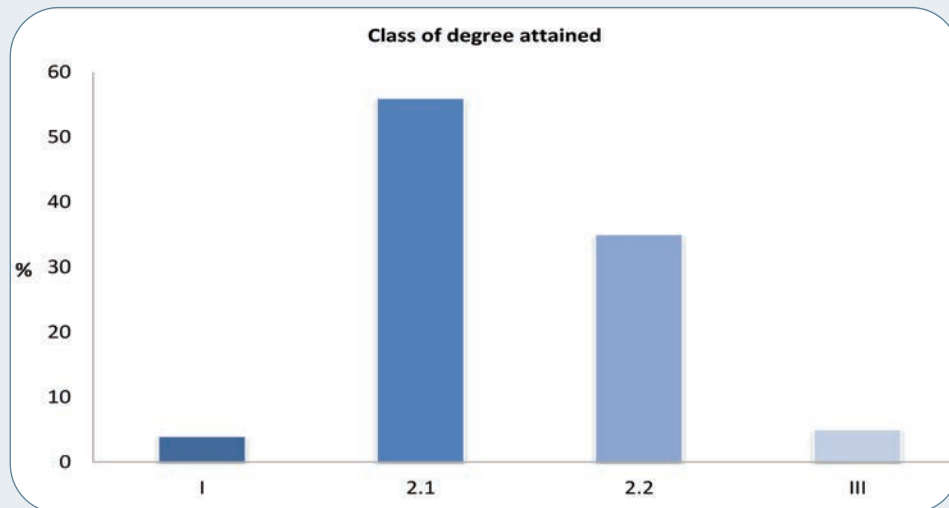


<sup>3</sup> Three graduates of the University Access Course (UAC): Pearse responded to the question, and are employed. Of the two graduates of the UAC: Plunket who responded to the question, one is employed. Only one graduate of UAC Liberties responded, and is currently unemployed. 'Other' or 'referral' graduates are those who were referred to TAP for financial or academic supports due to their socio-economic backgrounds but who did not enter the college directly through an access route, of the 8 graduates who indicated this route; 7 are employed (87.5%).

<sup>4</sup> The rate of participation of graduates from the University Access Courses (UACs) was low, however of the UAC: Plunket graduates: one graduate gained a 2.1, and one gained a 2.2. Graduates who participated from the UAC: Pearse two obtained a 2.1, and one obtained a 2.2. One UAC Liberties graduate responded and indicated they obtained a 2.2.

Figure 3.3 highlights that the majority of participants had achieved a second class honours division one degree (2.1) (56%; 64), which aligns with previous TAP research (TAP, 2010). This was followed by 35% (41) who had achieved a second class honours division two degree (2.2). Similar proportions of graduates of the TAP fFoundation Courses achieved 2.2 awards (64%). Although fewer HEAR graduates achieved 2.1 degrees (46%: 13) they were more likely to achieve a first class honours award (14%: 4)<sup>4</sup>. Approximately one quarter (27%: 36) stated they had a postgraduate qualification, three are currently engaged in PhD study. Trinity College was the most frequently listed institution for postgraduate study.

Figure 3.3: Class of degree attained



### Access: family & community

The majority of TAP Trinity graduates come from areas of Dublin that are under-represented in higher education. The main suburbs represented were Tallaght, Walkinstown, Ballyfermot and Cabra. Just over two-thirds (70%) remained living in the same area as during their time as Trinity undergraduates. When compared by access route we find that higher proportions of graduates of the FCYA (56 %: 27) and FCMS (68%: 17) were living in their local areas post-graduation than HEAR graduates (39%; 11).

Participants were asked if they considered themselves to be role models to others in the family or community who seek to attend third level education. The vast majority (84%; 101) of TAP Trinity graduates agreed with this proposition, with greater proportions of graduates from the foundation courses than HEAR graduates agreeing with this statement<sup>5</sup>. The majority provided a reason for their answer. The most frequently occurring categories of responses are shown in Table 3.5 below. The responses indicated that participants acted as ‘sites of information’ for those interested in returning to education, essentially bridging an information gap and ‘demystifying’ third level education for others in their families and communities.

Table 3.5: TAP Graduates as ambassadors for access to higher education

| Theme              | Example   | Frequency |
|--------------------|---|-----------|
| Immediate Family   | Applied to/ more aware of third level as a result of graduates attendance.  | 35        |
| Role Modelling     | Graduates see themselves as role models to friends and anyone in community thinking of third level education, ‘if they did it, others can too’.               | 32        |
| Extended Family    | Applied to/more aware of third level as a result of graduate’s attendance. TAP graduates who are grandparents also influencing their grandchildren to attend. | 16        |
| Education Guidance | Graduates ‘demystify’ third level education and the CAO points system, give advice on student finance, and talks to primary and secondary school children.    | 10        |

Graduates also assist with educational guidance in their families and communities; some were also involved in giving talks at local schools, while others drew on their areas of expertise to give free grinds to local schoolchildren. Others considered that their achievement positioned them as a role model in communities where third level education was not the norm:

<sup>5</sup> 96% of Foundation Course for mature student graduates consider themselves to be role models to others in their family or community as do 85% of Foundation Course for young adults and 75% HEAR graduates.

When people who wouldn't normally be expected to go on to third level see somebody from their community who has done it and more importantly enjoyed doing it, I think it really influences them. (Respondent 4)

As I stated before, I regularly give talks to other mature students who are thinking of going to college but have fears/anxieties etc regarding the process. (Respondent 13)

The 'ripple effect' is a very real phenomenon and I have witnessed how people are inspired by the TAP story I have had, as it inspired me and still does. I feel I will grow as a role model in the future as I achieve further in regards to career goals, which is ongoing at present. (Respondent 22)

My younger sister aged 12 has just started secondary school, she has been at two of my graduations in Trinity (Foundation Course and my degree) and will be attending my third graduation... (my masters from UCD)...my sister has known about university life since she was 3 years of age so she knows its attainable and wants to go to college herself. She knows about the Leaving Cert points system, college speak and academic terms etc and I would never have had that link or knowledge. The same with my parents, they're more academically aware because of my situation and know there's a whole different world out there in terms of education and travel etc. (Respondent 88)

It encourages people to come to the realisation that the area you come from and your socio economic status does not mean that education is inaccessible. (Respondent 29)

The responses to questions about their involvement in the local community also highlights that for some graduates, although they remain living in their communities, there are a number of factors that affect their ability to maintain connections in the community. For some their work, and social lives tended to be outside their local areas, and though they may want to engage more with the local community, they do not have the time to do so, due to work and study commitments:

I feel connected but there is always room for improvement, right now my main focus is my career. (Respondent 13)

My work takes me out of the local community. (Respondent 28)

Too busy working. (Respondent 37)

I still live in the area I grew up in and still have family and some friends there; but the majority of my friends are from college and not from where I grew up. Also my work is not based in the area where I live so I tend to work and socialise in the city centre. I am very proud of where I am from, I just don't have much connection to the community there anymore, probably due to the type of work I do. (Respondent 40)

Other graduates did not feel as 'connected' to their areas of origin or community, but saw their education as a personal achievement which they do not highlight to others:

I did not tell my friends or fellow students that I was a TAP student because my friends never knew or did not want to know of my circumstances financially or how unsupportive my school or family were. (Respondent 42)

I know that my pursuit of a third-level education was not generally understood in the local area where I live, especially as I was a very mature student. Unfortunately some individuals believed that the pursuit of further education meant setting oneself outside the general community. Therefore I only disclosed the information to a few trusted friends. (Respondent 11)

It has no effect because I am not there to give back to the community; I am still in college doing a PhD in Trinity. I am also very aware that the local community would have no knowledge about some sources of aid in college until they get here. (Respondent 54)

Though participation in local community, political or area partnerships did not feature strongly amongst graduate activities mature student graduates demonstrated the highest levels of engagement in community based activities (64%); mainly involvement with 'education programmes or school committees' (50%: 12) is a feature of this civic engagement.

## Intergenerational access: third level participation and attendance at Trinity College

### *Third level participation among extended family*

The vast majority of participants reported that at least one member of their extended family has attended a third level college (86% FCYA; 70%; HEAR, 58% FCMS), cousins being the most common. However, when we examine the proportions of graduates' family members that have studied at Trinity the proportions are much lower. Sixteen participants reported that a family member had attended Trinity and of these half were female siblings (57%), followed by just over a quarter (29%) of brothers (Table 3.6).

Table 3.6: TAP family members' attendance at Trinity

| Relative                | %        |
|-------------------------|----------|
| Sisters/Female Siblings | 57 % (8) |
| Brothers/Male Siblings  | 29% (4)  |
| Cousins                 | 14% (2)  |
| Father/Male Guardian    | 7% (1)   |
| Aunt                    | 7% (1)   |
| Total                   | 16       |

In addition to family members' attendance at third level we also assessed whether graduates' relatives had entered Trinity via the Trinity Access Programmes. The numbers reported were low (16), but for some TAP graduates, more than one of their family members had also attended Trinity through the TAP programmes<sup>6</sup>; sisters/female siblings were the most common second member of the family to attend Trinity via TAP. Relatives of the Foundation Course Young Adult graduates have slightly higher levels of progression into Trinity. Eleven relatives have graduated from Trinity.

When asked about whether their attendance at university has had an influence on their family the vast majority (80%: 91) agreed that it did. Analysis by access route indicates that the graduates of the TAP Foundation Courses perceived a higher level of influence than graduates of HEAR<sup>7</sup>. Explanations were provided by 86 (80%) participants. The most frequently occurring responses in the following categories were: 'motivational impact on family members' (28%) 'other family members had gone on to third level education' (17%) 'normalisation of third level (6%) within their family'. Participants also explained the influence in statements that reflected the pride felt within their families (6%). Just over one tenth suggested that attending university had a 'financial influence':

It has meant that I have not had to be as dependent on my parents so therefore they have more money to invest in sending my siblings to college. (Respondent 70)

Being a TAP graduate has had a very important influence on my family. Before I went to college none of my family had even considered third level education. Now my extended family would aspire to attend a third level college when they finish school. (Respondent 54)

Yes prior to me attending college they had very little knowledge or understanding of the system. It has made college 'normal' for other family members. (Respondent 61)

This data confirms previous findings that graduates act as role models to, and sites of information for, their families, friends and communities. The graduates assist with raising aspirations for education in general, and in doing so, they break down barriers to third level attainment.

When asked to rate how important third level education had been within their family when they were a child, one third of graduates reported that it was 'not at all important' (30%: 35) as opposed to 21% (24) who felt that it had been 'very important'. When graduates were asked if it was expected within their family that they would attend third level education (n = 114) equal proportions agreed and disagreed with the statement (40%) while almost one fifth felt that they did not know (19%).

<sup>6</sup> None of the graduates from the UAC courses reported a family member progressing to Trinity College.

<sup>7</sup> FCMS: 84%: 21; FCYA: 83%; HEAR: 78%.

## Niamh: Higher Education Access Route

Niamh is 24 and is the youngest of three children. As a teenager she grew up in Tallaght. Her parents have recently retired. Both her parents come from inner city Dublin and they left school at 14 to join the workforce. Her father did some training in a technical college and later became an electrician but finished his working life as a taxi driver. For many years her mother worked in retail but in later years she worked as a child minder. Niamh has positive memories of primary school and she loved reading and music. She attended a TAP secondary school and was encouraged to apply for university by her careers teacher who advised her about a reduced points scheme. She also attended a summer school in Trinity.

Niamh joined an undergraduate programme in science at Trinity. Although she attended the orientation provided by TAP she did not know anyone else attending her course. Her first two years were tough going but she got through. She availed of some maths support through TAP. She made friendships with some students from the country as they were easier to relate to. A lot of the other students in her course already had connections with students on the course or on other courses.

Niamh did not have time to avail of activities in Trinity, which she regrets, because she was concerned about her progress and had to get home to Tallaght every evening. She also had a part-time job at the weekend. In third and fourth year she felt more at ease with her studies and enjoyed them more, particularly project work.

Since graduation Niamh has obtained employment as a laboratory technician. She is happy with this although it took some time to secure; she admits that she graduated at a difficult time when jobs were hard to obtain. She doesn't have any connections to Trinity now but some day would like to go on to take another course if she can afford it, but probably not at Trinity. She wants to help with financial support to her parents now that they are retired on the State pension and because she has a full-time job. From time to time her mother will ask her to give some advice on the college application process to friends' children.

## Niamh's mother Mary

Mary recalls Niamh as a bright child with a love of learning. She fully expected Niamh to go on to third level education but they did not expect it would have been Trinity. She was disappointed that her other children did not go to third level. They are very proud of Niamh's achievements as she is the first in the family and on their street to go on to third level. She felt that Niamh had to work hard to get her place and Niamh struggled along the way. Mary tried to provide a supportive home environment but they rarely discussed what she was studying. She always knew when there were exams or a deadline. She values the fact that Niamh is still living at home and is able to provide some support to her.





## Graduates with children: aspirations, expectations and concerns

Approximately one third (42) of graduates reported that they have children. Of these, 77% (30) stated their involvement in their children's education was 'much greater' than their own parents' involvement in their schooling. The majority (88%: 35) of parents also went on to indicate that there is a 'much greater' level of awareness amongst their children regarding third level education, in particular, all of the mature students who are parents seek to instil this message in their children<sup>8</sup>.

Graduates with children were asked to respond to an open ended question about their how involvement in their children's education compared with their own parents'/guardians' involvement in their education as a child. The majority of respondents were mature students. Their own parents'/guardians' involvement was constrained by a number of barriers that related to the era in which they grew up, values about education, inability to help, and financial difficulties. These barriers that restricted their parents'/guardians' involvement in their education were in stark contrast to their own role in their children's education. As shown in Table 3.4 graduates' responses indicate active involvement and of the transmission of educational capital to their children through their understanding of the 'system' and how to navigate it. They have a much more active role, where they can draw positively from their own experiences and skill-set to assist with homework and study. The graduates are also acting as 'advocates' on their children's behalf to ensure they have positive experiences inside the school itself.

Table 3.4: Parental involvement in children's education – past and present

| Graduates' parents (Then) |  | Graduates' with their children (Now)                    |  |
|---------------------------|--|---|--|
| Theme                     | Example  | Theme   | Example  |
| Different Era             | Working was more important; practical issue of contributing to the household income.                                     | Active Involvement in Schooling                         | Assist with homework, reading, writing, project work at primary and second level. Graduate parents understand the curricula in schools.  |
| De-valued education       | Not practical to attend third level; college attendance not seen as valuable.  | Transmission of 'Educational Capital' to their children | Positive, proactive language around education in the home: theme of 'encouragement'.   |
| System barriers           | Parents valued and encouraged education but lack of free second level schooling, and college fees prevented progression. | Advocacy  | Graduates who are parents represent their children's interests on school committees shaping school policies for their children's education. Parents are 'advocates for their children', collaborating with schools in relation to their educational experiences. |

<sup>8</sup> All of the Foundation Course for mature student graduates who are parents (20) stated their children have a 'much greater' level of awareness of third level education, and similarly 75% of Foundation Course for young adult graduates indicated the same. Two HEAR graduates were parents, and both indicated their children's level of awareness is 'about the same'.

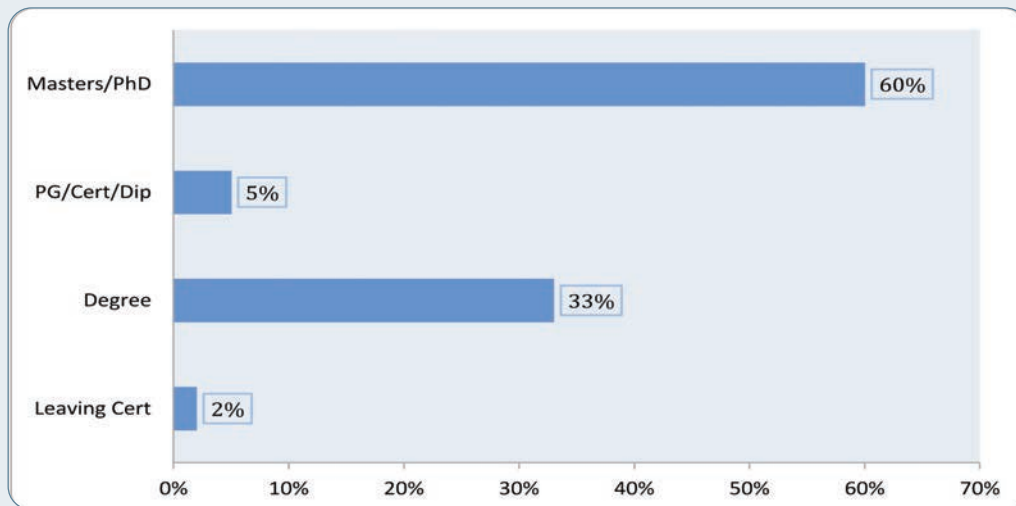
The vast majority (86%; 36) think it is likely their children will attend third level education. When asked about what educational qualifications they expected their children to obtain almost two thirds indicated that they expected their children to achieve a postgraduate (levels 9 and 10) qualification. The remainder indicated that degree, or postgraduate certificates/diplomas were the expected level of attainment. In terms of the graduates' access route, mature students reported very high aspirations for their children's education with 70% (14) believing their children will obtain a Masters degree or PhD; half of FCYA and HEAR graduates also hold these aspirations for their children's educational careers.

The open ended data also suggest that graduates have passed to their children that to aspire for third-level education is a natural and expected next step in education; and that their children will exceed their own educational attainment patterns:

Two of my children got places in college but I especially think that the youngest saw it as a right. (Respondent 52)

I am much more aware of the education system and how it works, and a lot more confident with directing my children. (Respondent 71)

Figure 3.4: Graduates' educational aspirations for their children



Although graduates reported that they take an active role in the education of their children and have high aspirations for them in relation to educational attainment, some were concerned about whether it would be possible for their children to attend third level, due mainly to financial pressures on families and the increasing tuition rates in this sector:

The cost of education, and the reduction in grant aid may affect opportunities for younger generations (my grandchildren), but I feel further education is an experience vital to personal growth and development and is something I would encourage whatever the cost. (Respondent 4)

I will hopefully have the income to support [my children in going to third level], however, with constant increases in fees this may not be possible without a student loan company being established like what is already established in the UK. (Respondent 12)

The only barrier I could possibly anticipate for my children to study at third level would be the financial cost of sending them to college as given my work status they would not qualify for tuition fees, but we will hopefully overcome this barrier when the time comes. (Respondent 15)

## Summary

The survey of TAP Trinity alumni aimed to examine how TAP Trinity alumni view the impact of their Trinity qualification on their families and communities.

The majority of alumni were from working class suburbs of Dublin and had parents/guardians that were early school leavers. The majority were the first generation of their family to undertake a degree at Trinity but there was evidence of third level participation among their wider family, particularly cousins. Amongst a minority there was evidence of a second-generation influence as siblings, notably sisters, progressed to TAP and to undergraduate programmes at Trinity.

The findings in relation to TAP Trinity graduates' educational attainment and employment align with previous TAP research. They are employed in areas that are typical for college graduates in Ireland but this is less likely for mature students.

These alumni perceive that they have a strong influence on their families and communities, particularly in providing information about third level education. This is perhaps bolstered by their continued residence in the area in which they resided as an undergraduate.

TAP Trinity graduates reveal that they act as ambassadors for access in their extended and immediate families, and in their communities; they also fill an education information void that they perceive to exist in those communities.

Graduates with children report that they play a strong and active role in their children's education. Their aspirations and expectations for their children exceed those of their own parents, and interestingly for many graduates, their expectation of their children is for them to progress further in education than they did, pursuing at least Level 8 and 9 qualifications.

For some there are concerns over the current state of the higher education sector. There is concern as to whether financial pressures and fees will become a barrier to them ensuring their children, like them, can access higher education in future. However, despite these concerns about tuition fees they still believe they will encourage their children's progression to third level education.

## Jackie: Foundation Course for Mature Students

Jackie is 50 years old. She grew up in Drimnagh where she still lives today. She is the third of six children. Her parents came from Dublin's inner city and both had left school at the age of 13. Jackie's mother had worked as a cleaner for most of her adult life, but also suffered from poor health. Jackie's father had been a delivery boy for a biscuit manufacturer and later became a driver. Jackie's father had a strong interest in politics and was always reading papers and loved conversation. He was also good at arithmetic and helped Jackie as much as he could when she was in primary school.

Jackie loved primary school and was enthusiastic about reading, although she found Irish difficult. Her move to a convent secondary school was not so positive. Two of her sisters had gone there before her and had not done so well and she felt marked out. She found the discipline in the school as somewhat harsh and that being from a poor family made it difficult to participate in school activities. Her siblings all left school after the Junior Cert and were in factory jobs – sewing and electronic manufacturing. Her friends were keen to leave school on completion of the Junior Cert and she knew she would be able to get a job in the sewing factory where one of her sisters worked. She also liked the idea of having money and independence.

After Jackie married she continued in part-time retail and reception jobs. Materially her family were doing fine. She took some personal development courses from the local adult education centre and liked the adult learning approach. She went on to take some Leaving Certificate courses offered by her local college. She found this to be a very empowering experience but had no plans to continue beyond this level. Her attendance at a talk by a graduate of TAP Trinity from the area sparked off her interest – 'well if she can do it, so can I'. Jackie enrolled in the Foundation Course for Mature Students.

Jackie had never been in Trinity before and felt somewhat daunted by the prospect. She didn't see TAP as Trinity; she loved the approach to learning and she made strong friendships through TAP. She found new areas of interest and skills in subjects that she did not realise she possessed. It was tough going but she was proud of her achievements and so were her immediate family. Though ultimately proud, her own siblings and parents were not really sure why she was putting herself through that 'at her age'. Jackie graduated with a degree in history and is now taking postgraduate studies. She works part-time in adult education.

## Jackie's daughter Jessica

Jackie's daughter Jessica is 25 and she recalls doing her Leaving Certificate when her mum was on the Foundation Course. Their house was always a hive of activity; at times stressful, particularly when Jackie had a major assignment due and when exams were coming up. Jessica said that her dad helped a lot by being home for the children if Jackie had a late lecture. He also did a lot of the shopping and meal preparation, and brought in the income to support them. Jessica felt that her mother was very courageous and instilled in her and her brother a very strong work ethic.



### Introduction

This chapter presents findings from the qualitative interviews undertaken with twenty TAP Trinity Alumni. These interviews explored alumni's pathways into TAP; the experience of being a first generation university student; and the impact of being a Trinity graduate on family and community connections. Characteristics of the interviewees are presented in Table 4.1 below. This is followed by a thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews.

Table 4.1: Alumni participant characteristics (n = 20)

| ID       | Sex | Age | Access Route | Parent | Parents' education | Employed | Year grad |
|----------|-----|-----|--------------|--------|--------------------|----------|-----------|
| TAPAL 1  | M   | 24  | HEAR         | No     | Primary            | Yes      | 2011      |
| TAPAL 2  | M   | 75  | FCMS         | Yes    | Primary            | No       | 2009      |
| TAPAL 3  | F   | 50  | FCMS         | Yes    | Primary            | Yes      | 2008      |
| TAPAL 4  | F   | 27  | FCYA         | No     | Primary            | No       | 2008      |
| TAPAL 5  | F   | 27  | FCYA         | No     | JC                 | Yes      | 2008      |
| TAPAL 6  | F   | 32  | FCMS         | Yes    | Primary            | No       | 2010      |
| TAPAL 7  | M   | 30  | FCYA         | No     | Inter              | Yes      | 2006      |
| TAPAL 8  | F   | 31  | FCYA         | Yes    | Inter              | Yes      | 2007      |
| TAPAL 9  | M   | 27  | FCYA         | No     | Primary            | No       | 2009      |
| TAPAL 10 | F   | 70  | FCMS         | No     | Primary            | Yes      | 2007      |
| TAPAL 11 | F   | 35  | FCMS         | Yes    | JC                 | No       | 2010      |
| TAPAL 12 | F   | 50  | Link         | Yes    | Primary            | Yes      | 2010      |
| TAPAL 13 | M   | 24  | HEAR         | No     | LC                 | Yes      | 2010      |
| TAPAL 14 | F   | 30  | FCYA         | No     | Primary            | Yes      | 2006      |
| TAPAL 15 | F   | 27  | HEAR         | No     | Inter              | Yes      | 2007      |
| TAPAL 16 | M   | 24  | HEAR         | No     | Primary            | Yes      | 2010      |
| TAPAL 17 | F   | 31  | HEAR         | No     | Primary            | Yes      | 2004      |
| TAPAL 18 | F   | 41  | FCMS         | Yes    | Primary            | No       | 2010      |
| TAPAL 19 | M   | 27  | FCYA         | No     | Primary            | Yes      | 2009      |
| TAPAL 20 | M   | 29  | FCYA         | No     | Primary            | No       | 2007      |

### Family profile

Each interview established the participant's family background and experiences of school. The overwhelming majority were the first generation of their family to attend tertiary education; many were the first in their family to complete the Leaving Certificate. All had stories to tell and, in common with findings from previous Irish research on mature age students' life experiences, reflected eloquently on their family and educational backgrounds (Kenny et al., 2010).

Participants mainly came from traditional working class areas of Dublin. The vast majority came from households headed by manual and/or unskilled workers, with jobs including: cleaner; factory worker; driver delivery-person; shop assistant; seamstress; and railway worker. One or both parents had left school at primary or Junior Certificate level. Most participants' parents had joined the workforce as teenagers without further educational opportunities; there had been no expectation that they would do anything other than work. Some had experience of considerable social and economic deprivation within their families due to illness, disability, death, addiction, divorce or separation.

Most participants recalled a supportive home environment where they were encouraged to do the best they could. Despite the limited schooling of their parents, it was striking that often a parent, grandparent or sibling had encouraged them in education. Most did not come from homes with a strong home literacy environment; but many had access to newspapers and children's books, radio and TV. A few reported that their parent(s) provided a very rich reading and book environment:

My Dad, he would have been a very good writer and a very good reader. And my Mam she would probably have basic, like very, very basic, my Mam never read a book and she would never read a paper. (TAPAL 12)

We'd read but I wouldn't read that much but yeah we were always like ...we always read the newspapers. We were always very up to date on current affairs and stuff.

*What about books in the home, did you have books in the home?*

Yeah there was, there were novels to read and books to read. Maybe not at the start, there were probably like kiddie books but then there were a lot of books especially my brother reads an awful lot like. (TAPAL 13)

Incredibly supportive of anything I ever wanted, I had many hobbies like painting and anytime I needed a book my Da brought me out and we got the book ... like my father always greatly encouraged me to read, he gave me comic books because he wanted me to read and then after that he became involved in like giving me the classics and modern tales and any book he could give me that I might read I would read, so always very encouraging in academics. (TAPAL 1)

They took a huge interest. They'd always want to see how you did in a test. They were always encouraging us to study, not that I needed much encouragement, and I suppose they'd praise you when they knew that you had studied. (TAPAL 17)

## School experience

Participants had mixed views about their school years. Some had enjoyed primary school, but may have had a negative experience of second level. Even where they had not fared well at school they may have enjoyed the social aspect. Some had a very negative view of their school environment:

*So why was it so?*

I just didn't like anything in it. I don't know.

*Give me an example?*

Well the people, the students in it like there was no control. The teachers had no control. A lot of them had very little interest; a lot of them were like trying to clock up years before they retired. I'd say most of them wouldn't get away with the level of teaching in other schools because pressure, I'd say, would be put on them, you know, by parents in better areas (TAPAL 15)

I never wanted to go to college. I had no interest in school. It was never an ambition to go to college. I hated school. I was working from 15. I was a [ name of job] in [street in Dublin city centre] because my mother at the time had no money. I used to work...(TAPAL 11)

*When did you leave school then?*

At 14.

*So you didn't do the Junior Cert?*

Didn't do the Junior, no.

*Why did you leave then?*

I left because I was going through a rebellion stage. I was - at 13 I started to experiment with hair and makeup and jewellery and just wanted to go for this black gothic look - that was in at a time and - I said, I loved - but I wasn't a trouble maker, I was very - I still liked school - aspects of school - I always liked English and history and stuff, but - and I kind of, I always gave that my all; but every day I'd go to school and the headmaster would wait for me and he would wash my hair every single day - and I'd go back home and put more soap in it. (TAPAL 18)

Most mature-age students' reflections of their school experience, particularly their reason for leaving before completion of the Leaving Certificate, revealed an expectation either in their family, or among their peer group, that they would do so for employment:

***How do you feel about your school days?***

I have no good, bad or indifferent memories, I just went. I know I hit that rebellious way at 14. I didn't want to be there and that was more about probably knowing that there is no point, I was going to leave anyway. (TAPAL 12)

And I do remember coming up to Junior Cert and, sort of, why am I bothering to do this; and my mother would have kind of you know 'at least get to that level'. I don't think she even knew why but she knew. I didn't even bother to pick up the results. By that stage I had a job and my older sister went down and picked them up. And I think the nun said oh my God can you not get her to come back and do her Inter Cert - and they said 'no she has no interest'.

***So you, you kind of switched off yourself?***

I did, because the group that I sort of hung around with, everyone had jobs, and there was a couple of people that would have been say in the area I wasn't particularly friends with them but there was a couple of people in the area who would have went to do their Leaving Cert. (TAPAL 3)

Some of the mature-age students had been young adults in the mid-to-late 1970s in socio-economically disadvantaged areas of Dublin. At that time there was a pull to employment and they tended to follow the path of other family members. This was also an experience among some of the younger participants, those now in their late twenties who had completed their second-level schooling during the Celtic Tiger years and had grown up in working class suburbs of Dublin:

Like, there would be an expectation, like, you finish school, you go out to work or you'd become part of the productive economy, as opposed to going on to college, like ... I know blokes who were bricklayers who were bringing in €1,400 a week and so, you know, that was a barrier. (TAPAL 19)

Despite differences in their school experiences, a common account among participants was that they were generally good students with an interest in learning:

I was quite studious in school. I done transition year and in the transition year I won student of the year award in the school and I kind of would have, I always got work done. When I got home I'd always do homework fairly early. Immediately when I'd get into the house I'd sit down and be regimental about it. (TAPAL 20)

I loved English. I always loved English that would have been, yeah, English would have been ... because I read and that was probably the only subject. (TAPAL 12)

The vast majority of participants related that their parent(s) provided support for their education. The majority reflected that, while support with homework was available to them during the primary school years, most parents were not able to support them during their secondary education, particularly in maths and Irish:

She is very literate and her family would be like that, like books and stuff, but they wouldn't, they are actually very different, like a total block against science or maths so there wouldn't be any, like up to a certain level like primary school but after that I was on my own. (TAPAL 15)

Yeah, and homework was a nightmare, because she didn't know any maths and she was, she could do a bit of English, she didn't know any Irish, do you know that kind of way? So it was difficult in that sense, but we all, in the sense of routine, we always did our homework, we were always in school, we were always in school on time, you know, we were always encouraged to be in school and to do whatever the teacher told you. (TAPAL 8)

Up until a point where they could help, you know, obviously there came a point where it was beyond them, certain aspects. They don't speak Irish so getting help with the Irish even at junior level was quite hard and it passed onto me. I have no ambition to learn Irish and I'm not very good at speaking Irish. I did very poorly in the Leaving Cert in Irish so, say, maths they could help obviously up until you started going to secondary school. (TAPAL 9)

She'd sit with me and she'd help me with, certain things she could help me with, the basic English, but no, she couldn't help with me maths and she couldn't help me with Irish. But when she couldn't, I had a neighbour next door and she asked the neighbour, who was a couple of years ahead of me. (TAPAL 4)

Another common experience among the interviewees who had completed Leaving Certificate was late decision-making about progression to third level education. Even when they were sure they would go on to third level, planning was left to the final two years of school, or the last year:

It was only formative then, but I mean I only got the final picture, I mean the gumption really, to go for it in fifth and sixth year in secondary school. (TAPAL 19)

Like I wouldn't have even known, not even that I wasn't, I didn't know anything about points 'cause it just wasn't on my agenda, I suppose. I was doing all the foundation level subjects. No, I don't think I thought about it in third year or fourth year, I think fifth and sixth year, then you start thinking, 'Oh God, I'm going to go to college soon'. (TAPAL 4)

Like I remember being in fourth year in secondary school looking at options and stuff and I didn't know the difference between an undergrad and a postgrad, you know, I was kind of like undergrad sounds very diminutive relative to postgrad, I want to do a postgrad, you know. (TAPAL 9)

Those who had attended TAP link schools, though still coming late to their decision-making, recalled receiving talks and guidance, and visits to Trinity:

Yeah, in 2002 and I would have went around different ... and I went in for a shadowing day and I think there was some other kind of competition, I'm trying to remember now was it art or something. I remember going in there another evening into Trinity for something else.

***So you had a bit of experience of coming into Trinity then?***

Yeah so they did make a connection with the school from maybe first or second year, yeah.

***Was there any awareness for you about wanting to go here at that point ... what do you think was going on then doing these activities, did you visualise?***

In fifth year, yes, I would have. Something changed, I was very clued in. I don't know how old I was at that stage but maybe when I was 13 or 14 no I don't think I had, I wasn't thinking that far ahead maybe. (TAPAL 15)

For others the process was somewhat ad hoc and they just happened to stumble upon TAP, particularly those who attended schools not linked to Trinity:

It wasn't until 6th year in school that I went to my Careers Guidance Counsellor and said I may have been a bit of a messer but I really want to go to university or whatever, so she gave me an application, and there was only two applications in my school because it wasn't affiliated, it wasn't an affiliated school with Trinity Access Programme. So she just handed me a form and said kind of make an account so I filled out the form and got an interview and I didn't get accepted and then the day the Leaving Cert results were out Cliona Hannon who is the Head of Trinity Access Programme, she rang me and said there is a place available and the rest is history as they say. (TAPAL 5)

The funny thing is, though, they pushed me towards DCU. They pushed me towards the access programme in DCU, which I didn't mind. I would have loved to have gone to Trinity but I didn't know about the Trinity Access Programme at the time. It was only when DCU refused me, for reasons I still don't understand. I never really got an explanation about it that my guidance counsellor which at the time, I am not being biased here, but he wasn't the brightest spark said – oh, there is one at Trinity. I was like – why didn't you tell me? I would have just applied for that. I very hurriedly applied for TAP not holding out much luck and I am very, very thankful. (TAPAL 7)



Participants pointed to key individuals in school and TAP who were important in their decision-making about third level education. Others made their own decision:

To be honest when my Guidance Counsellor handed me that form it was, my Mam and Dad they always hoped that I would go to university, and they would never be, you have to go, you don't have to go, they were very much you do what you want to do. But it was my choice, if I have to be honest. It was definitely me and it was the belief from my teachers as well. They kind of gave me a final chance in sixth year to say you have ability, maybe you should start applying and they were so helpful and they gave me basically free grinds. (TAPAL 5)

It was largely myself. It was my own driven decision. I wanted to go to Trinity and generally the parents were quite behind it. (TAPAL 20)

***Who was involved in your decision making at home? What sort of level of encouragement were you getting here?***

None. To be quite honest, none. I mean my Mam was real 'If you want to do it do it yourself.' My sister encouraged me quite a lot to, you know, study, engage and go on and succeed. (TAPAL 19)

## TAP experience

While not all participants attended the TAP Foundation Course, those who did were overwhelmingly positive about the experience. Positive aspects included: building supportive networks; obtaining knowledge and skills in academic writing; and finding a new educational process to explore skills they thought they did not have. For those with a negative experience of school, the year in TAP provided a sense of empowerment:

I think it binds us all together as a unit of people and it's probably why as TAP students we kind of gel together that bit more than the general college population, you know, because we'd have more in common with each other even though we wouldn't necessarily actually say to each other what we have gone through. We can relate to each other on a more kind of existential level I think. (TAPAL 19)

Debriefing from school learning into academic learning it's not just rote learning and then learning the skills to critically analyse, to get over the fact that just because somebody writes something in a book doesn't mean that your opinion on it is wrong. You know, you could argue with them as long as you back it up somehow and that's what I learnt on the foundation course, that skill to appreciate my own opinions and arguments and make them. (TAPAL 9)

Although the TAP foundation year was received positively by all those who had experienced it, many commented on how TAP was perceived as separate and different to the rest of Trinity. In particular the physical aspect, being outside the Trinity walls in Goldsmith's Hall, added to this feeling of difference:

One of the major down points of TAP is that it is located outside the campus. It is a major thing. It is a psychological thing. It is like you are leaving the campus to go to where you really belong. You have to understand as well that if you come from a working class area, from a disadvantaged background you will have a complex about that ... because you are entering Trinity, which is a symbol of something completely opposite. You are going into a place where they are actually putting you outside the wall. It is a major thing. (TAPAL 7)

Though they acknowledged that TAP provided them with opportunities to use the Trinity libraries and to attend events such as the Hist, Phil, and Trinity Ball, most did not avail of the library, and some found attendance at Trinity events to be alienating:

I got on fine with them but I remember as part of my TAP year they took us for a visit. I think it was in the first week or something to the Hist. and to the Phil. I remember walking into that room and feeling - and I remember remarking to my classmates and they said the same thing - that was a horrible feeling in that room. It was horrible. It wasn't that it was horrible because they were smart, it was horrible because you knew that there were certain things going on in that room that made no sense to you. (TAPAL 7)

Stuff like, though I would have liked there to be more connection with the college maybe itself, because we were in the TAP building and it's just, it still seemed kind of scary, and I don't know, I think we did have access to the library but I don't remember being in the library very much! (TAPAL 8)

Overall, participants who engaged in the TAP Foundation Courses spoke positively about the strong bonds of friendship and the continuation of their TAP connections. These extended beyond their undergraduate programme. Some spoke of 'gratitude', indicating they would try to give something back for the support that they received. This could involve giving talks, helping at events and acting as a TAP Ambassador:

Yeah. I - it was without question, I was focused then, I was saying, right - like eye on the prize. Study hard this year, really put your back in and I did, I really - anything they asked me to do, I tried to do it 110 per cent and I didn't want - I felt also they had given me this opportunity and I wasn't going to waste it, I wasn't going to - it's not every day you get this opportunity and I felt I owed it to them to give it back, you know, and say look you didn't waste whatever money it was invested in me on that course. I didn't want that wasted. (TAPAL 18)

## Kate: Higher Education Access Route

Kate entered Trinity through the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR). She studied on one of the science related undergraduate programmes in Trinity. Throughout her time in Trinity she maintained her link with TAP and its programmes. Kate excelled academically and is now employed in the health sector, in the area of her qualification. She is from a rural area and has a large family. She was not the first in her family to go to third level, many of her siblings have gone to college through access initiatives like TAP and the HEAR scheme in particular.

## Kate's sister Ciara

Kate's sister Ciara is 20, and in her first year of college. Though her family were not well-off, there was an expectation that she and her siblings would go to third level education. Though their parents did not have third level qualifications and did not know a huge amount about the process of going to college, it was made easier because Ciara's eldest sister did well in school, had the help of her guidance counsellor, and was the first in the family to go to college and helped them to 'navigate' the system. Yet it was the influence of her sister Kate that was to be most important for Ciara; she spoke about Kate's love of learning, her dedication to getting the best out of her Leaving Certificate, and her determination to go to Trinity College.

Ciara had a positive experience of school and found her teachers to be enthusiastic. Throughout her schooling Ciara had role models in the home, whom, at different stages showed her how to succeed at her studies, navigate the system and choose the college course that was right for her. Two of her siblings were studying courses she was interested in.

With the deadline for applying to CAO approaching, her sisters Kate and Jane provided examples of the type of material Ciara would cover if she selected one course over another; having such practical information to hand, was significant in Ciara's choice of undergraduate course. Ciara drew from her siblings' experiences and made informed decisions. It was also from this experience that she and her guidance counsellor felt that she did not need to participate in access programme activities for secondary school students, as she already had a wealth of experience to draw from at home. Ciara's transition to college in Dublin has also been made easier by the example set by Kate, who was always positive about living in the city and studying at Trinity. She continues to draw on this support network while studying, and Dublin has become for her a home away from home.



## Undertaking the Trinity degree programme

### *First impressions*

The vast majority of participants had never been in Trinity before they became a student; even if they had been, it was just to walk through. Most did not know anyone who had studied in Trinity. It was perceived as an 'other' place for 'other people':

Trinity is kind of this weird aura, you kind of pass it by on the bus, well I used to a lot, and I used to kind of look at it but I never really knew what it was, and then when I was 14, I went into the campus and we took photographs and that was my first ...

### *So why did you go in there?*

Because we were very bored and we used to go to Stephen's Green park.

### *You and your friends?*

I would just love to go in through the arch because I had never been and I was 14 or 15 and never knew what was there. So we got the security guard to take a picture and that was my first kind of seeing it and I did just think this was huge and God you must be so intelligent to get in here. That was my first impression of Trinity. (TAPAL 5)

Trinity is still regarded by a lot of people in the working class especially (area of north Dublin) as being other. It is not considered part of our society in our world. That alone was enough for me not to even entertain the idea. (TAPAL 7)

### *'You experience it as a minority'*

#### *The points*

Participants were asked about how they experienced their transition to an undergraduate programme as an access student. For many there was a degree of unease about how they would fare in their studies. Many spoke of how they differed to traditional Trinity students ('the little ones'), particularly in terms of their points for the course. For some, not having the points, or not having achieved the Leaving Certificate, was an obstacle:

I didn't feel I was good enough academic wise...So, fear of failure would have been a huge one because I didn't, it was a kind of people saying to me, 'Trinity, why, at your age, why?' you know, and I am going 'I don't know.' (TAPAL 12)

Oh yeah, without a doubt. Even though I had friends in first year I still felt quite lonely as in, it was just a huge place and I was thinking I am after coming from the Trinity Access Programme and these people are here after getting 550, 560 can I compete with them, am I on their level? And you try and justify your position really. I did in first year anyway, I found it ... God do I really deserve to be here, because these are proper intellects, do you know like, they are proper people. (TAPAL 5)

So, it just, but it was a thing of, 'I'm not as clever as these, they all got 600 points', and it didn't matter that I'd got the 2:1 in the course, and that was hard to get result, it didn't matter, to me it was, 'They got 600 points, I got 380 points, I don't belong here'. (TAPAL 4)

Yet this was not the experience of all access students; some did not feel pressured if other students had achieved many more points than they had. One participant took a broad view on university entry, indicating that all students, regardless of their entry route to first year, were at the same level when they commenced:

The way I feel it was that when I came in on the first day of my primary undergrad, that was year nought. We were all in year nought. The Leaving Cert, my previous learning experiences and degrees, well they got me to where I am and got others to where they were, (that) didn't really count. We are on a new journey; a new path to attain a degree and how we got there didn't really matter. (TAPAL 19)

### ***Fitting into a different culture***

Participants from TAP and HEAR all spoke about the challenge of fitting into a different culture when they entered their degree programme. Many who had entered their degree programme via the TAP Foundation Course gravitated towards the students they had spent time with in TAP:

Yeah I did. Yeah I stayed mostly friends with them (TAP students).

#### ***So, on an average day going to college, who were you communicating with?***

The TAP and I'd go over to TAP as well to use the computers. (TAPAL 14)

The situation appeared less daunting for students who entered programmes in social sciences and history. They were joined by students they had known from TAP, while some of their lecturers had been involved in the TAP Foundation Courses:

We had some idea of what it was like, but yeah I think I was comfortable going into history because I knew the lecturers. I mightn't necessarily have had them in my first year but I knew the lecturers that I had them for say two hours for two weeks. (TAPAL 5)

Participants varied in the extent to which they would identify themselves as an access student. While not an issue for mature age students, as they physically looked older than traditional Trinity undergraduates, some HEAR participants chose to keep this information to themselves:

I suppose there was a lot of determined kind of people in that class as well. They were from a background that was probably, it was a lot different than the people I went to school with, but somehow I seemed to slot in more with them. I didn't tell people as well in the class that I had come through the TAP. (TAPAL 15)

I was also aware that there were three people on my course from the foundation course but saying that I didn't go round telling people that I got in via TAP.

#### ***Why, why did you think?***

Because I didn't want people to think like ... even people here where I work, I've never brought it up and I wouldn't really want to discuss it because I wouldn't want people to think that I didn't get the points to get the course or that I wasn't as intelligent or as capable, do you know that way? (TAPAL 17)

Participants from the TAP Foundation Courses reported that they had received preparation during their course about the cultural background of the majority group in Trinity. What is notable in participants' accounts is that while they had awareness (though this did not necessarily make it any easier) non-access students in their class appeared to have no awareness that they would be studying with students that were culturally different to them. Many spoke of feeling the difference because of their accents:

And I remember even the first day, first year, and thinking, 'I'm common, I don't belong here', because people just hear my voice and they think, like, 'What's she doing in here, she doesn't belong in here'. (TAPAL 6)

No. Like there was probably more about being from the north side of Dublin than being on access like. You get the odd ribbing from like people from the south side but I've lots of friends from the south side. (TAPAL 13)

Yeah well there was people who would hear my accent and, you know, big thick Dub, Crumlin accent and they'd be like 'Oh who's your man?'

#### ***Really? You don't really have a very big accent...***

I did back then and, you know 'Who's your man?' and that was at the start and then they got to know me and then that barrier was crossed. (TAPAL 19)

For some access students their address, or not going to a school that was recognised by the other Trinity students marked them out as different:

It was very shaky at the start because people would have assumed well you've got through off some sort of a special needs...

***How would they have known that though?***

Well you generally say 'Hi I'm (name)', 'where are you from?', 'I'm from Tallaght' and then they go 'whereabouts in Tallaght?' because they assume, you know, if you are coming from Tallaght you are Firhouse or something and then you'll say Fettercairn and they say 'No, that's where people get murdered!'

***Yeah but that happened?***

Yeah it did and people assumed you were there, you know, you were getting €10,000 on grants. I didn't have a grant. Between TAP and ( ) I paid everything by myself. (TAPAL 16)

Well, it (what school were you at?) is what you don't say to people but this is the funny thing because in Trinity they don't expect anyone else in there either from their point of view so they would expect someone to say Loreto Blackrock or something. (TAPAL 5)

Accent was not a concern for all access students, but some still felt culturally apart from other Trinity students, many of whom had come from the same schools; exhibited more wealth through their appearance and activities; and did not have to work part-time, or go home in the evenings:

Their normality. Their - I knew they must have had nice lives, parents that maybe guided them through to where they are now. Even - I even felt like they just have these yellow books, probably from the Institute (of Education – a private cram school) something where they write their notes; and I used to look at them and I used to imagine what their lives were like before they came here. (TAPAL 18)

You kind of, you feel a little bit isolated, you feel maybe, I don't know, for example, on reading week they were all discussing about where they were going on holidays, and I was kind of going, I had never, and I'll be honest, I was probably naïve or just had never experience that, but I was shocked, like I couldn't believe that these people had money to be going away on holidays. Because we never went on holidays as children, like never really. (TAPAL 8)

I mean a big barrier for me and I'd say for a lot of access students was the fact that they didn't go, and I don't say in a clichéd way, is the fact that they didn't go out to work. (TAPAL 19)

Feelings of not fitting into a different culture were compounded by their first and second year undergraduate experience. Participants that had entered via the TAP foundation programmes and the HEAR spoke of how the first two years of their college experience, spent in large lecture theatres with hundreds of students, made it hard to connect with other Trinity students. As noted earlier, some students who had joined courses such as history and social sciences (though they still had to experience large class groups) often joined with other access students. However, those who had entered science, law and psychology, where access students were very much a minority, found the experience lonely and isolating:

By myself. If (name) wasn't around, I was by myself a lot of the time. Four years I'd say was probably the happiest, but the loneliest time of my life. (TAPAL 18)

But that's the thing, I didn't have, during the first two years of the undergrad I wasn't exposed to outside of TAP, you know, and I didn't get to know people in my class and then the friends that I did make in Trinity weren't in my class. (TAPAL 9)

The situation improved for most by their third year when students were exposed to group work and projects:

I just felt more comfortable, I don't know. But then I did make other friends in third year and then that just made my life in third and fourth year so much easier. And I don't think I'd have got the grades that I got if I hadn't finally, so that was more, because I was forced into this group situation, that I just had to get over these insecurities. (TAPAL 4)

In first year they were massive. Massive. Sociology class, huge. Economic Policy class, huge. All very large classes with huge cohorts.

***And what about a difference in the teaching and learning stuff compared to what you'd had?***

Incredibly different because it wasn't as focused on one on one and, you know, it was just broad. (TAPAL 19)

One participant, who undertook studies in law, noted the lack of connection with other students (many of whom came from families with a legal background) and how this limited their professional development:

Yeah and I regret that a little bit, you know, I could have made more connections. Like it stunted my professional life in the sense that now I'm only, well I only started to realise a couple of years ago how to make connections in law, you know, even stuff like, you know, they come in and they go 'Oh the interview, how did you get on in the interview'. I was like 'Are the interviews on, even?' I had no idea like when applications were due and all that kind of stuff. (TAPAL 9)

Many students commented on the lack of orientation that occurred in the first week of their degree programme. While acknowledging that Fresher's Week provided an opportunity to join societies and that TAP had provided them with an orientation to the college, no such opportunity was provided in the first year of their degree programme. Some participants who have gone on to postgraduate study commented on how orientation and small group work was a feature of their current work, and how this would have been helpful at the start of their undergraduate studies, where it was needed more. For those who had experienced the TAP foundation course, their undergraduate teaching and learning experience reflected the massification of undergraduate programmes: acutely different to that in TAP. This contributed to their feelings of difference and led many to operate in compartmentalised worlds.

## Compartmentalised worlds

As shown in the previous section many access students spoke of the difficulties of fitting into a very different educational context, where they did not share a history or culture with most of the students in their class. The majority of participants responded to this situation through a 'compartmentalisation' of home and college life. The rationale for this response varied: the demands of family life (particularly for mature students); a lack of relevance of the typical Trinity students' life to their own life; a disconnect with other students; and the pressure to keep focused on their work:

Yeah, because I had to be. So I used to drop the kids to school, for nine o'clock, I'd go back, have a cup of tea, if I had lectures I went to the lectures. If I didn't have lectures I'd go to the library. I would start my work or whatever I had to do. When college was finished, say if I was finished at four o'clock, I'd collect the kids from crèche and that was it, my bag, I didn't open it again until the next morning. (TAPAL 6)

I found it really difficult. It was like spinning plates. When you went into college you are in college mode and you are that person and then when you went home and you are in your family home you are that person and then when you went out with your friends you were that person. (TAPAL 7)

I did find that there was people that got on but for whatever reason, I didn't connect and I suppose I was always going home early. I don't drink and maybe that's a big factor as well, like, I don't really drink. And so, I never had the money for a start to go socialising whereas they all, a lot of them seemed to have, like, spare money, but I never did, I was always tight, like. So, I just never socialised outside college. And then, what else, oh yeah, but then I was always working part time to support as well, so I was always running home to a job like, so it was, in (name of place outside Dublin), so, I never really got the chance. (TAPAL 8)

Most students, when asked if they availed of the Trinity clubs and societies reported that while they may have joined up initially, they generally did not avail of them. Traditional Trinity societies had little resonance for them. Of all societies mentioned by the interviewees, the Dance Society stood out as something that was welcomed for some and in which they got to meet a wide range of students:

No I didn't actually join. I didn't do much. No one really did in the class. It was kind of nine to six Monday to Friday nearly. It was unbelievable and then you had to come home in the evenings and fill out lab manuals. It was just absolutely nonstop, weekends; it was just so intense. There was nothing else. (TAPAL 15)

I didn't do debating. I was a member of the Law Society so there were debates on there. I did like the odd debate but you could hardly call that debating and I did activities through there but no I didn't do anything extra. I was very busy. I was working part time and I was playing GAA at home, I had a girlfriend. There's lots of things to do! (TAPAL 13)

I joined and I really wanted to do the dancing, I love the whole dancing you know and I joined that and never went. I think it was because of work and again the reality of it - if I wasn't working I probably could have got more involved but because I always worked. So I was kind of concentrating on college on the bus to work in the evening time, not a whole lot in-between. (TAPAL 12)

No that's something that I kind of regret. I don't feel that I engaged in the student life as many people would. (TAPAL 17)

## Survivor stories, other capital and resilience

Participants were asked to reflect on their pathway to and through Trinity, where they often had to contend with a cultural world that was very different to their experiences while growing up. They spoke of how they differed to other Trinity students: who had more money; went on holidays; wore nicer clothes; and had a better knowledge of course requirements; without the demands of part-time work.

But their accounts can be thought of as 'survivor stories'. They had brought with them their own strengths and other forms of cultural capital that enabled them to respond to the challenges before them. For example, one reflected on how her school did not have the teachers or facilities for Leaving Certificate chemistry, but she went ahead and taught herself. Another felt that because they had family commitments and/or part-time work that they had to be more focused. This was a benefit when it came to working in groups with other non-access students as they usually demonstrated organisational and leadership skills. While this could be expected for mature age students it was also the case for younger access students, who, even if they were closer in age to the other Trinity students, felt they were more mature in any case:

Yeah, I would. I suppose one of the things I would have brought, if we were doing a group project, because I had to be organised, I had to make sure there was dinner there and lunches and everything else, so I - from an early age, I always - because I worked younger and I also had the kids younger - I learned to be able to organise everything. Like military precision and I knew when I was doing a group project, they would all be sitting on their laurels going 'Ah, there is another week' - I'd be like, 'No, no, come on. This has to happen' and I'd nearly be doing their parts just to make sure. ...They were kind of lackadaisical, night-before type of job and to me that just doesn't work. I'll be like, no, no, this has to be done. (TAPAL 18)

This 'other capital' evident in the accounts of many participants was expressed in terms of resilience. They did not have the inherited cultural capital of the majority group expressed in terms of family qualifications, knowledge of the system and prior experience of third level education. In contrast, as first generation university students they exhibited a resilience derived from the legacy of their socio-economic status, school and family experiences.

Some reflected that as no-one else in their family had gone on to third level, other family members expected they would 'break the mould'. These expectations could be a burden for some, felt from an early age: they were expected to achieve what other family members had not. This required them to be resilient at school and in their pathway into and through Trinity. They sometimes consider their fellow students would not have been able to cope with what they had to contend with:



Like this might sound very over-confident and I'm not like that at all, but a lot of these people I know wouldn't have been able to get through the Loreto and wouldn't have been able to teach themselves so I knew at that stage.

***So you knew about yourself that you had that?***

Yeah I said if you put these people in my shoes they wouldn't be here on their own. (TAPAL 15)

I had to fight harder. I think in many respects I think I had to fight harder to get my place in college than others would have. (TAPAL 19)

I would find my work ethic would be a lot higher than a lot of other people.

***Would that be something to do with the fact that you had all those extra jobs as well?***

Yeah I always had to work and I can manage my time very well because I used to have to study on less time because I was going into work the next day like. (TAPAL 13)

## Life beyond Trinity

Each interview attempted to gain insights into the everyday life and work experiences of participants since graduation including how they were faring in their professional life and how their qualification had impacted on family and community connections.

### ***Employment***

There were differing narratives in how participants had fared with employment since graduation. Their accounts revealed a range of contextual factors relevant to understanding their employment outcomes, including: the impact of the economic recession; lack of awareness of the need for postgraduate qualification; not having the connections required for their chosen profession; and choice of degree.

Most participants gained employment after graduation. Those who had graduated in social work, science, and law were most likely to be employed, but there were exceptions within all of these fields. Some had gone on to take postgraduate qualifications and were in the process of seeking employment but were feeling the impact of the economic recession. Some participants were in employment that continued from their student days, for example retail work, that had no direct relevance to their degree programmes. For these young graduates, this was not necessarily viewed as problematic, as they saw their degree as a broad educational process.

Others expressed disappointment that their degree had not made any difference to their employment situation. The following participant felt that they were not aware of the status of an undergraduate programme and the need to go on to take further studies:

Yeah, everything kind of fell apart, just as I finished college, with jobs. And a lot of people that I know have got work from psychology, they had to go on and do masters. ... And it's kind of the way of psychology, which I didn't really take into account when I picked it in the first place. And obviously I wanted to work to get money to do a masters and that just hasn't worked out. (TAPAL 4)

Some who had progressed to postgraduate courses similarly felt the impact of the economic recession. They considered the current economic climate made it difficult to get work. There was disappointment as they had felt they had worked for several years to achieve their qualifications and would like to move on with their lives and give something back to their families.

Some participants had not been aware of the need for a postgraduate qualification; for others their chosen course had proved to be a barrier to gaining employment. Though they were happy with their educational experience, they felt they could have been more strategic in choosing a course with a better chance of leading to employment. In contrast, some participants had made a firm choice for a course that would give them a professional qualification:

I suppose like, in a way I picked social work, I wanted to do philosophy but I knew I'd never get a job with it, or at least I thought I did. (TAPAL 8)

I put what I kind of would have liked to do aside to do something that I knew I would get work with and get more of an opportunity. I felt that kind of Arts was more actually for like the more comfortable because if I had done something like that I would probably have either emigrated or I'd probably be unemployed. (TAPAL 15)

Some spoke of the need to have better careers support after graduation, particularly those who were mature age students. Though TAP had given them strong support in the pre-university stage, and during their studies, they felt there was nothing for them after graduation that was relevant to their own experience:

It can be frustrating at times because I qualified to do it (history) and I would love to do it but it's just a question of getting in and it's all about who you know and it's kind of networking, those sorts of things and stuff like that but

***And is that something that you have been prepared for?***

No, I hadn't been prepared for it and in terms of college I was always told with history that the jobs are research jobs, kind of lecturing jobs, things in the media, things like that as well but in this current climate it's very hard to get in anywhere. Everyone who seems to be getting positions in terms of what I've seen at the moment are somehow connected, they'd have their foot in the door. (TAPAL 20)

## Professional identity

Those who had gained employment relevant to their degree reflected positively on how their qualification had made a big difference. They spoke of how their employers and colleagues respected the Trinity qualification; though sometimes expressing surprise, particularly if they revealed that they were from a working class suburb or inner city Dublin. The combination of their Trinity degree and working class identity could work positively in their employment and in the formation of their professional identity:

Yeah I use it to my advantage. I can talk to anybody so I use it to my advantage and like I wouldn't be hesitant to tell people where I come from or where I went to college or what I did. (TAPAL 13)

***What about where you came from? Does that make any difference?***

Well yeah, because when I entered into the professional land, working for [name of company], I had the degree from Trinity but I almost contradictorily had a degree from Trinity but was from Finglas.

***How does that work then in fitting in - in your professional life then because there is this contradictory thing going on? They are looking up to you – you have a degree from Trinity but you are from Finglas.***

I think it translates a lot quicker than most into respect.

***So it does. You don't get stigmatised by the background?***

No. I think people who operate in my job, they are clever people, don't get me wrong. I think most people when they make a snap judgement they say he is a whatever. They put a label on you. I think a lot of times they go he is a really smart, poor person. Do you know what I mean? I don't see anything wrong with that because what that means is they know that you are tough but they know that you are smart. (TAPAL 7)

## Confused identity

Although participants could reflect on the advantage that their life experience could bring to their professional life some participants, notably those now unemployed, expressed mixed feelings about their degree and Trinity experience:

I've come out and I feel now that I know nothing. No, that's it and I feel like I've been abandoned and like a child thrown out of his pram, because it's like, yeah - everything was kind of mapped out for me for the last eight years and the fear - when I was finishing off my masters, finishing off my thesis, it was like I was trying to hang on as far - as much I could. (TAPAL 18)

I never tell anybody. I never talk about it. I still get embarrassed about saying I have a degree from Trinity. I never tell anyone.

**Really?**

Never.

**Why are you embarrassed?**

I don't know. I sort of feel like, I kind of feel like a fraud. It's really weird to explain. It's like I think it's probably the way we were raised not to brag or, you know, to be modest and you are kind of brought up that way so to kind of tell someone and then they kind of look at you if to say 'You are on welfare.' I mean the image doesn't fit. (TAPAL 11)

Yeah, even now it seems, when people ask me what college I'm going to, I'm like, 'I went to Trinity', you know, it doesn't...

**Still not...**

Still sometimes no, because it is very prestigious, like, it's one of the most prestigious in Ireland, so it is kind of, to me it's always been, and even sometimes now people go, 'Get you' like

**Really?**

Yeah, even now. So then I suppose sometimes when you're not working, you feel more pressure because you went here and you should be. (TAPAL 4)

## Family

Echoing the findings of the quantitative TAP alumni survey, reported in Chapter 3, the vast majority of interviewees spoke about their family's pride in their achievement. Many acknowledged that while they were doing their degree there was little discussion with their parents about what they were doing, despite living at home; for the most part they were unable to assist them if they were having difficulties.

For those participants with children it was clear they approach parenting and education differently to their own parents. Because of their own educational experiences they considered they had greater awareness of the educational system, what was required for progress, and of the need for home supports from a very early age:

No, they didn't have it to pass onto me and I suppose I, and I'm more knowledgeable now about grants and very practical stuff, like. And just, you know, being above, kind of being conscious about being above income levels and below income levels, and all that kind of craic before she goes into college. And I suppose I'm just more aware of that practical sort of stuff. (TAPAL 8)

I would have been very pro education with them...

**When they were growing up and going to school what was your involvement and how would you have been involved with them?**

Their homework, and wanting to know how their day went and very much that kind of thing. (TAPAL 12)

## Community and Trinity connections

There was a mixed picture in relation to participants' community and Trinity connections after graduation.

### Community

Many were still living in the area in which they grew up and some maintained their friendships from school. Even when they felt their friends' lives had moved on and were on different trajectories, they still connected to them for events such as weddings, engagements and birthday celebrations:

Well the people and they are all from Ballymun, most of them still live in Ballymun, a lot of them, all my Facebook friends are from Ballymun, literally from 90% of them. The girls, we'd meet up for reunions. I wouldn't see them as much, I have gone to all those reunions and we have gone away a number of us together, holidays, going out all the time. (TAPAL 11)

Though there was an acknowledgement of a shared history and culture, a minority reflected that they did not share the same values about living on social welfare and their friends' lack of educational ambition.

Few were involved in community organisations. For those who were, it mainly related to their job or when they had a child in a local school. Some engaged in helping others with information about access schemes and with giving talks in their local school.

### Trinity connections

As with community connections, a mixed picture emerged in participants' accounts of their links with Trinity after graduation. Those who had maintained strong connections were most likely to have reported a positive experience of Trinity life. For others, particularly those that had led a compartmentalised student life, there was little or no connection to Trinity beyond their graduation:

No, only with that one girl, and I think the fact that she works in (the same place as her) so that is probably the connection as well. (TAPAL 3)

I have a couple of friends who I still talk to sometimes from Trinity, from the TAP Programme.

### *From the TAP, what about people that weren't on the TAP?*

I have no real, no connections. (TAPAL 14)

## Summary

The qualitative interviews conducted with 20 TAP Trinity alumni traced their pathway to, through and beyond Trinity. The vast majority were from traditional working class areas of Dublin and were the first generation of their family to attend tertiary education; many were the first in their family to complete the Leaving Certificate. The vast majority of their parents/guardians were early school leavers. All described themselves as 'good' students when they were at school, and almost all had a family member that took an interest in their education. Though most had a supportive home environment their parents/guardians were limited in the support that they could provide during their second-level education, particularly in Irish and maths. There were mixed experiences of school. While primary school may have been a positive experience, secondary school was, for some, a difficult time. Some participants, particularly mature age, grew up in an era, and in neighbourhoods where there was little expectation that they would do anything other than gain employment. Younger participants, though they may have completed the Leaving Certificate and wanted to go on to third level education, came to their decision-making late, in the last or final two years of school. There were mixed views on the appropriateness of the careers guidance that they received. Nevertheless, students that entered Trinity via the HEAR scheme and those who had attended TAP link schools seemed to have greater awareness about how to progress to university and had more support in this regard.

Overwhelmingly participants of the TAP Foundation Courses found these to be an enjoyable and beneficial experience in terms of their preparation for Trinity. For some, it was emancipatory, particularly for mature age participants that had a negative school experience. Though TAP supported them with study skills, and strong friendships and networks were formed there, being off the main campus, outside the walls of Trinity exacerbated their feelings of difference when they entered Trinity as an undergraduate.

The transition to undergraduate programmes was difficult for the vast majority of participants. Difficulties occurred on many levels that included: the change to large, depersonalized teaching and learning; fear of failure; stigma of not having the points achieved by the other students, concerns about 'sticking out' because of their working class accent, particularly for those in programmes in which they were the only access student or part of a very small minority of access students. Where small groups of access students were in the same programme they tended to stick together and made little connection with the majority student group. The teaching and learning environment made it difficult to connect with majority group students. However, this changed for most in their third and fourth years when they had group work activities and smaller classes. Most participants had compartmentalised their college and home lives. They had to remain focused on their programme and many had other responsibilities, children or part-time jobs. For some the typical undergraduate student life had no appeal. Some considered that they were tougher than the typical undergraduate because of their life experiences. They exhibited a resilience that they felt others did not have and this could work to their advantage when it came leadership and organisational skills required in their group projects.

An examination of their life beyond Trinity presented differing narratives in terms of employment, family and community connections. Those that were unemployed had some disappointment that their hard earned degree had not led them to employment. While this could be accounted for by economic recession, some graduates were not aware that they might need a postgraduate qualification. Careers advice, particularly for mature age participants seemed geared more towards young traditional Trinity graduates. For those in employment their employer held their degree from Trinity in esteem. Some reflected on their dual identity as a working class graduate from a high-ranking university and how this gave them an edge over other middle class graduates. In contrast, those who were unemployed reflect a confused identity. They have seen their friends move on in terms of housing, family and employment, and they are unsure of where they belong.

While they may not have interacted with them about the specifics of their degree programme, their families view their achievements with pride. Those with children now feel that they have greater knowledge of the education system in terms of access and progression. They consider that they have much more information to pass on to their children than their parents.

## Matthew: Foundation Course for Young Adults

Matthew is 29 and comes from Darndale. He was raised by his mother and grandparents who moved from inner city Dublin to Darndale in the late 1980s. He has one sister aged 22.

Matthew's mother left school at 15 and he was born when she was 16. She had been working in a sewing factory and gave that up to raise him. She undertook a number of FAS courses as he was growing up but eventually returned to office cleaning jobs. Matthew recalls that his grandfather read to him, brought him to the local library, and helped him with his homework. His mother bought him books and she had a strong interest in reading.

Matthew enjoyed school in Darndale and feels that he benefited from being in a streamed system within a disadvantaged school. He was strongly encouraged by his teachers to take higher level subjects and his careers teacher felt that he may be able to get into DCU to do computer science. He was unaware of the Trinity Access Programme because his school was not linked to it and happened to hear about it through a friend. His mother investigated it with him and he was enthused by the prospect of studying law.

Matthew was accepted to the Foundation Course for Young Adults. He had achieved 380 points in his Leaving Certificate and could have gone to DCU but was attracted to the status of Trinity and the possibility to pursue law. He was pleased about learning academic skills that he would need for college. He observed that his school education was somewhat limited and had relied on rote learning. In this way he found the experience in TAP to be empowering.

Matthew enrolled in law but did not like the large class sizes. He mainly stayed with students from TAP and found it hard to get to know other students in law. Other students in the class were surprised to hear that he was from Darndale and he was viewed as a 'rough diamond'. It was not until 3rd year that he felt he was learning the ropes. He did not have the law connections or understanding of the system that other students seemed to have and this has impacted on his progression in law. However, he feels that his life experience and mature outlook combined with his degree from Trinity gives him a competitive edge with employers.

## Matthew's mother Bridie

Bridie is adamant that Matthew was always going to go to university and she is very proud of his achievements. Not only is he the first in the family to get a degree he is also the first to achieve the Leaving Certificate. Bridie and her parents tried to support Matthew with his education. Bridie was conscious of not allowing Matthew to hang out with children who were on a pathway to nowhere, which was an easy alternative where he was growing up. She knew from her own experience as a single teenage parent and the death of another family member from drug addiction in the 1980s that the only path for Matthew was education. For her there is a mix of irony and pride when she considers that she grew up close to Trinity, could see it everyday, but had never been there until her son graduated.



## Chapter 5: Discussion and conclusions

### Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings from the research. It draws together key results and provides interpretative commentary that refers, where appropriate, to relevant published material. The aim of the research was to understand the perspective of TAP Trinity alumni on the impact of their qualification on family and community.

First, to provide a context to our understanding of community and family impact, we examined graduates' educational background; that of their family; and their pathway to, through, and beyond Trinity. Second, we examined how they have fared with employment and how they perceive their professional identity since graduation.

A mixed methods research strategy was employed that comprised a quantitative survey of alumni that entered Trinity via an access route; and qualitative interviews of alumni; family members; and TAP stakeholders within Trinity.

### Profile of alumni

The findings of the quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with TAP Trinity Alumni established that the vast majority were the first generation of their family to attend Trinity. Most participants' parents were early school leavers, with the majority having left school early at primary or Junior Certificate level. The alumni mainly come from areas of Dublin under-represented in higher education and from socio-economically disadvantaged suburbs.

Many were the first in their family to achieve the Leaving Certificate. Those with partners were likely to be in relationships with people who held similar or higher qualifications. Taken together these findings reflect both intra- and intergenerational social mobility. In the UK Wainwright and Marandet (2010) note that policy related to social mobility tends to focus on children and young people rather than older adults. They consider that greater attention needs to be given to the social mobility that can occur for older people, particularly those who are parents. This is something worth considering in the Irish context.

Most participants had a family member that had shown an interest in their schooling, though support with homework during second-level was not common. While, for most alumni, there was a parental expectation that they would go to college, decision-making about this and support for it came late, in the final or last two years of school.

The TAP Trinity graduates had entered Trinity through a range of access routes. For mature age participants, early school leaving and a pull to employment was common. Echoing Jones (2006), mature age students' pathways to Trinity often comprised incremental steps through adult education courses. Access to Trinity was rarely the long-term aim: many stumbled on it through their return to education courses. As Brine and Waller (2004) note, access courses should be viewed as part of the reconstruction of a learner's identity rather than its commencement.

For younger students, particularly entrants through HEAR or the Foundation Course for Young Adults, completion of Leaving Certificate was commonplace. Participants from Trinity link schools may have had some familiarity with Trinity, but these schools had not yet established a 'tradition' of students going to Trinity. Many participants, in particular those of mature age, had negative experiences of the second-level educational system, reflecting experiences elsewhere (Brine & Waller, 2004; Reay, 2002). All alumni confirmed that in school they had been academically able with a strong interest in learning.

### Access to and accessibility within Trinity

#### *Foundation courses – learner-centred teaching and learning*

Participants on the TAP Foundation Courses said they enjoyed the programme and that it had introduced them to new ways of learning. The teaching and learning they experienced in TAP was akin to that of community and adult education in that it emphasised the interaction of the personal and the social domains in enhancing the learner's role as a social being through processes of social engagement (Connolly, 2006). For some it renewed their belief in their learning abilities, particularly if their school experience had led them to believe otherwise. The foundation courses provided a supportive environment for learning; a strong collegiate network was formed among students and staff.

### *Transition to Trinity – teaching and learning, and fitting in*

Though positive overall about their TAP experience, many participants found the subsequent transfer to undergraduate study difficult in terms of fitting into a different cultural context and in coping with different teaching styles and large classes. Nonetheless, many availed of TAP support during their first year, in the form of study skills, computing and study facilities, particularly those from the foundation courses. This also occurred for non-foundation course students who also sought TAP support if they encountered difficulties with progression or understanding the system. Participants also affirmed that they supported each other, particularly those that had joined their undergraduate programme with other TAP students. For some, the fact that TAP was located 'outside the walls' (in Goldsmith's Hall) made the transition into the main campus more difficult to negotiate. Though opportunities were provided to participate in its activities and societies few took up this option.

When it comes to access initiatives in HEIs, programme location is important. The HEA considers that institutional commitment to access programmes is indicated not only by being aligned with the wider strategic plan of the HEI but also by being in a 'visible, accessible and central location' (HEA, 2006: 19). Such findings should be considered in the context of a high-ranking HEI such as Trinity, where academic culture and history is aligned not only with its high calibre alumni and staff but also to its architecture and bounded physical space.

Participants' accounts of how they fared in their undergraduate programme revealed mixed experiences. Those enrolled in social sciences and history, where they were likely to be joined by other access students, had a smoother transition than those in fields such as law, psychology, and science, where they may have been the only access student or part of a very small minority. Foundation course students that progressed to history or social sciences also fared better as they had familiarity with staff on their degree programmes that had also taught on the foundation courses.

Foundation course students had become used to small-group and interactive teaching and learning styles in their TAP year; they found the move to large lectures daunting. Fleming (2002) similarly found that mature age students on access programmes find the university programme to be 'at odds' with their access programme experience. Where access students have difficulty in the transition to higher education, this is due to the relative inflexibility of the teaching methods of the higher education institution. This can result in a more fragmented learning experience as personal and experiential knowledge is denigrated in favour of abstract and objective knowledge (Fleming, 2002). This phenomenon is not unique to students that have undertaken TAP Foundation Courses. HE policy also observes the limitations of the massified response to teaching and learning and calls for reform of the undergraduate curriculum (Report of the Strategy Group, 2011).

For others, including those who had entered through HEAR, particularly those who joined courses where they were the only access student, fitting in and making new connections could be difficult. The perceived lack of an active and hands-on orientation for all undergraduate students added to this difficulty. These findings echo previous research undertaken by TAP (TAP, 2007) and other literature on widening participation in higher education. Writing about UK post-1992 universities, Read, Archer and Leathwood (2002: 275) argue that there is a need to consider not only the admission process of access students to university but also their experiences while they are in it. They point to the need for initiatives to focus on the 'cultural' aspects of the academy such as methods and styles of teaching and learning.

Although in their first two years access students experienced challenges in fitting into the large-scale teaching and learning environment, by their third year most reflected that the situation had improved when they had the opportunity to undertake group work and projects. Still, many operated in compartmentalised worlds. They had part-time jobs, and/or family responsibilities and needed to get home in the evening. Their experiences mirror those found in research of other first generation students who find the 'student experience' available to them as largely irrelevant to their everyday lives, and to their cultural background (Christie, Munro & Wager, 2005; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; London, 1989). Even when they were similar in age to the traditional Trinity undergraduate they found that they had little connection with them in terms of interests and values. Few participated in any of the Trinity clubs and societies.

While some participants had no concerns about being different to the majority group of students, a minority experienced the difference acutely. These felt stigmatised by their inner-city Dublin accent, such that they were not confident about speaking in class, by their address when they came from inner-city Dublin flats, or a working class suburb of Dublin known for gangland crime, not having the points that their fellow classmates had, or not having their lifestyle in terms of money, holidays and clothes. Their accounts parallel those reported by Thomas and Jones (2005) and Reay, Ball and David (2002) on some of the difficulties faced by first generation university students.



For many participants while they felt apart from main student culture they focused on getting through and achieving a qualification. They exhibited, as many did during their school days, a resilience that enabled them to survive a system that was culturally different to their own life and educational experiences. But they had other strengths derived from their life experiences. Most had to manage home, work, and family responsibilities that they considered traditional students would not have the capacity to deal with alongside their degree programme. In this way they felt they were tougher. These findings resonate with Stevenson and Clegg (2013: 26) who found that mature age students were acutely aware of the constraints they faced in higher education because of their 'complex and fractured pasts', but were, nonetheless, 'agentic' in their response to these challenges. Additionally, as observed by stakeholders and alumni the TAP students were able to bring this 'other capital' into the classroom. This benefited non-access students and teaching staff through the production of 'new knowledge' and alternative understandings.

Although feelings of separation were not distinct to any particular type of access student, those that had undertaken foundation courses were to some extent prepared for what they would encounter at Trinity. It is notable that while foundation course students were given advice about the dominant Trinity culture and what they would encounter, this appeared not to be the case for traditional Trinity undergraduates. From the accounts of this sample of TAP Trinity alumni, it seemed that traditional Trinity undergraduates had no expectations of being educated with students from a different socio-economic and cultural background to themselves. Similarly, one Trinity stakeholder observed that traditional Trinity undergraduates experience a seamless transfer to university as for many it represents an extension of school where they continue their education with their friends. As noted earlier an active hands on orientation programme for all undergraduates has the potential to sensitise the whole Trinity community to issues of difference and diversity.

## Life after Trinity

### *Professional identity*

The survey and interview data reveal that the majority of TAP Trinity alumni were employed. Employment was most likely to be in traditional higher or lower professional roles that included social workers, solicitors, teachers, and healthcare professionals.

Yet for those that had not achieved employment there was some disappointment and mixed feelings about the outcome of their undergraduate qualification. While for some there is an acknowledgement that they have graduated at the wrong time in terms of the economic downturn, for others it appeared that they lacked knowledge about what an undergraduate degree would do for them and had not expected that they would need a postgraduate qualification. For those who were the first generation of their family to complete the Leaving Certificate and a degree, they and their families held strong expectations that the degree would lead to employment. It was clear for this group that they did not really get to 'learn the ropes' in terms of how to progress to a career in their chosen area. For some participants, particularly those that had been mature age students, the type of career advice available was inappropriate to their needs. This must also be considered in the context that of all groups within the sample mature age students were least likely to have obtained employment.

A mixed perspective was evident in terms of how participants viewed their professional identity. Those who were employed in a job that was directly relevant to their Trinity degree often reflected on the esteem it garnered from their employer. While some chose not to reveal to employers that they entered university via an access route, others by virtue of their working class accent and experiences used this as 'other capital' in their jobs. They were able to bring their life experiences to their employment and had an edge that other traditional graduates appeared to lack. This was particularly the case for graduates in law and social work. Jones (2006), in the case of access to social work students, notes the important contribution to be made to practice by access students that have some common experiences with future service users. Yet for the minority who were unemployed, particularly those whose friends had left school early and gone on to employment, there were mixed feelings about their professional identity; their educational attainment that had been held in such high regard did not match with their current social welfare status.

### *A ripple in the sea - family and community connections*

As noted, most participants were the first generation of their family to attend university and the first in their family to attend Trinity. However, the findings of the survey indicate the beginnings of second generation progression, or a ripple effect, as other family members progress to Trinity, and specifically into the TAP foundation courses/ HEAR scheme. The findings from

the interviews with family members, that have been used in the alumni case studies, also highlighted how the first member of the family can function as a role model in the home that navigates the education system and imparts knowledge to siblings that follow in their path. Nevertheless, though evidence of this emerging second generation access is encouraging, its sustainability will be a challenge for some alumni. Fees and increasing student contribution charges may hinder their children's future progression to third-level education. Similarly, the move towards a market-oriented higher educational provision in the UK is considered a significant impediment to widening participation (Milburn, 2012).

Arguably the most prominent ripple effect takes place among TAP Trinity alumni who are already parents. They acknowledged that their own parents did not have knowledge to pass on to them about how to access and succeed in higher education, and many alumni had limited experience of careers guidance at school. They are confident that they now have the information to pass on both formally and informally to their children, and in doing so demystify and normalise the idea of progression to third level education. In addition, the vast majority had very high educational aspirations for their children's progression to third level education, and almost two thirds considered that their children would surpass their own level of education through the attainment of a Level 9 or 10 qualification. These findings are consistent with other studies of first generation university students, notably mature age women who act as role models increasing the cultural capital within their families through the provision of an educationally supportive environment (O' Shea & Stone, 2011; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010).

This ripple effect in which other family members take up access and progress to third level education should also be considered in the context of the survey findings that show most graduates remain resident in their communities of origin. Graduates' accounts reveal that many experienced their life at Trinity as 'day students' (Christie, Munro & Wager, 2005) and their compartmentalisation of college and home worlds meant that many students remained connected to their friends and families. While this seemed to have a limiting effect on the extent to which they participated in student life, their continued connection to their local area appears, for some, to benefit their families and communities to whom they pass on information about third level access. In this way we can see the interaction of the bridges and barriers of access and participation in third level education that are implicit, but rarely illustrated, within widening participation research (Kettley, 2007).

Though many graduates remain in their communities of origin and demonstrate that they transfer information about third level to families and friends, participation in community, political or area partnerships did not feature strongly in their reports of their community activities. Where there was such involvement it was found with participants employed in a teaching, political, or community development job. Mature age participants demonstrated the highest level of engagement in community-based activities, particularly in education programmes or school committees. Community connections were fewer among participants from the HEAR than the foundation courses; the former tend to be younger and a more geographically diverse group.

Taken together these findings suggest that while the broad response to widening participation has resulted in increased rates of participation and more geographic diversity, particularly through schemes such as HEAR, there is also a need to reflect on the wider influence that community-based access provided via foundation courses can achieve. Diamond (2008: 6) notes that the current approach to access is something that is vested in HEIs rather than in communities and that policy and practice tends to ignore the relationship between locality, neighbourhood and access. This has resulted in a personalised and individualised response to access rather than one that seeks to bring about change at the community level.

Nevertheless, remaining connected to friends and local community should not be considered in absolute terms. Though they have educational capital that they can transmit to others about the system, and how to survive within it, doing this can be difficult for some as they feel the stigma of a working class identity complicated by their Trinity qualification and dependence on social welfare. This is exacerbated for those that have remained with their friends from school who now have children, housing and employment.

For others their educational experience has disrupted the nature of their friendships from school/community, resulting in what Brine and Waller (2004: 108) term a 'segmentation of the self and a fractured identity'. Though they acknowledge a shared history and culture they also realise that when it comes to their worlds of work and study they have little connection. Their educational experiences have given them new insights and values about work and life that are different to those of their friends. These findings also align with Stevenson and Clegg (2013: 26) in their accounts of socio-economically disadvantaged first generation students who:

recognise that their life experiences have disrupted both their learning trajectories and their learning identities and that their futures are not always certain.

Despite some accounts that indicate mixed feelings about the outcome of their undergraduate experience, the data reveals a strong sense of reciprocity among TAP Trinity alumni in terms of their willingness to promote higher education among their families, friends and neighbours.

### **Trinity Connections**

As noted above many TAP Trinity alumni remain resident in their communities of origin and operate as ambassadors for access and university participation, particularly among their families and, albeit to a lesser extent, within their communities. For many of the participants, continuing connections to Trinity were limited. Younger participants and those undertaking postgraduate Trinity programmes had maintained some friendships and networks from their undergraduate days. The majority that had undertaken TAP Foundation Courses remained connected to TAP rather than to Trinity.

## Conclusions

As the Trinity Access Programmes mark their twentieth anniversary it is timely to consider how graduates that entered Trinity via an access programme perceive the impact of their degree on their family and community, and on their professional identity.

First, it is important to consider the strengths and possible limitations of the research. The study was comprehensive in terms of its methodological approach, its utilisation of mixed methods of documentary analysis; quantitative survey; qualitative interviews of alumni, family members, and TAP stakeholders. Comprehension was further supported by the achievement of a 68 per cent response rate to the alumni survey.

The study relied on cross-sectional alumni self-report data and it is acknowledged that self-report data can be affected by inaccuracy and by social desirability responses. In addition, the perspective of family members and TAP Trinity stakeholders is limited by the small sample of interviews. The TAP Trinity alumni interviewees were randomly selected from the list of alumni that had provided consent to participate in the survey but they mainly constitute a convenience sample. It may be that those that participated in interviews were happy to participate in an in-depth interview about their experiences as they wanted to voice criticisms, however, it may also be likely that they were happy to do so as they were keen to tell the story of a positive experience.

The high response rate to optional open-ended questions on the alumni survey provided largely positive information and indicates a general willingness on the part of the TAP Trinity alumni to provide information about their experiences.

The results should also be considered in the context that the sample of respondents by access cohort indicates that those who responded were most likely to be recent graduates - in the last five years. In addition, respondents that had undertaken access courses in Trinity link colleges were a minority and future research would need to take a closer look at the experiences of this particular group.

The following conclusions are drawn from the study that may be useful for the future development of access programmes at Trinity.

### ***Access versus accessibility: the teaching and learning environment***

Those that experienced the TAP Foundation Courses found them to be positive and beneficial to their subsequent progression within Trinity. In terms of widening participation among socio-economically disadvantaged students TAP has been highly successful in reaching many who were the first generation of their family to attend third level education. The graduates' experiences indicate a heightened awareness and understanding of third level education and led to the progression of other family members. TAP has been instrumental in breaking down the barriers to progression to Trinity for non-traditional entrants and in so doing enhances intra- and intergenerational social mobility among this group. While access programmes do much to prepare first generation students for entry to university this is just one side of the story. Transition from access to Trinity, and accessibility within Trinity remains difficult owing to the dominance of a system established for traditional school leaver entrants. While access is supported, issues remain about how accessible undergraduate life is for these students.

Barriers to accessibility arise in the context of the undergraduate teaching and learning environment. Whereas access students have benefited from an adult and learner centred interactive approach to teaching and learning in their TAP Foundation Courses, they are distanced by the depersonalised nature of the large group teaching in first and second year. As noted earlier, the lack of an orientation programme that involves them with other non-access students makes it difficult to fit in and get to know other non-access students. Accessibility is also difficult for access students that undertake degree programmes where they may be the only one, or part of a very significant minority of access students. A common critique of HEI access programmes relates to the dominant model of access as one where the access student must fit to the system that has let them in, rather than a response that is transformative and in which the HEI adjusts to meet their needs (Jones & Thomas, 2005).

There is a dissonance between what some TAP Foundation Course participants have described as the emancipatory experience of their access course prior to their undergraduate experience; the latter being more teacher-centred with a largely passive approach to learning in large lecture theatres. Furthermore, as Wainwright and Marandet (2010: 453) assert,

and as shown in the present study, 'whilst widening participation is potentially transformative for students and their families, access and participation is not equal for all, with caring responsibilities, in particular still occupying a marginal place'. In terms of social inclusion and widening participation, addressing such aspects of the current undergraduate teaching and learning environment is beneficial not only for those who experience Trinity as a minority but also for all undergraduates. Such a response is also strongly supported in current national policy for higher education (Report of the Strategy Group, 2011).

### ***Family and community connections***

The study demonstrates that a ripple effect occurs within families when the first generation of a family participates in third level education. There is a clear indication that those who are parents transmit to their children knowledge about the education system, how to access and succeed within it. They also affirm that their parental involvement in and aspirations for their children's education is high. This indicates the clear benefits for students who are parents and their families in terms of intergenerational social mobility. Further, it endorses the argument for a lifelong learning response to higher education but one in which accessibility issues related to structures and values are addressed (Wainwright & Marandet, 2010).

In terms of community connections after their graduation from Trinity we found that foundation course students in particular tended to reside within their communities of origin. Potentially they can play an important role as ambassadors within their local areas for access to third level education. Current responses to access remain school-based or individualised, and dominated by HEIs. This finding confirms the importance of grounding access in the community (Diamond, 2002). Most graduates, unless they have a job that has a strong community orientation do not engage in community organisations and community activities but they remain living in their local communities. Current policy responses to social inclusion and educational disadvantage favour localised action (DES, 2005). Given that there is evidence of a ripple of change within families because of the first generation graduate's educational experience, there is a potential to expand this at a community level through the promotion of access at a more grass roots level with organisations that are firmly located within disadvantaged communities.

### ***Widening participation – moving beyond the barriers to access***

Access students have overcome many barriers in their progression to, through, and beyond Trinity. While there are many success stories and much pride amongst graduates and their families about their achievements, intertwined are stories that show they had to navigate a system that was culturally different to their own educational and life experiences. They experienced their Trinity undergraduate education in a system established for traditional students that enter on high Leaving Certificate points. In this system educational provision tends to be geared to the majority group. This means that for access students, notably mature-age, the appropriateness of support for them in terms of careers advice was irrelevant to their particular circumstances. This is an important consideration for any HEI in the context of policy that endorses lifelong learning. While there has been considerable progress in the diversification of the student body, students from lower socio-economic groups remain a small part of this diversification. In terms of increasing diversity among the undergraduate student population it is important to consider that their 'student experience', was largely not that portrayed as the 'Trinity student experience'. They mainly operated as 'day students' where they separated their college and home life. Apart from their connection to TAP, many graduates had little or no connection to Trinity since graduation. These Trinity graduates, though they constitute a very small group are potentially very important alumni that can represent Trinity as a socially inclusive and diverse institution. There is a challenge to move access beyond entry to consider broader issues related to diversity in student experience, in education and service provision, and how access students are embraced as Trinity alumni.

After twenty years in the provision of access programmes at Trinity it is timely to consider the vision for access for the next two decades. Similar to all Irish HEIs Trinity faces the challenges of reduced public expenditure for education. There is pressure on many fronts: to maintain academic excellence; compete in a global higher education market place; to ensure that graduates are prepared for the demands of a knowledge economy; and to become more socially inclusive and diverse through its widening participation agenda. Schemes such as HEAR and the move towards restructuring university admissions systems have the potential to generate a more diverse student body. It is also worth considering access to Trinity in the context of its local community. As demonstrated in the present study, targeting access in local communities in the immediate locale of Trinity can impact on enhancing social mobility amongst groups that are marginalised. As Trinity embraces globalisation and engages in national access programmes how will its next phase of access make a difference in the community in which it is located?

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## Appendix 1: Methodology

The Terms of Reference for the research were to examine:

- How TAP alumni experienced TAP primary and second level activities before joining Trinity
- The experiences of TAP alumni of programme involvement and of Trinity
- How alumni have navigated professional, social and cultural conflicts (if any)
- Where alumni live and work
- How alumni who are parents perceive their role as their children's educator, and the extent of parental involvement in their children's education
- The level of volunteerism amongst alumni, including involvement as TAP ambassadors
- How the TAP experience has impacted on family members
- How and to what extent has TAP actively brought about community change

### Approach to the research

To address the Terms of Reference outlined above the study adopted a mixed methods approach. The research commenced in June 2012 with final data collection completed in January 2013. The study involved qualitative interviews with 20 TAP Trinity Alumni, quantitative surveys with TAP Trinity Alumni (n = 157), interviews with family members (n = 12) and stakeholders (n = 5).

#### *Quantitative online survey of TAP Trinity Alumni*

All TAP Trinity Alumni (N = 252) were invited by TAP via email and the TAP Facebook page to participate in the research. Two hundred provided consent for their contact details to be passed to the researchers. Participants were sent an email from the Children's Research Centre with further information about the study and a link to an electronic survey hosted by SurveyMonkey®. One hundred and thirty seven valid surveys were completed.

The survey was piloted with 10 graduates and Trinity staff working in access during October 2012. Following some minor adjustments to wording and layout, the survey was accessible during the period 23 October to 9 November 2012. The questionnaire was short and took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

The survey examined participants' demographic background and had a particular focus on the educational levels and higher education participation of other family members. Other areas examined were parental involvement in their education when they were a child, and for those who are parents, their own attitudes and practices towards their children's education. Questions used in previous TAP studies were included for comparative analysis. Several open-ended questions were included that gave participants an opportunity to provide explanation for their responses.

#### *Qualitative interviews*

Twenty, one-to-one semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with TAP Trinity Alumni. These aimed to understand participants' pathway to and through Trinity, and the impact that their degree has had on their professional identity and family and community connections.

Twelve one-to-one qualitative interviews were conducted with family members of TAP Trinity alumni. These examined participants' educational background, their recollections of their family member's time at Trinity and whether any challenges were experienced during their time at Trinity. The interviews also elicited family members' perspectives on how they considered their family member's attendance at Trinity impacted on them, their family and community.

Five one-to-one qualitative interviews were undertaken with TAP Trinity stakeholders located within Trinity. These interviews broadly aimed to get an understanding of the role of TAP within Trinity, and the changes over 20 years, how it works with communities and how it addresses educational inequalities, its strengths and weaknesses.

All interviews were digitally recorded with participants' permission and lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours.

### ***Data analysis***

The quantitative data derived from the online survey was checked for errors or missing data and was transferred into SPSS. Descriptive data analysis was undertaken that describes the data in terms of frequencies/percentages of responses. Cross-tabulations were carried out on key variables of interest, for example, access route, gender and age group.

### ***Qualitative data***

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and notes were written during and after the interviews. As the transcripts were produced each was read through and annotations were made on recurring issues and occasions of dissonance. Initially a deductive approach was followed in which the text was broadly analysed and coded against the questions in the interview schedule. Following this a closer analysis took place in which the text was allocated to themes and sub-categories occurring within themes. Members of the research team each produced accounts of their own determination of themes and sub-themes for discussion at team meetings. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to assist in the management and storage of the transcripts and the development of a thematic coding index.

### ***Ethical considerations***

Research ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Advisory Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity. Information about the study was provided to all participants before they completed the survey/and or interview. These outlined the research to be undertaken; the benefits of the research; what participation in the research would involve; and issues of confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained directly from participants that engaged in an interview.



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