

# **Why Not Education? The Necessity for Welfare to Education Programmes to Alleviate the Social Exclusion of Welfare Recipients in Ireland**

**Martin J. Power**

*University of Limerick, Ireland*

## **Abstract**

*In this paper I offer a critical appraisal of the value of welfare to education programmes in alleviating the social exclusion of welfare recipients in Ireland. Education is located as a key resource to be utilised in the fight against social exclusion. The paper suggests the function of education with regards to social inclusion is to promote relative social mobility. It is noted that in modern capitalist societies educational credentials are a key determinant of one's social class. Consequently education has a dual role in improving the individual's class position and additionally in potentially reducing the gap between those at the top of the hierarchy of economic power and those at the bottom.*

*The paper takes the view that it is beneficial to society as a whole to specifically fund access to third level education for people on welfare. It is suggested that funding access for these groups is more likely to result in employment for them, more likely to sustain employment, and furthermore it will reduce time spent unemployed in the future. Additionally the paper demonstrates from a financial viewpoint welfare to education programmes will provide the state with a larger return on its initial investment. However it is apparent that internationally welfare to education is seen as a luxury, and subservient to welfare to work programmes. This is increasingly becoming the case in Ireland.*

*The final part of the paper is concerned specifically with the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) third level option. It finds that the BTEA has aided social inclusion to a certain extent by moving sections of the population off welfare and into sustainable quality work and to a position*

*of higher status, which is largely based on occupation in our society. In essence it has helped to reduce the gap between the top and the bottom of the economic hierarchy. However it is shown that the BTEA falls short in a number of instances, namely the fact that it offers financial support alone, does not help individuals to obtain a third level place, and has removed the post graduate option for all bar one particular course of study. To this end it is argued that the addition of some key changes to the BTEA could result in major positive implications for the social inclusion of its target population.*

## **Introduction**

There is a consensus that social exclusion involves a much wider range of problems than poverty and deprivation based only on material deficiency. It involves a broad set of inter-related issues over time (Walker & Park, 1998; CASE 1999). However while I believe this to be true, I must acknowledge that we live in an era of Global Capitalism where equality of outcome in practice principally means income equality. Thus it can be argued that the source of social exclusion lies in the structured inequality of the labour market and the state, which disadvantages particular groups in society (Morris, 1994: 80). As a sociologist, I wished to know how this disadvantage can be rectified. To this end I intend to show how education and particularly third level education is the best route to take.

## **How can education address social exclusion?**

Education is now seen primarily in terms of its relationship with the economy, which has ultimately resulted in the commodification of education. (Mulderigg, 2003) The education system selects individuals for different types of occupation through exams and qualifications, thus controlling levels of social mobility (Drudy & Lynch, 1993: 26). By extension it can be argued that any institution which can control social mobility rates affects social exclusion / inclusion.

Irish government policy documents on education primarily reflect a variant of functionalism, namely 'human capital' theory. Human Capital theory in keeping with the ideas found in functionalism proposes that any increased investment in education

will bring automatic economic benefits for society as a whole and also the individuals concerned (see Drudy & Lynch, 1993: 31). The education system is seen to play a major role in identifying ability and ensuring that this ability guarantees any individual their appropriate positions in the social and economic hierarchy, thus bringing about a meritocratic society. However, a functionalist approach assumes that a certain amount of social and economic inequality is both inevitable and necessary to the proper functioning of industrial societies. (Davis & Moore, 1945; Marshall, 1971; cited in Drudy & Lynch, 1993: 31) This has profound implications for education as a mechanism for achieving social inclusion.

There was extensive debate on whether education policy should venture to ensure equality of opportunity, or equality of outcomes (Lynch, 1999, Cited in McCoy & Smyth, 2004: 66) Equality of outcome means that after social policy interventions, differences between people in terms of their welfare are less. Conversely equality of opportunity is where everyone receives equal support and assistance, but thereafter inequalities are allowed to multiply as individuals make what they can of their opportunities (Baldock et al, 2003: 75). Advocates of equality of opportunity strategies have for the moment won this vital battle to determine the purpose of education in Irish society.

It is accepted that addressing educational disadvantage requires intervention at pre-school level right through to third level. However in today's society third level qualifications have implicit importance to the labour market. Riseborough (1993) argues that social inclusion is related to employment status, with third level graduate careers ensuring social inclusion. The focus on education as a vital element in ensuring social inclusion is linked to the role which education plays in the status attainment process and reward structure of our society, with the higher the level of education attained the less likely the prospect of unemployment (Clancy, 2001: 17). In fact as recently as December 20<sup>th</sup> 2005 Minister Martin said that the higher the educational qualification that one can get in the modern world the better.

Thus access to education and employment and social inclusion are inextricably linked. Without access to education it becomes increasingly more difficult to find employment, which in turn can cause an increased dependence on the state, which can in turn lead to social exclusion (Chard & Couch, 1998:608).

The situation in Ireland at present (as elsewhere), is that third level education is replacing secondary education as the focal point of access, selection, and entry to rewarding careers for the majority of young people (OECD, 1999a: 20, Cited in Clancy, 2001: 16). A plethora of research (Lynch, 1989; Winefield et al., 1993; Hammer, 1999) has been carried out on the labour market careers of previously unemployed young people. It identifies that for the unemployed, further education can be an extremely important option given the current situation in European labour markets. Over 50% of the jobs created in Ireland in 2005 require third-level qualification across all disciplines (IDA, 2006). Thus with the increasing requirements of the labour market to have third level qualifications, it becomes ever more apparent that access to third level education is indeed a mechanism by which people can combat social exclusion. Conversely the lack of access to third level education is a major obstacle to getting the kind of work that would help people out of poverty and thus contributes to or reinforces existing situations of social exclusion.

#### **Access to third level education:**

Tackling social exclusion through education, achieving equity of educational opportunity, and encouraging access to and successful participation in higher education have all been national policy priorities in Ireland since the mid-1990s (Higher Education Authority, 2004: 9). The National Development Plan identifies the lack of educational achievement as a pivotal factor in individual social exclusion, while also noting the correlation between low levels of participation in the education process and the development of socially and economically marginalized communities (Cited in report of the action group on access to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education, 2001: 103).

However there are still major differences between socio-economic groups in terms of the type of college students attend (Clancy, 2001: 55).<sup>1</sup> Students from lower socio-economic groups thus have a higher risk of dropping out of third-level education as the rate of non-completion in the Institutes of Technology is more than twice the rate found in the universities. (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 9-13) Additionally students from lower socio-economic groups continue to be significantly under-represented in third-level institutions. In 1998, over nine out of ten from the 'Higher Professional' group entered higher education. Conversely only 20% of those from an 'Unskilled Manual Worker' background entered higher education.

(Department of Education and Science, 2003: 2) What these figures suggest is that our educational system is not really the meritocratic system that those of a functionalist persuasion would suggest.

With these figures in mind it is interesting to note the words of Mary Hanafin, Minister for Education and Science, who stated in 2004 that

Equity of access must be an integral feature of our higher education system if that system is to deliver for individuals, society and the economy ... There is now general agreement that individuals should be able to enter and successfully participate in higher education, regardless of social, economic or cultural background. (Higher Education Authority, 2004: 5)

The debate therefore exists as to whether we should be happy that the absolute participation rates of the lower socio-economic groups have increased considerably, or whether the relative participation rates should be of paramount interest. While it is very encouraging to see major advancements in the lower socio-economic groups of accessing higher education in absolute terms, in my opinion the relative participation rates must be of paramount interest. A primary reason for this belief is the importance of third level educational qualifications to the contemporary Irish labour market. Thus while the numbers from lower socio-economic groups accessing higher education may be on the increase in absolute terms, we must be aware that there is competition to achieve the most highly valued credentials. (Clancy, 2001: 174)

### **The Back to Education allowance: A brief history:**

In July 1990 the Third Level Allowance (TLA) was introduced on a pilot basis. The primary objective was the removal of the barrier to participation in third level education faced by the long-term unemployed. An applicant had to be at least 23 years of age and unemployed for at least 15 months prior to starting an approved full-time third level course of study. In the 1990/91 academic year, only 67 applications were approved. Between 1993 and 1995 several changes<sup>2</sup> were introduced which increased the number of people who could qualify for the scheme. Additionally the scheme was extended to include people aged at least 24 and wanting to pursue a postgraduate qualification.

By 1996, the Department of Social, Community & Family Affairs moved to a more pro-active position and changes were made to encourage unemployed people to try to find further educational credentials (Healy, 1997). Payment of the BTEA was now made at the maximum standard rate and as the scheme was not means-tested it allowed participants to avail of employment if they so needed or wished. A continuation of the payment during the summer became a feature of the scheme and a book allowance of €127.00 was introduced. The introduction of these and other measures<sup>3</sup> resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of participants on the Scheme between 1995 and 1997 (See Table 1).

**Table 1: Level of participation since 1990:**

	Third Level Option		Third Level Option
1990/1991	67	1991/1992	184
1992/1993	363	1993/1994	914
1994/1995	1228	1995/1996	2228
1996/1997	3150	1997/1998	3852
1998/1999	4503	1999/2000	4765
2000/2001	4853	2001/2002	4431
2002/2003	4968	2003/2004	5458

Source: O'Dea, 31.3.2005

In January 1998 both the second and third level schemes were merged into a unified Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) Scheme, which was also non-statutory. Between 1998 and 2002 the BTEA underwent a series of changes<sup>4</sup>, which widened the groups who were eligible to apply for the scheme. The number of participants on the scheme grew from 67, in its inaugural year, to 5,458 in the 2003/2004 academic year. Thus it appears that the measures introduced up to this point had extended opportunities to a broader base of social welfare recipients in order that they could obtain qualifications necessary to participate in the modern labour market.

However worryingly in 2003 the summer payment to BTEA participants previously on an unemployment payment was discontinued. Furthermore it was decided that the postgraduate option was now to be restricted to only those who wished to pursue a Higher Diploma (H.Dip.) or Graduate Diploma in Primary School Teaching. On December 2<sup>nd</sup> 2003 (Dáil Debates) Minister Coughlan said

It is estimated, based on the numbers who actually came forward for the scheme in the 2002-03 academic year, that up to 1,200 people who might otherwise have qualified for the scheme in 2004 will not now qualify.

Consequently 2004 saw the decision taken to extend the qualifying period for the Third Level Option of the BTEA to 15 months. Interestingly the government then performed a u-turn in 2005 and from September of 2005 the qualifying period for the Third Level Option of the BTEA was once more be reduced to twelve months (nine months if you are assessed and approved by FÁS under the National Employment Action Plan<sup>5</sup>) and the Cost of Education payment increased to €400.00.

Thus there is a particular concern with mature students and students with a disability, as BTEA recipients will primarily be found in these groups. Thus we must examine the provision of access to higher education for mature students. Mature students are expected to provide a significant proportion of future cohorts of higher education students. In 1997, Lynch carried out a comprehensive survey on mature students in higher education and found that most came from a lower middle class background, with only 22% of all mature entrants coming from the four lower socio-economic groups. While full-time day students no longer pay fees, the majority of mature students pursue higher education through part-time or distance education options, where the fees waiver does not apply, and so finance is a major burden. (The report of the action group on access to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education, 2001: 88-89) In addition there is a major lack of information and guidance service for adults wishing to pursue third level education, a fact highlighted by the fact that of approximately 1,500 enquiries to the AONTAS Information Service for 1999 showed that the majority of callers were looking for information on getting into higher education (Ibid: 90). In addition Ireland lags behind many other OECD countries with regard to access for mature students. For example Ireland pales in significance in comparison to Sweden wherein 38% of full-time higher education participants over twenty-five years of age (OECD, 2003).

Thus it is clear that Ireland's success to date in achieving equity of access to higher education for mature students leaves a lot to be desired.

When we look at students with a disability (who qualify for the BTEA), we see that in 1998/99 this group only represented 0.8% of the total undergraduate population, but participation of students with disabilities in higher education is improving (report of the action group on access to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education, 2001: 64). For many students with disabilities, intensive courses with long contact hours do not offer the optimum conditions for pursuing third level studies. The absence of funding structures to support access to part time education, and the limited range of courses available on a part-time basis, remain significant obstacles to access to third level courses by students with disabilities (Ibid: 65).

I conclude there is a clear connection between educational attainment and socio-economic status. While rising participation rates have assisted all socio-economic groups, and some working-class groups have improved their educational location in absolute terms, they have not gained any great advantage in relative terms compared to middle class groups (Report of the action group on access to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education, 2001: 33-34). Additionally equity of access to higher education for both mature students and students with a disability is lacking. Furthermore as those completing higher education continuously rises, we may see such educational credentials losing their value both in the competition for attractive jobs in the labour market, and as cultural capital. This has ominous connotations for people who have not obtained third level qualifications as they stand to lose even more as a result of such devaluation (Bourdieu, 1984). Moreover socio-economic inequalities increase as you move up higher through the education system and these inequalities are greater the more prestigious the sector (Whelan and Whelan 1984: 7, Clancy, 1988). Therefore it can be argued that education is actually a mechanism through which societies inequalities are reproduced. Therefore in order to start to offset inequalities in education and consequently social mobility rates, we must offer those who are disadvantaged the opportunity to gain valued educational qualifications (Drudy & Lynch, 1993: 267).



Governments put forward 'Lifelong learning' as a solution. The publication of a White Paper on 'Human Resource Development' in 1997 was the Irish government's pledge to lifelong learning. This was defined first and foremost in terms of the need for people to obtain commercially practicable qualifications, which would guarantee Ireland's competitiveness in the global market (Healy, 1997: 11). Likewise in the UK, Colleges are to focus on 'vocational skills building.' Academic progress or personal development remains a valuable and important part of lifelong learning' but the government will fund it at its discretion (Besley, 2005). I believe that lifelong learning can help counter social exclusion as a consequence of the relationship education now has with the economy. However while on the one hand the government promotes the idea of lifelong learning, on the other it has (for example, through the removal of the postgraduate option of the BTEA) restricted the opportunity for lifelong learning for certain sections of our population of interest.

Thus as we will see momentarily, the promotion of lifelong learning represents a form of self-regulation where individual social actors are responsible for and invest in their own economic welfare through continuous education (Mulderigg, 2003). Further, this discourse can reshape public attitudes towards social justice, where poverty, inequality and social exclusion become the responsibility of the individual and not the state. (Ibid)

### **Activation policies:**

Activation policy in Ireland emerged as a result of the unemployment and particularly long-term unemployment of the 1980s and 1990s (McCashin, 2004). Government discourse is a critical element in both ratifying and legitimising this change. To ensure the smooth transition to activation policies, where the government no longer assures financial support, 'welfare' has to be outlined in a negative evaluative frame, where receipt of welfare becomes 'dependency' and throwing off the shackles of welfare becomes 'empowerment'. (Mulderigg, 2003) It is out of this particular mindset that Activation policies (Welfare to Work) emerged. McCashin (2004: 217) defines Welfare to work as a

broad range of policies and measures targeted at people receiving income support or in danger of becoming permanently excluded from the labour market. Often the aim is to assist the target group to enter or re-enter the labour market through various forms of education, vocational education or re-training.

Consequently the 'welfare to work' scheme places both a written and 'moral' obligation on those claiming benefits to take part in education, training courses etc, in return for their benefit. Accordingly when the opportunity presents itself, those in receipt of benefit should take paid employment and cease to require the state to support them. Hence these 'welfare to work' schemes compel claimants to undertake some activity in return for retention of their social welfare benefit.

However there are noteworthy problems with activation policy. Crucially, activation policy associates welfare with dependency and employment with self-sufficiency, despite the fact that minimum wage work can no more sustain a family than welfare can. Additionally it is somewhat worrying that O' Connell (200: 70) argues that participants returning to unemployment after having availed of these welfare to work or welfare to education schemes are then counted as newly unemployed even though they had to have been long term unemployed prior to starting the scheme. This distorts the figures and implies that activation policy may primarily be a method in use by governments to paint a better economic picture than is actually the case.

### **Post Welfare State: The Place of Welfare to Education Programmes:**

In 1995 the development of a National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) was initiated by the government to deal with poverty, social exclusion and inequality. Primary objectives acknowledged in relation to education included a need to eradicate the costs of educational involvement for those on social welfare or on low income, together with the removal of additional barriers to educational participation (Healy, 1997: 10) To meet these objectives the state made a commitment to promote equality of access, participation and benefit from the State.

Internationally post-welfare reforms assume that the road to self-sufficiency begins with employment, irrespective of the earnings or social insurance benefits attached to that job. Very few states in the US help welfare recipients pursue the education that will get them off welfare. The UK has the 'New Deal' which helps unemployed

people<sup>6</sup> partake in a full-time education or training option. However the decision as to whether or not a welfare recipient avails of these educational opportunities is dependent on the individual's personal advisor. Thus in effect the UK state through its welfare department decides who will be allowed to avail of these educational opportunities. It is not the individual welfare recipient's choice. Thus it is clear that the UK is not too unlike the US in the provision of welfare to education programmes. While the UK allows welfare to education programmes there is still more of a preoccupation with welfare to work programmes. Consequently it can be argued that the provision of welfare to education programmes in the UK is to the benefit of (a functionalist) society, not to the individual. Access is improved, but not for reasons of personal fulfilment. Thus we have seen a progressive march towards a situation where the current political climate seems hostile to efforts to further increase access to education for welfare recipients. (Polakow et al, 2004)

This mindset when combined with that fact that during the past decade Europe has tended to move politically to the right, has meant that welfare is increasingly regarded as “an expensive luxury and one upon which taxpayers money can only be spent sparingly” Jarvis (1992: 407). This ensures that in relation to ‘second chance’ education we invariably see equality of opportunity measures introduced in preference to equality of outcome measures.

However the crucial argument here is that there is a pressing need for a policy, which facilitates education, so welfare recipients can obtain jobs of a sufficient standard that allows them to move away from welfare on a more permanent basis. Under the current programmes working poverty has replaced welfare. We have higher levels of low skilled workers, and our levels of lifelong learning is lower than our economic competitors. Additionally our “make work pay policies have increased the number of ‘Working Poor’ households” (NESF, 2005: 2). Thus many are now arguing that education should not be viewed as separate from work. Instead they must be seen as part of a continuum of activities that result in work through lifelong learning. The logic being that education makes a critical difference in employability, earnings, and job retention. (American Association of University Women, 2004) It is thus interesting to note that welfare staff find that participants on the US state of Maine's ‘Parents As Scholars program’ require fewer support services; employers have access

to a more well-rounded and educated work force, and the State sees genuine prospects of higher earning power, a stronger tax base and a more viable citizenry (Butler and Deprez Cited in Tessier, 2001). This ultimately helps the social inclusion of the participants.

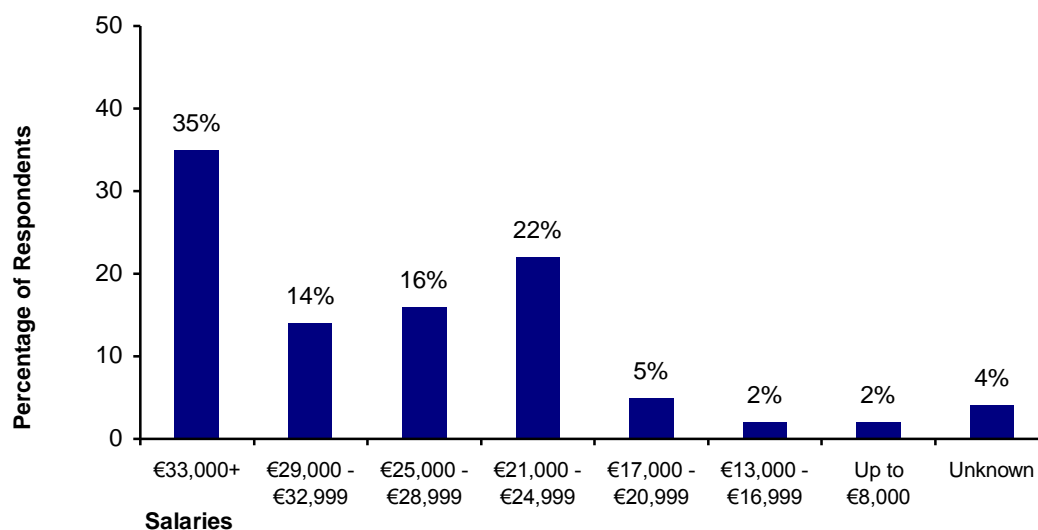
### **A preference for welfare to education programmes:**

While the financing of the welfare state has become a problem, this paper argues that the way to move towards social inclusion is through increased education. To this end the provision of welfare to education programmes in the post welfare state era are of paramount importance. We saw earlier how the rapidly changing nature of work in modern economies has greatly enhanced the importance of educational qualifications over recent decades. Thus the unemployment rate of those with higher education is one third of the rate for those with lower levels of educational attainment.

(Department of Education and Science, 2003: 7) Unqualified people were six times as likely to be continuously unemployed or in low paying jobs than those who had a third level qualification. (Layte *et al.* 2003, cited in McCoy & Smyth, 2004: 87) In essence the higher an individual's level of education the less the individual's chance of unemployment. Additionally when unemployment occurs it is for a shorter period than it is for those with lesser levels of education.

Consequently we see clear evidence that third-level education bestows considerable advantages to individuals and that educational accomplishment is directly closely linked to success in the labour market. In fact a third level education delivers an annual earnings premium of 57% in Ireland (OECD, 2002. Cited in Department of Education and Science, 2003: 7). Moreover, the benefits of education accrue not only to individuals but to the broader society with increased educational investment associated with a reduction in welfare costs and crime levels, (McCoy & Smyth, 2004: 92) active citizenship, and taxation, etc. (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 7)

**Figure 1: Salaries of Mature Student Graduates.**



University of Limerick Careers Service Cooperative Education & Careers Division, 2004: 12.

Salary levels are frequently used as a measure of the status of graduate jobs. As can be seen from Figure 1, 35% of mature student graduates at the University of Limerick had salaries over €33,000, with only 13% earning less than €21,000. Salary levels like these would seem to support Riseborough’s (1993) argument that educational qualifications are ‘cultural capital passports’ into the labour force, with graduate careers ensuring social inclusion.

Finally in the age of knowledge-based economies, Ireland needs its graduate output to be in the top 25% of OECD countries to ensure national economic competitiveness. (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 14) For all of these reasons I would argue that it makes more sense to give welfare recipients the opportunity to avail of third level education, rather than the current preoccupation with welfare to work programmes.

### **Assessing the ability of the BTEA to facilitate access to third level.**

We saw earlier how the numbers qualifying for the BTEA and consequently the numbers availing of the scheme increased since its inception. Consequently a comparison of the socio-economic status of BTEA participants before and after

college showed social mobility from the lower Non-Manual and Manual categories to the Lower Professional category (Healy, 1997: 64).

However the more important question to be answered is how has the BTEA enabled access to third level education? The answer to this question proves not to be as positive. BTEA participants had a relatively high level of educational achievement prior to commencing college, with 70% having a Leaving Certificate, Undergraduate Diploma or Degree (Healy, 1997:15). Moreover, 60% had become unemployed in the two years preceding their entry to college (Ibid, 1997: 16), inferring that those people who were unemployed for more than two years were a lot less likely to avail of the Scheme.

Obtaining information about the scheme in the early 1990s was very difficult and a general lack of knowledge about the scheme existed in local Social Welfare Offices (Healy, 1997: 27). Anecdotal evidence suggests that a similar process is still occurring. Most BTEA participants obtained a college place through a combination of factors, which included educational qualifications, interview and/or entrance examination (See table 2). To this end it is crucial to note that the BTEA does not offer applicants any assistance in relation to obtaining a place in third level.

**Table 2: How Participants Qualified for a College Place**

<b>How Participants Qualified</b>	<b>%</b>
Interview and/or Entrance Exam	42%
Leaving Certificate Only	29%
On basis of work experience, other qualifications etc,	16%
As ‘Mature Students’	13%
	(114)

Source: Healy, 1997: 28

In relation to the difficulties which participants experienced at college we can see from table 3 that the main areas of difficulty experienced by BTEA students were in relation to ‘Managing Money’, ‘Personal and/or Family Problems’ and doing ‘Coursework’. Again it is crucial that the BTEA does not provide any assistance in relation to the alleviation of these difficulties.

**Table 3: Extent of Difficulties with a number of areas while in College**

	<b>A lot of Difficulty</b>	<b>Some Difficulty</b>	<b>No Difficulty</b>	<b>Total</b>
Managing Money	26%	50%	24%	(105)
Personal and/or family problems	26%	32%	42%	(101)
Getting maintenance/ESF grants	14%	27%	59%	(85)
Coursework – eg studying, essays, exams...	9%	47%	44%	(104)
Getting social welfare payments	2%	26%	72%	(98)

Source: Healy, 1997: 30

For BTEA students the field of study of participants varied extensively but by far the most popular area of study was Arts (Table 4). Conversely Clancy (2001: 156) noted that technology claimed 26% of all new entrants to third level education, 21% went to courses in Commerce, 17% to Arts / Humanities and 12% entered courses in Science. Thus it would appear that students on the TLA were hugely over represented in Arts / Humanities.

**Table 4: Field of Study**

Arts / Social Science	47%
Education	9
Engineering	9
Commerce	8
Science	7
Art & Design / Graphic Design	4
IT	3
Horticulture	2
Medicine / Health Science	2
Other	9%
	(116)

Source: Healy, 1997: 19

These figures are significant in relation to entry to the labour market. Anecdotal evidence suggests that as a result of changes to the labour market and qualification inflation, post graduate qualifications in certain areas (ie, Humanities / Arts) are becoming required more and more. The extra year required to obtain a postgraduate qualification and thus specialise in a particular area has a tremendous bearing on position of entry to the labour force and thus earning potential.

Healy's (1997: 47) study found that 24% of all BTEA graduates were either engaged in further education or waiting to be accepted onto a course for the 1997/98 academic year. 59% of those TLA graduates were studying at Masters level, with a further 18% studying for Higher or Postgraduate Diplomas. This is a significant jump from the figure of 11% who were pursuing postgraduate courses in 1993 (ibid, 18), reflecting the view of postgraduate qualifications expressed above.

In this context the decision to restrict the postgraduate option was profoundly negative. The OECD has said that Ireland has a shortfall in the amount of Masters and PhDs, (See Department of Education and Science, 2003: 10) therefore this decision restricting those who may wish to go on to complete either of these qualifications is somewhat baffling. The decision to cease the eligibility of almost all postgraduate courses, when examined from an economic viewpoint does not make much sense either. The government through the BTEA scheme has made an investment in each person undertaking the scheme. However the economic returns on that investment are not as profound as they could be. The economic return on a person emerging with a degree will not be as high as it will be from a person emerging with a postgraduate qualification. Those emerging with post graduate qualifications will enter the labour market at a higher level, typically earn more money and thus pay more income tax, meaning that the return on the initial investment made by the government is higher. Consequently the argument is made that it makes far more economic sense for the government to fund those in receipt of the BTEA who wish to undertake postgraduate studies for at least one year, thus increasing the economic return that it gets on its initial investment.



**Table 5: Suggested Improvements to the Third Level Allowance Scheme**

Publicise Scheme more widely	23%
Provide extra allowances (books, travel, childcare)	20%
Provide career counselling and backup support	17%
Have less restrictive eligibility criteria	15%
	(75)

Source: Healy, 1997: 57

From table 5 we see that publicising the Scheme more was suggested by 23% and the provision of extra allowances for additional expenses was wished-for by 20% of BTEA participants. With the exception of the increase in the cost of education allowance neither has happened. Furthermore 17% recommended the provision of career counselling and back up support. Again these suggested changes have not been implemented. Finally we see that 15% suggested that eligibility criteria should be changed to allow greater access to the Third Level Allowance Scheme. It was suggested that the required six months signing period should be reduced and the age restriction be lowered. However we know that the opposite actually happened with the qualifying period being extended to 15 months in 2004. This decision resulted in up to 1,200 people who might otherwise have qualified no longer doing so. Accordingly this particular change was very detrimental in enabling access to third level education in Ireland for our groups of interest. Even with the reduction of the qualifying period for the Third Level Option of the BTEA to 9 months in 2005 it must be noted that this period is still three months longer than those availing of the scheme had to wait in 1995. Accordingly it can be argued that the changes introduced by Minister Coughlan in 2004 had profound negative implications for enabling access to third level education for those most in need of it.

A combination of the measures discussed is required in order to effectively increase the impact of the BTEA. Yet the primary argument in the post welfare state era will be around costs. For example the payment of fees for part-time students who are medical card holders, recipients of unemployment payment means tested welfare, or family income supplement, or their dependants, has been estimated at €3.4 to €5 million annually. (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 26). Yet by far the greatest expense on student supports is the provision of free tuition fees. However evidence indicates the free fees initiative has had little or no impact in advancing

equity or widening access to third level for the lowest socio-economic groups. (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 29) Therefore, retention of the current system perpetuates existing inequities. Consequently it is becoming more apparent that those of high enough financial means should pay tuition fees as “it is not equitable or efficient for students from more advantaged social backgrounds to be in receipt of financial aid from the State to attend higher education” (Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education, 2001: 52). To this end for example if the service charge was charged to those with an income over €40,000 and full fees were levied only on those with an income of €100,000 or greater, it would generate an estimated additional €15.5 million to redistribute. (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 29) Ultimately the more those students from higher-earning families contribute in tuition fees, the more additional revenue that can be funnelled to support the third level education of our population of interest.

## **Conclusion**

The paper finds that education has enormous potential to address inequality and disadvantage. However, the evidence presented in relation to participation at third level suggests that this potential is not being maximised. (See Department of Education and Science, 2003: 24) I argue that it is beneficial to society as a whole to specifically fund access to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education as it more likely to result in sustainable employment, and presents the state with a greater return on its initial investment. In spite of this we saw how welfare to education programmes are subservient to welfare to work programmes. When examining the BTEA specifically we saw that for those who got access to third level courses the BTEA aided their social inclusion to a certain extent. However the paper finds that the BTEA falls short in a number of instances and that the key obstacles identified must be addressed through the provision of additional targeted supports which ultimately may have to be financed by the reintroduction of tuition fees for students from higher-earning families. To this end the findings of this paper raise serious questions about the ability of the BTEA (in its current guise) to significantly aid the social inclusion of its target population.

## Notes

1 Almost 67% of entrants to University came from just four socio-economic groups, those being Higher Professional, Lower Professional, Employers and Managers and Farmers. In addition these four groups make up 51% of entrants to Institutes of technology, over 61% of entrants to Colleges of Education, and over 53% of entrants to other colleges. It is most interesting to note that the Employers and Managers made up the highest percentage of new entrants in all four categories of college. In addition it is noteworthy that the Manual skilled group made up 17.7% of new entrants attending Institutes of technology, yet made up fewer than 10% of new entrants to universities. Additionally those from the semi-skilled, unskilled, own account workers, farmers, and agricultural workers socio-economic groups had higher attendance at IT's, Colleges of education or other colleges.

2 In 1993 the qualifying period was reduced to twelve months and the scheme was further extended to include recipients of One-Parent Family Payments, Deserted Wife's Benefit, Widow's and Widower's Contributory Pension. The age requirement was reduced to twenty-one years of age and the qualifying period was reduced to 6 months (156 days) in 1995 in order to make the scheme more accessible.

3 An assurance was given in 1996 that the Allowance payment would be paid for the full duration of the course. Another important improvement was the removal of the requirement to sign-on every month at Local Social Welfare Offices as this gave out the message that the scheme was not merely another form of a social welfare payment (Healy, 1997)

4 In 1998 the Disability Allowance became a qualifying payment for the BTEA scheme with a qualifying age of 18 years. The Cost of Education Allowance, which prior to this had been called a Book Allowance was increased to €254.00 in 1999. The BTEA scheme was extended to those in receipt of Invalidity Pension, Unemployability Supplement and Carer's Allowance in 2000. Furthermore the Spousal Swap was introduced and any periods of time spent on the Back to Work Allowance, Job Initiative and or Job Start were now to count towards the qualifying period. From September 2001 early school leavers (18-20 year olds) qualified for the BTEA if they had been out of formal education for at least 2 years prior to gaining a

place on a recognised third level course. Those with disabilities who had accessed Community Employment Schemes through NRB also became eligible to participate on the BTEA Scheme without having to establish a Social Welfare entitlement. In 2002 the BTEA scheme was extended in order that people in receipt of Deserted Wife's Allowance/Benefit, Widows Contributory/ Non-Contributory Pension and Prisoners Wife's Allowance without child dependents became eligible to participate. The scheme was further extended to include those people who had been in receipt of Disability Benefit for 3 years or more, while the Qualified Adult Dependent of a Social Welfare recipient became eligible in his / her own right.

5. For up to date information on changes to the BTEA scheme see [http://www.oasis.gov.ie/education/adult\\_and\\_vocational\\_education/back\\_to\\_education\\_allowance.html](http://www.oasis.gov.ie/education/adult_and_vocational_education/back_to_education_allowance.html)

6. [http://www.direct.gov.uk/Employment/Jobseekers/LookingForWork/LookingForWorkArticles/fs/en?CONTENT\\_ID=4001318&chk=hfMXUg](http://www.direct.gov.uk/Employment/Jobseekers/LookingForWork/LookingForWorkArticles/fs/en?CONTENT_ID=4001318&chk=hfMXUg)

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### **Author's Details**

Martin J. Power is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Limerick, Ireland. He is in the second year of his Ph.D. research in which he is analysing the effectiveness of welfare to education programmes in Ireland. His areas of interest include inequality and social exclusion, critical theory, and educational and social welfare policy analysis.

### **Correspondence**

Department of Sociology  
Room CM085  
University of Limerick, Ireland.  
martin.j.power@ul.ie