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EMPLOY

# **Equality, in and after, higher education in Ireland: Enhancing non-traditional students' employability through a study of their working and learning lives**

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# Relationship between Employment and Education (Em<->Ed)

- Em <-> Ed key concern internationally (Teichler, 2007). Challenging to analyse due to complexity of fields and rapid changes within them. Review of literature (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007; Brown et al 2011; Harvey, 2010; Lapavitsas, 2013; Livingstone, 2004; Sayer, 2015; Sayer & Walker, 1992; Standing, 2007) indicates five major trends:
  1. **Neoliberal globalisation:** increased mobility of capital, massive increase in global workforce and weaker unions. Widening inequalities.
  2. **Technological change:** IT, communications, transport etc.
  3. **Significant restructuring of labour market and welfare:** growth in managerial, technical and service work: upgrading *and* increased polarisation. Changes in contracts and conditions. Welfare to workfare. Increased levels of precarity.
  4. **Uncertain and weak growth** in leading industrialised countries and large **increase in unemployment** over thirty years.
  5. **Massive expansion of higher education (HE).** Seen as central to growth in Knowledge Based Economy and path *towards* equality.

# Contradictions and tensions

- “Human knowledge is being taught, certified and applied on a scale not witnessed before in human history” (Brown et al 2011, p. 12; see also Burke, 2009)
- **Intense competition:** globally, regionally, between cities, sectors and firms and amongst individuals. Led to “a secret war of positional advantage as people are forced to depend on a job market unable to cope with the rising tide of individual, social and political expectations” (Brown et al, 2011, p 11).
- **‘Digital Taylorism’** requires flexibility and standardisation
- **Underemployment, credentialisation and skill shortages.**
- **Range of demands on employees-** generic and specific skills
- **Depth of demands on employees-** knowledge and dispositions

# A new socio-educational imaginary?

- Startling range of economic, social and cultural objectives. The argument is that in this great ferment of expansion and change there is a clear and, above all, a *progressive* logic at work.
- This socio-educational imaginary is an integral part of wider economic imaginary (Sum & Jessop, 2013).
- “World of smart people doing smart things in smart ways” (Brown et al, 2011, p15). At core of KBE-SI are cluster of ideas about innovation, market competition and the use of technology. Version of human capital theory (Becker, 1993).
- Claims made for HE and access policy can often seem both excessive and ill defined.

# A powerful idea in a small country

- Ireland- open, liberal economy that has experienced very rapid 'late industrialisation' (Whelan & Layte, 2010). Upgrading and polarisation in labour market in past two decades (Breathnach, 2007)
- Social and educational policy very strongly wedded to human capital. Remarkable expansion of HE and radically changed educational profile.
- Twenty years of access- uneven impact (Finnegan et al, forthcoming) Very little known about non-traditional graduates (Finnegan & O'Neill, 2015a; Fleming et al, 2010).
- In crisis employability became new keyword (Finnegan & O'Neill, 2015b).

# Our research

- EMPLOY six country research network looking at non-traditional students transitions from college into the labour market.
- Interview cohorts: Employers, university staff, civil society and at the core 'non-traditional'; students (with longitudinal dimension) graduates
- Approached as adult educators using biographical methods which offer “rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds, self and other” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 1).

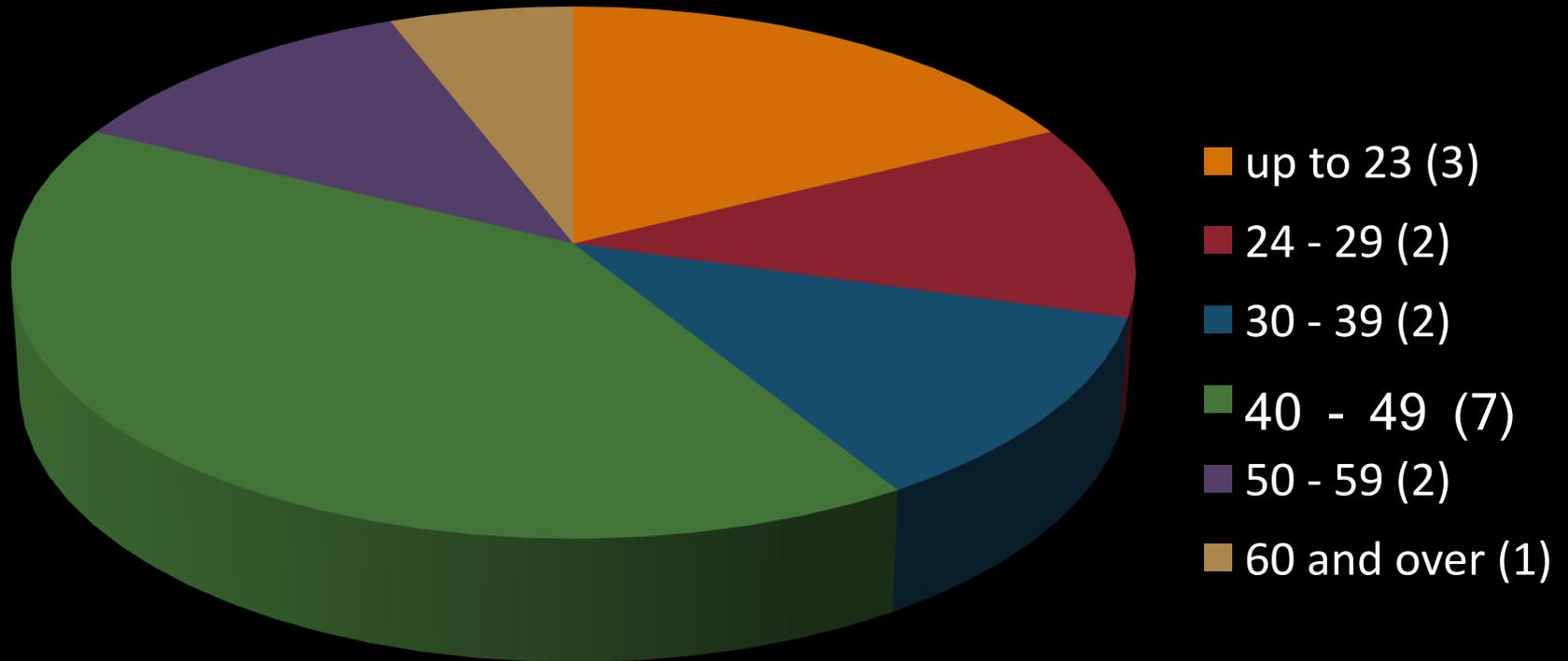
# The ongoing process of research

- Selection and sampling: troubling categories
- Sensitising concepts
- Joint analysis: using theoretical and methodological commonalities and differences as resources
- Importance of reflexivity (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Reay, 1997; West, 1995).

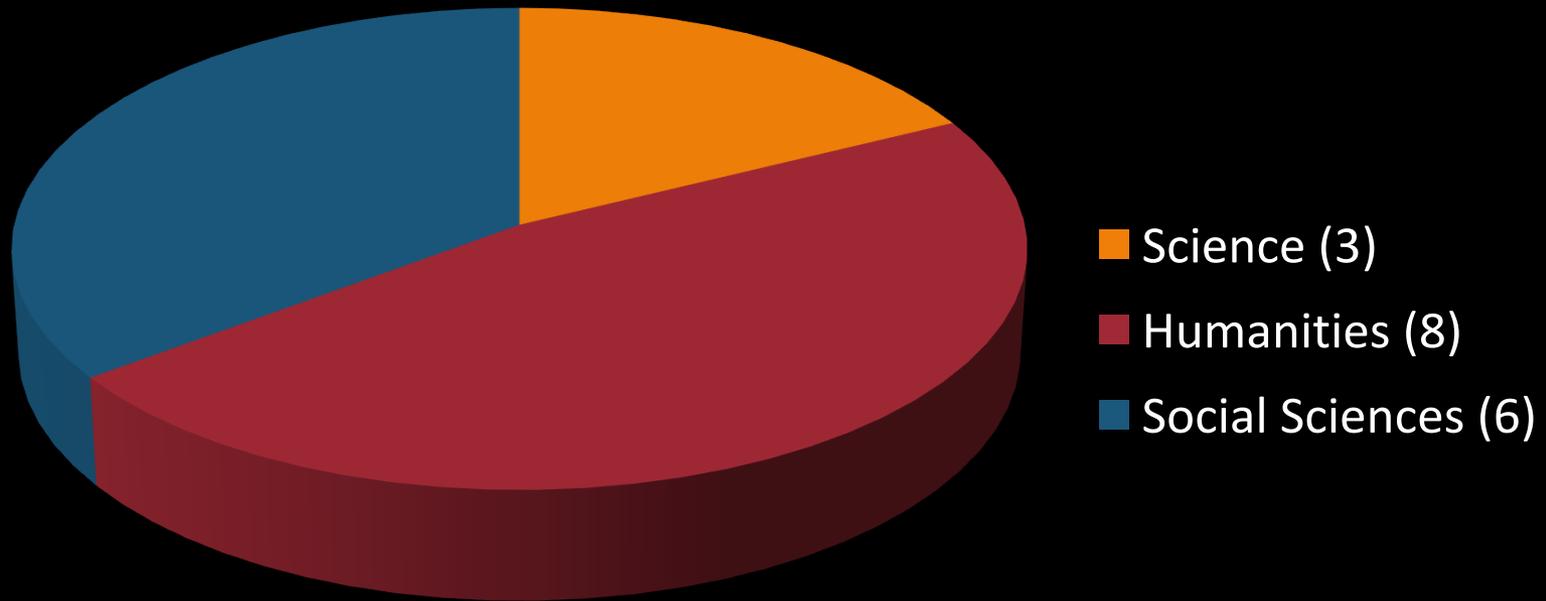
# Participant Selection

- Maynooth university
- Faculty gatekeepers
- Email via gatekeepers to all final year students across three faculties with link to short Google Form
- Form designed for some self-definition of 'non-traditional'

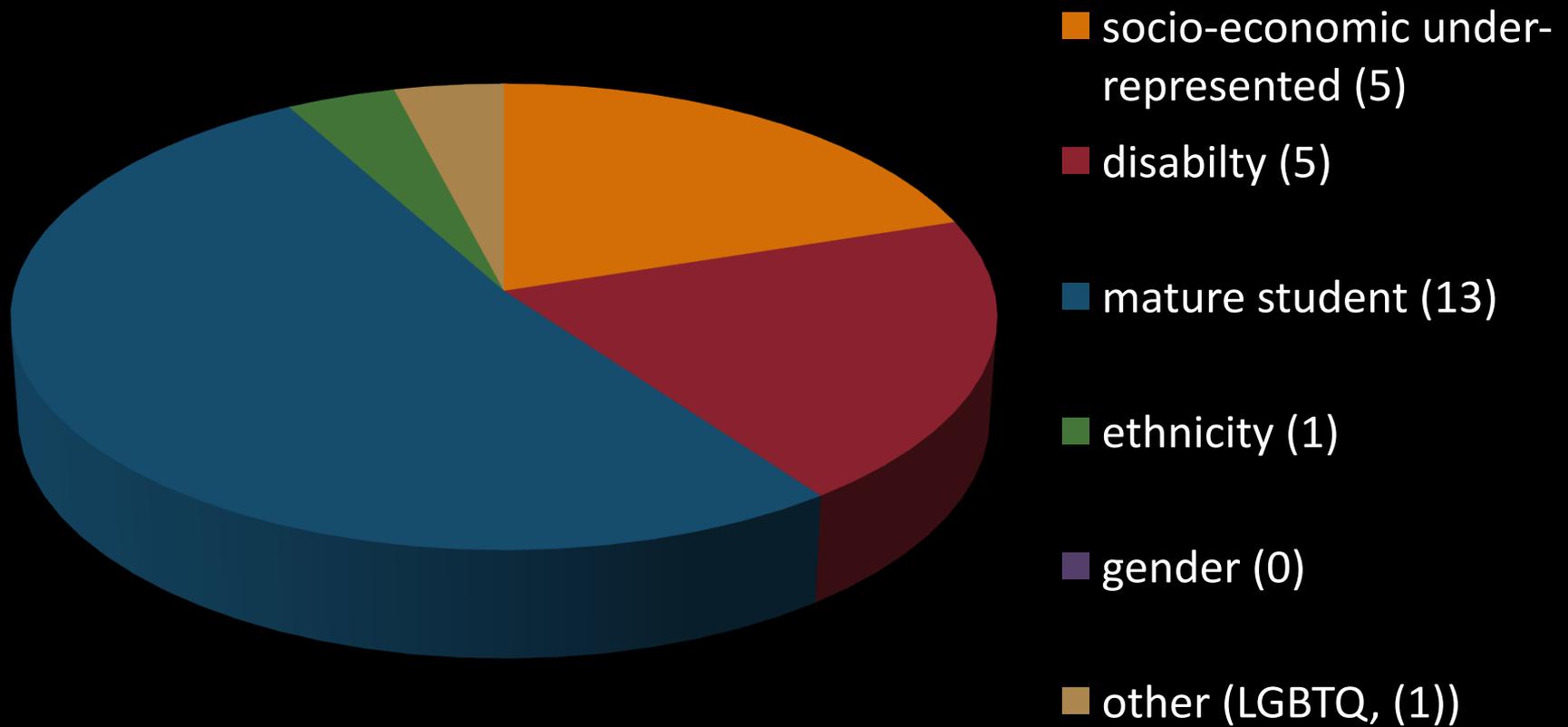
# Participant age profile



# Participants' field of study (faculty)



# Participants' non-traditional status



# Listening to students

- Research with the student cohort still ongoing. 17 of 20 interviews conducted with range of non-traditional students.
- Maria (29) Natural science.
- Eric C (58) Applied social science.
- Rebecca (39) Arts and Humanities
- Chloe (19) Applied social science
- Rachel (38) applied social science,
- Very provisional findings. Small sample, early in the process and no consultation or checking with participants.

# General findings

1. Complex and intersectional nature of inequalities and identity. Social class and gender have loomed large but sexuality and age are important factors as well.
2. Evidence of detraditionalisation in relation to work, education, communities and intimate relationships. The biographical imperative (Alheit & Dausien, 2002).

# Education/Work

Today we want to highlight two findings:

1. Enormous faith in education but some criticism of credentialisation.
2. The search for 'good work' is vital part of these people's stories.

# Value of Higher Education

- **Will to learn:** *“Yeah love it. Yeah I love it. I love learning about people”* (Rachel). *“I am really determined with studying”* (Maria).
- **Agency and self:** realised *“people make decisions for other people instead of thinking about what they want for themselves like”* (Rachel).
- **Naming your world:** *“I would not have been able to decipher what is actually being said [in policy and government]. I would have read it and thought Jesus we’re all going..this is happily ever after here”*. (Eric C)
- *“Why are we getting ignored?”*(Chloe).
- But also criticisms of credentialisation.

# Credentialisation

- Credentials are *“my passport into youth work [.....but] I just feel there should be another avenue for people if they want to go into that kind of work like possibly in house training or some other way [..] Like we’re also excluding a lot of people. I mean not everyone can afford to go to college, not everyone, or university, not everyone will have time to do it so you’ll probably have people who would be absolutely ideal for various positions within the caring professions and they just don’t have the money or the time or the whatever to go and get the academic qualifications and, I don’t know, do they need them. (Eric)*

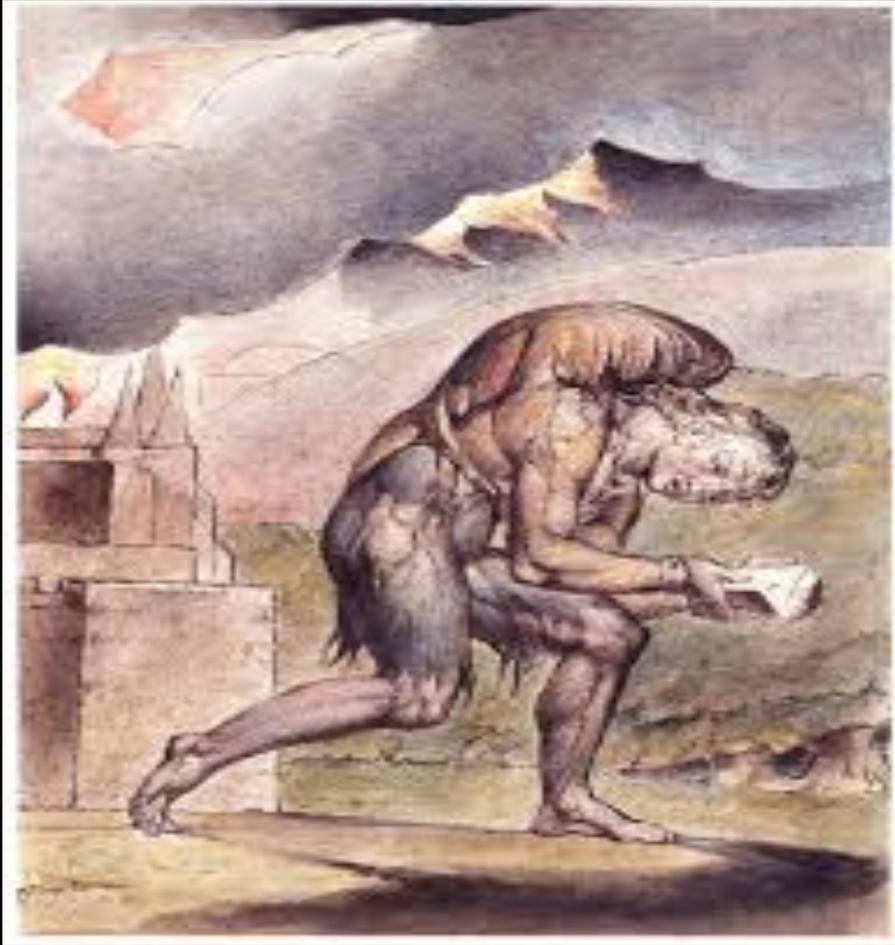
# The search for good work

- Hope for a “*proper job*” (Rachel) is very important part of the stories. Degree as thing which they believe will overcome inequalities and insecurity on a personal level. Response to both the precarity of sudden crisis “It was like a bomb going off” (Rebecca) and extended precarity
- How is good work described? As: non-routine and secure and offers communicative richness, enough money, autonomy respect. Also “*Helping other people understand*” (Chloe). Especially important is making link between paid work and broader concerns and projects.
- Notion of good work partially elaborated out of negative work experience (personal, familial and amongst friends and peers). Four of the people discussed HE as part of a move away from service work.

# Rachel on value of the degree

*Well it just gives you that kind of, if you look at, I suppose because I have spent so many years looking for jobs and proper jobs and they are like 'You have to have this qualification', 'that qualification', 'Oh and if you have a third level degree it's desirable' or like it gives you that little edge over somebody else that doesn't, that like, you know. [...] Or it would be like if I didn't come back and do a degree and I had no Leaving Cert and going up against somebody that has a Leaving Cert and that gives them the edge, do you know that kind of way, because they want, obviously they want people in. [...] Like even, even jobs that I'd say God I'd be able to do that no problem without my degree they still want people with a degree, you know, it's just the way it is, you know. Yeah it's been, now it's tough, don't get me wrong, and especially when you have family life and you have all the things that go on and I was working. I worked since I left school at 16 and I have always worked but the only thing was it was only part time jobs and, you know, I could never get anything that I really liked. Now when I left school at 16 I worked in a clothing factory and I worked there for about 14 years but then the clothing trade kind of diminished out of the country, you know, so everything after that was only little bits of kind of things. I couldn't get a grasp on what I wanted to do, you know. I want to better myself. I didn't do it when I was younger, I want to do it so that I can be able to say to myself well I've got a degree now and now I'm going to get my job and, you know, I'll be confident going into a job because I'll know I'll have that behind me as such type of thing.*

# Search, quest or ordeal?



- Striking just how much time, effort and passion is being expended.
- A case study Maria



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