'After the Celtic Tiger'

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Selective Impacts

Authors; Alice McDonnell[1], Fintan McCabe[2], Michael Kenny[3]

Institution: NUI Maynooth
Email: michael.kenny@nuim.ie

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[1] Parent, community activist, and 2008 mature student graduate of the BSc Rural Development By Distance Learning. Alice lives in Mullingar, Co Westmeath.

[2] Parent, full-time farmer, and 2008 mature student graduate of the BSc Rural Development By Distance Learning.. Fintan lives and farms in Co. Cavan.

[3] Lecturer in community and rural development at the Department of adult and community education, NUI, Maynooth, Co Kildare. Michael Kenny is co-designer and coordinator of the BSc Rural Development By Distance Learning

Abstract:

The four National University of Ireland Universities have offered a diploma in rural development to adults experienced in, or concerned about rural development since 1996. The diploma initiative arose from a government report on the needs for education and training for the development of rural areas. The universities acted upon the Creedon Report (1993) and offered a 60 credit two-year distance learning diploma in 11 separate themed modules. Over 400 people have completed this diploma since 1996 and have gone on to impact on their local communities, develop careers, develop enterprises, and impact on rural development policy.

By 2004 the universities were able to launch a follow on degree. This degree completed by distance learning in two years, (following the diploma), has graduated almost 80 people in the last four years.

This paper draws on research completed by two graduates of this degree. These graduates, with support from a summer research programme within NUI Maynooth, sought to qualitatively and quantitatively enumerate the impact of the degree on the professional and non-professional lives of the people who completed this course. Taking a sample the researchers designed and administered questionnaires and convened focus groups.

The outcomes show a significant impact of this education. The respondents enumerate the strengths and weaknesses of this type of education for mature students and for rural development education. They also report career progression, community impact, and greater involvement in aspects of development among the graduates. The outcome of this research shows that this type of education has significant impact on personal confidence, competence in developing innovative solutions to need, and a greater capacity to participate.

Presently there are significant challenges to development. These challenges are exacerbated in remote rural areas. They are especially challenging to those who do not have the skills and the knowledge to engage with a post-modern economy. The outcome of this research is important as a contribution to our planning for how we can educate into disadvantaged communities rather than taking the most ambitious people out of their communities for education.

Introduction

Arising from an identified gap in the provision of education and training to rural communities the Irish government commissioned a Strategy for Rural Development Training (1993). This report identified a number of education and training needs. The diploma and degree in rural development delivered through distance learning formats were among the most successful outcomes of the Creedon Report, [Strategy for Rural Development Training (1993), Rural Advisory Training Committee (RUTAC)[4]]. The BSc degree in Rural Development is an undergraduate higher distance education course in rural development delivered to mature students with experience of rural involvement over a two-year period for the diploma and a further period of two years for the degree.

The specific purpose of this paper is to report on supervised research undertaken by two of the rural development degree students to map the impact of the course on developments in rural areas and progression possibilities for learners. The extensive research was conducted with a sample of 90 diploma and degree graduates (this sample was drawn from the Maynooth University student data base). This particular paper addresses selective impacts of higher education courses on practitioner progression and contribution to rural development.

Policy Underpinning

The context(s) within which the BSc was proposed, designed and continuously developed is multi-faceted, connecting policies and related measures across diverse fields. At European Union level, the Lisbon Presidency Conclusions (March 2000) adopted a resolution that the European Union would institute reforms to "… become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge –based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion". This resolution explicitly linked education and training systems to the development of human capital in the member states of the European Union so that

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[4] http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/index.jsp?file=pressrel/2000/95-2000.xml

by 2010 'Europe should be the world leader in terms of the quality of its education and training system'. A ten-year work programme agreed addresses three key goals:

1. To improve the quality and effectiveness of EU education and training systems;
2. To ensure that they are accessible to all; and
3. To open up education and training to the wider world.

These aims seek to make a reality of lifelong learning via the improvement of formal and informal education including, for example, integration of ICT, systems flexibility to make learning accessible to all, etc. The e-Europe Action Plan (2002) and the e-Learning Action Plan (adopted in May 2000) constitute other reference points to attaining the broad objectives of the developing European Union's education and training systems by 2010. These in turn are linked to the European Employment Strategy and hence to the National Employment Action Plans.

The White Paper on Rural Development (2000) noted that the development of the human resource base in rural areas is crucial to their sustainable development. The Department of Agriculture and Food notes the recommendations of the Creedon Report and proposed a review of the possibilities for improved coordination and integration between the various education and training providers. The White Paper on Adult Education (2000) identifies adult education as a vital component in a continuum of lifelong learning. It states that "The Adult Education sector has shown itself to be highly creative, talented and relevant to meeting the educational objectives of diverse groups of society (2000, p.24)." The White Paper presents a series of recommendations including the need to abolish fees for part-time students and the need to continue to support institutions developing mature student processes (2000, p.74). It specifically considers the ways in which the adult education and training sector has an important role to play in promoting and sustaining development in rural communities and envisaged its progression via the implementation of the National Spatial Strategy(2002) and the Irish Government's Action Plan New Connections: A strategy to realize the potential of the Information society(2002). This plan specifically considers lifelong learning and how ICTs can enable new ways of learning.

The Rural Context

Two thirds of the Irish population are rural based and over 95% of the land area is either rural or perri-rural. The transformation for both the population and the landscape since Ireland's entry into the European commission (EC) in 1973, but particularly over the last two decades, has been unprecedented. A rural household survey undertaken by course participants in 2005 (Rural Typology: an Analysis of 1257 Rural Households, 2005[5]) presented the extent of the typology shift. Rural Ireland was no longer only a farming community with associated services and enterprises. It was now a serene yet contested living space for a widening variety of inhabitants. The needs of these multilayered disparate communities was placing greater pressures on service providers, and the quality of life demands were leading to challenges to the very nature of rural community.

Economically rural areas were going through tremendous change. We have seen a constant exodus of people from the land. As a subplot we have seen the farming community predict a hopeless future and then recover with the possibilities of rising food prices and bio-energy needs. In the midst of this we have households of ageing and increasingly isolated rural people and service providers arguing that unless people come to a central locations it is unviable to provide services. We have seen Post Office's close and community centres fall into disuse. We have also seen hotels and golf courses usher in 'a countryside' prospective. Improved infrastructure has made more rural areas available to weekend visitors but the increasing broadband and IT deficit compounds the sense that rural is also backward.

Educational strategies and policies have contributed to rural decline. Increasing amalgamation of primary and secondary schools means that students travel longer distances to school. From a young age we educate children 'out of' rural communities. The message is 'there is not much here for you' and increasingly school education has no link with the local community, culture, or environment. Higher education contributes to this process of decline. Our emphasis is on the

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[5] http://www.v-learn.ie/Rural%20Living%20Book%20final.pdf

populated campus. While we have built a very good higher education infrastructure on campus we have done little to education back into the communities.

Theoretical Underpinning

What is the purpose of higher education delivered to adult mature students? Education theorists ranging from Freire to Mezirow challenge us to consider this question. Classical education proponents have successfully developed educational syllabi to fill 'empty vessels' with a greater range of facts. Increasingly sophisticated and pressurised exam systems seek to determine how full the vessel is at that particular time. The principles underpinning adult education question this approach. Adult education, 'Andragogy' (Knowles), looks at knowledge and learning in a very different way from pedagogy.

As we move further into a post-modern, post information age society, agencies responsible for the delivery of higher education will be increasingly challenged by both the learners and the policymakers. Increasingly higher education institutions will be challenged to connect the discovery of knowledge with the application of that knowledge for the betterment of society. Increasingly the literature is urging higher education to come outside the wall's, to get closer to the people, to work with problems and to offer solutions.

Michael Gibbons in the extensive document "Higher Education; Relevance in the 21st Century" notes that in the 21st century the new arrangements of the 'techno-economic paradigm' society will force 'discovery' and 'application' closer together. He particularly mentions the word 'relevance'. "Relevance is now less tied to generating new knowledge … and more dependent on the ability of higher education institutions to link with others in the production of knowledge in the innovation process (p.66.)". If universities do not play this role, Gibbons notes, they (the universities) will be marginalised by other knowledge producers.

While this paper focuses on the selective impacts of a course delivered by distance learning the research did not focus on the effectiveness of the distance learning itself. In keeping with the adult education principals the process of education within this

course used distance learning (Internet and CD ROM) as a tool to support information gathering, discursive exchange, critical reflection, current local research, an immediate solution application. Michael Gibbons notes (p.68.) that the challenge is not " … [R]eally one of delivering teaching on the Internet or via CD ROMs as is often discussed …". Gibbons says the challenge for universities will be "… [T]o take the lead in the training of knowledge workers". These are individuals who are creative and skilled at making use of knowledge that may be produced anywhere in a "… global distributed knowledge production system" and are expert at configuring knowledge to a wide variety of applications (p.69.). A reflection on the outcomes of this research will address if the course was successful in training of rural development knowledgeable workers. Phipps and Merisotis, (1999) in A Review of Contemporary Research on the Effectiveness of Distance Learning in Higher Education (Journal of Distance Education, Spring 1999) suggest that a review of distance education should:

1. Should place emphasis on the evaluation of whole programmes rather than single courses;

2. Place more emphasis on individual differences such as gender, age, educational experience, motivation and learning style;

3. Focus on the interaction of multiple technologies rather than the impact of single technologies.

The research findings: Selective Impacts

The questionnaire sample comprised 90 graduates. Fifty-three completed questionnaires were returned (fifty-nine pre cent response rate), six return-to-sender and thirty-four non-responses. Fifty-four per cent of respondents were female, and forty-six percent male. It was interesting to find that the age profile of the participants on the programme were in the 45-54+ age brackets with only two from the younger age group. This age group represents a generation from the fifties and sixties, who remember the economic recession and the effect of modernisation, particularly those who have a farming background. They also came from the generation whose parents pushed for education for their children This influenced their motivation for doing the course particularly at a time of uncertainty of the rural sector.

Full-time farmers were well represented with ten (10) participants, equal to the employers/managers, and just under this the lower professional group at seven (7). The rest of the socio-economic groups where represented by two to three in each including; manager of a women's community project, mobile-phone technician, CE supervisor, community activist and stay-at-home mother, public servant, and driver/plant operator. Fifty eight pre cent did not personally pay for the course, leaving forty two pre cent paying or part paying for the programme. The LEADER[6] Companies were clearly the main source of funding for graduates on the programme. Many could not consider doing the course otherwise.

Ninety-three per-cent noted that time was the greatest barrier to undertaking course, with fear the second most significant barrier. Funding and broadband access were the next top concerns with course fees, lack of academic attainment, and distance all following. Other barriers mentioned where; might be too old, lack of confidence, ability work, lack of knowledge, computer literacy level, needed change in career and information technology (IT) skills.

Impacts

1. Respondents noted that their understanding rural issues was the most significant learning impact (Understanding Rural Issues, Increasing knowledge Base, Educational Achievement). They noted confidence in making public presentations, communications skills, influencing policy and the ability to debate in public as significant impacts also.

Area Theme	Prior	Completion	Difference
Understanding Rural Issues	105	181	76
Increasing knowledge Base	104	174	70
Educational Achievement	103	171	68
Confidence in Making Public Presentation	106	160	54
Communication Skills	119	170	51
Influencing Policy	81	131	50

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[6] http://www.pobail.ie/en/RuralDevelopment/LEADER/LeaderFAQs/#1

The Ability to debate in Public	99	146	47
Management Skills	120	163	43
Leadership Skills	125	163	38

2. Respondents noted that gaining new employment opportunities and controlling their future were the most significant impacts they wanted from the programme. Ten of the responding graduates indicated they had made high progression in this area, with fifteen responding graduates making medium progression, and twelve responding graduates only raking it as low progression. Three responding graduates made high progression in developing their own business, nine made medium progression, where twelve responding graduates rated low progression. Creating employment for others was a surprising impact result. Six responding graduates placed it as a high progression area, with nine on medium progression.

Reason for undertaking the programme ranked by graduates	How many selected				
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
2. Gain new employment due to new skills obtained	30	5	6	4	3
6. Advanced in your own personal ability to control your future	15	10	9	5	3
1. Career advancement within your present employment	8	3	2	4	2
7. Taking more leadership in your Community	5	6	8	5	9
10. Improved quality of life	2	5	6	13	4
8. Greater Non paid/voluntary sector involvement	2	3	2	1	4
5. Progressed to further education	1	11	3	4	2
9. Progressed IT skills	0	3	1	6	7
3. Started your own business	0	1	1	1	1
4. Created new employment for others	0	0	2	1	5

3. Thirteen responding graduates noted that the opportunity to progress into further education as a significant impact, fourteen noted that there was medium progression into further education. The first set of degree graduates (2006) have progressed into further education; two graduated with Higher Diploma (HDip) in

Adult & Community Education, and one is in her second year of a masters. Fifty per-cent of the 2008 graduating degree cohorts (included in the sample) are progressing to further education; five graduates are the HDip in Adult & Community Education, one is registered form a Masters in DCU.

4. Twenty five responding graduates indicated high progression in their personal ability to control their future. Twenty one responding graduates noted they made medium progression in this area. The course impacted on their sense of self empowerment.

5. Twenty responding graduates noted that they experienced an improved quality life arising from the course, with sixteen responding graduates a medium improvement in their lives, with six responding graduates showing low progression in their lives.

6. As an indication of overall satisfaction with progression forty nine responding graduates indicated overall satisfaction with their progression (n = 53), while four indicated dissatisfaction. The reasons given for dissatisfaction was; the course did not improve IT skills, and disappointment that the person did not get employment in the sector.

Conclusion

The research indicated that this course, focused on adults with experience but without qualification, achieved significant impacts in a short period of time arising from their involvement. From this research personal and collective[7] impacts are evident. The multiplier effect of the impacts when an adult achieves a qualification leading to a personal or professional progression is not addressed in this research. However as rural society progresses to a new paradigm and the demands from higher education change, research will seek to determine quantitative and qualitative impacts on the sector.

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[7] As an indicator of the collective impact the graduates established the RSA (the Rural Science Association) as a professional body for graduates and as a means of networking.

References

RUTAC, (http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/D/0463/D.0463.199603260279.html) Report of the Review Group, 1993. Strategy for Rural Development Training. Dublin: Teasgasc

Gibbons, Michael, 1998, Higher Education; Relevance In The 21st Century. Paper prepared for the UNESCO world conference on higher education, Paris, France, October 1998.

Phipps Ronald and Jamie Merisotis, 1999. What's the Difference: A Review of Contemporary Research on the Effectiveness of Distance Learning in Higher Education. Journal of Distance Education, Spring 1999, Vol. 14, No. 1, 102-114

RD White Paper

AD Ed White paper

Rural Typology: an Analysis of 1257 Rural Households, 2005

Appendix 1

The Diploma in Rural Development by Distance Learning and BSc Degree in Rural Development by Distance Learning (http://www.v-learn.ie/) were bold initiatives by the four NUI constituent universities to bring 'new learning' in a 'new way' to rural areas for their development. The diploma and degree were among the most successful outcomes of the Creedon Report, [Strategy for Rural Development Training (1993), Rural Advisory Training Committee (RUTAC, 2000) http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/index.jsp?file=pressrel/2000/95-2000.xml]. Over 500 diploma graduates nationally are now influencing rural development, and 150 degree graduates have qualified.

The BSc degree in Rural Development builds on an undergraduate distance education Diploma in Rural Development (See Level 1) developed in 1996 and delivered over a two-year period. The BSc degree (see Levels 2 & 3) is offered over a further period of two years.

Some rural development organisations (such as LEADER groups), the Department of Agriculture and Food (the responsibility is now moved to the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs), and the four National University of Ireland (NUI) constituent universities have shown great vision through this technologically-cutting-edge, yet, androgogically accessible learning format.

Structure & Content of the BSc Programme

	LEVEL 1
Module 01	RD101 Introduction to Rural Development
Module 02	RD102 Socio-economic Aspects of Rural Development
Module 03	RD103 Socio-economic Community/Resource Audits
Module 04	RD104 Community and Rural Development through Groups
Module 05	RD105 Choosing and Setting up a Rural Development Organisation
Module 06	RD106 Marketing for Rural Enterprise
Module 07	RD107 Business Planning and Stimulating Rural Enterprise
Module 08	RD108 Interpersonal Communications, Leadership and Group Work Skills
Module 09	RD109 Designing and Managing an Area Development Plan
Module 10	RD110 Inter-organisational Partnerships and the Role of Support Agencies
Module 11	RD111 Social Exclusion and Gender Equality Issues in Rural Development
Module 12	RD150 Integrated Field Work Project
	LEVEL 2

Module 13	RD201 Rural Development SME Development
Module 14	RD202 Rural Development Co-operative Theory & Practice
Module 15	RD203 Rural Development Project Planning & Development
Module 16	RD204 Rural Development Information Technology
Module 17	RD205 Rural Development Communications in Development
Module 18	RD206 Rural Development Public & Social Policy Processes
Module 19	RD207 Rural Development Community Education & Development
Module 20	RD208 Rural Development Rural Labour Markets
Module 21	RD209 Rural Development Social & Economic Aspects of Policy & Planning
Module 22	RD210 Rural Development Socio-economic Research Level 2
	LEVEL 3
Module 23	RD301 Financial Analysis & Planning
Module 24	RD302 Food Business
Module 25	RD303 Socio Economic Research
Module 26	RD304 Co-operative & Rural Social Enterprise Management
Module 27	RD305 Health & Social Service Policy
Module 28	RD306 Rural Tourism
Module 29	RD307 Research Project/Thesis