

Precarious professionalism: graduate outcomes and experiences from an Initial Teacher (Further) Education programme in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This article presents and discusses the findings of a small-scale research project into the occupational outcomes of graduates of an Initial Teacher (Further) Education (ITE) programme at Maynooth University in Ireland. The findings from this mixed-method research indicate that many graduates experience high levels of occupational precarity and a sense of professional inequity when compared with their compulsory education teacher-peers as they attempt to make the transition into the heterogeneous field of adult and Further Education in Ireland.

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Introduction and scope of research

This paper outlines research conducted in 2017/18 by some staff within the Department of Adult and Community Education (DACE) at Maynooth University in the Republic of Ireland. The research probed the occupational experiences and career destinations of graduates from the department's Initial Teacher (Further) Education programme: the Higher Diploma in Further Education (HDFE). The HDFE enables graduates to register with the teaching profession's statutory body, *The Teaching Council of Ireland*, to work in any environment where Further Education awards are offered. These include, but are not limited to, Further Education Colleges, Community Education settings, Youthreach Centres,¹ prison education, charity, and private providers.

The main purpose of the study was to see how graduates of the HDFE are faring in their attempts to develop a sustainable career as adult educators. It was also hoped that the research would not only take stock of the graduate outcomes and experiences but, get a sense of the quality of work that graduates were moving into. The perceived need for this study emanated from many conversations amongst students, graduates, colleagues, and with a wider practice and scholarship community that suggested the jobs-market was increasingly precarious. The research was also precipitated by our previous inquiries into practitioner experiences in community and adult education (Fitzsimons 2017; O'Neill 2015) and research into experiences of graduate employment for non-traditional students more generally (Finnegan and O'Neill 2016; Finnegan et al. 2019).

Further Education or 'FE' hasn't the historic purchase and clarity in Ireland that it has in the UK and the term is often used, clumsily, to refer to the broad and diverse range of post-compulsory educational

spaces other than HE. In fact, FE is talked, and written, about for what it is not, rather than for what it is. This negatively defined definition is problematic on a number of levels but not least for obscuring the visibility of the diverse significance, presence and values of vocational, community and adult education.

Following this contextualising introduction, this article outlines the development and current contexts of professionalism and professional training for educators registered, via route 3 FE,² with the *Teaching Council* of Ireland. We then outline the methodology underpinning this mixed-method research before synthesising findings into a number of emerging themes. Finally, we will discuss the significance for students, graduates and for various other stakeholders.

A contested professional space: naming our position as adult educators

In recent decades, there has been much ambiguity in the naming of spaces where adult education is practised in Ireland (Murray 2015). Indeed, the semantic tensions that have emerged likely reflects, and is part of, a deeper, and ongoing, ideological and political struggle to name and claim the legitimate purpose and character of adult learning.

For us, adult education isn't simply 'teaching adults' but is an approach to education that is dialogic, reflexive and problem-posing rather than passive, instructional and solution-providing. Whilst most adult educators endeavour to work in this way, we also acknowledge philosophical differences such as those that exist between a humanistic pedagogy, that largely sees a person within the boundaries of their individual wellbeing (Rogers 1989) and a critical pedagogy that more deliberately situates 'the self' within the structures of inequality (Freire 1972). Both philosophical orientations seek to understand ways in which each of us are shaped by powerful experiences both personal and social. The philosophy that we lean on interprets knowledge as co-created through our engagement with others, and not fixed in the minds of particular experts or in the pages of certain texts (Fitzsimons 2019;Mc Cormack et al. forthcoming). We also think education is a fundamental human right and that collaborative, critical adult learning has the power to transform individuals and change society for the better. These values inform all our adult education work, including our involvement with the programme under investigation here.

In our work with students, we tend to talk and write, about ourselves, and about the students' emerging pedagogic selves as 'adult educators'. We do this with a sense of a philosophical and methodological orientation, rather than a way of identifying particular sectoral spaces where we work. So, although Further Education is one of many contexts where adult educators might work, other settings include community education, workplaces, social movements, Higher Education Institutions, youth projects, prisons, some schools, education provision for adults with intellectual disabilities, and, in fact, anywhere that embodies this philosophical approach. This approach is often the exception to the norm, particularly within traditional education spaces such as schools and colleges.

An historical perspective on the professional recognition for adult educators

The entire landscape of adult education in Ireland – its location, structures, policies and discourse – have gone through an extended and deep process of change over the past 15 years or so. A cursory glance may suggest that the training and professionalisation of adult educators emerged out of this recent period of change. However, this assumption can be challenged by adopting a more historical perspective on the development of adult education and an emphasis on the heterogeneous spaces within which practice is, and has been, located. As Murtagh (2015a) points out in his study of the development of formal, and in particular, vocational education for adults, the first government initiative to support and regulate provision for adults can be traced back to 1900 with the establishment of the Department of Agriculture,

Trade and Industry (DATI). As vocational education grew in a fragmented fashion with the emergence of the new post-independence, Irish state, so too did the training for those responsible for teaching adults. The uneven state response and relationship to vocational, and adult education in general, meant that an ambiguity persisted for many years towards teacher education and tutor training for those working with adult learning groups. As Murtagh asserts:

The net effect of the low status of FET [Further Education and Training] was that it was invisible to the rest of the Irish education system. [...] The low status was further demonstrated by the fact that most of the FET staff employed in 1997 were appointed on a part-time basis (Murtagh 2015b, 22).

Murtagh argues that a lack of knowledge or, maybe the lack of a sustained interest and commitment, on behalf of the state meant that much vocational education in Ireland was left with 'a flawed institutional architecture' (20).

In the 1980s and 1990s in particular, much adult education practice equally emerged from the bottom-up and in response to the needs of communities, industry, and social justice movements. As a result, many early practitioners came from these population groups with community educators, in particular, often emerging from disadvantaged communities where adult education was practised (Fitzsimons 2017, 88). In relation to vocational education, some practitioners emerged from the professions themselves; be these hairdressing, plumbing, or child-care. There was, and remains, a significant cohort of educators in colleges of Further Education who trained as secondary school teachers. As a result of these bottom-up and horizontal trajectories, many educators, although skilled practitioners, lacked specific 'teacher-education' for adults.

Yet, and in no small part influenced by pressure from practitioners, we can see the very slow emergence of state interest in supporting adult education. This began with the state commissioned *Murphy Report* (Committee on Adult Education 1973) and the subsequent *Kenny Report* (Commission on Adult Education 1984), each of which acknowledged the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in supporting sectoral development through teacher/tutor training and development. This inclusion likely affected how adult educators have, for many years, sought professional recognition for their work. This slow move started to crystallise in the form of policy influence towards the end of the last century with the *Green Paper: Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning* (Department of Education and Science 1998). This policy document, written in consultation with lead adult educators, called for an inter-agency group to make recommendations on how best to recognise adult education qualifications. It proposed a practitioner forum for adult and community educators as well as the development of in-service training and career progression (Government of Ireland 1998, 112–113). Two years later, the *White Paper Learning for Life*, (Department of Education and Science 2000) supported these recommendations calling on the inter-agency working group 'to progress the issue of formal recognition of qualifications in adult education' by representing a range of agencies in the field, identifying practitioner needs, and exploring flexible approaches to third-level adult education qualifications (Department of Education and Science 2000, 151). Both Green and White papers argued that any process of professionalisation should recognise the diversity of adult educator backgrounds and the expertise held by those with no previous qualifications. What's more, both of these key policy documents reflected a rising awareness of the impact of adult education amidst a wider European engagement with lifelong learning (Fitzsimons 2017, 141).

However, this heightened interest in adult education coincided with a growing state and popular discourse which stressed the human capital functions of education and, in particular an accelerating tendency to align education with employability (Finnegan and O'Neill 2016; Grummell 2014; Hurley

2015). This employability discourse was the ideological impetus for a top-down re-organisation of the public provision of vocational education including apprenticeships, post-compulsory education outside of Higher Education (HE) and community education. From a policy perspective, this re-structuring was rather awkwardly re-imagined and re-named as the *Further Education and Training* (FET) sector. It may be no wonder then that, out of this contested space, what emerge is ‘a contested profession’ for adult, community, and Further Education practitioners (Grummell and Murray 2015). As the policy language of FET sought to replace expressions like ‘adult education’ and ‘community education’, the democratising, critical, emancipatory principles of adult education were held firm within the academy, and in the hearts, minds and actions of many adult educators across the country.

Within this increasingly dominant context of ‘work-readiness’, the more active citizenship recommendations that had been outlined in the Green (1998) and White (2000) papers were simply not advanced. Although an inter-agency group did meet, this was suspended soon after its inception and there were no real outcomes from the process (Fitzsimons 2017, 204). Instead movement in the direction of adult educator professionalism came in the early 2010s and largely outside of adult education. Most significantly, *The Teaching Council of Ireland*, which had been established in 2006 to articulate, safeguard, legitimise, and ultimately, gatekeep teacher education programmes and standards, extended its original remit to regulate schools-based Initial Teacher Education (ITE) to include FET. This shifted the initial primary and secondary school gaze of *the Council* to include the validation of Further Education ITE and, by extension adult educators; something not really on their radar in its early years. This increased focus on accountability and quality mechanisms asserted, not unproblematically, connections between high-quality education and professionalism. In Ireland, the UK and in a broader European context, this was one of many policy changes that ensured intense focus on the professionalisation, and the quality of, teacher education outside of school and university settings (Murphy 2015; Research voor Beleid [Alpine] 2008).

At the same time, much sectoral change was happening in response to local, national and international forces. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) emerged as the national accreditation body that, for the first time, merged FE and HE awards under one governing authority.³ This coincided with the decline of the state vocational training service called FÁS amidst a loss of public confidence in its governance and organisational culture. From the ashes of FÁS, a new government body called SOLAS emerged with responsibility for funding and organising FET nationally. As part of this restructuring process there was a rationalisation of the 33 county-based Vocational Education Communities (VECs) into 16 larger more regionally based Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The ETBs which are responsible for the provision of secondary and post-compulsory education remain one of the main employers for adult education practitioners. Their trans-sector role and organisational structure has meant that there has always been some, mainly one-way, flux of teaching staff from secondary to Further Education. This presence of secondary-trained teachers into spaces more traditionally aligned with adult education philosophies and methodologies remains problematic for many adult educators.

Maynooth University's Higher Diploma in Further Education

The Department of Adult and Community Education (DACE) at Maynooth University was established in 1975 and remains the only dedicated academic adult education university department in Ireland. Throughout its over 40-year history, it has developed a community, national and international reputation for its critical and radical philosophy, research and practice. Its programmes are grounded in transformative and critical educational philosophies and methods which place a high value on experience, critical reflection, dialogue, group work and the social-change imperative of education.

It was, then, within the context of this departmental practice and philosophy and the emergent, albeit 'contested', professionalism outlined thus far, that DACE became one of eight HEIs across Ireland to seek recognition from *The Teaching Council* for an existing post-graduate Higher Diploma in Adult and Community Education.

Following some negotiations, *Teaching Council* approval was granted and, in 2012, a revised Higher Diploma in Further Education (HDFE) was launched. The academic modules offered and, still covered on the programme in Maynooth, include history and policy of adult education; adult education methodologies/adult learning in groups; sociology of adult education; philosophy of adult education; curriculum and assessment theory and design; reflective practice; and counselling. At the heart of this re-designed programme is a year-long placement learning experience with a minimum of 100 teaching hours in settings where Further Education awards are delivered. As well as targeting existing practitioners, the programme, in its re-configured ITE-inception in 2012, now also targeted new entrants to the field. For the first time, in theory at least, DACE could support professional entry routes into careers for those wishing to work with adult learning groups.

Methodology

The HDFE, at the time of this research, was in its sixth year with five sets of graduates. A total of 178 past-students were eligible to participate in the study (Table 1).

In order to get a broad sense of occupational status and experiences and to allow us to delve deeper into some of the experiences of graduates, a sequential mixed-method approach was used. This approach allows philosophical, theoretical and socio-political issues to be embraced in a way that draws from qualitative and quantitative methods as appropriate to the way in which the study unfolds (Tashakkori and Teddie 2010). The research was grounded in the ethics of a humanist and critical adult education practice as well as guided by the ethical principles of Maynooth University and that of the British Education Research Association (BERA, 2011). As stated at the outset, this research focused exclusively on HDFE graduates – there was no research engagement with other stakeholders (i.e. DACE programme staff; HEI partners; The Teaching Council; ETBs; or trade unions). A larger research project would be well advised to consider broadening the participant base to include these cohorts.

Phase one was an online, anonymous survey that combined closed and open questions relating to graduates' status, experiences and thoughts about the HDFE programme. Phase two invited all graduates to participate in a one off focus-group to discuss the initial survey findings and explore, in more depth, graduate experiences.

The survey was circulated via email to all graduates (n178) and was open for three months (Sept–Dec 2017). One hundred and ten graduates, or 62%, of the HDFE graduate population participated. Recruitment for the focus-group was less successful and just five graduates participated in an open-ended group conversation in December 2017. However, the smallness of the group allowed participants to engage deeply and fully with a variety of dimensions of their graduate experiences.

Survey findings

The online survey, which we will consider first, provided some useful data on occupational outcomes and experiences of 110 graduates.

Graduate occupational status

Although 48% of the respondents are working in an FE setting, only 10% (n11) of these are in full-time

permanent employment within the sector (Table 2). It may even be possible that some of these respondents were in these jobs before undertaking the HDFE; a question that was, unfortunately, absent in the original design of the survey. The same number again (10%) are working full-time under temporary contracts in the sector and an even higher proportion (25%), hold part-time, temporary contracts in FE. Given there were 113 responses, some respondents identify with more than one occupational setting.

What is striking is the relatively high proportion of graduates who are 'working in another job not related to FE' (25%) and the significant proportion (12%) out of work but actively looking (n14).

The survey also provided data on various dimensions of part-time work for graduates in FE settings. Twelve respondents are working between 10 and 20 hours a week, while just as many again (n12) are getting less than 10 hours a week teaching. A follow-on question determined that over 75% of those working part-time are not doing so by choice.

Type of employer organisation

When the survey inquired into the type of educational organisations graduates are working within, the following destinations are revealed (listed in descending order):

What is most striking, again, about Table 3 is that, at 28% (n32), by far the highest proportion of graduates are 'not currently working in an education related role'. This represents almost a third of the graduates who completed the survey and a high proportion of the overall graduate population.

Table 1. Graduate numbers from the HDFE to 2016/17. (Table view)

Academic Year	Students graduating from HDFE
2012/13	18
2013/14	28
2014/15	41
2015/16	46
2016/17	45
Total	178

Table 2. Graduate occupational status. (Table view)

Graduate occupational status	%	n
Full-time permanent in FE setting	10%	11
Part-time permanent in FE setting	3%	3
Full-time temporary in FE setting	10%	11
Part-time temporary in FE setting	25%	28
Working in another education setting	13%	15
Working in another job not related to education	25%	28
Out of work and looking for work	12%	14
Full time student	0.8%	1
Unable to work due to illness	0.8%	1
Other	0.8%	1
TOTAL RESPONSES		113

Table 3. Type of employer organisations where graduates are working. (Table view)

Type of employer organisation	%	n
Not working in education	28%	32
ETB setting (not FE colleges)	17%	18
FE college	10%	11
Other educational (school, university, Institute of Technology)	10%	11
Youthreach	9%	10
Private education institution/company	8%	9
Independent community organisation	7%	8
National Learning Network, ⁴ disability organisation, other	6%	7
Employment services	3%	3
TOTAL RESPONSES		109

Despite the strong emphasis on FE on the programme, most graduates working in the sector are not working in an FE college as such, but are working within ETBs on government-funded 'Vocational Training Opportunity Schemes' (VTOS), community education or with a Youthreach Centre. In fact, there are nearly as many (n11) graduates working in schools and HEIs as there are in an FE college (n12).

Further study – academic and continuous professional development

When we asked about the extent to which HDFE graduates have gone on to further study, we learned that this applied to around a third. A significant proportion of these (12% or n14) completed studies in a discipline unrelated to education. Although there is noteworthy Continuous Professional Development (CPD) activity in evidence for over a third of the graduates, over 65% (n71) are prevented from undertaking CPD due to financial or access issues.

Perception of career impact of HDFE

Two questions (Table 4) captured participants' perception around career paths and their capacity to earn a reasonable wage. With each question, it should be remembered, respondents are relatively newly qualified and, if working at all, in the early stages of their careers. As such, it is understandable that it may be too early for some to make mid- to long-term career judgements with any sense of conviction and it is not unreasonable for graduates to be reticent in providing any definitive response to these questions.

Table 4. Perception of career impact of the HDFE. (Table view)

The HDFE has put me on my desired career path and I am now working in a job that I enjoy,				
Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
25%	26%	23%	16%	9%
The HDFE programme has enabled me to earn a reasonable wage,				
Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
13%	25%	26%	23%	13%

Reflections on progression from HDFE

Seventy-one of the 110 respondents took up an invitation to answer a final question that allowed them to comment openly on anything else they would like to say about progression from the HDFE. Some comments were quite extensive. Thematic clusters have been generated to present these: precariousness and conditions of work as barrier; ETB recruitment practices; networking; the standing of HDFE in sector;

the importance of FE-friendly subjects; transferable skills enabling progression to other fields of work.

Precarity, limited opportunities and conditions of work as barrier

One of the strongest themes to emerge from this final open-ended question was the extent to which HDFE graduates are experiencing occupational precarity and, what many regard as, poor pay, in their working lives. One graduate captures this when they write:

I found the HDFE qualification and training to be very beneficial. However, it does get somewhat disheartening when many of the contracts of employment in this sector are precarious. It is also somewhat annoying that a person with a 'Train the Trainer Course' can still command a position within many areas of Further Education over that of someone with an Honours Degree and a Teaching H-Dip (respondent 2).

Others echo similar frustrations. One writes 'It's just so hard to get permanent work, therefore stability is a struggle' (respondent 5), whilst another comments 'FE jobs are few, currently working less than 5 hours per week as a learning support teacher. I have no contract & I can be called in last minute. No job security' (respondent 11). Some respondents linked contractual precarity with low rates of pay and poor contractual conditions such as:

Employers want you to work as a tutor freelance and pay you for tutoring only – no preparation time/money, no payment for corrections. The hourly rate is not covering all this. There is no job security that is why I had to leave the FE sector (respondent 18).

Another writes 'a forty-hour week on just above minimum wage is not a fair condition of work and is an erosion of both student care and the rights of teachers' (respondent 3). The two contributions below again illuminate the challenges these graduates face amidst a socio-economic culture of precarity.

Lower pay scales means I am earning less than in my previous non-education post. Difficulty with temporary contracts and the [institution] I work for insisting on re-interviewing means I have interviewed 8 times in just over 2 years, often with the same interview panel. The confidence I gained during the HDFE is being eroded by this process and making me re-consider my decision to move to education (respondent 21).

The HDFE is a very good course. However the FE sector is not up to date with qualifications. There are no full time jobs. I would feel lucky now to be offered a few hours work which is a shock to me after the cost and effort of the HDFE. [...]. In my opinion the only jobs open to us are on an hourly basis with absolutely no security. I hold out no hope that I will find the rewarding career that I was so excited about on commencement of the HDFE (respondent 43).

Finally, the emotional dimensions of precarity emerge when this graduate writes:

I am also very disappointed with the lack of job opportunities. More than disappointed, I am distressed. It will be a struggle for me to pay my rent in the coming months. I feel the time and money spent on the HDFE was wasted. The HDFE has not enhanced my life in any way. In fact my already precarious existence has become even more precarious. I do not know where to go from here, but I certainly won't be taking any more courses in Maynooth (respondent 28).

Sector recruitment practices

Another theme related to the graduates' sense of frustration in relation to recruiting practices, especially within ETBs. Some respondents drew attention to the need for more support and information on the application and recruitment process on the HDFE programme.

I would like to see more transparency by ETBs, particularly in relation to interviewing candidates for posts

that may or may not exist. I am happy to interview for a post if there is a real and competitive chance of employment, but more and more I am seeing it being used to satisfy a legal requirement while behind the scenes they redeploy existing staff or do whatever else they want (respondent 2).

Networking

The importance of networks, or social capital, also emerged as a significant theme with many commenting on the importance of knowing people already working in the field. One graduate is not an isolated voice when they express concerns of ‘favouritism in the sector’ claiming ‘there are tutors who deserve to be given the opportunity to work in this sector who are overlooked in favour of friends’ (respondent 49). Two further examples under this theme are shared below:

The HDFE prepared me to facilitate learners to the best of my ability with confidence in my knowledge and methodology. However, many of my peers can’t find work and I know that most of what I’m doing work wise came about because I have worked in the centre as a volunteer. It seems to be difficult, regardless of qualifications, if you do not have contacts (respondent 9).

I find it disappointing that there are platforms in place for other teaching graduates but nothing in place for graduates of HDFE. (respondent 14).

Standing of HDFE in sector

There was some sense that the HDFE standing within the sector has less ‘employability’ value than secondary teacher training qualifications, and even in some instances, the lower, Level 7 certificate course, Train the Trainer.⁵

I don’t think the HDFE holds any standing for helping me get a job. I have found people looking for Train the Trainer even more so, and that breaks my heart. With those who have done it, laughing at what I put myself through. Why are people with secondary school qualifications getting in before us? This is what those involved in the ETBs are telling us, “they take on secondary school teachers quicker”. That makes my blood boil. More regulation is needed. A lot of the ETBs want 4 years teaching experience! how do I get it? (respondent 4)

The HDFE does not possess the standing that it needs to with HR divisions and AEOs [adult education officers] of the ETBs. Many regard it as the ‘poor relation’ and look on it less favourably as we are not able to deliver educational material in mainstream second level schools (respondent 7).

Again these are not isolated voices. Another graduate shares how they ‘would love to have gained work in FE’ and was even successfully interviewed and put on tutor panels. However, they were ‘never called again [continuing] I’m not sure if it’s recognised here in the Midlands or even taken into consideration by the ETB’ (respondent 45).

Transferable skills enabling progression to other fields of work

A number of respondents commended the HDFE programme for enabling them to develop a range of high-level skills which they have used in a range of occupational contexts. As one person puts it ‘The HDFE was pivotal to changing my employability in education’ (respondent 24). Other positive comments include:

At times I did not see how the HDFE would set me up for work as it seems so far from my experience and perceived capabilities. It turned out that the HDFE set me up and enabled me to embark on a road I never could have envisaged. I loved the HDFE and how it challenged yet guided my growth as a professional

(respondent 14).

The HDFE has given me a lot of tools in terms of engaging learners. Although I work in Higher Education I am constantly using some of the transferable tools for engaging and hearing the learner voice (respondent 46).

From a personal and professional perspective, I would not be where I am today without the guidance from the HDFE, and I am eternally grateful that I engaged with the course (respondent 54).

Focus group

Five graduates attended the session, who we will name here as Liz, Orla, Emma, Hannah and Tom. Two had graduated from the HDFE in 2016 and the other three in 2017. Three live and work in the greater Dublin area, while two live and work in the midlands. After introductions and discussions about the ethical dimensions of the research, the group were presented with some of the themed survey findings as a way of opening up and extending a deeper conversation. A number of issues emerged in the focus group discussion which we have named as: status of the HDFE; qualified/unqualified status and rates of pay; subject specialism in FE; inequality of access to post-qualification induction and CPD; the need to focus on sector-specific job-seeking skills; and more work on practical curriculum/programme design skills.

Status of HDFE

The status of the initial teacher training programme under investigation emerged again as a clear theme. Graduates expressed disillusionment that there were inconsistencies across employers in terms of the status given to the programme. Orla captures this frustration in the comment below and extends her frustration to disparity when compared to primary and secondary school teaching:

I don't think it [the HDFE] is valued as it should be considering that we've put the time and effort into it ... and the crossover with the sectors, we can't teach post-primary, and they [post-primary] can teach in FE ... their skills are more transferable and you can see why – if that centre closes down, you know, they can put them in a school they can switch them around ... you can see in my centre, and I know it's a legacy issue, most of them are post-primary. (Orla)

Some focus group participants had worked within the school system but were frustrated at how they were categorised as 'unqualified' whilst a person registered as a secondary school teacher would be considered qualified to work in FET.

This reality is not unconnected to a significant part of the group discussion that not only focused on pay and conditions across education providers but illuminated the absence of uniform standards across employers. This included different rates of pay for the same job, different payment cycles, and a situation where employers are openly expressing that they can only employ them for a minimum period so as not to be bound by employee rights legislation in terms of contracts of indefinite duration⁶ (CIDs). Hannah explains her situation as follows:

My contract is just the part-time, tutor panel – so you're entitled to nothing. If you get hours, you get hours, but you're not entitled to anything – it's a zero-hour contract basically ... and then whoever has CID hours will be contacted first – so you could be brilliant at your job, but if someone has CID hours, they'll have to get that first – then it's your turn, if there's anything left ... crumbs.

Equally, Liz shares 'It was all a bit all over the place. I didn't know what was going on', which sums

up the experience for all focus-group participants. She continues:

I'm finding that too with pay. It's a minefield. You're not told until you start. I didn't know whether I was qualified or unqualified. I just arrived down there and met the caretaker and off with you [...] You could be on minimum wage and you wouldn't know.

Inequality of access to post-qualification induction, communities of practice and CPD

Another dimension of professional inequality that emerged related to the capacity to access various dimensions of Continuous Professional Development (CPD). Hannah shared an awareness of how primary and post-primary teachers are supported through a range of CPD programmes in their early career that are overseen by *The Teaching Council*. These support pathways do not exist for those registered with the *Teaching Council* as Further Education teachers where career development opportunities appear to be stunted by precarious working conditions and a lack of any genuine opportunity to be integrated into established communities of practice. The principal reason for this is the common practice of graduates moving across providers and working in more than one setting at any one time. Hannah describes the burdensome nature of this reality through the comment below:

But a lot of us are the same in that we are in different places [centres/colleges] ... there's a lot of different places and you don't really settle as much than if you are in one place. It's a huge advantage if you have your colleagues but a lot of people are just going in and delivering and off you go somewhere else ... you don't have that continuity to build relationships with colleagues and also learn from them ... especially as a new teacher. I'm always trying to grab the coordinator if I see her – five minutes – because there is so much I have to learn.

One unsurprising consequence is a professional development deficit between educators who hold contracts within FE, many of whom are qualified secondary school teachers, and these graduates who are constrained by the precarious nature of the terms and conditions of their employment.

The need to focus on sector-specific job-seeking skills

When we look across the findings from the survey and the focus group, it is clear that there is an issue, and not insignificant anxiety, about career prospects in the sector and associated frustrations in negotiating the complex and highly localised differentiations in recruitment practices across, in particular, ETBs. Participants reported being overwhelmed and confused in navigating the career-entry landscape of FET and other spaces where adult educators are typically employed. They shared examples of lengthy application forms, repeatedly being interviewed for 'panels' where there was no guarantee of work and, when work was offered, sometimes being asked to deliver a programme with little or no notice.

Discussion

Three distinct, yet in reality often overlapping, themes emerged from this research: occupational and professional precarity; challenges of sectoral recruitment practices; and a strong sense of inter-professional inequity.

Precarity and uncertain occupational futures

Undoubtedly, the strongest theme to emerge from this research is the extent to which occupational precarity is experienced by HDFE graduates. A significant proportion of the research participants, many of whom are mature students, are struggling to find stable and secure work and very few are in

permanent, full-time positions.

Precarity for adult educators may be extensive but it is certainly not a new occupational condition when we note the references made to it in the Green paper (Department of Education and Science 1998), White paper (Department of Education and Science 2000) and even the Murphy report of 1973 (Committee on Adult Education 1973). Indeed, there has been much more focus in recent years on precarity and its impact across occupational fields (Bobek, Pembroke, and Wickham 2018; Courtois and O’Keefe 2015; Finnegan et al. 2019; Standing 2011). Although a phenomenon originally associated with low-status unqualified work, precarious work has spread to what were once regarded the ‘safe and stable’ professional fields such as teaching (Bobek, Pembroke, and Wickham 2018).

There has been some response to precarity in Ireland by unions and activist groups and there is a small but growing body of literature around graduate precarity. For example, a recent transnational biographical research project (Finnegan et al. 2019) has shown that mature graduates, and the non-traditional graduate population in general, face an additional set of barriers in their quest for the decent and stable work that traditional graduates access with more ease. Lack of access to social networks or capital; caring responsibilities; financial hardships; geographic immobility can all conspire to contract career opportunities for many non-traditional graduates.

However, less is known or written regarding the working conditions of adult educators – and, in particular, graduates hoping to enter the adult and further education field through ITE programmes such as the HDFE.

Many of the participants in this research used the word ‘precarious’, or some variation of it, to describe their working conditions and/or experiences. This two-dimensional characteristic of precarity is, we argue, crucial to understanding the nature of the occupational lives of adult educators such as the HDFE graduates.

Precarity is often, quite rightly, discussed and conceptualised as a socio-economic condition related to pay, conditions and contractual structures (or lack of) which has serious consequences on the quality of lives of workers in many ways. The very real social impacts of precarity, which have been identified by a recent cross-sector report, include barriers to accessing healthcare and, for many, much-needed supplementary social welfare (Bobek, Pembroke, and Wickham 2018).

However, precarity can also be understood, as Worth (2016), drawing on Butler (2004), sees it, as a psychosocial phenomenon that has profound impact on the internal world of workers. The dissonance associated with this internal precarious condition can, so their argument goes, have a detrimental impact on development and identity formation and, ultimately, contributes to the emergence of precarious subjects. In the context of this study, then, it might be argued that it is useful to start to recognise graduates of initial teacher further education programmes, such as the HDFE, as precarious professional subjects.

This research illuminates the various dimensions of precarity at play for emerging practitioners: we have seen, across the graduate cohort under study, the unstable and temporary contractual outcomes and positions which are characteristic of socio-economic and structural understandings of precarity. But we have also caught a glimpse of the emotional and developmental impact of such conditions on graduates as they struggle to make, and hold, their occupational way through ‘bits and pieces’ of work towards a precariously held version of educator professionalism.

Sector recruitment practices

Another major theme that emerges is the sense of complexity, confusion and localised nature of recruitment practices across the sector. Research participants stressed the frustration and the sheer

quantity of work that is involved in engaging with recruitment processes. Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the national representative body for Ireland's sixteen ETBs have recently published work on the professional development of those working in publicly funded FET settings. This strategy promises to build on 'targeted professional development' through creating and supporting integration and consistency across the sector (ETBI 2017, 1). This is a welcome development – it is heartening to see that ETBI are thinking carefully and developing practices to support cultures and structures for CPD. This might address some of the concerns of these graduates who are unsure of what CPD opportunities are available to them.

As it is though, and despite acknowledging an ageing workforce (ETBI, 19–20) current developments seem to be written for existing staff of ETBs with little attention to professional and sector sustainability and growth on a longer time scale. It is unclear, from the ETBI strategy, how new graduates can embark on their next steps in developing such a professionalism. It is this sense of what Sennett (1998) calls the 'futureless' occupational spaces of precarious work that makes the current condition for so many newly qualified practitioners incompatible with the future-orientated nature of professionalism as is implied in any CPD discourse. New entrants to the field need at least some sense of an occupational future to develop into.

Professional inequity

Furthermore, as was pointed out by one participant, there seems to be much more focus and support for the professional development of post-primary newly qualified teaching graduates. In this study, participants feel unequal to their post-primary peers. Their self-questioning of the professional capital of their own hard-earned qualification thus seems justified. Furthermore, like other non-traditional graduates, these research participants can often lack social capital and networks to 'get a foot in the door' which can contribute to the development of a major barrier in career progression (Finnegan and O'Neill 2016).

If a sustainable FE professionalism is to be supported in Ireland, it seems crucial to develop an understanding of the continuum of CPD for emerging adult educators that is cognisant of the often difficult processes of transition from postgraduate ITE student-teacher to the all-important first post as a newly qualified teacher. Despite potentially rich and positive learning experiences of the HDFE programme many graduates, unwillingly, are currently set out on the 'outbound trajectories' that Bathmaker and Avis (2013) refer to in their analysis of the career paths of FET practitioners in the UK.

Of course, the ETBs are in a powerful position here as the main employers of those working in Further Education, but also as a significant employer for many second level schools. The tightening of resources and culling of many non-CID educators in recent years marked a shift where many ETBs, it seemed, looked at adult education provision differently. Practitioners report a shift away from adult educators being chosen and matched to the needs learning groups, and towards a more managerial approach which looked at ensuring that CID hours were covered (O'Neill 2015). This has likely led to a shift in provision where, sometimes, unsuitable educators and irrelevant modules are being offered to learners to meet the bureaucratic targets relating to contract entitlements.

Many HDFE graduates sit uneasily and unequally at the back of the broad, but hierarchical, church of educational professionalism as this is, in some respects, defined and managed by the *Teaching Council* and ETBs. The recent evolution of adult educator professionalism currently asks that practitioners join existing professional bodies like the *Teaching Council* rather than be supported to establish their own, as was proposed within the Green Paper on Adult Education in 1998 (Department of Education and Science 1998) and re-iterated in the White Paper of 2000 (Department of Education and Science 2000).

Similarly, there is no dedicated trade union that represents, exclusively, those working in FET settings. In the absence of this, some adult educators join existing unions, such as the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI), whose main body of work represents post-primary teachers. The recent report by the think tank TASC points out that precarious working conditions thrive in areas of weak worker representation (Bobek, Pembroke, and Wickham 2018) and although it can hardly be argued that teachers have weak representation, those working in the FET field, without a dedicated union, have justified concerns about the centrality of their plight within a large secondary school teachers' union such as the TUI. Indeed, it is hard to see how the diversity and difference of adult education values and pedagogy can be best served by professional and representative bodies who in many ways struggle to see that difference and, indeed, appear to look upon HDFE graduates, and graduates from other Initial Teacher Education FE providers as a kind of under-developed secondary school teacher.

For graduates, more support is needed in making the transition into employment. A lot of that support needs to come from elsewhere; however, there are things HDFE graduates might attend to themselves. For example, graduates have shown considerable capacity to use their peers as a source of learning and professional development – they could continue to develop professional relationships and networks and extend these beyond the specific cohort of their graduate year. Organising and, importantly, politicising as a distinct professional community of practitioners would assist HDFE graduates in seeing themselves positively defined against secondary school colleagues.

Conclusion

The burning issue that emerges from this study is high levels of professional precarity and underemployment for HDFE graduates. Not only does this have serious implications, personally, occupationally and financially, but the normalisation of such conditions serves to undermine and marginalise the field of adult education.

This research may raise some questions for the HDFE programme coordinators and for DACE itself. In terms of student intake and demand, it is a popular and expanding course. This research evidences substantial concerns amongst the graduate population regarding sustainable employment and equity of access to early careers professional development when compared to colleagues graduating with a secondary school qualification. It is difficult for the HDFE programme team to create jobs that do not exist, but are there supports and resources they could develop that draw on other stakeholders, to help students graduate with some hope of securing decent work? Another question, we are left with is to contemplate the experiences of graduates from similar programmes in other HEIs How common are the experiences of precarity? What can existing HEI networks do to support graduates nationally? Should HEIs liaise to stagger intakes of students to avoid flooding the graduate market?

The Education and Training Boards (ETBs), as the main employer for adult educators, also come under a sharp spotlight in this research. There is an urgent need for ETBs and their national representative association, ETBI to develop coherent and visible professional pathways for graduates from such programmes as the HDFE. One pressing matter is the need to clarify these employers' commitment to the distinct value of adult education philosophies. If this commitment is not forthcoming, then, as things stand it seems likely recruitment will favour graduates with secondary school qualifications.

It is, perhaps, a cliché now to say that Adult and Further Education is often regarded as the Cinderella of the education sector (Hayes, Marshall, and Turner 2007). However, with the enduring professional inequity that is sustained by preferential *Teaching Council* registration practices for post-primary school graduates, and the ETB recruitment experiences of HDFE graduates, it is understandable that adult

educators would not be paranoid to see themselves cast as the Cinderella in the teacher professional field. Indeed, we believe that practitioners trained, and with experience in, the critical and participative methodologies of adult education would have much to offer a secondary school sector which is struggling to reimagine and enact more progressive modes of education. But rather than allocate all the blame elsewhere, we should finish with a reflection on our own responsibilities as university-based FET teacher trainers. Irish HEIs could themselves take a lead by designing bridging-programmes across the domains of FE and secondary school teaching as it is unfair to assume that school-qualified teachers working with adult learning groups would not be open to the dialogic, politicised, participatory principles we seek to champion.

Notes

1. Youthreach offers training, work experience and educational opportunities for early-school leavers aged 15–20.
2. Route 1 and Route 2 are the professional entry routes into primary and secondary school teaching, respectively.
3. The university sector in Ireland reserves the right to award its own certification – seconded to do so by QQI.
4. The National Learning Network provides a range of vocational and personal development programmes for adults with additional support needs.
5. Train the Trainer is a short-course, usually offered at NCQ level 6 or 7, which provides an industry-recognised qualification for delivering training courses.
6. An employee continuously employed on fixed-term contracts for a period in excess of four years can claim a contract of indefinite duration based on the teaching hours they have been assigned to date.

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