



An Evaluation of the Pilot Pre-University Programme for County Limerick VEC 2005



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EVALUATION OF THE PILOT PRE-UNIVERSITY PROGRAMME

1.0 Introduction

In the period of November 2004 – February 2005, the pilot Pre-University Programme, run in partnership with the Adult and Community Education Programme of County Limerick Vocational Education Committee (VEC) and the Learner Support Unit of Mary Immaculate College, was completed. The programme was designed as a ‘stepping-stone’ to university access programmes such as Mary Immaculate’s *Foundation Certificate: Higher Education for Adult Learners*. The focus group conducted as part of the evaluation suggested that approximately 50% of the students from the programme intend to apply for the Foundation Certificate with other students pursuing access courses in different universities. The pilot programme took place in Newcastlewest, Co. Limerick. It began with fifteen students, fourteen of whom completed the course, ten with merit. This programme targeted adult learners over the age of 22 years, many of whom came from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds. It was delivered on an outreach basis in order to break the cycle of disadvantage and marginalisation that can persist in communities and families for generations.

As this was a pilot programme, County Limerick VEC, led by the Adult and Community Education Team, decided to commission an evaluation. This was carried by Mary Immaculate College following the completion of the programme. It was agreed that an evaluation of progress to-date should be documented and possible directions for further development of the Pre-University Programme should be recommended. The evaluation process was undertaken in March 2005.

2.0 Current Government Policy

A number of reports place the rationale for Pre-University Programmes in context. All aspects of the mature student experience were examined in the context of the *White Paper, Adult Education: Learning for Life* (2000) with a view to future legislation governing this area. Other key reports emphasise the importance of second chance education especially for those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who did not participate in upper second level first time around e.g. *Commission on the Points System, Final Report and Recommendations* (1999) and the *Report of the Review Committee on Post Secondary Education and Training Places* (1999).

There have been a succession of government reports recommending that the number of mature students in the Irish third level sector needs to continue to increase. The *Report of the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education* (1995), for example, advised that a quota of 25% of all college places should be put aside for adult learners. This would bring Ireland into line with other OECD countries. *The Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education* (2001) recommends that each third level institution should reserve at least 15% of full-time undergraduate places in each faculty for mature students. This was to be achieved by this year (2005). Mary Immaculate College has exceeded this target: 16% of mature students participate and access a range of programmes but Mary Immaculate College’s approach represents a national trend. There have been tremendous changes in mature student participation, nationally, in higher education in recent decades:

First, there has been a commitment to the concept of 'lifelong learning' and a recognition that a great many people lost out educationally, in the past, that they represent a reservoir of talent and ability and an effort to offer a second chance at achievement of potential. Their involvement will bring both social and economic gains and rewards both to the individual and to our society.

- The government has been giving support to increased educational opportunities through grant systems and Back-to-Education allowances.
- A far greater range of programmes have been made available, and made accessible in more flexible ways, such as this pilot community outreach programme which links the further and higher education sectors
- Commitment of the Higher Education Authority to the area has been demonstrated by the recent formation of National Office for Equity of Access to higher education

3.0 Aims of the Evaluation

- To determine clearly the programme goals and evaluate achievements of the pilot programme against these goals
- To assess the effectiveness of the Pre-University Programme
- To measure the impact of the programme in terms of its stated objectives
- To encourage participants in the pilot Pre-University Programme to reflect on the process, structure and deliverables of the programme to ensure accountability to participants
- To determine the sustainability of the programme, with particular reference to funding
- To list recommendations to develop the work of the programme to assist with its future development
- To provide an example of good practice for dissemination

4.0 Evaluation Methodology

To gain perspectives on the Pre-University Programme a number of qualitative methods were used:

1. Opened-ended questionnaires were sent with a covering letter to participating students of the pilot Pre-University Programme which asked them questions related to the following areas:

Personal details from the students were requested such as gender, age range, educational qualifications held, current occupation and whether they were recipients of any type of social welfare assistance. Themes such as how the students heard about the Pre-University Programme, their reasons for applying to the programme and how they considered it had benefited them were also addressed. Details of the content and structure were also examined and students were asked what aspects of the programme they liked and disliked, whether they thought the support offered to them during the course was suitable to their needs and how they thought the pilot programme could be improved for future students. Eight questionnaires were returned, from the 14 who completed the course, giving a high response rate of 57%.

2. Opened-ended questionnaires were sent with covering letters to all levels of staff involved in the pilot Pre-University Programme (senior managers, course co-ordinators and course tutors).

This questionnaire focused on the aims of the Pre-University Programme from the perspectives of each of the stakeholders. It sought to identify problems of returning to learning for students, consider the impact and effectiveness of the programme, explore programme sustainability and highlight any recommendations on how the programme could be improved and developed. Seven out of eight questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 87.5%.

3. A focus group session was held with participating students in March 2004, shortly after the Pre-University Programme had been completed.

The focus group examined in more detail the academic aspects of the programme and asked students questions on what other academic subjects they would have liked delivered, whether they advanced their existing study skills, how they found the course assignment, what they thought about the structure and timing of the course, whether they thought the tour of the library at MIC was beneficial and whether they were now thinking of applying to MIC or another third level course in the near future. Some brief questions were asked on other aspects related to the programme including whether they thought it was sufficiently advertised, whether the fee was manageable and what other resources might have been offered to assist them on the programme. Seven students attended the focus group session, a total of 50%.

5.0 Working in Partnership

5.1 The Consultation Process

The Learner Support Unit (LSU) of Mary Immaculate College (MIC) made initial contact with County Limerick VEC via a letter sent to the CEO, requesting a link with the further education sector as part of the LSU's *Moving On Project*. This project aims to improve access by minorities to higher education (principally refugees and members of the Travelling community).

A positive response was received from Mr. Burke who requested that the VEC's Community Adult Education Facilitator, Bernadette Cullen, further pursue a possible link with the higher education sector at MIC.

Four preliminary meetings with the Community Adult Education Facilitator and some members of the LSU took place in autumn 2003 and spring 2004. Discussions revolved around the development of a community outreach course for adult learners who were interested in returning to learning, primarily to access third level. At a final meeting, it was agreed that the pilot course should run in the autumn 2004. As MIC was intending to accredit this programme, senior management were consulted at this stage in the process. The President of the college was informed of the establishment of this partnership with the further education sector and acknowledgement and endorsement was received, prior to the programme being advertised in local newspapers, on community radio and in existing VEC courses delivered in the community.

5.2 Mature Student Initiatives at MIC

At the Adult Education Award Ceremony held on 19 May 2005, the keynote address was delivered by Dr Peadar Cremin, President of Mary Immaculate College. He stated that:

'Mary Immaculate College (MIC) prides itself on its commitment to social justice issues. This commitment is firmly articulated in our mission statement: '...(MIC) respects cultural diversity. It strives to promote equity in society and to provide an environment where all have the freedom and opportunity to achieve their full potential'.

He added further that 'Mature learners represent both an opportunity and a challenge to an institution such as Mary Immaculate. On the one hand we welcome the diversity which you bring. You are diverse in terms of background, educational attainment, employment history and motivation to study. Very often there is greater cultural, ethnic and religious diversity among these groups. On the other hand, this may be a challenge. There can be greater demands on the system, such as a need for dedicated support structures (Some mature learners have academic, financial and pastoral support needs that must be recognised institutionally). Likewise, dedicated and flexible programmes are required to address the deficit of groups traditionally under-represented in third level'.

The Learner Support Unit, among others, has learned that establishing community-based access routes supported by institutional structures is a successful method of increasing participation while minimising non-completion. These 'gateways' facilitate gradual familiarisation with third level academic demands and environments, and contribute to reducing attrition.

As a pilot, this programme has proven to be very successful, as has our partnership with the Co. Limerick VEC. We hope to grow and develop this work further in the years ahead' (*Source: <http://www.mic.ul.ie/news.htm>*).

5.3 The Learner Support Unit

The LSU at MIC was set up in 1997, funded by the Higher Education Authority's Strategic Initiative Funding, with the aim of providing academic support for students studying for a degree at the college. The unit aims to improve the quality of learning by supporting students in the transition from post-primary and the further education sectors to the higher education sector. It also aims to increase participation among groups traditionally under-represented in third level in Ireland.

There are currently eight staff members in the following roles: the Co-ordinator of the Unit, two Academic Support Tutors, an Academic Support Counsellor, a Research Officer, an English Language Tutor and two Project Support Workers, one of whom is responsible for the day-to-day co-ordination of the Pre-University Programme from the College's perspective. The LSU is chaired by Dr. John Hayes, Co-ordinating Head of the Arts Faculty at MIC.

Services provided by the LSU to students in MIC include:

- Access/minority group initiatives to target under-represented groups in higher education such as refugees and minorities
- Learner Training Seminars which are delivered weekly on themes such as lecture note taking, academic reading skills, essay writing clinics, referencing, study skills, how to give oral presentations, time management and examination techniques
- One-to-one tutoring: Students are encouraged to visit the LSU for one-to-one advice on aspects of learning in higher education. LSU tutors are available to assist students in areas such as subject choice, essay planning, study skills and examination techniques
- Peer-tutoring in Mathematics, Irish and Philosophy
- Foundation Studies: The LSU co-ordinates the *Academic Writing* and *Introduction to Research* programmes as part of the Bachelor of Arts (BA) first year Foundation Studies modules.
- The LSU has produced a study skills handbook, *Facing New Challenges*, which provides useful and practical advice in areas such as academic writing and study skills.
- The LSU website (www.mic.ul.ie/lisu) demonstrates how to accurately reference essays and provides online access to LSU tutors via a direct link to e-mail from the site
- Ongoing auditing of students' feedback and dissemination of this information to college academic staff.

5.4 County Limerick VEC

County Limerick VEC is a Local Education Authority. Its objective is the delivery of a quality and responsive education service to the people of County Limerick. It has a strategic approach to the development of the education services which incorporates objectives such as partnership, community, quality, innovation and responsiveness. In the Academic Year 2002/03, the number of participants in Adult Education was 3,625. The gender breakdown of these was 78% female and 22% male. The age distribution was: 14% (15 – 24 years); 51% (25 – 44 years); 31% (45 – 64 years) and 4% (65+ years).

The Adult Education Services of County Limerick VEC include: Adult Education Services, Adult Guidance Services, Adult Literacy Services, Back to Education Initiatives, Childcare Support, Community Education, Outdoor Education, Post Leaving Certificate Courses, Senior Traveller Training Centres, Third Level Grants, Third Level Outreach, VTOS and Youthreach.

All Adult Education Courses are accredited by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) at Foundation Level, Level One and Level Two.

6.0 Advertising the Programme: Promotional Literature

The Pre-University Programme was advertised widely across the mid-west region including the local press in Limerick City (the county edition of the *Limerick Leader* and the *Limerick Post*). It was also advertised in the West Limerick/Kerry county border (which could be viewed as the natural catchment area for a course in Newcastlewest). The local press in this area included the *Kerryman* and *The Observer*. The advertisements included the logos of the LSU and County Limerick VEC.

Bulletins about the forthcoming courses were also delivered on local community radio during the application period (September – October 2004) on Limerick's *Live 95 FM* radio station.

The Pre-University Programme was also advertised in existing VEC adult education centres and courses such as VTOS, Youthreach and Adult Literacy Centres.

The course was not advertised on the County Limerick VEC or MIC websites.

An Information Evening was also held in Desmond College, Newcastlewest where representatives were present from both the Limerick County VEC (Assistant CEO and Adult and Community Education Facilitator) and the LSU (Project Support Worker). Over 25 prospective students attended this information evening.

A presentation was given on the work of each of the partners, followed by a description of the Pre-University Programme content. It was outlined that the programme was intended, from the VEC's perspective, to increase the range of progression opportunities from various adult education programmes. From the viewpoint of the LSU, it was intended to be a prerequisite for the *Foundation*

Certificate: Higher Education for Adult Learners, for which the LSU provides academic support. Another aspect was to help adults overcome barriers to progressing to higher education such as lack of confidence around learning and low levels of academic writing and study skills. The Pre-University Programme would assist in overcoming these barriers using the expertise of the LSU in developing skills for success in higher education.

A question and answer session followed before application forms were handed out. Eight students out of the intake quota of 15 completed the forms at the end of the Information Evening, suggesting this was a very successful way of recruiting potential students.

7.0 Programme set-up & staff recruitment

The VEC provided the funding, resources and facilities for the Pre-University Programme. The course was delivered in Desmond College in Newcastlewest which has a reputation for being one of the best providers of adult education in West County Limerick (during the day Desmond College provides second level education). It also has a large number of computer terminals which are networked for internet usage.

Pre-University Programme staff were recruited from the pool of existing experienced VEC staff and included the following three roles: Lecturer in Psychology, Academic Support Tutor and an IT Tutor.

Day-to-day programme management and co-ordination of the Programme was jointly conducted at administration headquarters of County Limerick VEC through the Community Education Facilitator and Community Education Administrator and through the Project Support Worker of the LSU at MIC.

7.1 Roles and responsibilities within the programme

Staff involved in the programme at all levels provided a high quality of service to participants. Commitment, professionalism and good interpersonal relationships between participants and staff were evident at all levels. Individual and group Learner Support was seen by participants as very worthwhile and staff training and development was provided by the Learner Support Unit of MIC in this area. Staff were asked about their roles and what they considered their responsibilities to be:

VEC Adult Education Facilitator

- Co-responsibility with VEC Adult Education Officer for Pre-University Programme in Co. Limerick
- Work in partnership with MIC in designing programme
- Identify priority target participants
- Identify appropriate tutors
- Monitoring programme
- Review and evaluation of programme in relation to its aim of increasing progression opportunities and removing barriers

LSU Co-ordinator

- Oversee course design and maintain academic standards by helping in approving recruitment of course tutors
- Oversee MIC's role and interests: i) gateway to foundation level of study and ii) increase numbers of mature students especially from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds such as Travellers.
- Maintain good relations and co-funding with Co. Limerick VEC to ensure programme continues
- Assist in the promotion of the programme at VEC fora

PUP Co-ordinator / Liaison Person between MIC/VEC/Support Tutors

- Link person between MIC and VEC
- Provide support/training to PUP learner support tutor
- Assess teaching of learner support tutor in outreach setting.

Psychology Lecturer

- Deliver the psychology component of the course
- Set and grade assignment
- Possible advisor/course designer regarding future programme development

Outreach Learner Support Tutor

- Support development of study/writing skills
- Provide guidance regarding courses and life/study balance

IT Support Tutor

- Teach basic computer skills to students that will help in the preparation of assignments
- Teach basic skills for internet usage regarding search engines, saving information off the internet
- Help students set up email accounts and teach basic email skills, about attachments etc.

8.0 Profile of the Students

15 students applied for the course, and of these 14 were female and one was male. The majority were aged between 25-45 except for the only male who was in his 50s. Eight of the participants had a Junior Cert., six had a Leaving Cert. and one had completed primary education only. The current occupations of the participants included: one registered staff nurse, five in administrative positions, four in support roles allied to health, education and social care, two retirees, one shop assistant, one unemployed and one person with an occupation not stated.

9.0 Description of the pilot Pre-University Programme

9.1 Open Entry Admission

One of key aspects of this programme was that it required no prerequisite qualifications to remove barriers for adults to return to learning, especially for those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds living in rural areas.

There was, however, an age requirement. All applicants had to be over 22 years of age on the 1 January 2004 (the year in which the course was to be delivered). This is consistent with the policy that mature learners in higher education in Ireland have to be over 23 years on the 1st January in the year of their application.

9.2 Outreach Provision

One of the significant features of the pilot Pre-University Programme was that it was delivered on an outreach basis to make it easier for target groups in the community to attend the course. This was a successful aspect of the course, and one participant referred to this as a very helpful feature because it was near their home.

Desmond College was initially chosen for its good ICT facilities as it could accommodate fifteen participants, each with their own computer terminal.

9.3 Programme Structure

Course duration: 1 November 2004 – 28 February 2005.

The pilot Pre-University Programme lasted eight and half weeks, and consisted of two two-hour sessions per week on Monday and Thursday night. There were five academic lectures in psychology; three Learner Support Seminars (groups sessions) and nine sessions of IT (one of which included an IT exam).

A library tour of MIC was provided outside programme hours on a Saturday morning towards the end of the course.

A break of over three weeks was provided between Christmas and the third week in January (due to the venue of Desmond College being closed during this period).

An evaluation evening was held on 7 March 2005 to carry out a focus group session, shortly after the course had been completed and after the student evaluation questionnaires had been posted and returned by students. County Limerick VEC provided the resources for light refreshments.

9.4 Programme Content and Level

The Pilot Pre-University Programme had three main components:

- Academic subject (in this case, psychology). The options chosen for the five lecture sessions were developmental, social, clinical and educational psychology.

- Developing IT skills with assistance of a tutor, including word-processing, and the use of the internet for research purposes and communicating via e-mail
- Developing academic study skills with the aid of Learner Support Seminars (groups sessions). These sessions focused on Study Skills (reading skills and note taking), learning styles and strategies (Kolb's Questionnaire) and Academic Writing (use of quotations and referencing)

These three components were offered in rotation, throughout the programme. The participants could also avail of a Learner Support Tutor who could be consulted for one-to-one consultations by telephone, post or e-mail. This tutor undertook to contact each participant at least twice during the programme.

9.5 Programme Accreditation

The Pre-University Programme is accredited by Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. The Award Ceremony was held on the 19 May 2005 at MIC. Certificates were presented by the College President and a social gathering followed where all participants and their families were invited guests.

9.6 Co-Financing and Co-Resourcing

9.6.1 Tuition fees and Tutor Fees

Participants on the Programme were required to pay a tuition fee of €100 to the County of Limerick VEC, for the 40 hour course. To make it easier to pay, participants could pay in two instalments of €50 each. For those receiving social welfare assistance, a subsidy was provided to assist the socio-economically disadvantaged. Ten participants out of 14 received social welfare assistance: five received unemployment assistance, three received one parent family allowance, one participant received Farm Assistance and one participant received Disability Benefit.

While student fees contributed a little towards the costs of running the Programme, the course was invested in heavily in terms of both time and finance by both the County of Limerick VEC and the Learner Support Unit of Mary Immaculate College.

Outreach tutors were paid by the County of Limerick VEC at the standard rate for part-time tutors and as no comments were made about rates of payment, it is assumed that they were considered to be fair and reasonable.

9.6.2 Advertising Costs

Advertisements for the course in local newspapers were paid for by the County of Limerick VEC. A programme flyer was also printed and paid for by the VEC.

9.6.3 Employment of Tutors

The three tutors on the course were hired and employed by the County of Limerick VEC. An additional support provided by the VEC was an Information Session with an Adult Guidance Counsellor.

9.6.4 Provision of Facilities

Excellent outreach facilities such as the classroom for the course, use of computers and the internet was also provided by the County of Limerick VEC at Desmond Community College, Newcastlewest.

9.6.5 Co-ordination/Liaison/Training

Co-ordination of the course was provided jointly by the LSU and the VEC, which included day-to-day liaison and communication with the outreach tutors. The Learner Support Unit provided training and advice to the outreach Learner Support Tutor.

9.6.6 Library Tour, Adult Award Ceremony

A tour of the College library and an Award Ceremony were hosted by Mary Immaculate College. The printing of certificates was organised by the Learner Support Unit. The Award Ceremony social reception was funded by the Learner Support Unit.

9.6.7 Evaluation

A comprehensive evaluation of the course was conducted by Mary Immaculate College. This involved an evaluation evening with the participants where a focus group was held. Additionally, questionnaires were produced for students and staff involved in the programme. The administration and analysis of these was conducted by Mary Immaculate College and a written report documented the findings.

The sharing of the financing, resources, outreach facilities and staff clearly benefited the programme and the working in partnership added to the success of this pilot programme.

10.0 Analysis of Staff and Student Responses to Questionnaires

10.1 Aims of the Pre-University Programme

Staff were asked to identify what they considered to be the aims of the programme and they highlighted the following:

10.1.1 Develop a progression route

One of the principal aims of Pre-University Programme mentioned by staff was to develop a 'progression route', a 'progressive pathway' or a 'gateway' to third level for adults. It had the similar aim to 'bridge the gap' between adult education programmes provided by the VEC (and similar providers) and third level. It was also considered to be a useful 'stepping stone' to a third level access programme for adults delivered within their own community.

10.1.2 Develop skills for success in higher education

Another principal aim of the Pre-University Programme was to provide an opportunity for adults ‘to gain the skills required to succeed at third level’ and similarly, develop the ‘critical learning skills associated with success in higher education’. A number of specific skills were referred to such as ‘study skills, writing skills and some research skills’ and preparation in ‘basic computer skills’.

10.1.3 Taster course for higher education

A third important objective of The Pre-University Programme was providing an opportunity for students ‘to experience what third level study might be like’ or provide ‘a taste’ or ‘a sample’ of what third level education would entail. It was further seen as raising students’ ‘awareness of the academic requirements at third level’.

10.1.4 Attracting under-represented groups in further and higher education

An aim referred to by three out of six staff who returned questionnaires was to attract hitherto under-represented groups in further and higher education. One stated the Pre-University Programme provided ‘a gateway to third level to groups/individuals who ordinarily would not have considered it (especially educationally disadvantaged groups)’. Others saw the programme’s objective as ‘targeting non-traditional students interested in attending third level e.g. disadvantaged, Travellers’ or identifying ‘priority target participants’.

10.1.5 Raise awareness of mature student programmes in higher education

One significant aim mentioned by only one member of staff was to generally ‘raise awareness of mature student access routes to third level’.

10.2 Finding out about the Pre-University Programme

A multi-pronged approach to advertising the Pre-University Programme is beneficial. The returned questionnaires demonstrate that advertisements in local newspapers were the most successful, with letters from the VEC sent to existing students and word of mouth jointly being the second best methods.

- Three participants heard about the pilot Pre-University Programme through an advertisement in local newspaper, while two students did not specify which one, one noted, *The Observer*. The *Limerick Leader* was also mentioned in the focus group session
- Two participants heard about the programme through a letter sent out to them from the County Limerick VEC while participating in other VEC programmes, for example VTOS and adult literacy programmes
- Two participants heard about the course through word of mouth – a tutor based at a rural community development partnership group (West Limerick Resources)
- One participant heard about the course by attending MIC’s Open Day

10.3 Identified Problems of Returning to Learning

Staff were asked to consider what they thought were the barriers to returning to education. The following responses were given:

10.3.1 Financial issues

Four staff members identified ‘funding’ or ‘managing money’ and ‘losing benefits’ as a problem regarding returning to learning

10.3.2 Child Care

Four members of staff identified problems with child-care as an issue

10.3.3 Time management

The next most mentioned problem by staff were issues concerning ‘time’; ‘time management’; ‘juggling time’ and mature students feeling guilty regarding the ‘lack of time for family and other commitments’ when returning to study.

10.3.4 Fear of failure and lack of confidence issues

Staff identified that mature students often had ‘fear of failure, being found out’ and a ‘fear of struggling academically especially with writing skills. There were also problems around confidence issues; and the ‘fear of not fitting in’ and ‘not being good enough’

10.3.5 Prior educational experiences

Two members of staff noted negative ‘previous experiences of education’ or weak ‘educational background’ as being problematic aspects for mature students returning to education.

10.3.6 Transportation problems

Lack of transport was referred by two members of staff; as being a barrier to returning to learning, which demonstrates that an outreach mode of delivery in the community is important.

10.3.7 Cultural issues

Only one member of staff referred to ‘cultural difficulties’ (both institutional and between different ethnicities).

10.4 Motivations for Applying to the Pre-University Programme

Three of the eight participants who returned questionnaires said that their key reason for pursuing the Pre-University Programme was that they were keen to improve their education and to develop their career by improving their employment status from non-skilled manual or low grade clerical/administrative work. One participant stated that

‘having had to take early retirement from my job, which was manual work, I am anxious to improve my education.’

Another key reason for two respondents was to see what it was like to return to learning as an adult, and for another, consider the possibility of a doing a third level degree: ‘I felt that it would give me an insight into further education having been away from study for such a long time.’ ‘I would like to do a degree course but am unsure about which course to choose and felt that the programme would help.’

Other reasons given include participating in courses for personal fulfilment and enjoyment and to gain a qualification, other than the Leaving Certificate. ‘The psychology interested me. I am interested in courses and would do one every year.’ ‘To gain this cert. [certificate] as a qualification.’

10.5 Perspectives on Programme Structure

The break in the course in January was something the students felt needed to be addressed: ‘It was difficult having the whole month of January off because you sort of lost your momentum really. For a short course it was just a very long period of time to be off.’

There was a general feeling that the students would benefit from the course being slightly longer in duration and perhaps offering a second academic subject such as English Literature. One participant commented that ‘if you were writing on two essays that would have been very interesting, because your approach with one subject might be far superior to another subject and you could at least see how you managed the two of them, if you find one really easy and one really difficult or something, because if you were at any third level programme anyway you’d be doing numerous essays.’

One student pointed out that some course sessions had been rescheduled and that this caused much frustration as they worked shifts.

10.6 Perspectives on Programme Content

Academic Component - Psychology

Many respondents commented on the components of the course. The academic component of psychology was the most popular part of the course, with only one student who returned the questionnaire requesting a ‘less demanding’ subject. However, even though psychology was popular, a number of participants, both in the questionnaires and the focus group, shared in the view that more time and detail should have been given to the academic component due to the fact that psychology is a wide-ranging discipline that is difficult to be covered in a short time. One participant noted that ‘I felt that the psychology was too broad and that there wasn’t enough classes to into much detail,’ and another that ‘we were lucky in one way in that we got such a lot of information but in another way the course was so short that that may have been a slight disadvantage as well.’

An additional point was that the academic component could be offered in one block at the beginning of programme, rather than being interspersed with IT and Learner Support. All respondents suggested that psychology be covered at the beginning of the course, that there should be more hours dedicated to psychology and less to IT and that psychology needs to be more focussed, perhaps confined to one area such as Educational Psychology, due to the length of the course. Some typical comments were as follows: 'I think the course should be more definite in its format, say, one or two definite topics, and do those from start to finish.' and 'more specific layout of subjects to be covered, both in psychology and IT. A topic or topics set out on advance of each lesson, be it psychology or IT would avoid time wasting.'

The focus group session raised the issue of providing a core textbook for the academic component being studied as part of the programme. The students present all responded very positively to this idea. One participant observed: 'You have something to fall back on and you can research from there like at least you've got a starting point.'

Information Technology

IT was the least beneficial aspect of the course, particularly for participants who were already computer literate and therefore would have liked less IT. For example, one third of the students were in administrative roles in the workplace. Four students commented on the fact that too much time was devoted to IT and that this time could have been better served by giving more hours to the academic component of the programme. Examples of this include: 'Too much time given to IT; not enough coverage of other aspects of the course' and 'I felt that there was too many IT courses, yet very little was covered during this time. It may have suited complete beginners, but for the more computer literate (and I am not very experienced), I felt it was not challenging enough.'

Nevertheless, it was still seen as important feature that should be retained especially the IT skills such as using e-mail and the Internet for research purposes. 'IT being very important in this modern age, I feel it should be retained in future.'

Other comments about the IT component revolved around its lack of structure with no definite focus such as following computer modules leading to recognised certification: 'For me the IT section wasn't great. I would have liked to have followed a definite format and got an IT cert. at the end' and 'all we had to do for the IT was to be able to type the actual essay so you weren't actually doing anything that was going to be graded or examined.'

Learner Support

The participants commented very favourably on the support provided for the Pre-University Programme. Four out of the eight respondents to the questionnaire were very happy with the learner support they received and found this particularly suitable to their needs as adult learners and many availed of it outside of the Learner Support Seminars, whether on a one-to-one basis face-to-face with the tutor or by telephone. One participant at the Focus Group remarked on the Learner Support aspect as follows: 'Oh that [the support] was great. Just how to do an essay the practicalities

and then X [name of IT tutor] on the IT side how to present it to format it, those little things that you know maybe par for the course for Leaving Certs but which we wouldn't have a clue about ... the support was absolutely fantastic' and another noted 'having somebody read your essay and say you know that's pretty good and you're thinking this is c**p, it's somebody saying who you feel is quite competentsaying actually that's quite good... It kind of boosts your confidence a little bit.'

Some students used learner support more than others. This depended on how proficient they already were in study skills. However, it was a commonly held view that participants would have availed of learner support more if the programme essay had been assigned earlier, for example: 'the support was helpful. I used it on two occasions. Would have used more if started essay earlier.'

Another student found the learner support 'confusing', while another suggested that there needed to be more encouragement by a person (possibly the tutor) to use learner support more often, rather than it being a resource used if the student had enough confidence to ask for help: 'I think it was suitable but needs to be more involved. Didn't use it often enough, but needs (a person) more encouragement.'

10.7 Programme Assessment

The Pre-University Programme was assessed by means of an essay in which the participants were required to discuss a theory in psychology previously explored in class and then relate it to their own experiences or the experiences of others. While participants in the Focus Group considered the assignment to be at a level that was sufficiently challenging for them, there were some reasons why the essay was problematic for the participants. Two respondents raised the point that the essay titles were not given early enough in the course. One of these stated: 'I think that the students should be given a few essay titles at the start of the programme.'

Two participants also highlighted that the essay topic was too broad and should have had a more narrow focus or have been limited to a choice of options for future courses. The first participant commented that: 'you could write about anything. That was the problem' while the second participant had observed that 'if you were given a few subjectsor a few options that you could sort of very early on do a bit of research and at least you could sayI've the body of the essay or now I'll look at my introduction or my conclusion or where can I perfect it.'

One student remarked that more specific guidelines in relation to the writing of the essay would be helpful.

In terms of participant achievement and attainment, out of 15 who commenced the course, 14 were retained to complete the course. The one participant who did not complete the Programme, attended for only two sessions and decided the Programme was not suited to them. Ten participants completed the Programme with merit, due to not only having fully attended the course but completing the essay assignment. The four who did not receive merits were awarded a certificate for full participation in the course, even though the essay at the end of the Programme was not produced. Of the ten who completed the essays, one participant received an A2 grade, five received a

B2 grade, while four received a B3 grade. These were very good results for those planning to progress to higher education in the future.

10.8 Additional Support Provided

Library visit to Mary Immaculate College

In the focus group session, it was noted that only two (out of 14) students actually participated in the tour conducted on a Saturday morning. The reasons given for this were that finding appropriate child care was difficult and that this tour should be earlier in the programme so that students could avail more fully of the library services while working on their assignment. An additional reason cited during the Focus Group session was that other students towards the end of the course were now planning on progressing to other colleges and thought it would be more beneficial to become familiar with those library facilities: 'For some people that aren't here tonight they said that the course they wanted next was at a different college and that they would have to become familiar with the library of that college so there wasn't much point in going to Mary I when the course was completed which made sense but would have gone at the beginning or in the middle.'

One of the participants who attended the tour described it as very useful: 'We were very impressed with the lady [librarian in MIC] how she organised everythingshe was actually very nice and she took us into the office and personally spoke to us which I found very nice.'

Adult Guidance Session

An information session was provided by a VEC Adult Guidance Councillor to raise participant awareness of the link between the Pre-University Programme and other third level access programmes such as MIC's *Foundation Certificate: Higher Education for Adult Learners*. One staff member noted from participant feedback the need to incorporate an individual guidance element into the programme.

11.0 Beneficial Aspects of the Pilot Pre-University Programme

Both staff and students were asked to identify what they considered to be the most beneficial aspects of the Programme. They both shared the view that the Programme had been beneficial in improving study and IT skills required for higher education, had provided a group learning environment and improved participants' confidence and self-esteem.

Staff perspectives

- Learner support component / study skills
Four members of staff referred to the learner support element 'especially help and advice regarding academic writing' as the most beneficial aspect of the programme.

- Good preparation for higher education
The Pre-University Programme was seen as a ‘good preparation for those wishing to pursue university access courses’. ‘Attempting and succeeding in essay research and compiling an essay on their chosen topic’ was seen as another beneficial aspect for students.
- Group Support
Two members of staff acknowledged the benefits of group support and described it as ‘interaction with other like minded people’ or ‘a meeting of like minds’.
- Academic Subject
Two members of staff considered the ‘introduction to an academic subject or ‘academic content’ as a beneficial aspect of the programme.
- IT Skills
Two members of staff viewed ‘gaining basic computer skills’ or ‘IT Skills’ as the most beneficial aspect of the programme.
- Improved self-esteem and confidence
One member of staff noted the Pre-University Programme had been beneficial in the ‘building of confidence and self-esteem’.

Student perspectives

Participants also identified a number of benefits. Overall, they had many extremely positive things to say about the course. In general, the course achieved a number of things for instance:

- improving confidence with regard to returning to learning
- improving participants’ study and computer skills
- providing opportunities to participate in a group learning environment
- raising awareness of learning opportunities for mature students.

Improving Confidence

Three participants, in common with staff commented on the effectiveness of the programme in improving confidence and self-esteem around returning to learning: ‘I felt it opened up a door for me. The course gave me a feel for a third level course.’ This point was also reiterated in the focus group session: ‘for many years I was considering the Foundation course in Mary I and every single year I wouldn’t enquire about it and then I come and do this and now I feel, well yes, I can do it as well as anybody else can do it because the support is there for us. Previous to coming on this I would have never felt or known that there was support there of any description for anybody. I thought you were just thrown in at the deep end you’re now third level you get on with it and you’re supposed to know what you’re doing. Now I realise it’s not as clear cut as that at all and there’s quite a lot of assistance out there really for you.’

Benefits of group learning and improving study skills

Similarly to the staff, two participants commented on the benefits of group learning and improving their study skills. ‘It has helped me greatly, the advantage of group learning where different ideas are put forward for discussion was very enlightening’

and ‘it has helped by focusing my attention for organisation and for application of skills to undertake and complete assignments.’

IT Skills and raising of awareness of other learning opportunities

Other benefits highlighted by the participants were the inclusion of the IT element of the programme. They also felt more aware of other courses available to mature learners. ‘It has made me more aware of the opportunities available for mature students and of the support available also.’

12.0 Effectiveness of the programme

Staff were asked to consider how effective they thought the Pilot Pre-University Programme had been and observed it had been very effective in a number of following ways:

12.1 Removing Barriers to Progression for Mature Students

The Pre-University Programme was seen as very effective by a number of staff in ‘removing barriers to progression’ because it provided students with ‘a taste for further education and enabled them to see whether they would like to progress to university as mature students’. The outreach model of delivery was effective because it was considered by one member of staff to be ‘student friendly’.

12.2 Developing Learning Skills required for Higher Education

Three members of staff stated that the Pre-University Programme was effective in developing learning skills including those ‘necessary to succeed at third level’; ‘critical learning skills’ and ‘essay writing skills’.

12.3 Increased Confidence around Learning / Recognition of Personal Potential

One member of staff noted the ‘increased confidence’ of students and another viewed the Pre-University Programme had contributed ‘to helping students recognise their potential’. However, for a small number of students, one tutor considered the programme had been effective in ‘helping learners acknowledge that third level is not for them just yet’.

13.0 Impact of the Pre-University Programme

13.1 Inter-sectoral Partnership created between Further and Higher Education

A positive impact of the Pre-University Programme was the inter-sectoral working between further and higher education providers. This was referred to positively by all the Learner Support Unit staff involved in piloting the programme, for example, the programme had ‘created a strong working relationship with Co. Limerick VEC’, ‘good relations’ between MIC and the VEC and a ‘successful partnership’ with a local education provider. The Co. Limerick VEC wished ‘to acknowledge the support and co-operation received from all of the MIC staff involved in the programme, including the design, delivery and evaluation of the programme’.

13.2 Greater Students Numbers on Higher Education Access Programmes

Three members of the Learner Support Unit staff at Mary Immaculate College referred to the impact on student numbers in the future. It had 'created a gateway for potential follow-ups for the Foundation Course or Mature Student access route' at Mary Immaculate College.

13.3 Potential for Programme Model Replication

Three Learner Support Unit staff saw the Pre-University Programme as having potential for replication. One described it as providing a 'blueprint' that could be adapted to other similar contexts and another stated that after the pilot it was now 'possible to deliver it [the programme] at different locations, both urban and rural.' It was also referred to as a 'useful model' for Adult Education.

13.4 Mature Student Learning Issues

One member of staff described the students on the Pre-University Programme as now being 'more confident' in taking the step into third level. Another indicated that the programme had provided more 'focus and clarity' concerning adult learners thinking regarding third level. A further positive impact noted by one tutor was how much the students enjoyed the 'interaction with the group' and 'learning computer skills particularly the use of the internet and email'.

13.5 Mature Students and Mary Immaculate College

One member of the Learner Support Unit staff viewed the Pre-University as raising MIC's profile as 'mature student friendly'.

The programme has proven to be very effective at achieving its aims such as providing a progression route for higher education, targeting socio-economically disadvantaged students, increasing confidence and self-esteem of participants and developing their study skills. However, there are other goals that need further attention such as further targeting the Travellers.

14.0 Programme Sustainability

All six staff members who returned the questionnaire saw sustainability of the programme into the future. The two reasons for this optimism were the outreach delivery and potential replication aspects of the programme model in other locations:

14.1 Outreach delivery

The 'programme offers an opportunity within in local communities to develop the skills necessary for success at third level' and it is a 'useful introduction and the outreach aspect is positive'.

14.2 Replication in other parts of the Region

Three LSU staff members suggested that the ‘course shell’ can be adapted to other centres and that ‘PUP has enormous potential for expansion and would be delivered in multiple locations around Munster – in urban and rural settings’, ‘perhaps with courses running concurrently’.

14.3 Course fees

Only one staff member suggested that in terms of sustainability that programme managers be ‘beware of inflating course fee’. The course fee was €100 but was subsidised for students in receipt of welfare assistance. During the Focus Group session, participants were asked whether they thought the course fee was manageable and whether the course could be considered value for money and there was a consensus that it was.

15.0 Conclusions

15.1 Strengths of the Pre-University Programme

The Pilot Pre-University Programme was very successful and effective at achieving its objectives (as outlined in earlier in Section 10.1). This evaluation has identified a number of strengths of the Pre-University Programme:

- The excellent development of a positive inter-sectoral link that has been forged between further education and higher education. The VEC link with a higher education college has contributed to the good reputation of the pilot, as well as the excellent management of the jointly run programme
- There is a high level of support for the pilot Pre-University Programme among senior managers and key personnel of County Limerick VEC and MIC. Much professionalism and commitment to the Pilot Pre-University Programme has been evident as well as good will developed
- The Pre-University Programme has made a substantial impact on the lives of the participating students by improving self-confidence and self-esteem
- Delivering the programme on an outreach basis has made higher education a possible option for the participating students and given greater priority to access for disadvantaged students at MIC by removing barriers to third level education
- The open entry procedure make it unnecessary for students to require any pre-requisite educational qualifications in order to apply for the course
- The programme successfully developed the necessary skills required for higher education including ICT and academic writing
- Individual mentoring and group support has been very effective. With learner support as an integral part of the pilot programme, a good practice model has been implemented

- The Pre-University Programme has achieved considerable success in targeting socio-economically disadvantaged students
- The Pilot Pre-University has been very successful at raising the aspirations of its participants. A significant proportion of the participants on the Pre-University will go on to MIC's *Foundation Certificate: Higher Education for Adult Learners*, significantly adding to its numbers and contributing to its continued success at attracting greater numbers each year. Over half of the participants of the Pilot Pre-University Programme are planning on progressing to the Foundation Certificate course, but statistics will not be available until the autumn.

16.0 Recommendations for the future to enhance the Pre-University Programme

A number of strengths have been outlined in the Pilot Pre-University Programme and we wish to thank participants and staff for their recommendations to develop the programme further to enhance it for future participants. The following recommendations have been identified:

Build on Programme Strengths

- Continue to provide the Pre-University Programme as the pilot has proven to be highly successful and worthwhile
- Consolidate, reflect and focus on the Pre-University's strengths and successes (as detailed in Section 15) and maintain components that are effective at achieving programme objectives (as noted in Section 12)
- Clarify existing aims and possible new strategic directions for future development
- Disseminate good practice emerging from the implementation of the Pilot Pre-University Programme

New goals and strategic directions for the future

- Consider the future linkage with local community groups in the consultation process to help with recruitment to the Pre-University Programme and maintain close links with community groups to promote the programme
- While the course has succeeded in targeting students from under-represented socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (as determined by those in receipt of social welfare assistance), this evaluation recommends the need to widen the diversity of the student profile further to include Travellers and consider setting a target

Programme Model Replication / Expansion

- Consider the expansion of the Programme through setting-up similar courses in other areas which would run simultaneously

Programme Structure

- Consider the synchronising the course timetable to coincide with the academic calendar thereby eliminating the need for an extended course break at Christmas
- Consider the possibility of extending course hours from 40 to 50 hours to allow for more academic subject teaching hours. Alternatively, consideration could be given to reducing the hours assigned to the IT component and increasing the hours dedicated to the academic subject component
- This evaluation has demonstrated the need for participants to visit the MIC campus earlier in the course so they can fully avail of the facilities available e.g. consider rescheduling the timing of the tour of the MIC library

Programme Content

- Recommend that Pilot Pre-University Programme content and requirements are clearly integrated with the MIC Foundation Certificate Programme
- Recommend greater number of hours devoted to the academic component on future courses in order that the offered subject may be explored in greater detail
- Consider the addition of a second academic subject to the programme such as English Literature along with Psychology
- This evaluation recommends that less time to be spent on IT up-skilling as a number of participants already had good IT skills developed in the workplace – the -programme-should perhaps concentrate initially on the academic subject, with IT commencing when participants have received their assignment(s) to assist than with using the internet for research purposes.
- The pilot has demonstrated that consideration should be given to assigning the course essay(s) earlier in the timetable, to give participants more time to research and work on producing a good essay
- The evaluation revealed that the provision of additional group and/or individual learner support when participants are producing assignment(s) would be more effective
- The provision of the following additional student supports would be beneficial:
 1. provision of sessions with the Adult Guidance Officer of the County Limerick VEC to provide advice on education/career development

2. provision of information regarding the application procedures for MIC's *Foundation Certificate: Higher Education for Adult Learners*

Programme Resource Materials

- Recommend that course tutors provide an outline syllabus to participants at the beginning of each Pre-University Programme to assist with guiding them through the timetable
- This evaluation recommends that participants be provided with lecture handouts and additional reading at the end of each session of the academic component as additional materials were requested by students to reinforce the lectures. These materials may be offered in lieu of a programme textbook requested by participants to reduce personal learning costs.
- This evaluation further recommends the development of a specially adapted range of materials for both students and staff of the Pre-University Programme:
 1. A study skills handbook specifically designed for learners at this level.
 2. A website dedicated to the Pre-University Programme to provide additional on-line learner support and information
 3. Prescribed teaching materials especially for the Learner Support Seminar series

Clarify existing roles and potential recruitment of new roles

- As a number of MIC staff were involved at various levels and stages of the pilot programme, there is a need for the clarification of roles within the programme in order to maintain consistency when communicating with the VEC, outreach tutors and community liaison officers in the future
- Consider linking with/ developing local community group liaison officers roles to undertake who programme developments, such as assisting with student recruitment, in the future
- Changes in the Pre-University Programme timetable, for example a change in date of class, require communication to all Pre-University Programme staff and participants in order to avoid confusion

Application Materials

- Recommend the minor revision of the course application form (see Appendix 6) to include age range for participant profiling purposes

Publicity Materials

- Consider advertising the programme more widely in the mid-west

- This evaluation recommends the development of a course brochure for the Pre-University Programme which clearly outlines the aims of the programme and links it to the MIC's *Foundation Certificate: Higher Education for Adult Learners* in order to promote the programme more effectively and to also encourage progression

Fees

- It was the consensus that the programme fee should be maintained at its present level as it found to be manageable by participants and good value for money.

[End]