Graduate attributes: Social constructions and lived experience of university students in Ireland

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Abstract

Aim. This paper examines how dominant understandings of students in third-level education in Ireland are reflected in national policies, filtered through the official and aspirational texts issued by Irish colleges, and negotiated and contested by students. Specifically, we investigate the discrepancies between the perceived needs of students in third-level education as imagined in government policies and promoted by higher education institutions, and the lived realities of students who grapple with multiple challenges brought about by structural failures in housing and higher education funding policy.

Methods. Through documentary analysis and primary qualitative data on student experiences, we examine how the imagined figure of the third-level student/graduate becomes imbued with the aspirations of multiple stakeholders: policymakers, academic institutions, and potential employers - in ways that conflict with the lived realities of students.

Results. We find that students are caught between the ambitions and expectations of an education system that pushes them into higher education without the requisite and adequate supports.

Conclusion. The ideal graduate is expected to embody the nation's hope for future success as well as to uphold the alma mater's reputation among employers. Couched in this rhetoric of the graduate as the beacon of hope, however, are deeper failings of a welfare state that is still battling the aftermath of recession. These failures are projected onto students, manifesting in a very real way in their minds and lives as they struggle to

balance between institutional, family and personal expectations, the demands of daily life and future plans.

Key words: Ireland, third level education, social policy, student lives, higher education institutions

Introduction

This paper examines how dominant understandings of students in third--level education in Ireland are reflected in national policies, filtered through the official and aspirational texts issued by Irish colleges, and negotiated and contested by students. Specifically, we investigate the discrepancies between the attributes of students in third-level education as imagined in government policies and promoted by higher education institutions, and the lived realities of students who grapple with multiple challenges brought about by structural failures in housing and higher education funding policy such as the lack of affordable housing, long commutes, and necessity to take on part-time jobs.

Research approach

As educators in the third-level sector, and therefore, occupying a unique vantage point of connection between the state, educational institutions and students, we are privy to the various perspectives of national policies, institutional practices and student struggles. Through documentary analysis and primary qualitative data on student experiences, we examine how the imagined figure of the third-level student/graduate becomes imbued with the aspirations of multiple stakeholders: policymakers, academic institutions, and potential employers - in ways that conflict with the lived realities of students.

We begin with a short overview of higher education policy in the Republic of Ireland in the context of the Great Recession and its aftermath. Next, we turn our attention to the promotional material and documents pertaining to undergraduate education reform in Irish universities and the ways in which these convey values, aspirations and expectations of graduates, and indeed, the institution's imagining of itself. Taking our educational institution as a case study, we examine reports and surveys compiled by our university's disability service and career advisory service as well as qualitative surveys we have administered to outgoing graduates in our classes about their hopes, expectations and realities of their third-level education experience.

National policy context

Ireland is emerging from a long and severe period of austerity marked by the Great Recession. The global financial crisis that started in 2007 and primarily

affected the housing market and export trade also had a significant impact on Ireland's education sector. In order to bail out its banks, the Irish government was forced to spend €73 billion, which had dire consequences for public debt, domestic investment and unemployment (Government of Ireland [GOI], 2009; International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2009). To offset the blow to the exchequer and to maintain Ireland's global competitiveness, the 2009 emergency budget announced a drastic tightening of purse strings through a policy of deflation and austerity. The education sector suffered a major cutback of €81 million, primarily in higher education and capital expenditure (Raidió Teilifís Éireann [RTÉ], 2009). Taxes were increased and public sector employment was down-sized with a hiring freeze on academic staff and a reduction in the salaries and pensions of public sector employees amounting to €11.5 billion (GoI, 2009). Moreover, the Fine Gael Labour government reinstated student fees, which had been abolished since 1995, calling for a €600 annual college 'registration' fee, which sparked widespread student protest (Independent, 2008). Never-theless, student fees have continued to increase, and as of 2017-2018, Irish full--time undergraduate students pay approximately €3000 in annual fees, rende-ring Ireland the second highest fee charging country in the European Union for third-level education, the first being the United Kingdom, which charges its students €10,028 on average (European Commission, Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency & Eurydice, 2017).

Notably, even in the face of reduced public expenditure, there have been a record number of enrolments in Irish colleges and universities increasing from a total of 36,437 new entrants in 2007-2008 to 39,396 in 2008-2009. As of 2016-2017, this figure stood at 43,569 (Pigott & Frawley, 2019). The incre-ase in higher education during the recession was matched by an increase in the unemployment rate, which had been holding steady at 4% to 4.5% in the seven years preceding recession (2000-2007), but climbed dramatically to 12% in 2009, reaching 15% in 2012 (Duffy, FitzGerald, Timoney & Byrne, 2014; Barrett & McGuinness, 2012). Youth unemployment rate (15-24 years) reached its peak at 16% in August 2016 (Central Statistics Office [CSO], 2016). As of April 2019, the unemployment rate is 4.6%, showing signs of rever-ting to pre-recession levels, while youth unemployment rate stands at 10.31% (CSO, 2019). These numbers, however, only tell part of the story. They do not reveal the reasons why individuals are unemployed, or if employed, whether they are in jobs that are commensurate with their educational level and spe-cialisation. They also do not inform us about the significance of social cate-gories such as ethnicity, social class, marital status and so on, which would provide better insight into the profile of the unemployed population. Fur-thermore, emigration – particularly of young, qualified individuals – took on massive proportions during the recession and was *de facto* an unacknow-ledged central mechanism for dealing with unemployment (Carney, Scharf, Timonen, & Conlon, 2014).

Graduate employment outcomes
– the data and the gaps

While the 'Irish National Skills Strategy 2025' places heavy emphasis on developing workplace skills in every academic course through work placement and promotion of lifelong learning, Irish universities remain academically focused with little emphasis on work placements and internships (and this is corroborated by student responses to our questionnaires as outlined below). What becomes of fresh college and university graduates in the employment market? The Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland publishes an annual First Destination Report titled 'What Do Graduates Do?' which attempts to track and document the number of graduates who find employment within the first nine months of graduation. In its 2016 report, the HEA survey revealed 70% graduates to be in employment within the first nine months of graduation, with 60% based in Ireland and 10% working overseas, while 6% were actively seeking employment at the time of the survey.

At Trinity College Dublin (TCD), the Careers Advisory Service (CAS) similarly conducts its own research on first destination statistics of its graduates. CAS's 2016/17 survey of its fresh graduates nine months after graduation reveals that of those who responded, 71% were employed and 4% were seeking employment. These statistics paint an optimistic picture of respondents' employment status. However, this picture changes when we discover that only 55% of the total graduate population responded to TCD's internal survey and 64% responded to HEA's 2016 national survey (HEA, 2018a). The survey results, therefore, omit the non-responders who may be unemployed, underemployed or employed in jobs that are not commensurate with their levels of education. It may also be reasonable to assume that non-responders are likely to be in less desirable graduate jobs than those who responded to the survey.

The HEA's (2018b:54) latest attempts to inquire further into the question of first destinations of third-level graduates in its 'Graduate Outcomes Survey: Class of 2017' reveals that only 38% of the graduates who responded to the survey stated that their job was 'very relevant' to their area of study while 35% stated that their job was 'very relevant' to their field of study. Alternately, 11% graduates felt that their level of study was 'very irrelevant' to their jobs and 10% stated that their field of study was 'very irrelevant' to their jobs. While the surveys provide some insight into the lives of fresh graduates, they are to be seen as a snapshot in time. As survey response is voluntary, participants can choose not to respond to certain questions within the survey or can provide inadequate responses, as is evidenced by the sparse data on graduate salaries (HEA, 2018a). The data received, therefore, is not representative of the general graduate population – a point that HEA (2018a) too, admits. For example, the overall response rate to HEA's 2017 survey was 51%, which reveals that close to half the graduate population did not respond. Moreover, the highest responders to the survey com-

prised graduates of Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics (58%) and the lowest response rates came from Services graduates (43%), which raises questions about highly variable outcomes for graduates of different disciplines – questions that cannot be answered in the absence of better and more specific data (HEA, 2018b).

University-level representations of the ideal student

Education in Ireland has been influenced by the dominant political, social and economic trends of the time as the country transitioned from agrarian to industrial modes of production. Once a private, religious enterprise, operating on a voluntary basis and paid for by a social elite who could afford it, education in post-independence Ireland became more accessible to the masses, serving as a conduit through which the Catholic Church and Irish state could promote religious values and cultural nationalism (Akenson, 1970; Coolahan, 1981; Clancy, 1989; O'Sullivan, 2005).

Since the 1960s, higher education in Ireland, as in many European countries, has adopted a 'human capital' perspective, with an emphasis on education as the conduit for economic growth and productivity. Globalisation and the move towards creating a 'smart' or knowledge economy has further intensified this human capital perspective from the 1990s onwards (Dukelow & Considine, 2017). Subsequently, the goals of the Lisbon Strategy (2000) and its successor, Europe 2020, have all emphasised investing in people, entrepreneurship, and upgrading knowledge and transversal competencies to make European economy the strongest in the world. These ideas have been adopted by third-level institutions in their promotional literature to gain competitive advantage and attract a wider pool of prospective applicants. They also explicitly and implicitly communicate attributes expected of incoming students and outgoing graduates. Further, as we will demonstrate below, the competitively driven language also instills certain expectations in new entrants to third-level education about the kinds of services that will be provided to them as part of their student experience.

We argue that the national policy context outlined above has resulted in an influx of students into a higher education system which is not prepared to support them. To back up this argument, we contrast the high-level aspirations that the university sector directs at students, and evidence of major problems that students are facing, both while at university, and as they emerge into the labour market. We shine light, in particular, on evidence that students are facing mental health issues which are debilitating to the extent that anxiety and depression now comprise a significant category of disability. We examine some of the challenges that the student population faces through the lens of university-level data pertaining to key aspects of student support and welfare.

Higher education: The promise of future success

An examination of websites and prospectuses of major Irish universities reveals competitive efforts to create narratives foregrounding institutional strengths and histories of prestige woven together with an embrace of modern science and technology and an optimistic future outlook - the promise of better job prospects and a successful life after graduation. The language used in the marketing and advertising materials of higher education institutions primarily consists of human capital-oriented jargon such as 'global citizenship', 'global focus', 'community', 'diversity', 'flexible career', 'international', 'research centred', 'cutting edge', 'technology-focused', 'career-ready', 'hit the ground running', 'creativity', 'innovation', 'lifelong learning', 'high profile', 'job placement experience', 'world-class', and so on. The realities of state budget cuts, student to staff ratios, classroom size, long waiting times for (limited) counselling appointments, struggles with finding affordable housing, and the cost of living, especially in big cities such as Dublin and Galway are omitted from the picture. University College Dublin's (UCD) 2019 undergraduate prospectus attempts to provide some budgeting figures to help prospective students assess the cost of living in Dublin, but the costs of living away from home are substantially understated in comparison to the actual cost of living in Dublin, even from the perspective of a rough guideline (UCD, 2019:13).

We take the case of TCD as it illustrates trends across the university sector in Ireland. The chief reform that TCD has undertaken in its undergraduate education is called the Trinity Education Project (TEP). All main component parts of TEP (curriculum design, assessment, academic year structure) converge around the so-called Trinity Graduate Attributes. An internal university document dated June 2016 (TCD, 2016) explains:

> "In June 2015, the first iteration of the Trinity Graduate Attributes was presented to [university] Council for discussion. Since then, on the basis of ongoing consultation with the College community and with employers, four Trinity Graduate Attributes have emerged."

Further, this document outlines the Graduate Attributes as follows:
* to think independently,
* to act responsibly,
* to develop continuously,
* to communicate effectively.

Even though these attributes are the fulcrum around which all of undergraduate education at TCD is supposed to revolve, they are presented on the public face of the university website in a haphazard way i.e. not in prominent places, but rather buried in other content, in over-sized font or in fast-changing slide shows. While these attributes are extremely generic, they are also elusive and hard to clearly establish. Indeed, we are yet to come across a student who would be able to recite them. In our roles as lecturers, we still come across third and fourth year students (i.e. those in their last two years of the undergraduate degree) who have never had the experience of writing a critically evaluative essay or presenting

in front of their peers. Most students feel very underprepared for such a task, which could be considered as fundamental to the fourth attribute (being able to communicate effectively). Various internally circulated PowerPoint slides contain elaborations on these attributes such as, 'Commitment to building career skills and maintaining career readiness,' but they appear to be removed from the ongoing concerns that students express and evince.

The university websites and brochures are awash with testimonials from students who adhere to the publicly promulgated and idealised picture of the successful student. Undergraduate testimonials on the TCD website feature the following statements from students:

> "I feel I will have a real competitive edge by having both a Bachelor's Degree and a Masters from a top international university (…) I'm hoping to pursue a PhD at an Ivy League School after Trinity. On top of this, I know that there are a lot of job opportunities for Trinity graduates. I'm loving being here. I've joined so many societies from film and tennis to hiking and croquet!"

> "Trinity is located in the heart of Dublin, and I often get the feeling that the centre of Dublin has become the college campus as well."

> "As Ireland is a member state of the European Union, it is a brilliant opportunity to visit the rest of Europe and to enhance our own understanding of the continent. Trinity seemed to offer the perfect combination of a fantastic University life and high calibre academic work."

Tellingly, all these testimonials are by students from abroad, who paint a picture of student life exclusively focused on academic excellence while also having the time and money to have fun and go travelling. While we do not want to deny the genuine nature of such individual testimonials, we consider it important to interrogate them critically as representations of what it is like to be a student in contemporary Ireland. There is a glaring contrast between this idealised graduate, and the realities of many (if not most) students' experiences, where increasing numbers of students struggle with learning difficulties and mental health issues to the point where they have to exit their chosen course of study, even in the Sophister (last two) years, at which point they (and society) have made considerable investments of time and other resources into an educational pathway that is ruptured due to inadequate or belated supports. We now turn to examining the challenges that students face, and that the ambitious national strategy for massive expansion in third-level education has not prepared to prevent or to effectively address.

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE: COUNSELLING AND DISABILITY SERVICES AT TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

We approach the student experience through interrogation of data that is compiled by Trinity College's Student Counselling Services and Disability Services. We then present student experience through data collected directly

from students through end-of-term surveys of modules taught by us, which also feature student reflections on the issues raised during these modules – the challenges they experience as students and expect to face as new graduates.

Established in the year 2000, Trinity College's Student Disability Services (DS) are responsible for implementing the university's policy of providing its students with equality of opportunity in education by ensuring, as best as possible, access to facilities and services in all areas of student life. According to DS annual reports ranging from 2005-2017, the number of students registered as having a disability has doubled from 1.5% of the student population in 2001-02 to 3.2% by 2006-07, and further increased to 8.6% in 2017. These figures correspond to a fourfold increase in mental health issues as a disability category, as evidenced by data on the rising numbers of DARE applications from 2010-2016 (Reilly, 2019; NicFhlannchadha, 2018). DARE applications offer an alternative admission scheme for prospective third-level students whose disabilities adversely affected their second-level education. It must be noted that the increase in students registering for disability services corresponds with an increase in the total number of incoming students over the years. On average, there are more undergraduate students registered with TCD's disability services than graduate students as undergraduate students outnumber graduate students at the university. Notably, the 2017-2018 TCD DS report observes that while the number of students with specific learning difficulties has decreased slightly from 367 in 2016-17 to 362 in 2017-18, there has been a significant increase in the number of students with mental health difficulties from 302 in 2016-17 to 361 in 2017-18, thereby rendering mental health the single largest disability category for registering with disability supports in TCD.

TCD's counselling services are linked with DS and keep data on the numbers of student attendance for each service. Students can attend counselling for any reason and do not need a medical diagnosis to attend. However, students must have a medical diagnosis to register with DS. All students with mental health difficulties are assigned a Mental Health Occupational Therapist as their key contact in DS. Students are also offered the opportunity to discuss their support needs and mental health in a needs assessment meeting. Students may have ongoing Occupational Therapy meetings if deemed necessary (TDS, 2018). It should be noted that not all students experiencing mental health difficulties may want to engage with DS and, therefore, the numbers provided in DS or mental health data from the university may vary.

The Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD), which compiles statistics from 27 third-level educational institutions in Ireland on mental health and disability attributed Trinity College with having the highest number of students with mental health difficulties in third-level education in 2017-18, with 126 of 499 students applying for disability supports (TDS, 2018). The increase in numbers may be a reflection of the increased availability of the category of mental health as a disability. It could also reflect the campus' outreach efforts in awareness raising as well as students' self-awareness of their condition as a disability, and feeling safe and confident enough to disclose it to the university.

As teaching instructors, we periodically receive Learning Educational Needs Summary (LENS) reports from DS staff alerting us to students with special needs. We have found that the number of LENS reports on students experiencing mental health concerns such as anxiety, panic attacks and depression are on the rise as compared to LENS reports of students with learning disabilities. Students with mental health disabilities are also more likely to take longer to progress through higher education and are also more likely to drop out of their programme compared to other peers in their cohort who do not identify with mental health-related disabilities. Internal studies on student withdrawal rates at TCD reveal that 33% of students (91 out of 277) who have withdrawn between 2003-2013 are those with mental health difficulties (Treanor, 2016). Those with significant on-going physical or mental illnesses or specific learning difficulties were found to be more likely to defer their course, go 'off books' or withdraw altogether rather than use support systems provided by the disability service (Treanor, Doyle, & Reilly, 2013).

AHEAD's (2016) report 'Mental Health Matters' observes that a majority of Irish college services (14) are not involved in supporting students with mental health difficulties in transition planning for employment. However, the report also observes that disability and counselling services have been hard hit by budget cuts, which have greatly reduced their staffing, resulting in six month waiting lists in many institutions. It does not help that state financial supports for students with disabilities have also continued to diminish over time. For example, the HEA provides funding for educational supports for full-time students with disabilities through the European Social Fund (ESF). However, while the number of eligible applications for ESF funding has been increasing every year, the ESF's per capita funding has decreased considerably (DS, 2016, 2018). This has resulted in the need to prioritise counselling and disability supports to students who are deemed to be most in need. Frequently, students who present themselves to counselling services are in the midst of a crisis, but are forced to wait because of the shortage of counselling appointments, thus, making them further distressed and unable to cope with the demands of their academic or personal life. The duration of student counselling is usually short-term, and the staff works to link students in with services in their residential catchment area. However, accessing services for international students and students from counties other than Dublin is a difficult process. Despite the best efforts of the personnel and units on the ground, it is clearly the case that a large share of student support needs are not met.

The student experience: Student surveys

We administered surveys to third-year students in social work and social policy in three course modules we teach: 'The Life Course and Evolving Welfare States' (30 students), 'Global Health and Social Policy' (48 students), and 'Intersectionality and Social Policy' (46 students). We asked students why

they chose third-level education, what their expectations were for entering higher education, and what their actual experiences and challenges were. We also inquired into some of the pressures students felt about the prospects of entering the labour market after graduation. The questionnaires were distributed and filled in on an anonymous basis, hence we do not attribute any respondent characteristics such as gender to the quotes. However, in some responses, students have self-identified their marital status or age (e.g. 'mature students', 'being only 19', 'single mother', 'married', 'living with partner'). Some students have also self-disclosed special needs such as learning disabilities and mental health related concerns.

Among the responses to surveys distributed in the 'Global Health' and 'Intersectionality' modules, a majority of the students expressed that they pursued higher education because they expected to gain the necessary qualifications to be gainfully employed after graduation. Additionally, students expressed a desire to participate in social activities, make friends, learn new perspectives and gain fulfilment by contributing to the wider community. Students also expected that the university would support them in balancing their work and social lives. However, they expressed disappointment and concern that the university services fell short of meeting their needs. Some students attested to working part-time to support their families while also trying to balance study.

A very common experience among the students we surveyed is the actual or perceived need to work in part-time jobs that help to pay for the costs of education, housing and transport, but do not add any 'higher-level' skills that could be cited in curriculum vitae for 'graduate level' jobs. Some students expressed pressures with time management as they had long commutes to and from university. In addition to travelling from Dublin's neighbouring towns, students also travelled over 2-4 hours to attend classes during the week as they were unable to find suitable accommodation in Dublin due to the housing crisis which has pushed rents to unaffordable levels for many of them. Following are some student responses to questions about the challenges they faced. The responses below largely echoed the sentiments of the collective:

"Balancing work and college can be challenging [as I] cannot afford to go to college without part-time work."

"My main challenges are [not having sufficient] organisational skills, confidence in public speaking, uncertainty about my career choices."

"The workload is difficult and is taking a toll on my mental health. The stress can lead to break down."

"It's a struggle to balance work, family and hobbies."

"I am struggling to save enough money to find somewhere to live [in Dublin]. Crippling housing market."

"As a parent I found no support. I have children and had to do a work placement. During the placement, it was extremely difficult managing my home, parenting,

part-time job and a full-time placement. Managing all of that together is unrealistic. I lost wages as I had to cut back hours to do an unpaid full-time placement."

"No good childcare support from college. Prevents me from staying back in college to study."

Students worried about their pending graduation and the competitive employment market. While social work students felt some sense of security in having a vocational training, social policy students worried about not knowing their future in the employment market. The younger social policy students worried about employers taking advantage of their inexperience as new recruits and short-changing them on their starting salaries, of having to possibly work longer hours, thus experiencing stress and burnout, facing tough competition in the job market and not finding a job in their field of specialisation. Some students did not appear to be aware of the college's career services and felt they lacked appropriate guidance on applying for jobs. Other students shared that they could not even entertain the thought of having children even if they wanted to because of the emotional and financial costs involved alongside studies and employment.

Among the responses to the survey distributed to third-year Social Policy students who took a module titled 'The Life Course and Evolving Welfare States,' the following statements illustrate the main challenges that students reported experiencing and foreseeing for their immediate post-graduation lives. The fact that university education has few applied or job placement elements was a cause of concern for many students who felt that 'graduate jobs' would specify relevant work experience. Many responses implied that students would have been better prepared for the labour market through more applied and vocational routes, yet these were missing and sufficient exposure to the labour market had not been incorporated into the academic course model:

"I feel I lack the experience and skills, have the education, but no practical experience. [There is a] lack of internships or vocational and training programmes. [It is a challenge] managing college and trying to keep a part-time job because of costs."

These experiences and fears also reflect that Ireland does not have a structured student loans system, which means students either have to have significant parental back-up financially (paying the costs directly or acting as loan guarantors) or shoulder a large part of the costs through easy-access, low paid part-time jobs such as pub work, catering and retail positions. Such jobs help students to get by, but do not contribute to their skills at the level expected in the competitive graduate jobs market although some students may be able to utilise their personal networks and individual means to gain higher-skilled, more relevant work experience. The respondents expressed the fear that they would "not be able to progress [on to employment without further education e.g. Master's course]," and that while they were on course to "qualify with a degree," they might "not have enough of a skill for a particular or any stable/secure profession."

The sense of anxiety is evident in this response that reflects on family trajectories as well as future expectations:

"We grew up in the Celtic tiger [era] but watched the crash and family members lose jobs with no prospects of gaining anything above a minimum wage back. [I feel] anxiety by the lack of a future that other generations took for granted. The path to a stable middle-class job seems insurmountable. Owning a home seems unobtainable for so many. My peer group is floating helplessly with those in power refusing to listen, let alone help. It's a depressing reality that after years of scraping by in college, there may be another five or more years of scraping by in a new job watching those who started a decade before me enjoying very different and more appealing contracts."

The above mention of generational inequalities in the labour market refers, in addition to a broader pattern of growing inequalities in remuneration, to the egregious differences in pay levels and terms of contract offered to new employees since the recession in several sectors in the Irish labour force, including the teaching and nursing professions among many others. From our ongoing contacts with recent graduates, we know that their labour market outcomes vary greatly, from successful applications for roles commensurate with their degree and ambitions to ongoing struggles to gain anything other than casual work or short-term 'activation style' placements through agencies tasked with assisting the unemployed. Again, we are faced with the inadequacy of data that would ideally be longitudinal and hence able to capture pathways over time, yet the current surveys conducted by TCD are limited to one off questionnaires with such weak response rates that the results are statistically meaningless.

Conclusion

The ideal graduate is expected to embody the nation's hope for future success as well as to uphold the alma mater's reputation among employers. Official documents and public representations of the university are replete with the successful and driven students who resonate with these ambitions. Couched in this rhetoric of the graduate as a beacon of hope, however, are deeper failings of a welfare state that is still battling the aftermath of recession. The failures are particularly visible in the area of housing policy, with availability and cost of rental accommodation in Dublin among the very highest in all of Europe, yet there is no national accommodation strategy for students. Student grants are inadequate and there is no system of state-backed student loans that would allow students to take low interest loans to sustain themselves while studying. These failures in financial and housing policies are projected onto students, manifesting in a very real way in their minds and lives as they struggle to balance between institutional, family and personal expectations, the demands of daily life, and future plans. While we have not been able to conduct a more detailed analysis on the basis of important variables such as social class back-

ground and family status, there can be little doubt that these pressures are most acutely experienced by students from backgrounds where financial support from family is scarce and pressures to divide time between work and family obligations can become unmanageable due to inadequacies in other areas such as childcare supports, which we have not been able to cover in detail.

In sum, students are caught between the ambitions and expectations of an education system that almost automatically pushes them into higher education without the requisite and adequate supports, and expects them to sink or swim, leaving the 'sinking student' – to quote one of our participants above – "floating helplessly with those in power refusing to listen let alone help." While the current provisions of educational and mental health supports are staffed with highly-skilled and hard-working individuals, the situation calls for much more extensive changes than any individual or any single higher education institution could achieve, namely root-and-branch reform in the funding of higher education, the provision of more vocational alternatives, financial support of students, housing policy and childcare policy. These are all matters for national policy, and must be addressed by the government, not left to be tackled by the isolated student.

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