

How I beat the odds for a place at Oxford

I graduated from Trinity College Dublin in 2004 with a first class honours and top of my year. From there, I went on to take a Master's degree at Oxford, where I have remained to complete a PhD.

What makes this remarkable is that I am from, and went to school in, Ballyfermot. The Dublin 10 area consistently has the lowest proportion of school leavers in college, out of the 21 Dublin postal districts. The latest available figures show 12% of Ballyfermot students made the transition to third level, compared to a high of 87% (Dublin 14) and an average rate of 45%, in 2004.

In my opinion

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Where, then, did it all go right for me?

Despite the fact that, or rather because, my parents had had a short and negative time at school they realised the value of education. Thanks to their efforts I had regular attendance and a quiet space to do homework, which made following lessons easier, my progress though school carefree, and kept me in education longer than might otherwise have been the case.

In the absence of hard facts (about the third level system) and hard cash (to fund continuing in education), 10 years passed between completing my Leaving Cert and entering Trinity as a mature student.

During, what I have come to call, my gap-decade I got a job in TCD Student Union shop. This was crucial. The time I spent working here broke down my preconceptions and raised my expectations. It made me want to go to college.

Equally important, was my entitlement to the Back to Education Allowance (BETA). Paid at the same rate as a social welfare payment, the BETA is not reduced if students take a job to supplement their allowance. Having a BETA and accommodating employers enabled me to combine full-time education and flexible employment. It put me in a position to go to college.

Recent developments in education policy are replicating many of these conditions. They are giving more students the opportunity to access higher education, as the 5% increase in transition rates for Ballyfermot since 1998 indicates.

However, if these students are to have the opportunity to realise their full academic potential within third level the solution, in my opinion, remains providing them with hard facts and hard cash.

An important ingredient in my academic advancement is the time my lecturers have dedicated to helping and encouraging me, and making me aware of my options.

This mentoring relationship is under threat from a time-squeeze caused by the increasing managerial and publishing demands being placed on staff.

For mature and working-class students in particular, the funding system for postgraduate studies is impeding them from achieving to the best of their ability.

The BTEA, since 2003, does not continue beyond an undergraduate qualification. While the recent expansion in state funded 4th level scholarships is welcome, the majority have an employment threshold attached and they are closed to studies outside Ireland.

In my opinion, it all went right for me because I had access to hard facts and hard cash. With some joined-up policy thinking it could go right for many more like me.