

Mature Reflections

A survey of the career experiences of mature graduates, University of Limerick, 1998 – 2002

**Careers Service
Cooperative Education & Careers Division
University of Limerick**

**Compiled by Patsy Ryan, Careers Advisor
Edited by Mary Sweeney, Head of Careers**

December 2004

Mature Reflections

This report is part of the Careers Support Service for Mature Students offered by the Cooperative Education & Careers Division of the University of Limerick. This project is funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) as part of the Strategic Initiatives Scheme under the Improved Access category.

Published by:

Careers Service
Cooperative Education & Careers Division
University of Limerick
Limerick

December 2004

The report can be downloaded from: <http://www.ul.ie/careers/careers/mature>

Foreword

This report presents the results of a survey of 60 mature graduates who completed full-time courses in the University of Limerick (UL) between 1998 and 2002. The UL Careers Service conducted the survey in 2003 in order to provide information on the career experiences of mature graduates from the University. There is an absence of data on the career destinations of mature graduates in Ireland at a time when the government policy is to increase the participation level of mature students in higher education. This report goes some way towards filling that information gap.

The report provides statistical information on the employment details of mature graduates, explores their personal experiences of the job search process, and presents a number of case studies from different academic disciplines.

The survey was supported by funding from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) as part of the Strategic Initiatives Scheme. The scheme supports the development of a range of activities in HEA institutions, which are designed to increase access and participation among under-represented groups (including mature students) in higher education.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement is made to the graduates who participated so willingly in the survey, in particular, the six graduates interviewed as individual case studies; to Denise Flannery for her skill in compiling this report and producing the accompanying graphics; to Patrice Twomey for her suggestions and observations on the final report; and to Ann Marie Costelloe for the cover design.

Executive Summary

For mature students, the decision to apply to higher education institutions is often part of a much greater decision to make a total life change. A degree is seen as the key to a better quality of life, an opportunity for intellectual development, and the possibility of material improvement. As the participation rate of mature students in higher education increases, so also does their need for information on career options and employment prospects. To date, there is a lack of recorded information on career destinations of mature graduates in Ireland. To meet this need, the Careers Service in the University of Limerick undertook a survey of mature graduates who completed full-time courses of study between 1998 and 2002. This report presents detailed information on the employment record and career experiences of 60 mature graduates, and provides a set of case studies representing a broad range of academic disciplines.

The overall findings of the survey are extremely positive and reflect a very high satisfaction level amongst this cohort of mature graduates.

Key Survey Results

Employment Details

- Employment levels of mature graduates compare very favourably with the first destination statistics for all Irish graduates, with 85% of the respondents in employment, 73% full-time and 12% part-time.
- Most of the graduates remained in Ireland, with only 4% working abroad. The most popular regions in Ireland were Dublin and the Mid-West.
- Salary levels were high, with more than 33% of mature graduates reporting salaries in excess of €33,000 in June 2003.
- The vast majority of graduates (89%) considered that their course was relevant to their current job.
- Almost half of the graduates had undertaken some form of further study since completing their degree.

Experience of the job search process

- Two thirds of the graduates thought that maturity proved to be an advantage in entering the job market.
- Only 3% believed that they experienced discrimination in the job search on the basis of their age.
- The vast majority (83%) considered that their degree made them more employable.
- For mature graduates, personal contacts proved to be the most important source of job vacancies.

Conclusions

The experience of these 60 mature graduates is evidence of the value of higher education as a route to a professional career. Not only did they successfully complete demanding degree programmes, the majority went on to highly skilled professional and technical jobs. The fact that half of the group subsequently continued with their education through some form of further study or training, suggests that they fully appreciate the need for life-long learning in order to maintain employability throughout their working lives.

The report also highlights the need for customised careers services that reflect the particular circumstances of the growing population of mature students in higher education. Many mature students have to balance student life with home, caring, and work commitments. This calls for a flexible provision of careers services, using a variety of delivery mechanisms, and adapting the content to relate to the needs and interests of students. Careers services have a vital role to play in supporting mature students as they prepare to make the transition from education to a professional career.

As the participation level of mature students in higher education increases, it is important that there is a formal mechanism in place to monitor employment records and career progression in a systematic way. In turn, this will provide accurate and up-to-date information to educational providers as well as prospective mature students.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations are included for mature students, employers, careers services, and higher education institutions. These include:

Mature students

Recognise and promote the value of transferable skills gained during the degree and through previous experiences, and be aware of how these skills can enhance employability.

Employers

Consider the business case for recruiting mature graduates: employers benefit from the skills and experience combination that mature graduates offer; it promotes diversity in the employee profile; it shows a practical commitment to equal opportunities.

Careers services

Collaborate with other support services and academic departments in delivering customised career development modules as part of access programmes for mature students.

Higher education institutions

Demonstrate a real commitment to the widening participation objective by funding permanent positions for specialist support staff that deliver services to mature students.

Table of Contents

FOREWORD.....	III
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	IV
INTRODUCTION.....	1
METHODOLOGY.....	3
Section 1: Statistical Analysis of Survey Results	5
GRADUATE PROFILES.....	5
<i>Gender of Respondents.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Age of Respondents</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Degree Backgrounds and Faculties of Study.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Year of Graduation.....</i>	<i>9</i>
SITUATION IN 2003.....	10
<i>Employment Situation.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Occupation Categories</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Salaries.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Sources of Information for Job Vacancies</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Further Study and Training</i>	<i>16</i>
Section 2: Mature Graduates' Experience of the Job Search	17
EXPERIENCE OF THE JOB SEARCH PROCESS.....	17
<i>Entering the labour market as a mature graduate</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Discrimination as a factor during the job search.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Does a degree improve employability?.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Careers and job search advice for current mature students.....</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Mature Graduates' Suggestions for the Careers Service</i>	<i>22</i>
Section 3: Case Studies	24
<i>BSc Applied Mathematics and Computing.....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>BEng Manufacturing Engineering</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>BBS Business Studies</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>BEd Physical Education.....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>BA History, Politics, Sociology and Social Studies</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>MBS Human Resource Management</i>	<i>33</i>
Section 4: Careers Services for Mature Students at the University of Limerick	35
UL CAREERS SERVICE	35
Conclusion and Recommendations	38
Appendices	42

Introduction

The profile of the higher education student population in Ireland is changing. It is no longer the sole preserve of school leavers. Life-long learning has become a government priority, and an increasing number of mature students are entering higher education institutions. Mature students, however, are not a homogenous group. Many have missed out on the chance to attend third level when younger, while others attend for professional reasons or intellectual and personal development. A significant number of mature students are motivated by career development or career change. This report focuses on the career experiences of 60 mature graduates from the University of Limerick.

In Ireland, a mature student is defined as being 23 years old on registration for their course of study. The HEA *Submission to Commission on the Points System* (1999), recommends that, by 2005, each third level institution in Ireland should have a quota of at least 15% of students aged 23 or above entering courses. At the time of this survey (2003), mature students accounted for approximately 5% of full time students in higher education in Ireland, one of the lowest figures in Europe. If colleges reach the 15% quota, this will inevitably impact on higher education careers services, and will require that they analyse and customise their services to ensure that they provide a high quality service to mature students, as well as their existing student groups.

According to Harris (2001), 'there is a low awareness among students of how to use the Careers Service, particularly among socially disadvantaged groups, specific subject groups and mature learners. Indeed...it was clear that those who appear most in need are often those least likely to use their Careers Service'. A similar concern is expressed by the Action Group on *Access to Third Level Education* (2001), which notes that the lack of coherent information and guidance service for adults is the second most frequently cited barrier to higher education for mature students. Mature students need information and guidance on entry requirements, course content and the career implications of courses. This point is also highlighted by the HEA in *Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland, Action Plan 2005-2007* (2004). One of the action points is to 'ensure that information and guidance on routes of access and progression to higher education are available to all learners through guidance counsellors and other educators'.

Careers services have an important role to play in widening access and making higher education a worthwhile experience for mature students by supporting them in making the transition from education to a professional career. It is vital, therefore, that careers services adopt a proactive approach in targeting mature students and delivering services that meet their specific career-related needs.

Since 2002, the UL Careers Service has introduced a number of customised careers initiatives, including this report, specifically designed for mature students. The report is based on a survey of mature graduates who had completed full-time courses in a wide range of academic disciplines between 1998 and 2002. The purpose of this survey was to learn more about the career experiences of these graduates, with a view to enhancing the careers services available to current and future mature students in UL. The survey was conducted in 2003, and this report presents detailed information on the employment record and career experiences of 60 mature graduates, as well as a set of case studies representing a broad range of academic disciplines.

As the participation rate of mature students in higher education increases, so also does their need for information on career options and employment prospects. To date, there is a lack of recorded information on the career destinations of mature graduates in Ireland. This report will be a useful information resource for mature students, and will also serve as a guide for higher education careers services in providing more focused and tailored services for mature students.

The report is structured as follows:

Section 1 provides quantitative data on graduate employment, locations, occupations, salaries, sources of job information, and further study. It also includes details of age, gender, course of study and year of graduation.

Section 2 covers the qualitative findings of the survey. Respondents comment on their experiences as mature graduates entering the employment market.

Section 3 presents six case studies. The case studies cover personal backgrounds, reasons for returning to education, life as a mature student, and situations after graduation.

Section 4 describes the customised careers support services for mature students provided by UL Careers Service.

Methodology

The target group for this research comprised 230 mature graduates who completed full-time degree programmes in UL between 1998 and 2002. This was the full complement of mature students who graduated from the University during this period. For the purpose of the survey, a mature student is defined as anyone over the age of 23 on registration.

In June 2003, the Careers Service wrote to all 230 mature graduates, informing them of the survey and inviting them to participate by completing a postal questionnaire. Each person received a five-page detailed questionnaire (Appendix 1) covering their experiences and perceptions of the graduate job search process and their current status. The first section focused on courses studied, current employment status, employment history since graduating, sources of job information, and further study or training. The format of that section of the questionnaire was similar to the questionnaire used in the annual *First Destinations Survey*, conducted on behalf of the Higher Education Authority. This allows for some comparison of results with the general graduate population. The second section of the questionnaire dealt with qualitative issues. This required detailed responses to open ended questions regarding their experience of the job search, advice regarding the job search for current mature students, and recommendations on how the Careers Service in UL could meet the career related needs of mature students.

The initial response rate was quite low, and the postal survey was followed up with a number of telephone calls. This increased the total response rate to 60, 26% of the total population of mature graduates. A number of the respondents agreed to give a more detailed account of their experiences of life as a mature student. Six people were subsequently contacted, and were invited to write about the following areas: their personal backgrounds, reasons for returning to education, life as a mature student, current situation, and careers advice for current mature students. The names of the six respondents have been changed to preserve confidentiality. The six case studies reflect a broad range of academic disciplines in UL: Humanities, Business, Education, Engineering and Informatics & Electronics.

In terms of secondary research, no published material exists on career destinations of mature graduates in Ireland. Some limited information is available for the UK, and

Mature Reflections

these reports were used as background reference material for this report. The *Destinations of Mature Graduates in 2002* report, published by the Careers Service in the University of Strathclyde, presents data on the first destinations of Strathclyde mature graduates. *The Voices* report (1999), published by AGCAS, reflects the personal career experiences and perceptions of 13 mature graduates in the UK. It helped to influence the content of the open-ended questions in the qualitative section of this survey questionnaire.

Section 1: Statistical Analysis of Survey Results

Section 1 provides a statistical analysis of the quantitative data covered in the survey questionnaire. This includes profiles of respondents regarding age, gender, course of study, and year of graduation. It also provides a detailed analysis of employment status, occupational categories, location of employment, salary levels, further study and training, and sources of vacancy information. The format used in the survey for these questions is similar to that used in the annual *First Destinations Survey*, which is conducted by higher education institutions, under the auspices of the Higher Education Authority.

Graduate Profiles

Gender of Respondents

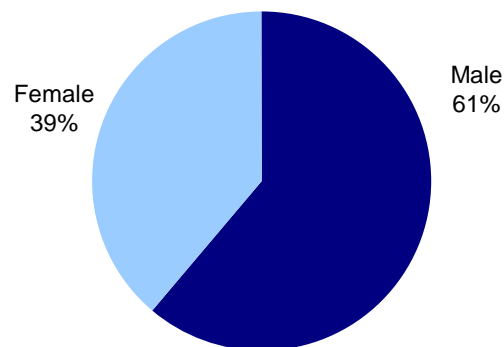


Figure 1: Gender of respondents

Figure 1 represents the gender percentage of respondents; 61% male, and 39% female. This broadly reflects the overall gender breakdown of the population of mature graduates surveyed. Interestingly, the male dominance is at variance with the gender breakdown of the total undergraduate population at UL, which is much more evenly balanced, with 52% male and 48% female. Not surprisingly, there is a higher concentration of male mature students in Science, Engineering and Information & Electronics courses, whereas female students have a higher representation in Humanities courses. There is a relatively even gender balance in Business and Education courses. These details are presented in Figure 4.

Age of Respondents

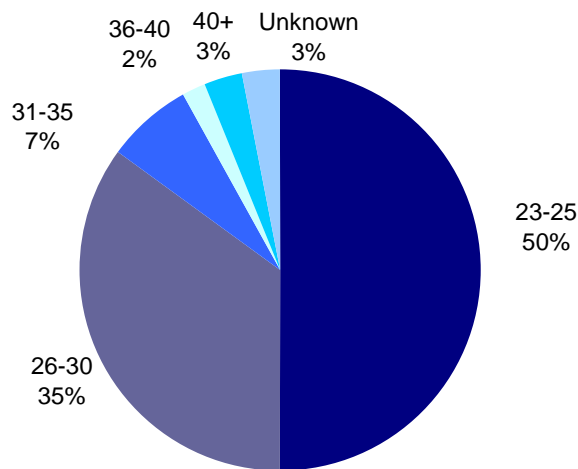


Figure 2: Age of Respondents

Although all these graduates conform to the definition of a mature student, i.e. a person over the age of 23 on entering university, it is clear from this chart that the vast majority of respondents were relatively young, as 85% were under 30 on registration. Half of the group, 50%, were aged between 23 and 25 when they registered for their degree course. It is realistic to speculate that some of these may not have qualified for entry as school-leavers, and that they benefited from the more flexible entry requirements for mature entry.

Since 2002, there has been a significant increase in the participation rate of mature students in UL and, at the same time, a widening of age profiles. Approximately 50% of the current cohort of mature students was over 30 on registration, and this includes a significant group aged over 40. The introduction of new degree programmes is partly responsible for this increase. One-year Access programmes for mature students are also influential, as these programmes are designed to introduce students to the higher education experience and provide them with the necessary support in academic disciplines, study skills, and career decision-making. The appointment of a Mature Student Officer has been instrumental in making the University more accessible and user-friendly to prospective mature students.

Degree Backgrounds and Faculties of Study

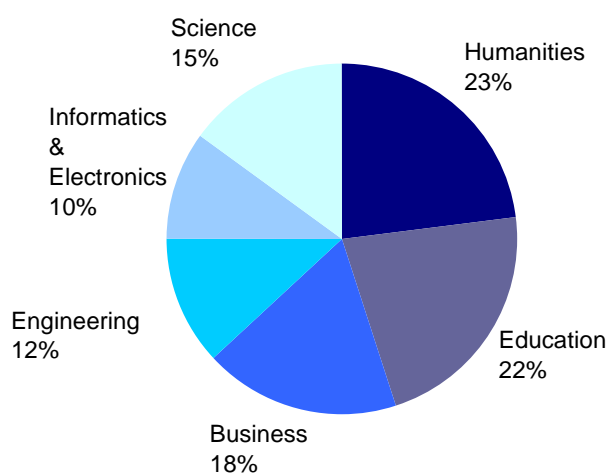


Figure 3: Percentage of respondents from UL faculties

Figure 3 shows the distribution of respondents per faculty. A more detailed analysis of specific programmes of study is presented in Figure 4.

- The majority of respondents studied Humanities, Education, and Business, with fewer opting for Science, Engineering, and Informatics & Electronics.
- The high percentage of respondents (23%) from Humanities disciplines reflects the popularity of these programmes to mature students. The introduction of a number of new Humanities programmes in UL is likely to attract an even higher number of mature applicants.
- Teacher training courses have also been a popular choice for adults returning to education. Of these courses, Physical Education (PE) was the most popular programme.
- Almost one fifth of the respondents opted for a Business degree.
- Science, Engineering, and Informatics & Electronics courses attracted sizeable numbers of mature students, which is encouraging, given the significance of these disciplines to Ireland's economic development.
- None of the graduates who participated in this survey undertook the recently introduced Access programmes for mature students. These programmes are intended to introduce mature students to different degree disciplines and provide them with support in subject areas and study skills. To date, these programmes have had a very high transfer rate into full-time degrees and, in time, this may impact on the selection of degree courses by students. This could be a subject for a future research study.

Degree Programmes

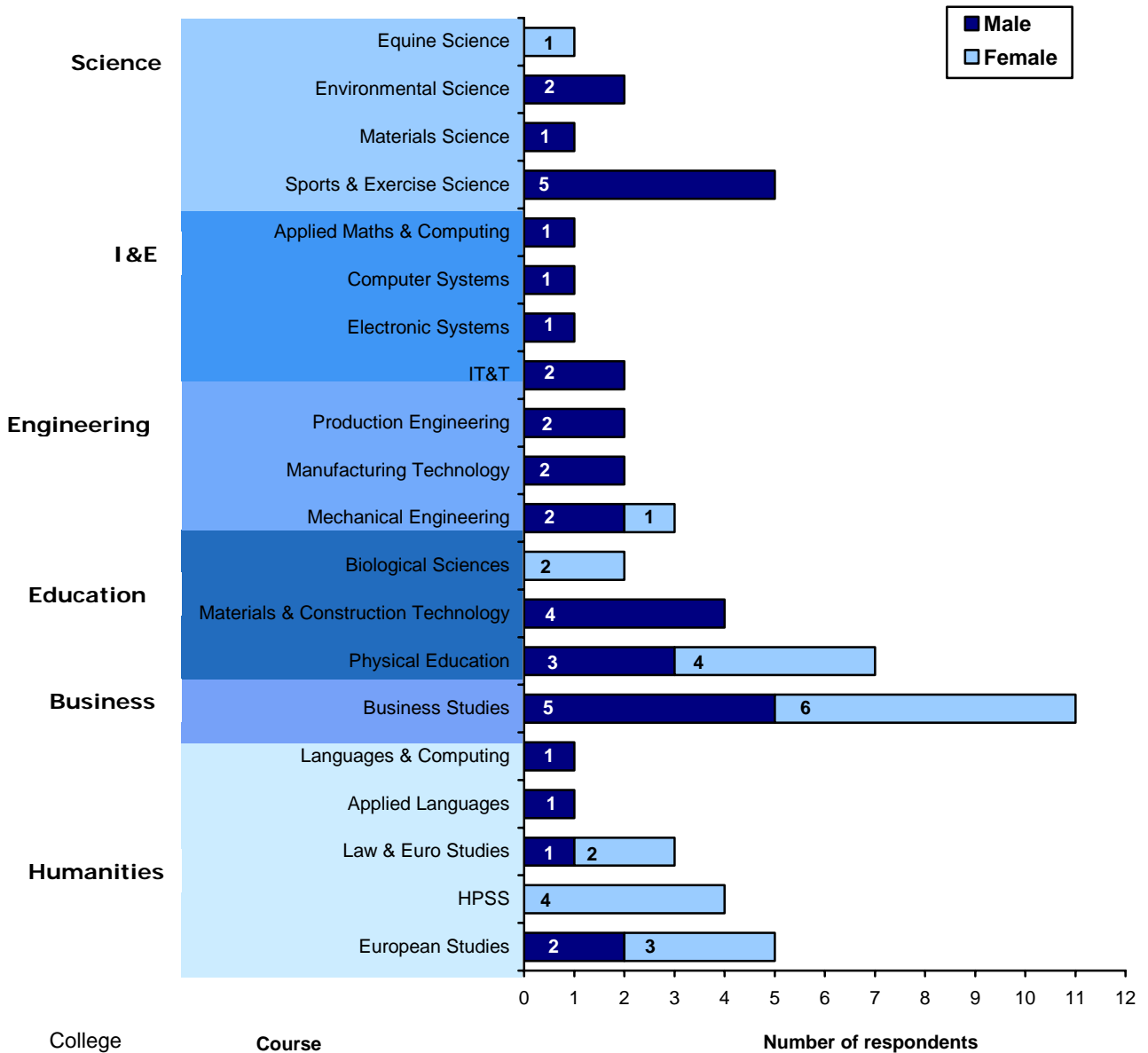


Figure 4: Degree programmes

There is variation in the male to female ratio across the different disciplines:

- The gender difference is particularly pronounced in Science, Engineering, and Informatics & Electronics, with only two female graduates, representing less than 10% of mature graduates in these colleges. This suggests traditional stereotypes still prevail.
- In Business, Education, and Humanities, the distribution is much more even.

Year of Graduation

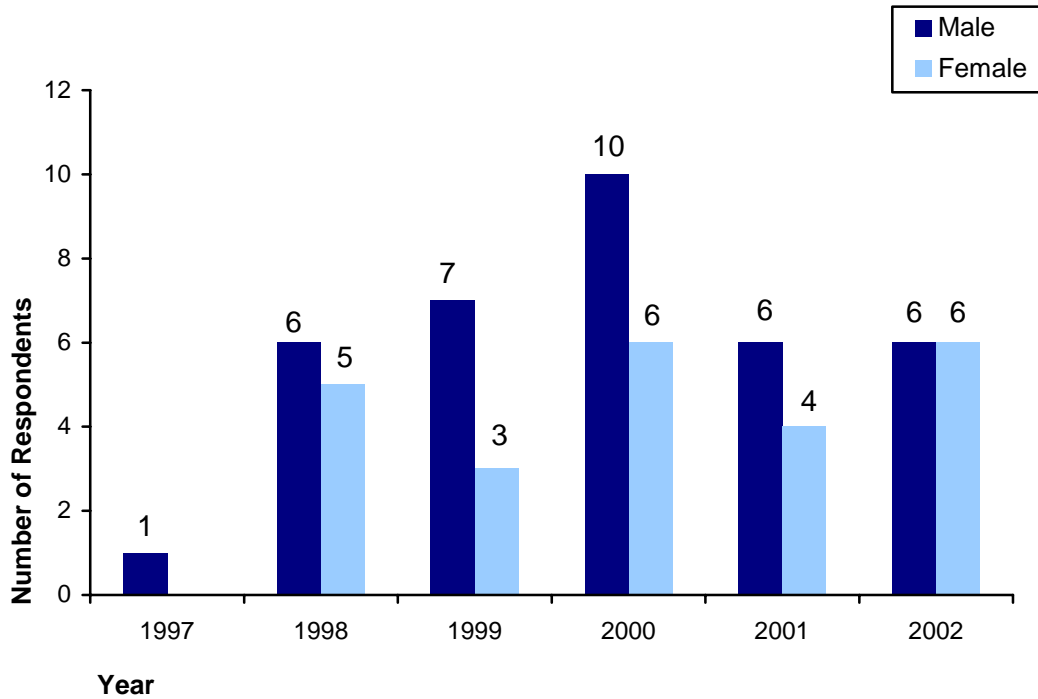


Figure 5: Graduation years

The criterion used for inclusion in the survey is the formal definition of a mature student, which is a student aged 23 or more on registration. With the exception of one person who graduated in 1997, all other respondents graduated between 1998 and 2002, with a relatively even distribution over the four-year period, peaking in 2000.

Situation in 2003

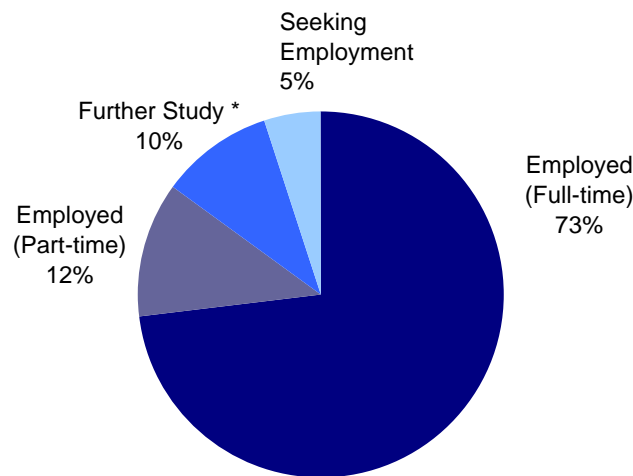


Figure 6: Situation in June 2003

* Further Study: this percentage of respondents was in full-time study. A number of employed respondents were also undertaking further study, on both full and part-time bases. See Figure 11 for further details.

Employment Situation

One of the primary motivations for mature students returning to full-time education is to access the graduate employment market and to improve their long-term employment and promotional prospects. In this context, the results of the survey are particularly encouraging, as they compare very favourably with First Destination statistics for all Irish graduates compiled by the HEA annually. The key findings are as follows:

- There were 85% of the graduates in employment; of these, 73% were working full-time and 12% part-time.
- At the time of the survey, 10% of the graduates were in full-time postgraduate study, but almost half of the respondents had undertaken some form of further study since graduation.
- Only 5% were seeking employment at the time of the survey. However, all but one of these graduates had been employed at some stage since graduation.

The results of this particular survey suggest, firstly, that the graduate market is receptive to mature graduates and, secondly, that the career aspirations of mature graduates were fulfilled.

Occupation Categories

The survey shows that the vast majority of mature graduates were successful in finding employment. To gain a better insight into the type and level of employment, a more detailed analysis of the employment details is required. The following chart provides a breakdown per occupational category. What is very encouraging is that all of these jobs could be considered graduate level positions. A full listing of all the respondents' job titles is presented in Appendix 2.

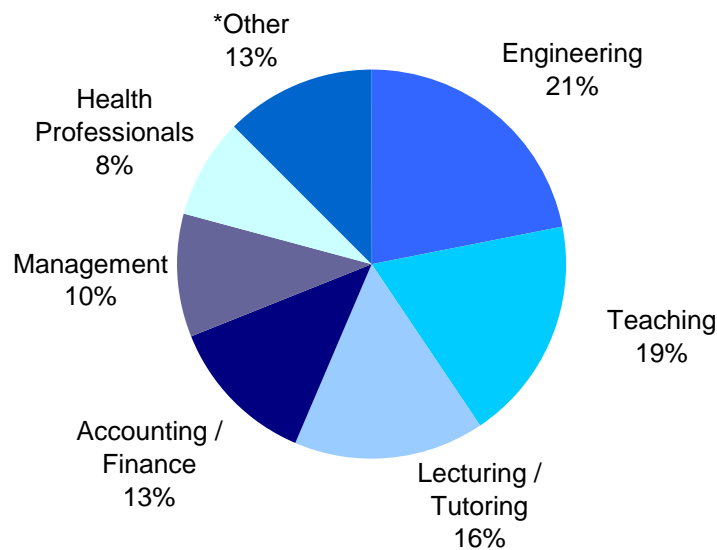


Figure 7: Occupation Categories.

*** Other includes:**

Irish Army Sergeant
 Technical Writer
 Helpdesk Consultant
 Fire Officer
 Clerical Officer
 Apprentice Solicitor

As one of the objectives of the survey was to look at the career progression of mature graduates, it is useful to note that 55% of graduates had changed jobs at least once since graduating, and half of these had changed jobs more than once. When asked for reasons for their job change, the most commonly cited reasons were:

- To improve promotion prospects.
- To move to a permanent position.

Mature Reflections

- To return to full-time study.
- Redundancy.
- Geographical relocation.

The survey also asked about the relationship between the relevance of the graduates' course and their current occupation. It is very encouraging that the vast majority (89%) felt that their course was relevant to their degree, and this is reflected in the job titles.

Salaries

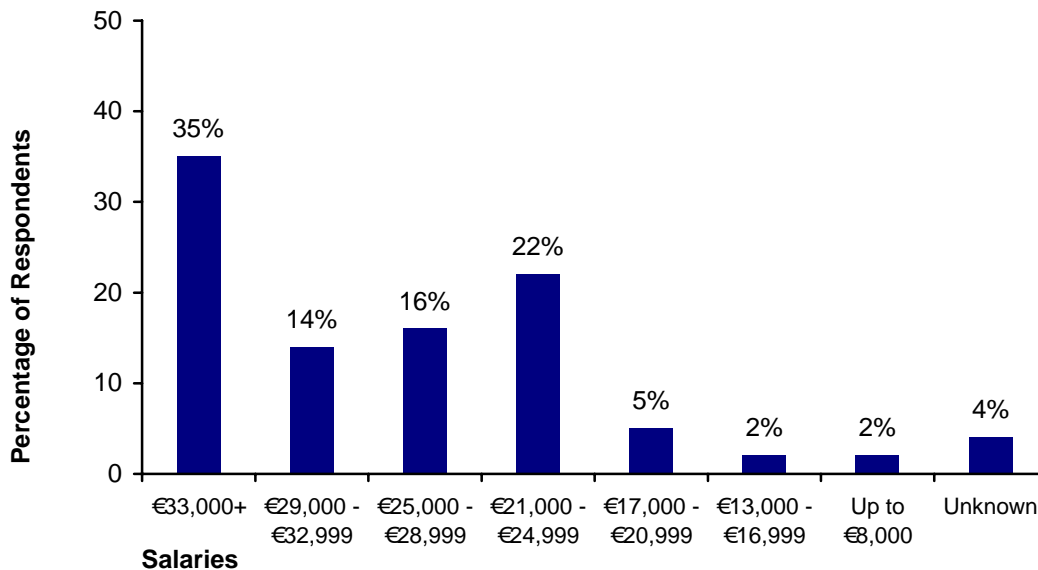


Figure 8: Salary Scales (June 2003)

Salary levels are frequently used as a measure of the status of graduate jobs. More than a third of the graduates reported salaries in excess of €33,000, 14% were earning between €29,000 and €32,000, and a very small proportion was earning less than €21,000. It should be noted, however, that some of these graduates had been in the workplace for a number of years since graduation, and this is reflected in the salary levels. This is encouraging news for potential mature students, as it reflects the value of a degree and previous experience.

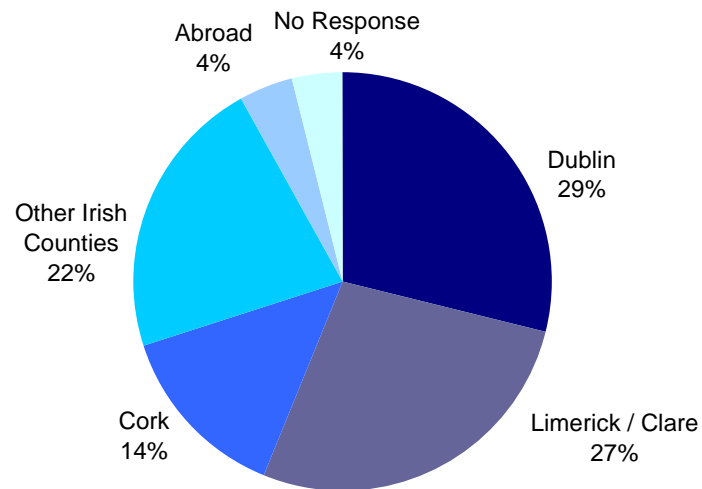
Employment Locations

Figure 9: Employment locations

- The geographical distribution of mature graduates reflects that of the overall UL graduate population in the annual *First Destination Survey* report, published by the University.
- Dublin continues to attract the highest concentration of graduates at 29%, with a very high proportion of graduates opting to stay in the Midwest region also.
- These results suggest that mature graduates are equally as mobile as the overall graduate population.

Sources of Information for Job Vacancies

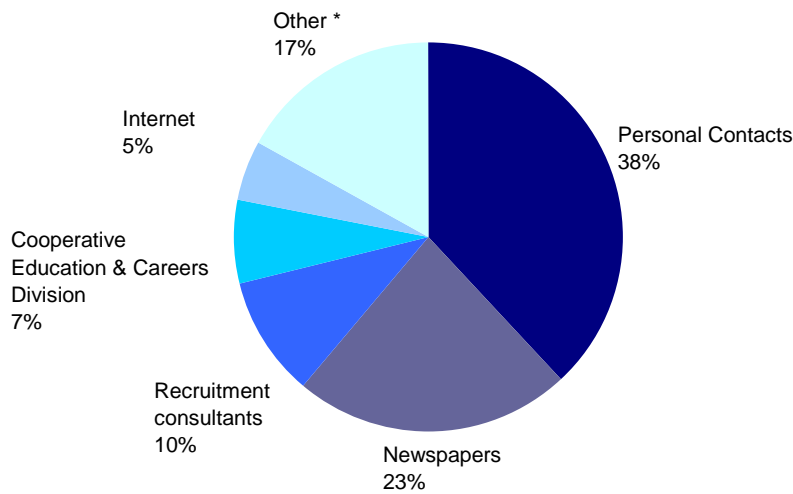


Figure 10: Sources of information for job vacancies

* Other: Four did not specify; two returned to previous jobs; two people were self-employed.

Figure 10 shows the range of information sources for job vacancies most commonly used by mature graduates.

- The most frequently used method was personal contacts (38%), which suggests that networking is a particularly effective method of job hunting for mature graduates.
- At 27%, newspapers proved to be a very significant source of vacancy information. This could be due to the fact that mature graduates possess the combination of prior experience and academic qualifications that makes them attractive candidates for jobs requiring experience, which are typically advertised in the national media.
- Recruitment agencies helped 10% of graduates to find their job. However, feedback regarding the usefulness of recruitment agencies was very mixed. Some graduates commented on the fact that recruitment agencies were targeting non-graduate level jobs.
- For 7% of the graduates, jobs were found through the UL Cooperative Education & Careers Division. These survey results pre-date the introduction of a customised careers service for mature students. It is anticipated that more mature graduates will avail of these services to source information on

graduate positions. The high participation rate of current mature undergraduates in careers education programmes and events would reinforce this view.

- The low usage of the Internet as a source of vacancy information is remarkable, considering the popularity of this medium as a job-search tool among the general student population.

Further Study and Training

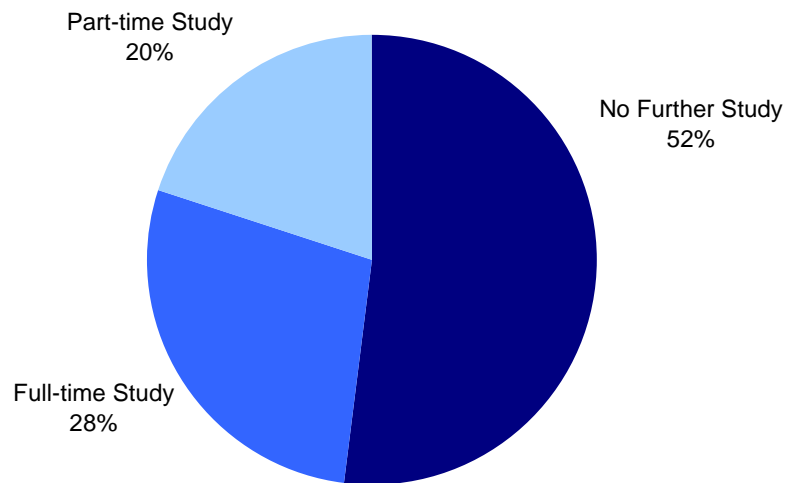


Figure 11: Further study and training

- The survey results indicate that 48% of graduates undertook some form of further study or training since completion of their primary degree. The majority of these (59%) studied full-time, and the remaining 41%, part-time.
- At the time of the survey, 10% of graduates were undertaking some form of full-time further study or training.
- The diverse range and professional quality of the courses is testament to the graduates' high academic performance and their commitment to the higher education experience and its benefits.

Courses taken include:

- | | |
|---|--|
| PhD Politics | MA Sociology |
| PhD Maths Education | MA Third Level Teaching and Learning |
| Masters in Equality Studies | MA in Psychology of Human Movement |
| Masters in Women's Studies | MSc Management Consulting |
| MA Health Promotion | MBA |
| MSocSc Social Policy | Higher Diploma in Guidance & Counselling |
| MTech Computer Integrated Manufacturing | Diploma Legal Studies |

A full list of all courses can be found in Appendix 3.

Section 2: Mature Graduates' Experience of the Job Search

Experience of the Job Search Process

Graduates were asked to comment on their overall experience of the job search process, and this question produced a mixed reaction. Many were positive about their experience, but a number of graduates found the process intimidating and frustrating, as they had been out of the workforce for some time. The most common responses to this question can be summarised as follows:

Reasons for positive responses:

- Plentiful jobs at the time of graduation.
- Clear focus and knew exactly what they wanted.
- Advantages of previous work experience and life experience.
- Jobs from Coop placement or final year project.

"I found there were more opportunities available to me than my class mates who had little or no experience in the job market."

"I found it very easy. I had five interviews. I was successful in all of them."

"Interviews went well. Employers were interested in previous experience and how it would contribute to the new position."

Reasons for negative responses:

- Tight labour market meant limited job opportunities for graduates in 2002.
- Time consuming job search process.
- Unhelpful recruitment agencies.
- Inadequate preparation for interview process.

"Looking for a job is time consuming and very frustrating. You have to be prepared for rejection before you finally get the job you are looking for."

"Tough enough. There were few opportunities. What I did myself was the best."

"Recruitment agencies are not interested unless you can do something for them."

For some graduates, it was a challenging experience with positive and negative elements, e.g.

"It was quite stressful, particularly the interview process, but it does get easier with experience. I felt at an advantage too because of my life experiences. At 29, you are more experienced than recent graduates."

These responses are presented in detail in Appendix 4.

Entering the job market as a mature graduate

Do you feel that entering the job market, as a mature graduate, was an advantage?

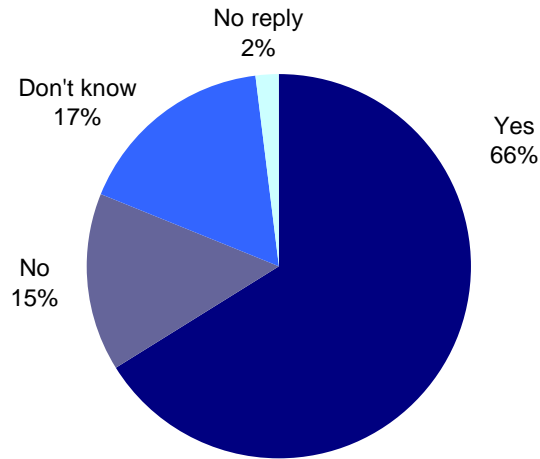


Figure 12: Responses to 'Do you feel that entering the job market, as a mature graduate, was an advantage?'

Two thirds of the graduates believed that maturity was an advantage in entering the job market for the following reasons:

- Employers respected past work experience and commitment to education.
- Maturity and life experience was an advantage at interviews.
- Worldly knowledge makes it easier to relate to work colleagues.
- Greater confidence and self awareness.

"The organisation that I first worked in felt maturity was an asset. After the first job, age did not matter. It was the skills and practical experience that were important."

"I know better what to expect at 27 than a 21 year old version of me."

"I was more confident, had better interview techniques, and was more aware of work procedures."

"Combined experience, maturity, and academic results were an advantage."

Entering the job market as a mature graduate was seen as a disadvantage by 15% of the graduates, for the following reasons:

- Difficulty in explaining gaps in employment history.
- New companies want a younger workforce.
- Age is often overlooked in favour of relevant work experience.

"I am starting off the career ladder at a later stage than other young solicitors."

"Companies want to train younger men and women whom they can mould easily."

"For some mature students, their experience can be extinct."

Interestingly, some felt that maturity was both an advantage and a disadvantage as reflected in the following comments:

“I knew what I wanted and felt I could mix with all groups, but some ‘new companies’ want a ‘one age’ workforce.”

“‘Yes’ in that employers see you as self motivated, but ‘no’ as in gaps in CV.”

“‘Yes’, as in a bit of savvy, but ‘no’ as in felt a bit decrepit - even at 30.”

Discrimination as a factor during the job search

Did you encounter any discrimination during the job search process?

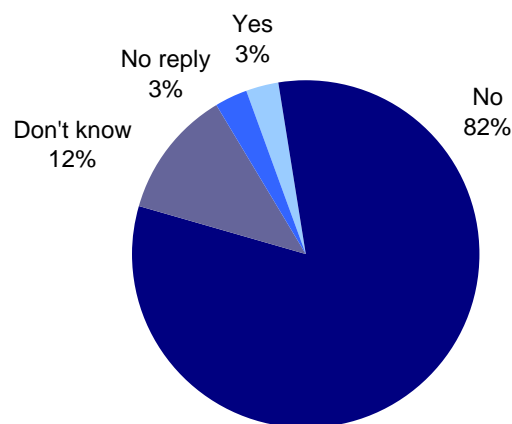


Figure 13: Responses to ‘Did you encounter discrimination during the job search process?’

The vast majority of graduates (82%) did not encounter any discrimination during the job search. This must be very encouraging for prospective and current mature students who may be worried about this prospect. Positive comments included:

“More grown up and able to handle responsibility from day one.”

“I thought that the economic downturn actually worked in favour of mature graduates- we’re more flexible, committed, adaptable and loyal.”

“Some employers may prefer mature students as they are usually more committed.”

Only 3% felt that they faced some discrimination, although they had no evidence that this was because of their age. Some were of the opinion that a mature graduate looking for a graduate entry-level position may be considered over-qualified on the basis of prior work experience. This is reflected in the following comments:

“Although employers respected the academic achievements of mature students, they would have a preference for younger students.”

“I wanted to work in a pure engineering environment, but I feel my age may have worked against me.”

Does a degree improve employability?

Do you feel that having a degree has made you more employable?

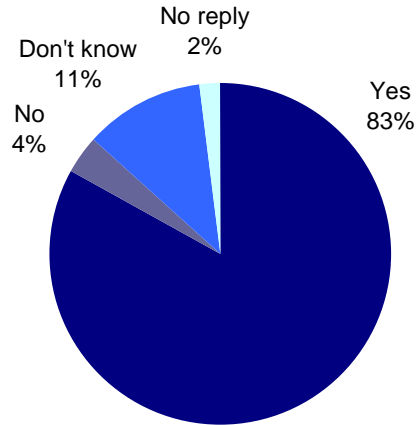


Figure 14: Responses to 'Do you feel that having a degree has made you more employable?'

The vast majority of graduates (83%) considered that they were more employable by virtue of having a degree. Only 4% responded negatively to this question. The most commonly stated reasons were as follows:

- A degree is a basic requirement for many professional jobs.
- A degree opens up more options.
- A degree complements existing experience.

Overall, graduates had a high level of confidence in employers' assessment of higher education, as reflected in these comments:

"The degree was vital, as was the fact that I gained valuable experience during my Coop placement. The combination of education and experience made me employable."

"A degree has more credibility in society."

"I always felt a degree would open more doors for me and that my skills and degree were transferable to other areas."

"It has made me more valuable and gave me a broader range of areas to work in."

"It trained me for specific roles and gave me a broad range of competencies."

"As most of my colleagues at my level don't have degrees, my promotion prospects may be higher with a degree."

A minority view is reflected in this comment:

"I suspect that a research degree tars me as academically orientated, whereas I am seeking jobs in industry."

Careers and job search advice for current mature students

Graduates were asked for advice and tips for current mature students regarding career planning and job hunting. This question generated a long and detailed list of very practical suggestions, which could be applied to graduates of all ages. The key recommendations can be summarised as follows:

- Begin the job-hunting process early.
- Prepare a good CV, with details of all relevant education and work experience.
- Relate your experience to specific job requirements.
- Believe in yourself: promote maturity, qualifications, and work experience.
- Make use of the careers service facilities available in the university.
- Apply early, be proactive and make personal contacts.
- Be patient; it takes time to find the right job.

Some of the more common, unique, and interesting comments reflect the personal experiences of mature graduates:

"I have three things to say:

- 1: Do it yourself - I found recruitment agencies unsatisfactory.*
- 2: Get some training in interview techniques.*
- 3: Be open minded/flexible."*

"Market yourself properly e.g. highlight the changes, the difficulties etc. the return to education brought, and the wealth of previous work experience you carry."

"Start small like any graduate. Give a good prepared reason for career change or gaps in CV. Get to know people in the business. A good CV is essential."

"Don't be too choosy starting off. Get employment first and better yourself from there. It is easier to get work when you have work."

"Each person has different goals and priorities, but whatever they are, don't sell yourself short. If your employer doesn't appreciate your qualifications, then go to one who does."

"Get involved in the Students' Union while at college."

"Try and get as much experience in the area that you would like to work in."

"Start early, be aware of current trends and demands of chosen area. Do not sell yourself short when drafting CV as all experience (education and work) is a positive contribution to the individual capabilities."

"Try and promote your age/maturity as an asset... and dispel any preconceived notions that the potential employers may have about mature graduates (e.g. they are not flexible, and are set in their ways). You need to anticipate these notions, and head them off at the pass."

"Go to a professional interview coach. Don't just focus on recent qualifications. Don't restrict the job hunt to one area."

"Consider your degree as a stepping-stone to a life long drive for information."

A more detailed list of comments can be found in Appendix 4.

Mature Graduates' Suggestions for the Careers Service

How could the Careers Service meet the needs of mature students?

This survey was undertaken as part of a broader initiative of the UL Careers Service, which involved the introduction of customised careers support for mature students. Prior to this, all mature students could avail of the mainstream careers services on campus, but these services did not always reflect the unique circumstances and career concerns of mature students. The questionnaire sought the views of mature graduates. It was quite evident from the responses that the majority of mature students would like a more targeted service, with a considerable element of personal interaction. These suggestions have been taken into account in the development of the customised Careers Support Service, which is now available to all mature students. The main recommendations can be summarised as follows:

- Provide opportunities for one-to-one careers advice, specifically for mature students.
- Provide support in self-assessment and interview-skills training.
- Inform mature students of career options related to their qualifications.
- Provide coaching on CV preparation.
- Organise more group meetings and discussions for mature students.

A selection of these comments reflect the views of mature graduates:

“Set up a special department which would help mature students gain graduate employment quickly.”

“The Careers Service should advise students on how to deal with the possibility of rejection after interviews etc.”

“There should be one-to-one interaction and talks. Give more information on worries and queries that students may have.”

“Provide advice to highlight for them their strengths and abilities due to their experiences prior to UL.”

“Mature students should be advised on how to draft a detailed and comprehensive CV. The CV should highlight the student’s current and previous experiences.”

“The Careers Service needs to understand that mature students have a fear of interviews and fear of rejection, and they need to portray themselves as assets, using no frills, but reality.”

“Listen carefully to them as most mature students know or have a good idea what they want and their general direction in life.”

One graduate expressed a minority view:

“I don’t think the needs of mature students are any different to any other students.”

There is general agreement that mature students have specific career-related needs that warrant the provision of customised careers support services. These services are now available to the current mature student cohort, and they complement the mainstream careers services for all students. Only one graduate expressed the view that the needs of mature students are similar to the general student population. This is arguably the exception that proves the rule, and serves to reinforce the importance of providing a service that reflects their combination of life experience, academic achievement and career aspirations.

Section 3: Case Studies

Case Studies

A number of respondents agreed to give a more detailed account of their experiences of life as a mature student, and six people were subsequently contacted, by letter, email, telephone, and in person. They were asked to write about the following areas: personal background, reasons for returning to education, life as a mature student, current situation, and careers advice for current mature students.

The six case studies reflect a broad range of academic disciplines in UL: Informatics & Electronics, Engineering, Business, Education, and Humanities. The names of the respondents have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

- **BSc Applied Mathematics and Computing**
- **BEng Manufacturing Engineering**
- **BBS Business Studies**
- **BEd Physical Education**
- **BA History, Politics, Sociology and Social Studies**
- **MBS Human Resource Management**

BSc Applied Mathematics and Computing - Sean

Background

I did my Leaving Cert in 1981. I didn't do very well, except for maths (which I liked), so going to university wasn't an option for me back then.

After the Leaving Cert, I got a job in Wang Laboratories in Limerick. I trained as an Electronic Technician, but after a couple of years, decided it wasn't the job for me. The economic climate in Ireland at that stage was so bad that I went backpacking to Australia for two years, fruit picking etc.

Reasons for returning to education

When I came back, things hadn't improved much, so I moved to Brighton, England, and ended up driving a taxi for eleven years, the last two years of which I spent a lot of time thinking about the future and where I wanted to be. I thought about becoming a secondary school maths teacher, and applied to Brighton University for their teaching degree. I didn't get the place because I didn't have the required standard of English. I was told that if I did a GCSE in English, and reapplied the following year, I was in. I did the GCSE English, but I also took a double A level in maths, which I really enjoyed. During that year, I started to look at some different options and decided to do a maths degree instead.

I came home for Christmas in 1997 and found out that coming to UL was a definite possibility, as I was eligible for free fees and a grant. I applied for, and was offered, a place on the Applied Maths and Computing degree at UL (Now called Mathematical Sciences). I chose this course because I had always liked maths, and I also felt that I needed to learn more about computers.

Life as a mature student

The first year in college was tough. Even though I was getting a grant, it wasn't enough to support me, so I worked nights in Dell Computers and studied full time during the day.

I was the only mature student in a class of 25, and I was conscious of the fact that I was in a minority. On the good side though, being older, my attitude to study and work was different to that of my classmates, and because I was doing the degree for myself, I was more motivated. My initial motivation was just to get a degree to prove

to myself that I could do it, but as time went on, I discovered that I was capable of getting an honours degree.

In third year, I did my co-op placement in Tellabs, working in software testing. I learned a lot about applying the computer and maths skills learned in college to an industry environment. It also gave me an idea of what it would be like to work in an environment as an educated person, as opposed to working in the very different world of the cab driver.

I graduated with a first class honours degree, but at that stage I'd had enough of college and couldn't wait to get back to earning proper money again. Unfortunately (like in the eighties), the economic climate was awful, and there weren't any jobs. I was gutted. There was a hiring freeze all over the country. I had hoped to go back working at Tellabs where I'd done my co-op, but they had closed down.

Current Situation

I came back to UL, spoke to the head of the Maths Department, and was offered a postgraduate scholarship. I'm currently doing a PhD in Maths Education, which focuses on how adults learn advanced mathematics, and how best to support them. I work in the Mathematics Learning Centre here in UL, where I run maths workshops and tutorials for adults at all stages, from basic to advanced. I feel that my own experience as an adult learner has helped me to become a more effective teacher of adults.

My advice to current mature students in UL would be: first of all, there's no need to be intimidated by the maths element of their courses. There is plenty of support and help available through the Maths Learning Centre.

Secondly, I would say, take a co-op placement, if possible, as that placement could turn into a job down the road.

I think there are definite advantages to being a mature student. All of the mature students I knew during my degree are working. I think that companies realise the effort, determination and sacrifice it takes to get a degree as a mature student. So above all, 'Don't give up, no matter how hard it gets.'

BEng Manufacturing Engineering - Alan

Background

I left school at 16, and joined an engineering company as an apprentice fitter. I worked in many areas of engineering, gaining valuable experience. I completed my apprenticeship and worked for other engineering companies on contract in Ireland and England. I worked in supervisory roles and on project work for a number of engineering companies. I gained lots of experience having worked in a wide variety of areas, which included dairy, food, beverage, chemical, automotive and aircraft industries.

Reasons for returning to education

Given the state of the economy and the changes and advancements in engineering in the early 1990s, I felt it was necessary to develop and improve my skills in order to increase my job prospects and advance my career.

Engineering was the logical course of study for me, as I had spent many years on the practical side of the industry. In 1994, I started a degree in Manufacturing Engineering in the University of Limerick, and I completed it in 1998, receiving a 2.1 honours degree. At the end of 1998, I started a postgraduate research degree developing a computer integrated data acquisition system for quality control. In 2002, I finished my doctoral thesis and received my PhD.

Life as a mature student

As a mature student, my time as an undergraduate was not the normal student experience, as I had a lot of experience both in engineering and in life. This helped me cope with the day-to-day business of student life. I was also married with two children, which didn't make me your typical undergraduate student. Instead of this being a disadvantage, I believe it was an advantage in many ways. I knew my role outside the University, and as a student. I knew what was expected of me, and I had firm goals, and the determination and the correct mental attitude to achieve them. The key to returning to education after many years absence from study is attitude, not the need for a piece of paper, although that will be the measure of your achievement.

Current Situation

I am currently lecturing in manufacturing materials and processes in the Department of Manufacturing and Operations Engineering at the University of Limerick.

BBS Business Studies - Kate

Background

I decided to apply to UL in the early 1990s as a mature student, as I had made the decision to enter into the world of human resource management. I chose HR, because while out in the working world for five years prior to that, I felt that a career in management and the human element of business appealed to me.

Life as a mature student

Being a mature student completely changed my life. Initially I was petrified, and while I was only 25, on my first day at UL, I thought I would stand out like a sore thumb. Little did I know that everyone else, regardless of age, felt the same way. It took a year for me to settle into a non-working life that wasn't nine to five, Monday to Friday. Things like lack of funds, planning study, preparing for exams, taking notes, were new to me. I was lucky to meet a great bunch of fellow students, of all ages, and felt I learned a lot from them. The one thing I would have liked advice or help on, was how to study and how to prepare for exams, because this was something I learned by trial and error. I barely scraped by my exams in first year, but saying that, I had a fantastic social life. In second year, things started to fall into place, and I learned how to study, plan and do the exams and the grades started to go up. In third year, we had co-op. I worked in the human resources department of a multinational and got some great experience, but overall was disappointed with it, as my expectation of what I would actually be doing was a lot higher than reality. In other words, I already had work experience, so I wanted more responsibility etc. My final year was just the piece de resistance of my experience in UL. The focus was very much on HR in terms of the subjects studied. I was lucky to be part of a very lively class who were very enthusiastic about the topic. It proved to be a hard year, but very rewarding. We had a lot of coursework and projects, and not every part of my experience during that year was positive, but overall I loved it! During third and fourth year it became apparent that I loved the legal side of my studies, coupled with the HR element.

Current Situation

I moved to Dublin straight away and registered with an agency. The very first interview that I was put forward for was with my current employer, a human resource management consultancy that specialises in employment law. It sounded like the role was made for me. I had focused my final year project on an element of employment law, and I definitely feel that it contributed to getting the job offer, as I was able to

indicate my ability to understand the application of the legislation. My career progressed very quickly, and within a year, I was offered a department manager's role. In the last year, I have been promoted to director level. It hasn't been an easy road, but certainly it has been very enjoyable and rewarding.

My advice to any mature student is: do your research, that is, really think about what course you want to do and why. Also, look at your life experiences to date and think about where your strengths lie, what appealed to you, and what you disliked about certain jobs and/or life experiences. Be prepared for a completely different lifestyle, and be open-minded about the changes that will happen to you. Be prepared to work hard, and you will see the rewards.

BEd Physical Education - Susan

Background

I went back to college, because I was unhappy with my first career choice, which was nursing. I did my Leaving Cert in 1989, got a place in St Vincent's Hospital for nursing, and a place in Thomond College, Limerick, for PE Teaching. I didn't expect to get the PE course, and my previous work experience was geared towards nursing. Also, my cousin, who is a PE teacher, said not to get into teaching just because I liked sport; you also have to be able to teach it.

So, that was the beginning of my nursing career. I worked for a year, but knew, starting my second year, that I really wanted to be a PE teacher, because sport was, and still is, my life, and I knew I had a good way with younger people.

Reasons for returning to education

I chose UL because it's the only place in Ireland where you can train as a PE teacher. I applied as a mature student, and had to do an interview. I also had to do a movement ability test, just the same as traditional school leavers.

Life as a mature student

Life as a mature student was wonderful! Going back to college was one of the best decisions I ever made. The only time I said to myself 'What the hell are you doing here?' was on my first day. Starting college at 23 has huge advantages. It's not your first time away from home, and you certainly have a more mature attitude to study i.e. you're not cramming excessively.

Current Situation

At the moment, I'm going into my sixth year of PE teaching in the same school I started in.

BA History, Politics, Sociology and Social Studies - Eileen

Background

I was born in England, left school at 16, and completed my City and Guilds in Office Procedures and Accounting. When I was 18, my family moved back to Ireland. I started work in Quinnswoth, and then moved to a factory job. After having my first child, I left the factory to stay at home.

In 1988, we moved to England, which was not very successful, so myself, and the children moved back to Shannon, while my husband stayed in the UK for work. I started working for an American multinational. After two years as receptionist, I applied for a position in finance, and worked as a financial analyst until 1996. Then, due to my husband's work and the opportunity to travel as a family, I took redundancy and we went to live in Austin, Texas, with our three children for seven months.

Reasons for returning to education

On returning from Texas, I started to think about going back to college. This was not my first time considering such an option, but full-time work and three children meant that, previously, it was not realistic. I applied for History, Politics, Sociology and Social Studies. I was called for an interview in June of 1997, and some weeks later I received a letter offering me a place. I was stunned, and incredibly excited by what lay ahead. I was now a mature student.

Life as a mature student

My first week of lectures in UL was one of mixed emotions, combined with dogged determination to do my best and nothing less. It was 20 years since I had taken notes, read a text book, written an essay and, the most daunting of all, sat an exam. All of these fears were overcome very quickly, except for exams.

I got exemptions from work experience, and went to New Paltz University in New York, for the study abroad requirement. Two things arose from this experience; my grades were straight A's, but it was a very lonely experience, especially when you are used to a busy house. In saying that, I had no regrets about my decision, as I had plenty of support from my family. One of the most important things you need as a mature student mother, to have any chance of completing a degree, is support and understanding from your family.

The four years of the degree passed by incredibly quickly. I applied for, and was accepted for, the Master's in Peace and Development Studies. I graduated with a first-class honours master's degree. I was then asked to lecture on the master's programme, so I came UL as a casual lecturer for one semester, and then as a dissertation supervisor for the second semester. During this period, I was looking for more secure employment, but was unable to secure a position. I was also considering starting a PhD, but I wanted the research to be financed through a scholarship. I applied to universities that were offering opportunities in my area: Conflict Resolution/Politics. In July of 2003, I was offered a scholarship and a place at Magee, in Derry. I started my research in October, and rented an apartment in the city. I travelled home every weekend, and, once a month, my husband and daughter travelled up. I was offered lecturing hours, starting in November, which I accepted.

Current Situation

At the moment, I've decided to take a year's leave-of-absence due to a sudden and tragic death in my family, and I'm looking for work in the Limerick/ Shannon/ Ennis area. I applied for one job, and received a 'dear john', but this didn't dishearten me. My search for work will be a patient one, but one, that I am sure, will be successful. I've gained many skills that are transferable outside of the world of academia. The ability to critically analyse information, to research a question thoroughly, to communicate the results, whether through the written word or by presentation, are important skills, that are very much needed in today's world of work.

My advice for mature students when job hunting is: firstly, you have to accept that you are starting out again, that you are, in fact, just another graduate. But, as a mature graduate, you have many skills, that, when combined with your educational achievements, do, in fact, give you an advantage if you recognise them, and sell them in your CV and in an interview situation.

Lastly, I just want to say, that my time in UL has been one of the most positive experiences of my life, one that I thoroughly enjoyed, and I also achieved more than I ever thought I would on that first day of lectures.

MBS Human Resource Management - Tom

Background

Born into a working class family in 1942, I left school aged 15. I became a gas-fitter before going to England, to seek out other job opportunities. I worked as a fitter all over England and Wales for about a year and a half. On returning to Ireland, I took a job as a builder's labourer, and worked my way up to become a contracts manager. I then spent 13 successful years working in the construction industry.

Following the oil shocks of the 1980's, the building industry went into deep recession, so I opted to join the manufacturing industry. I applied for a job in Asahi Textiles, in Killala, Co. Mayo, and was appointed as a Supervisor. After 18 months, I was promoted to Industrial Relations Officer, and a year later, I became Personnel Manager.

After a further two years, I was headhunted for an industrial-relations officer job in Aughinish Alumina Ltd, Co. Limerick. I subsequently obtained a National Diploma in Personnel Management with Distinction, from the N.I.H.E., and a Diploma in Quality Management, from the Plassey Management & Technology Centre. I was promoted to I.R. Superintendent with Aughinish Alumina, and worked there for approximately 11 years before I was made redundant!

Aged 51, I had to rebuild my career with worn out tools. I set up a small career development consultancy in Limerick. I then got a call from a manager with whom I had worked ten years previously. He asked me to interview for a personnel managers job in SIFCO, Cork. I got the job, moved to Cork, and spent five good years there. Unfortunately, my wife found she could not settle in Cork. Having considered my options, I decided that my marriage came first, and so I resigned from SIFCO.

Being a mere 58, I was much too young to retire, and decided to re-invent myself one more time. I considered doing a Business Studies Degree, but ruled this out, as that option would take three years. I then applied, and was accepted for, the one year, full-time Masters Degree in Human Resource Management in UL. I intended to re-enter the world of consultancy at a higher level than before, and a masters degree in Human Resource Management would increase my marketability, and extend my sell-by date!

Life as a mature student

I entered UL feeling very self-conscious, wondering how on earth I would fit in with a class of young, bright, honours students, most of whom were probably already twice as good as I had ever been! However, after the first few weeks, my brain clicked in again, and I learned that contribution, not age, mattered. For their part, the lecturers were totally blind to age, while heartily welcoming the practical work experience and insights that mature students brought to the course. Having found my niche, I hugely enjoyed the stimulation of the MBS in HRM programme, and qualified with a 2.1 honours degree.

Current Situation

While studying in UL, I got a call from a consultant, who was looking for an experienced industrial relations practitioner, on behalf of a major Irish construction company. They retained me as Industrial Relations Consultant, and I continue in that role today. I have also had enquiries from head-hunters, asking me to submit my CV for possible jobs. As I enjoy working in a consultancy role, I have declined other job opportunities. However, I continue to lecture on the IMI Supervisory Certificate Programme in Limerick.

To any mature student concerned about the age factor, I would say that there is nothing like need to overcome prejudice! In times of full employment, all candidates will be considered for a job. Mature students who have shown the motivation to re-invest in themselves, by undertaking a demanding study programme, will benefit most! Particularly those mature students who best market themselves, by ensuring their CV and interview skills properly reflect their career/study development! Finally, I would advise them to remember (as I believe Sally Fisher once said):

“Dream Big,
Plan well,
Work Hard,
Smile Always,
And
Good Things Will Happen”

Section 4: Careers Services for Mature Students at the University of Limerick

UL Careers Service

The Careers Service in UL is part of the Cooperative Education & Careers Division (CECD), which is the primary point of contact for:

- Students and graduates interested in planning and developing their careers.
- Students interested in work placements.
- Employers interested in student placements and graduate recruitment.
- University Departments interested in the career development of students, and in developing working relationships with employers.

The primary objective of CECD is to facilitate the career development of UL students, as an integral part of their academic programme. The Careers Service is fully integrated with the Cooperative Education programme. This ensures that students, the University, and employers have a single contact point for both undergraduate placements and graduate opportunities.

The mission of the Careers Service is to support students and recent graduates, from diverse backgrounds, to develop and implement effective career plans. The Careers Service also supports the University, in providing opportunities for students to develop the skills and attributes required to manage their careers throughout their working lives.

In 2002, the UL Careers Service developed a customised **Careers Support Service for Mature Students**, supported by funding from the Higher Education Authority Strategic Initiatives Scheme. The service aims to address the very specific needs and circumstances of mature students. The majority of mature students are motivated by the desire to improve their career prospects, and they need access to adequate and appropriate information and guidance, regarding the range of educational provision and employment opportunities. Many mature students have external commitments, as they balance student life with home, caring, and work commitments. This calls for a more flexible provision of careers advisory services, using a variety of delivery mechanisms, and adapting the content to relate to the needs and interests of this cohort of students. The key elements of the customised service are as follows:

Career Development Module for Mature Student Access Certificate Course

A fully accredited Educational Guidance and Career Development Module was developed in 2002, and is currently being delivered to mature students as a formal part of the Access Certificate Course, over two academic semesters. The delivery methods combine the use of online careers resources, and experiential class interaction. The curriculum includes elements on course choice, career options, aptitude testing, self-assessment, opportunity awareness, transition learning, and application and interview skills. It also includes information sessions on different degree programmes, and input from previous mature students.

Career Services for all registered mature students

- Individual career consultations with specialist advisor.
- Seminars on career planning, applications and interviews.
- CV consultancy service.
- Practice aptitude testing.
- A series of small-group, highly interactive workshops on 'Employability Skills for Mature Students,' are offered to facilitate mature students. These help to identify transferable skills, and formulate strategies for accessing the job market.

These services complement the core programme of careers information, advice and guidance services, which are available to all UL students.

Pre-entry guidance

The Careers Service provides input into the Mature Student Office initiatives, directed at potential mature students. This includes:

- Participation in the UL Open Evening for mature students/adult learners.
- Participation in the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) careers exhibition for mature students in the mid-west region.
- Provision of careers information and guidance to external callers, by means of telephone, email, and in person.
- Input into UL orientation programme for mature students.
- Meetings with Limerick Adult Education Guidance Service as part of 'outreach' activities.

UL Careers Service website – Section for mature students and graduates

The Careers Service recently added a section for mature students to the UL Careers website. This allows access to a comprehensive bank of specialist careers resources for mature students. It also links to the online Career Development Module, which has been developed as a self-directed career planning resource. The website is a shared resource that is available to other universities and to external users at: <http://www.ul.ie/careers/careers/mature/>

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Is it worth it - going to college as a mature student? The general conclusion from the survey results is a resounding 'yes'. Not only did all of the respondents complete their degrees, a majority went on to highly skilled professional and technical jobs. Half of the group also went on to further study, from certificate courses to doctorates. Two thirds believed that maturity was an advantage when entering the job market, and four out of five believed that having a degree made them more employable. These results should encourage students who are considering the mature student route.

For mature students, the decision to apply to higher education is often part of a much greater decision to make a total life change, with a degree seen as the key to a better quality of life, an opportunity for intellectual development, and the possibility of material improvement. This report highlights that mature students require access to adequate and appropriate information and guidance, about the range of educational provisions and employment opportunities.

There are currently no recorded data or statistics on the career destinations of mature graduates in Ireland. This report is the first to track the progress of mature graduates as they make the transition from higher education to the world of work.

All of the focus to date has been on increasing the participation rate of mature students in higher education, by improving access routes. However, it is equally important that there is a mechanism in place to measure the success of these initiatives, by monitoring the career progression of mature graduates. Surely, this information on graduate destinations is a vital factor in attracting mature students to participate in higher education.

The results of the survey were overwhelmingly positive, and reflect a very high satisfaction level amongst this cohort of mature graduates. The employment levels of mature graduates compare very favourably with first destination statistics for all Irish graduates. Salary levels were high, and the vast majority felt that their course was relevant to their current job. One of the most reassuring outcomes is the low level of discrimination (on the grounds of age), experienced by mature graduates in the job search. It is also clear, from graduates' comments that having a degree is not, by itself, a guarantee of employment. Awareness of ones own skills, areas for

development, and knowledge of the labour market are all essential in developing and enhancing employability. This is where careers services have an important role, in supporting mature students as they prepare to enter the market place. This report shows that most mature graduates prefer a service that is tailored to their particular, career-related needs.

In recent years, with support from the Higher Education Authority Strategic Initiatives Scheme, the UL Careers Service introduced a specialist Careers Support Service for mature students. This provides the students with opportunities to develop career management skills, which will improve decision-making capabilities, and enhance employability throughout their working lives. The service complements the mainstream careers services and events that are available to all UL students. The design of the specialist service has been informed by the recommendations and expectations of the mature graduates who participated in this survey.

Recommendations

Mature Students

Recognise and promote the value of transferable skills gained during the degree and through previous experience, and be aware of how these skills can enhance employability.

At an early stage of the degree, make good use of the careers supports available, and attend career workshops on employability skills, CVs and interviews.

Understand the value of developing a network of contacts in the labour market, as a source of job vacancy information.

Be focused, but also be flexible, by considering entry-level jobs as stepping-stones to desired professional careers.

Recognise the need to continuously update skills and knowledge throughout working life.

Employers

Consider the business case for recruiting mature graduates: employers benefit from the skills and experience that mature graduates offer; it promotes diversity in the employee profile; and it shows a practical commitment to equal opportunities.

Review current recruitment practices to ensure that there are no barriers to entry that might discriminate against mature graduates, thereby limiting employer access to a growing pool of potential talent.

Offer flexible working arrangements that allow mature graduates to make an effective contribution to the workplace, while fulfilling other commitments.

Careers Services

Provide a customised and flexible menu of careers services, using a wide variety of delivery mechanisms, and adapting the content to relate to the special circumstances of mature students.

Collaborate with other support services and academic departments in identifying and meeting the particular needs of the growing mature student population.

Assign a specialist careers advisor, with responsibility for developing and delivering careers services to mature students.

Deliver formal modules in educational guidance and career development, as an integral component of access courses for mature students.

Develop and maintain a network of mature graduates, as a support and career resource for current mature students.

Collaborate with careers services in other higher education institutions, by forming a working group to develop careers resources for mature students.

Higher Education Institutions

Demonstrate a real commitment to the widening participation objective, by funding permanent positions for specialist support staff who deliver services to mature students.

Expand the provision of access courses, to help mature students develop the personal and academic skills required to succeed in higher education, and in a professional career.

Monitor the employment record and career progression of mature graduates in a systematic way, to provide accurate and up to date information to prospective students.

References

Action Group on Access to Third Level Education, 2001. *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education*, Stationary Office.

Harris, M., 2001. *Developing Modern Higher Education Careers Services*, Department for Education and Employment. Available at: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hecareersservicereview/report.shtml>, accessed: December 2004.

Higher Education Authority, 1999. *Submission to Commission on the Points System*.

National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2004. *Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland, Action Plan 2005-2007*, Higher Education Authority.

Older Graduates Sub Committee. 1999. *Voices*, Association of Graduates Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS).

Strathclyde Careers Service, 2003. *Destinations of Mature Graduates in 2002*, University of Strathclyde.

University of Limerick Careers Service, 2002. *First Destinations Report*, University of Limerick.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Survey Questionnaire



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK

Cooperative Education & Careers Division

UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

If your address has changed, please amend the details below.

2003 Mature Student Graduate Survey

The information you give will remain confidential to the University.

Section 1: GENERAL INFORMATION *Please complete in block capitals*

1. Details of Course Completed

**Coding boxes
this side of
form where
Required**

DEGREE/DIPLOMA COURSE TITLE	MAIN SUBJECTS / OPTIONS
-----------------------------	-------------------------

(e.g. MSc - Biochemistry: PhD - Electronic Engineering. **BBS – please state Options**)

2. Year of Graduation

3. PRESENT SITUATION *Which of the following gives the best description of your main situation?*

1 = **In Employment (Permanent or Temporary)**
including graduate employment schemes or
work experience/training schemes of *one year's*
duration or longer.

3 = **Seeking Employment**
i.e. you are not employed, not engaged in further
study or training, and are seeking employment

2 = **In Further Study or Training**
i.e. Higher Degree, Postgraduate Diploma,
other degree/diploma/certificate course,
professional qualification, other training course

4 = **Not Available for employment or study**
for reasons such as ill health, personal
circumstances, travel, etc.

Now please complete one of the sections 2, 3 or 4, as appropriate to your situation

Section 2: CURRENT EMPLOYMENT *Please complete if you are currently employed - block capitals please*

Are you working full time or part time?.....

If working full time, how many hours per week?.....

If working part time, how many hours per week?.....

(a) **Job Title**

(b) Brief description of your main duties / type of work:
.....
.....

(c) **Organisation or company where you are employed:**

NAME	ADDRESS
------	---------

(d) **Location of Employment** (in Ireland, please give County; if overseas, the Country) _____

3. Sector of Employment:

Business/Activity of your employer

PTO

Section 2 : EMPLOYMENT, continued

Coding boxes on this side of form where required

6. **Present Salary (per annum)** Please enter the relevant code in box
 01 = up to €8,999 02 = €9,000 - 12,999 03 = €13,000 - 16,999 04 = €17,000 - 20,999
 05 = €21,000 - 24,999 06 = €25,000 - 28,999 07 = €29,000 - 32,999 08 = €33,000 +

7. **Course Relevance****Was the course you took relevant to the job you are now doing?** Please enter code number in box

1 = Most relevant 2 = Relevant 3 = Unsure 4 = Irrelevant 5 = Most irrelevant

*If working part time, please answer the following questions***Which of the following is your MAIN reason for working less than full time? (Please tick only one box)**

- 1 In education or training
 2 Housework, caring for children/others
 3 Personal illness or disability
 4 You want, but can't find, a full time job
 5 You have another job
 6 You don't want a full time job
 7 You consider this a full time job

Employment History

We now want to ask you about the jobs you have held since receiving your most recent third level academic award and prior to your current employment situation. (Please record all jobs held since you graduated from UL starting with the first. Do not count count promotions or changes in responsibilities while working for the same employer as job changes)

	Job 1 First job after Completing degree	Job 2 Second job....	Job 3 Third job...	Job 4 Fourth job..
Name of job:				
Type of work:				
Main Activity:				
Location of job: Town/City.....	Town/City.....	Town/City.....	Town/City.....	Town/City.....
Is/was this job? Please circle one only	" "	" "	" "	" "
1. Permanent	" "	" "	" "	" "
2. Temporary	" "	" "	" "	" "
When did you Start the job? Month..... Year.....	" "	" "	" "	" "
When did you Finish the job? Month.... Year.....	" "	" "	" "	" "
What was the main Reason you left That job? Please circle one only				
1 Made redundant or unemployed	1			
2 To return to full time education	2			
3 To take a job with a higher salary	3			

Mature Reflections

- 4 To take a job with better promotion prospects 4
- 5 The job was temporary or contract 5
- 6 Nature of work was unacceptable 6
- 7 Salary was too low 7
- 8 Other reason: please specify..... 8

What was your annual Gross income from This job when You started

Section 3a: CURRENT FURTHER STUDY OR TRAINING- If you are currently pursuing further study please complete this section

- 1. College/Institute where course is being pursued
- 2. Location (if outside Ireland)
- 3. Full title of course
- 4. Level of further award sought Please enter relevant code in box

01 = One year Certificate	05 = Graduate/Postgraduate Diploma (excluding teacher training)	08 = Masters Degree Research
02 = National Certificate	06 = Teacher Training Qualification	09 = Doctorate
03 = National Diploma	07 = Masters Degree Taught & Qualifier	10 = Professional Qualification
04 + Bachelors Degree		11 = Other training course
- 5. Course attendance required - please enter code in box : 1 = Full-time 2 = Part-time
- 6. Please tick either of the following if they apply to you:
 In addition to studying/training, I am working part-time In addition to studying/training, I am working full-time

Section 3b: PREVIOUS FURTHER STUDY OR TRAINING- If you have already completed further study please complete this section

- 1. College/Institute where course was pursued
- 2. Start Date and Completion Date.....
- 3. Full title of course
- 4. Level of further award gained Please enter relevant code in box

01 = One year Certificate	05 = Graduate/Postgraduate Diploma (excluding teacher training)	08 = Masters Degree Research
02 = National Certificate	06 = Teacher Training Qualification	09 = Doctorate
03 = National Diploma	07 = Masters Degree Taught & Qualifier	10 = Professional Qualification
04 + Bachelors Degree		11 = Other training course
- 5. Course attendance required - please enter code in box: 1 = Full-time 2 = Part-time

Section 4: SEEKING EMPLOYMENT

(To be completed by respondents who are not in employment or in full-time study)

- 1. Have you been employed at any time since completing your course? 1 = Yes 2 = No
 - 2. Have you any definite prospects of a full-time job in the near future? 1 = Yes 2 = No
- If yes to either question, please specify.....

For details of current graduate opportunities, check the UL Careers website at: <http://www.ul.ie/careers>

Section 5: NOT AVAILABLE FOR EMPLOYMENT – Please complete this section if you are currently unavailable for work or study

What is your main reason for not seeking work? (Please tick only one box)

- 1 Study, training etc
- 2 Housework, caring for children or others
- 3 Retirement
- 4 Personal illness or disability
- 5 I believe no suitable work available
- 6 Have already found work, but not started
- 7 Awaiting outcome of other possibilities
- 8 Other reason (please specify).....

Section 6: SOURCE OF EMPLOYMENT INFORMATION

1. How did you learn about your current job? Please circle appropriate source:
- | | | |
|--|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 = Cooperative Education & Careers Division | 2 = Coop Placement | 3 = Other College Contact |
| 4 = Speculative approach to employer | 5 = Newspaper advertisement | 6 = Recruitment Consultant |
| 7 = Internet | 8 = Other (please specify)..... | |

Section 7: Your Experience of the job search

In this section we would like you to think about how you, as a mature student found the job search process. We have given a list of open ended questions which we hope will provide us with relevant and useful information in our quest to provide current and potential mature students with an up to date and realistic picture of the labour market with regards to mature job applicants.

.....

How did you find the job search process as a whole?

.....

Did you feel that entering the job market as a mature student was an advantage? If yes, please tell us why. If no, please tell us why

.....

Did you encounter any discrimination during the job search process? If so, please tell us what type of discrimination you experienced and how you dealt with it

.....

Do you feel that having a degree has made you more employable? If so, why? If not, why not?

.....

Do you have any advice or tips for current mature students in UL with regards to career planning and the job hunting process?

.....

Mature Reflections

Would you be willing to come and give a short informal talk to current mature students in UL and pass on any advice on your experience of the job search process?

.....
Would you be willing to take part in a telephone interview with a careers advisor on your experience as a mature graduate in the Irish job market? We would like to collect some case studies of previous graduates of UL for the benefit of other students. Obviously, all names and personal details would be changed and all interviews would be confidential.

.....
If you are willing to take part in an interview we will contact you shortly to arrange a suitable time to telephone you.

.....
In your opinion, how can the Careers Service meet the needs of mature students?
.....
.....

Section 6: COMMENTS

Any other comments you wish to make

.....
.....
.....

SIGNED _____

DATE _____

Email Address: *(optional)*
(Email address to be shared with the UL Alumni Association)

Thank you for your co-operation and help. We hope that this survey will be used for the benefit of current and future mature students in the University of Limerick. Please return the completed form, using the reply paid envelope, to:

Cooperative Education & Careers Division, University of Limerick, Limerick

Appendix 2: Mature Graduates - Job Titles

Education

Education: 2nd level

- Woodwork & Construction Teacher
- Wood Technology Teacher
- PE & Geography Teacher
- PE Teacher
- PE Teacher
- PE & English Teacher
- PE Teacher
- PE & Geography Teacher
- PE Teacher – Special Needs

Education: 3rd level

- Supervisor (MA Dissertations)
- Sociology Lecturer
- Equine Consultant
- Assistant Lecturer, Carpentry & Joinery
- IT Lecturer

Further Education

- IT Tutor
- Tutor, Youthreach
- TEFL Teacher

Engineering

- Quality Engineer, Electronics
- Quality Engineer, Medical Services
- Engineering Manager, Manufacturing
- Graduate Engineer, ESB
- Application Engineer
- Manufacturing Engineer, Medical Devices
- Production Engineer, Aerospace
- Engineer
- Engineer, Telecoms
- Software Engineer
- Quality Control, Electronics

Healthcare

- Chartered Physiotherapist
- Occupational Hygienist
- Registered Nurse
- Research Officer, Hospital

Management

- Manager HR Services
- Assistant Bar Manager
- Partner Account Manager
- Marketing Director
- Sales, IT

Finance/Accounting

- Insurance Advisor
- Fund Accountant
- Visa Director
- Auditor
- Financial Accountant
- Accounts Administrator

Self-Employed

- Owner/MD Software business
- Industrial Relations Consultant

Other

- Clerical Officer
- Fire officer
- Sergeant, Irish Army
- Consultant- Help Desk Services
- Junior Technical Writer
- Apprentice Solicitor

Appendix 3: Further Study Courses

All courses are included in this list. Some of the graduates pursued more than one course of study.

Certificate in Occupational Hygiene, NUIG

Previous study: National Certificate in Health & Safety, UCD

National Diploma in Pollution, Open University

Certified Diploma in Accounting and Finance – distance learning

Insurance Course – Denmark

Professional Accounting Qualification – Dublin (college not specified)

Chartered Accountancy, Griffith College Dublin

Professional Development for Special Needs Coordinator, Open University

Post Professional Practice Course (One), Blackhall Place, Dublin

Diploma in Legal Studies, DIT

Previous study: TEFL course

Graduate Diploma Computing, UL

BSc Physiotherapy, Royal College of Surgeons, Dublin

Masters Psychology of Human Movement, USA

Previous study: H.Dip Guidance and Counselling, UCC

MA Sociology, UCC

Previous study: Postgraduate diploma Statistics, TCD

Masters Social Science, UCD

MSC Research, UL

MSC Research, UL

MSC Research, UL

Masters Health Promotion, NUIG

Masters Health Promotion, UL

MBS Research, UL

MBA Smurfit Business School

Previous study: Graduate Diploma Programming, LIT

Masters Management Consulting, Smurfit Business School

Masters Technology in Computer Integrated Manufacturing, UL

MA Women's Studies, UL

MA Peace and Development, UL

MA Equality Studies, UCD

MA Third Level Teaching and Learning, DIT

PhD Politics, Magee, Derry

Previous study: MA Peace and Development Studies, UL

PhD Maths Education UL

**Appendix 4: Graduates' Experience of the Job Search Process:
Responses to open-ended questions**

How did you find the job search process as a whole?

"Relatively easy, as I knew what I wanted and I looked for it. Interviews are always difficult, but if you do the preparation they go well."

"Occasionally exasperating. The labour market is quieter than a couple years ago. Firms are seeking more experience than previously. Yet, taking less relevant jobs is risky, as it makes a mark on a CV."

"Jobs are very scarce, and it is difficult to find a suitable job. It's an employers market at the moment."

"I found it very easy. I had five interviews. I was successful in all of them, and I picked the best school."

"I found the job search process relatively difficult due to the economic downturn, especially in the electronics sector. Being a mature student, I found it difficult to find graduate employment."

"Quite stressful, particularly the interview process, but it does get easier with experience. I felt at an advantage too because of my life experiences. At 29, you are slightly more experienced, than going from school to college to the job market."

"I was very lucky in that I registered with a Dublin agency and got the first job they put me forward for. I knew who the company was because of my co-op experience."

"Tough, as I was totally unformed about job search skills."

"Difficult as a whole. Most agencies only want to offer call centre jobs once they see you have languages. I have found all my jobs either myself or through friends."

"Didn't look that hard to be honest because I had a job got before leaving college."

"I found there was much more opportunities available to me than my class mates who had little or no experience in the job market."

"Hard to find the right job. Generally good opportunities available at the time."

"Frustrating. No interviews for seven months, unsure of reason why. Probably slow down of economy (I hope!!!!)"

"For BSc Sports Science, it was very difficult; BSc Physical Education, it was very good."

"Positive, I finished at the right time and have been lucky. I was very proactive."

"As the interviews and presentations for and by companies were on the same times as lectures, a decision as what to go to had to be made. Could have been scheduled better."

"Interviews went well. Employers were interested in previous experience and how it would contribute to new position. My first job was from college. All others from national papers."

"Good follow up service from UL."

"Not so bad - a little difficult at start."

"1998, jobs plentiful in IT."

“Limited vacancies. Difficult to fulfil all requirements, as previous experience does not match education gains. Area of work dependant on central finding also making it difficult.”

“Quite easy. This was my first interview and I got the job.”

“In 2000, very easy, as the economy was very strong. I also have a carpentry and joinery trade qualification, which resulted in gaining immediate employment on finishing at UL.”

“Quite difficult at the start; once I got a few hours of teaching, the work seemed to increase after that.”

“Easier than before returning education, but still less satisfactory due to economic climate.”

“Quite straight forward in seeking my first job, but a lot more difficult in trying to get a job closer to home.”

“Difficult, because I had been out of the workforce for quite some time. The degree and masters I have is quite specific, therefore can be quite limiting when looking for various types of employment.”

“Quite good. Found it relatively easy to find a job.”

“Very straightforward, had no problems.”

“Frightening; it is very difficult at the moment in the IT sector.”

“It was very easy. My co-op employer offered me the position. After being made redundant, I was only waiting 6 weeks for my next job.”

“Grand, found it very easy. Had contact with the company through my FYP (Final Year Project).”

“Difficult, as engineering companies have been in price freezes. All types of engineering and IT companies have been in difficulty.”

“Fine, I had no problem. I had completed a post grad diploma in IT so it helped me.”

“A bit frustrating, in the fact that it is very hard to find a permanent job without having to work up teaching time, so to speak.”

“Okay, worked between jobs before I got what I wanted.”

“Looking for a job is time consuming. It is also a very frustrating task. You have to be prepared for rejection before you finally get the job you are looking for.”

“Was lucky; the job market was good at the time.”

“I did not encounter any major problem. Perhaps my previous work experience (before UL) worked to my advantage e.g. computer literacy etc. However, I was never convinced my classification as a mature student was ever an advantage.”

“Due to a tighter labour market, finding work in my field has been difficult. To find a job that will give me a start will take patience and time.”

“Fine, but times were good for woodwork teachers in 2000.”

“Good if you want temp jobs, because there are very few permanent jobs around.”

“Recruitment agencies patronising, but got results.”

"Difficult, very scary. In 2001, things were slowing down and belts tightening. Few interviews were coming through."

"Tough enough. There were little opportunities. What I did my self was the best. Recruitment agencies are not interested unless you can do something for them."

Did you feel that entering the job market as a mature student was an advantage?

"Yes, because I have more self confidence and believe in myself."

"Worldly knowledge, easier to relate to fellow teachers."

"There is a bit more credit given to someone that is supposed to have a head on their shoulders."

"The experience I had was helpful."

"Start-Up companies want young people who are starting off."

"Seeking entry-level positions at a mature age may count negatively. For manageability issues, firms may prefer someone they can mould easily."

"Yes, because I knew what I wanted and how to go about the whole job search."

"I had done a previous course before as well as PE teaching, and this helped me to get my job."

"No. At the time I was graduating, there was an economic downturn, so I felt that this, and being a mature student, was going to make finding a job difficult."

"More confident, aware of procedures, interview techniques etc."

"More and varied experience and maturity gives an extra edge. It makes the interview go better."

"Employers were generally impressed with commitment given to further education, together with previous experience."

"Had extra confidence, awareness of the market, experience of interviews."

"Maturity gives you a good first impression, and employers feel you have a good classroom presence due to your age."

"It was no advantage, because age is overlooked in favour of relevant experience. For mature students, their experiences maybe extinct."

"It was an advantage, because the organisation that I first gained employment with felt maturity was an asset. After the 1st job, age did not matter. It was the skills and practical experience that were important."

"I was very flexible in the areas where I could apply, and was not confined to one area of employment."

"I know what to expect better as a 27 year old vs a 21 year old version of me."

"I had worked previously, so that was an advantage to just being a graduate with no work experience."

"I had 10 years experience working with children."

"I am starting off the career ladder at a later stage than other young solicitors."

"Having Trades Certificate was a major advantage."

"Had to explain why I did the course I did."

"Had slight advantage because of experience; still, you are up against candidates of all ages."

"Companies wish to train younger men and women."

"Combined experience and maturity with academic results."

"Felt I knew what I wanted from a job."

"Experience was an advantage in dealing with people."

"Experience is needed for any type of job."

"Certain training jobs are not available to you. Otherwise, it doesn't seem to be either an advantage or a disadvantage."

"Can be both 'yes' and 'no': 'Yes', have experience already. 'No', gap in employment due to time spent studying."

"Both 'yes' and 'no'. 'Yes', they see you as self motivated; 'No', why did you waste years, GAP in CV?"

"Both 'yes' and 'no'. 'Yes', I knew what I wanted, could mix easier; 'No', the very 'new' companies wanted a 'one age' workforce."

Did you encounter any discrimination during the job search process? If 'Yes', please explain.

"I would have liked to get into the Pharmaceutical end of things, but my course was not credited for such work."

"Although employers respected the academic achievements of mature students, they would have a preference for younger students."

"I wanted to work in a pure engineering environment, but I feel my age may have worked against me."

Do you feel that having a degree has made you more employable? If 'Yes', why? If 'No', why not?

"I suspect that research degree tars me as academically orientated, whereas I am seeking jobs in industry."

"Yes', jobs are so scarce that a higher qualification gives me the edge over competitors."

"Yes', because I am doing the work I want to do and could not do without a BA/MA."

"When the economy improves, I hope to find a job which would be far better than one I would get without a degree."

"Prior to my degree I mostly laboured, having a cert in farming. I find a degree is essential in looking for jobs in education."

"Can't work in HR without CIPD qualifications."

"As most of my colleagues at my level and even above don't have degrees, then, 'no'. Although my promotion prospects may be higher with a degree."

"More opportunities with various industries."

"I feel having a degree is seen as almost essential in current job market."

"Because you have the qualifications for the job advertised."

"Ability in attaining a degree is more important than degree itself or training."

"I always felt a degree would open more doors for me, and that my skills and degree were transferable to other areas or places."

"Yes', as it trained me for specific roles and given me a broad range of competencies."

"Good qualification and inspires confidence."

"Specific training essential for teaching."

"Some jobs require a degree, and at least it is a good stepping stone."

"Degree was just starting point. Needed Diploma and MBA to round it off."

"Combined with MBA it enables me to gain lecturing experience, which was very important as it contributed directly to the decision to continue and pursue PhD."

"Because the additional qualification and degree from UL was difficult to achieve, and consequently, something to have pride in."

"More credibility in society."

"Certified acknowledgement of level of education and commitment to apply oneself. Implied good standard of mathematics."

"Combined experience and maturity with academic results."

"Again, 'yes' and 'no': 'yes', because it shows I am committed to complete something; 'no', because degree and masters too specific."

"Provided the necessary knowledge needed for the job."

"Degrees are not as valuable anymore; employers expect more."

"Complements my experience."

"I don't know, because having a degree is fine, but if this doesn't allow you to get experience it isn't much good to you."

"Qualified and not qualified for jobs."

"Had the education and experience."

"Gave me the education I needed."

"Requirement for the job."

"The degree was vital. The fact that I had gained valuable experience during my co-op placement was also vital. The combination of education and experience made me employable."

"It has made me more valuable and gave me a broader range of areas to work in. Having experience in many other areas gives an employer many more uses for me."

"Before returning to college, I was doing assembly work which a trained chimp could do, and I'd been unemployed for half the time between leaving school and starting in UL."

Advice or tips for mature students with regards to career planning and the job hunting process?

"Don't be too choosy starting off. Get employment first and better yourself from there. It is easier to get work when you have work."

"Believe in yourself; you have a lot to offer in life experience as well as academic qualifications. Prepare especially for interview stage consider possible questions and answers."

"My advice to mature students would be to use all the careers service facilities available while an undergraduate and immediately after graduation."

"Have a good CV, but don't detail each and everything you've achieved; save some for the interview process."

"Have a simple 2 page CV. Don't underestimate your past work experience. Don't apply for 'graduate' positions only."

"Use your work experience as an opportunity."

"Each person has different goals and priorities, but whichever they are, don't sell yourself short. If your employer doesn't appreciate your qualifications, then go to one who does."

"Working on projects in both groups and individually makes for a qualified student."

"For law students, keep at it. Everyone in my class who wanted a career in law made it eventually, but the legal job market is very competitive!"

"Get involved in the Students' Union, and fight for a bit more respect from the powers that be."

"It can be a large chunk of your life wasted if you are not capable."

"Apply early, be proactive, and make personal contacts."

"1 Do it yourself- I found recruitment agencies unsatisfactory. 2 Get some training in interview techniques. 3. Be open minded/flexible."

"See how your previous experience can benefit new position/ career. Be willing to start at the bottom again. Be positive."

"Start small like any graduate. Give a good prepared reason for career change or gaps in CV. Get to know people in the business. A good CV is essential."

"Never stop developing yourself. Invest in your education."

"Start early, be aware of current trends and demands of chosen area. Need to start January of final year. Do not sell yourself short when drafting CV, as all experience (education and work) is a positive contribution to the individual capabilities."

"Market yourself properly e.g. highlight the changes, difficulties etc the return to education brought, and the wealth of previous work experience you carry."

"Most people have some idea as to what area they would like to work in. It is then a matter of applying for appropriate positions. Not to become disheartened if they do not get called for interview; keep trying, the right job is out there!"

"Start early in your final year (if you have time to spare after accounting for your final year project!) Be proactive, approach employers, and utilise any contacts you may have in university."

“Make your past work experience relevant to the job you are applying for, and use it as a strong pull or plus factor.”

“Get as much experience in the job area as possible where you would like to be employed in; it would be very beneficial.”

“Make the most out of the co-op placement.”

“Be patient, be very patient.”

“Be careful with your co-op. I got my permanent job from it. Don't start at the bottom; aim for what you want.”

“Try and promote your age/maturity as an asset. You should also try and dispel any preconceived notions that potential employers may have about mature graduates (e.g. they are not flexible /they are set in their ways). You need to anticipate these notions and head them off at the pass.”

“Make sure you have ENG at the end of your name.”

“A well-prepared CV that highlights abilities is a bonus. If a prospective employer has made a decision not to take on an older person, then their decision is already made.”

“To get around the tight labour market, maybe some voluntary work within your chosen field as part of the course should be followed as a method of gaining experience.”

“Enjoy study and keep options open.”

“Choose a course that leads to permanent employment; study what you really like.”

“Get advice from sectors that are growing. Get interview and CV advice.”

“Search in different websites. Publications are often specific in job orientation.”

“Student should research the areas where they are placed on co-op; find out about it.”

“Start early. Be well prepared for the interviews, especially with regards to employment history. You may be asked about jobs you had ten 15 years ago. Tailor your CV for the job you are applying for. Develop a thick skin, as it may take time to get the job you want.”

“Not sure, have never been in the market for a job as I have always been in the army.”

“Firstly, to go back to college as a mature student is a big commitment, so enjoy the challenge. Secondly, pick your co-op/teaching practice carefully. Thirdly, be open minded where you are going to work because you leave yourself more options.”

“I think the people you work with can make or break a job; what you're going to be working at will probably be mind numbing any way after a while, but the people you work with shouldn't.”

“Go to a professional interview coach. Don't just focus on recent qualifications. Don't restrict the job hunt to one or more areas.”

In your opinion, how can the Careers Service meet the career related needs of mature students?

“Get the word out that the service is there and that people should use it as their first port of call. Talk/lecture towards the end of an academic year to remind people of the service. Emailed newsletter, or something equivalent.”

“One service that the Careers Service could introduce would be to set up a special unit which helps mature students gain employment after graduation.”

“Helping with CVs. Picking Co-op jobs that are more suitable for older students.”

“More group meetings and info talks.”

“As well as being placed on work experience in 2nd year and third year, summer time work experience after 4th year could possibly mean full-time employment.”

“Advise people to be realistic in their expectancy. Offer proper interview coaching and career advice. Even though I did use the UL service, I found it was not realistic enough.”

“I don't think the needs of mature students are any different to any other students.”

“Unlike students coming from high-school, a mature student has been working and now finds themselves on little money having to deal with facilities and attitudes aimed at 19 year olds. A more equal status between staff (lecturers and admin) and mature students may keep a bit of pride.”

“Provide contact names of potential employers.”

“Find where their interests lie, Interview skills/training, Give a view of the possibilities with their qualifications.”

“Inform mature students of pros and cons of career change. Highlight need for practical experience. No job without experience, and no experience without job, only increases challenge for older students, and ensure students are computer literate.”

“Be honest and helpful. Offer advice on post-degree qualifications.”

“Grads need broad understanding with areas of deep technical capability.”

“Coaching on completion and drafting of CV, ensuring that previous and present skills etc are highlighted. Use of web and relevant sites.”

“Listen carefully to them as most mature students know or have a good idea what they want and their general direction in life. I found the staff in the careers office very helpful and efficient.”

“Help students to identify the type of work they are interested in, how to do interviews etc.”

“I was the minimum age to qualify a mature (23) when I started in UL. I'm not sure of the needs of the more mature students. Perhaps advice to highlight for them their strengths and abilities due to their experiences prior to UL.”

“Invite mature students to formal group meetings, and advertise more, either around campus or directly to your target group.”

“Play an advisory role, answer questions from students. The jobfile is a good aid in informing students what the companies are looking for.”

“Offer advice on CV preparation.”

“Better direction planning for mature students.”

“Have more options for older people; there is too much emphasis on the younger graduates.”

“Listen to their needs. They know what they want, or otherwise they would not go to UL.”

“Not sure, I did not use them much, as I knew what I wanted to do.”

“Co-op too geared at the young students looking for work experience. Mature students need to be more geared towards academic qualifications. Interview and recruitment techniques should be more up to date with the ethos of companies.”

“Should be one-to-one interaction and talks. Give more information on worries and queries that students may have.”

“Help people to aim for areas of employment where age/maturity may be seen as an advantage. For example, in the health services, maturity can be an advantage. I never had contact with a specialist mature student careers advisor while in UL. However, I received superb advice from one of the Coop Managers in preparing my CV. I never had any complaints about back up support in UL.”

“My problem with answering this question is that I never used Careers Service. I feel it is not geared towards Arts Students, it is aiming more at Business or IT graduates.”

“Advice for my classmates and me was to do further study, such as Grad Dip in Computing.”

“Be up to date with industry needs and growth sectors. Interview-training and CV-review confidence is vital. Arrange post-grad temp contracts if possible.”

“More meetings and discussions with mature students.”

“Have a realistic approach. Obtain feedback from interviews to find out where your weaknesses are.”

“The Careers Service needs to understand that mature students have a fear of interviews, fear of rejection, and they need to portray themselves as assets, using no frills but reality.”

Any additional comments?

“I had a very positive experience as a mature student in UL - it was a great platform for me and my career.”

“As a recent graduate, I was willing to begin my engineering career as a graduate. I felt people did not want employ a 31 year-old as a graduate engineer. Why? I don't know, as I had a lot to offer and was very motivated and willing to work at the graduate rate.”

“I am glad a little work is being done to help people adjust to the completely different lifestyle college has offered.”

“Getting a good degree is a bonus. I was still in my twenties graduating, so am not very 'mature' in years. Therefore, may not have had to overcome the same obstacles as other graduates.”

"Mature students should get involved with all aspects of college life i.e. union and clubs."

"Your degree should be seen as a stepping-stone to a lifelong drive for further education."

"Going back to college as a mature student was a huge advantage to me. I knew I really wanted to do PE teaching and was thus very interested in the course."

"The initial period of returning to UL was daunting; it would have been very beneficial to have an existing mature student too speak to. In our class of 42, about 4 of us were mature students, with the remainder straight from Leaving Cert. For the latter, it was a continuation of where they left off; not so for me, 7 years out of secondary school."

"I am unsure that the postgraduates needs of mature students differ greatly from other groups, in terms of what Service can deliver on that. Your best effort may be directed at Mature Students while they are still undergraduates."

"It should be more difficult for mature students to get into UL; this will determine if they will finish the course (a number of mature grads in my course never finished it because of academic requirements). There should also be accommodation arranged for mature students."

"It is very difficult to choose the correct course in UL. If I was back again, I wouldn't do the course I did, but I still don't know what course I would do."

"I have still not finished my studies and must return to Blackhall Place next year for another 3 month course."

"UL can be a cold place for mature students, so mix well with all to help with career confidence."

"More care to be given to mature graduates with regards to everything i.e. study, work experiences, study skills etc."

"Overall, I feel mature students can be a constant support to each other at different stages of college years, and encouraging more mature students to meet will help in all aspects of a mature student life."

**Careers Service
Cooperative Education & Careers Division
University of Limerick
Limerick**

www.ul.ie/careers