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# Widening Participation in Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland

Report submitted to HEFCE and OFFA

October 2013

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# 1| Introduction

- 1.1 This report constitutes the Ireland country case study for the international review of widening participation (WP) commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). A review of the literature was undertaken to inform the writing of all sections of this report. Ireland has amassed a significant collection of literature with respect to inequality in education generally, and HE, WP and retention specifically, and this report does not purport to be fully comprehensive. As well as the literature, the report is informed by the author's knowledge and experience of WP 'on the ground'. Colleagues, working in access and WP policy, practice and research, at local, regional and national levels, have been most helpful, and their suggestions have also informed the report's contents.
- 1.2 There are nine key sections following this introduction. Following brief sections on education, and HE in Ireland, with a particular focus on their impact on WP in HE, up-to-date data on Ireland's target WP groups is presented. Following this, another section provides an overview of the development and current status of Ireland's WP policy, with the subsequent section providing more detailed information on our target groups. Sections 7 and 8 constitute the main focus of the report, with information provided on widening access, retention and progression initiatives for Ireland's target groups. In Section 9, information on financial support to students is provided.
- 1.3 Before the concluding section, the critical review aims to draw together key points with respect to our successes and remaining challenges with WP in Ireland, and considers transferability to the English context. An important point to note is the relative lack of evaluative research conducted in Ireland in relation to WP interventions. Indeed, building an improved evidence base is one of our current central objectives.

## 2| Education in the Republic of Ireland

### Introduction

- 2.1 The formal education system in Ireland consists of primary, post-primary, further education (FE) and HE sectors, and there is also significant community and adult education provision. State-funded educational policy and implementation is managed by the Department of Education and Skills (DES). There are recognised socio-demographic and socio-cultural disparities in participation and performance in the Irish education system at primary, post-primary, and post-compulsory education levels.

### Overview of Education Sector

- 2.2 Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is a core concern of the DES<sup>1</sup>, and a free pre-school year of education for all children (aged between three and four years) was instituted in 2010. There are over 3,000 primary schools; these are privately owned and controlled by patron bodies (a significant majority by the Catholic Church)<sup>2</sup> and funded publicly through the DES. There are over 700 post-primary schools, more than half of which are voluntary secondary schools, whilst the remainder are vocational schools and community colleges, or community and comprehensive schools.
- 2.3 The introduction of 'Free Education' in 1967 led to huge increases in participation in post-primary education in Ireland: from 134,090 in full-time post-primary education in 1965, to 345,941 in 1991, to 337,851 in 2003/2004, and almost 360,000 in 2011/2012<sup>3</sup>. There are two cycles in post-primary education, namely the junior cycle and the senior cycle. The junior cycle culminates in the Junior Certificate examination, which is currently undergoing significant reform. The senior cycle (which includes an optional 'Transition Year') culminates in the Leaving Certificate examination. There are three Leaving Certificate programmes, namely the 'established' Leaving Certificate (LCE), which the majority of students who complete post-primary take, the Leaving Certificate Vocational programme (similar to the LCE with an additional vocational element), and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. The latter was developed with the objective of meeting the needs of those students who are not adequately catered for by the other programmes. Only a very small proportion takes the LCA, approximately 7% per annum. It is noteworthy that many students in the LCA are from disadvantaged backgrounds. This route does not facilitate direct entry to HE; students from the LCA may progress to HE via Post-Leaving Certificate courses in FE. The traditional LCE remains the main entry route to HE (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2008). The

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the Early Start pre-school programme for those aged three to four in disadvantaged areas. See: <http://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Early-Childhood/>

<sup>2</sup> A forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector was established in 2011.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics-2011-2012.pdf>

1998 Education Act constitutes the central legislative framework with respect to primary, post-primary and adult and continuing education<sup>4</sup>.

- 2.4 Ireland also has a range of FE colleges, mostly run by Vocational Educational Committees (VECs), which offer a range of full-time and part-time courses for individuals wishing to up-skill for FE and training or employment. Many of those attending FE colleges have not completed their post-primary education, and thus it often represents their 'second chance' in education. A new co-ordinating body for the sector, Solas, is planned, along with 16 new Local Education and Training Boards, which will amalgamate the current VECs and significant elements of FAS<sup>5</sup>.

## Educational Disadvantage and Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)

- 2.5 Schools with disadvantage have been identified using a new procedure since 2005, under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) plan<sup>6</sup>. At primary school level, indicators considered at individual school level include levels of unemployment and lone parenthood, numbers of Travellers<sup>7</sup> and large families, and eligibility for free book grants and local authority housing, combined into an overall scale of disadvantage. There are three categories of disadvantage at primary level: urban band 1 schools, urban band 2 schools, and rural schools. There are also schools with 'dispersed disadvantage'. In 2008, there were 199 urban band 1 primary schools, 141 urban band 2 primary schools, and 333 rural DEIS schools. At post-primary level, schools are categorised as DEIS (disadvantaged) or non-DEIS. A socio-economic indicator (medical card ownership) combined with measures of educational outcomes (junior cycle drop-out and Junior Certificate performance) is used. In 2008, there were 333 rural DEIS and 203 urban DEIS post-primary schools. There have been, and continue to be, differences in the socio-demographic intake of different types of schools, with vocational and community schools traditionally having higher proportions of students from lower socio-economic groups than secondary schools. Smyth & McCoy (2009) reported that DEIS schools have a higher proportion of those from lower socio-economic groups, 'newcomer' (immigrant) students, students with disabilities, and Traveller students than non-DEIS schools. They note a higher incidence of serious literacy and numeracy problems, emotional and behavioural problems, absenteeism, lower student motivation, problematic student-teacher relationships, and less parental involvement in DEIS schools. A key issue, however, is that 61% of young people from semi/unskilled manual backgrounds and 56% from non-employed households attend non-DEIS schools (ibid.). This links directly to a WP issue, as until 2010, to access HE through the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) route<sup>8</sup>, a student had to be attending a DEIS school. This has now changed (see Section 7).

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<sup>4</sup> Other relevant acts include: The Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 (which established the National Educational Welfare Board); and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (2004)

<sup>5</sup> Foras Áiseanna Saothair, Ireland's National Training and Employment Authority

<sup>6</sup> Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Plan (DES, 2005)

[http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobervlet/DEIS\\_action\\_plan\\_on\\_educational\\_inclusion.pdf?language=EN](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobervlet/DEIS_action_plan_on_educational_inclusion.pdf?language=EN)

<sup>7</sup> The Travelling community is Ireland's indigenous ethnic group, although their official status as an ethnic group is contested.

<sup>8</sup> Further information on this and other supplementary HE entry routes are provided in Section 7 of this report

- 2.6 In a relatively short period of time, Irish schools transformed from a relatively homogeneous to a very heterogeneous student intake (Smyth et al., 2009). There are currently over 48,000 students from over 160 different nationalities in Irish schools, having experienced an 87% increase in the number of immigrant children in our school system between 2002 and 2006. In the 2009/2010 school year, there were 28,422 immigrants in post-primary schools (9% of the school population), 45,700 immigrants in primary schools (10%), and 70% of 'newcomer' students were non-English speaking. Ireland currently has a greater diversity of nationalities in Irish schools than in other EU countries. British, Polish and Nigerian constitute the biggest immigrant groups in post-primary. While some have left, or are leaving, due to the severe economic recession and collapse of the 'Celtic Tiger' economy, it is seen that schools will remain multicultural (Intercultural Education Strategy 2010/2015 (DES & the Office of the Minister for Integration) (2010); Byrne et al., 2010).
- 2.7 Smyth et al. (2009) warned about the potential 'ghettoisation' of Irish schools: 'newcomers' are more highly represented in urban and disadvantaged schools and under-represented in Gaelscoileanna (Irish-speaking schools). Byrne et al. (2010) found that 40% of primary schools have no 'newcomer' children at all, that they make up more than a fifth of the student body in one tenth of primary schools, that nine out of 10 post-primary schools have at least one 'newcomer' student, and that many post-primary schools have very few (2-9%). While the DES has provided resources at both primary and post-primary levels to support pupils whose first language is not English, we have witnessed significant cutbacks in this area since 2009. There is now a maximum of two English as an Additional Language (EAL) teachers per school, irrespective of the total number of EAL pupils. A minimum of 14 pupils is required for one EAL teacher to be sanctioned.
- 2.8 There are three recognised indicators of educational disadvantage at school level relating to attendance, namely early-school leaving and academic achievement. In terms of attendance, forms of non-attendance (absences, expulsions, suspensions) are higher in DEIS schools. The average number of students who miss 20 days or more is approximately twice as high in DEIS, than in non-DEIS, schools (c.f. Millar, 2012). Absenteeism is thought to be an early indicator of early school leaving. The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 raised the minimum school leaving age to 16 years (it was previously 15), or the completion of three years of post-primary education, whichever is later. Almost 9,000 young people leave school before the Leaving Certificate each year in Ireland (Byrne et al., 2009). Despite targets of 90% completing senior cycle by 2000, 98% by 2007, and 100% by 2010 (targets set in 1997 and 2005 by the National Anti-Poverty Strategy and the Social Inclusion Forum), there was little significant improvement in retention rates between 1993 and 2008 (it was approximately 82% in 2008). A high proportion of early school-leavers come from semi-skilled and unskilled manual backgrounds (Byrne et al., 2009; National Economic and Social Forum, 2002). Despite some improvements in the retention of those from skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled and farm backgrounds, early school leaving is still strongly linked to socio-economic background (Byrne & Smyth, 2010) and membership of the Travelling community. Further improvements have recently been identified: according to the DES (2012c), just over 90% of those who commenced post-primary in 2006 sat their Leaving Certificate examination in 2011 or 2012. Specific improvements

have also been found with regards to the retention of young men in DEIS schools; the DES (2012c) reports that the average retention rate for DEIS post-primary schools increased from just over 68% for the 2001 cohort to just over 80% for the 2006 cohort. Travellers have almost full participation at primary school level and have a high transfer rate to post-primary. However, they have quite poor attendance and retention rates at post-primary level, whilst a significant majority leave school around the Junior Certificate point. More than 80% do not complete post-primary; 102 completed the Leaving Certificate cycle in 2008 (Hourigan & Campbell, 2010). Progression routes for Travellers included Traveller Training Centres (which closed in June 2012, and were viewed as contributing to a segregated system) and Youthreach<sup>9</sup>, in the FE sector, among others.

- 2.9 In Ireland, research has found that dominant educational practices disadvantage those from lower socio-economic and minority groups (Devine, 2011; Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Lynch, 1999; 1989). Low teacher expectations in relation to certain groups and 'ability grouping' practices play a particularly damaging role (Smyth & McCoy, 2011). If 'ability grouping' is used, students are brought into a highly differentiated system at an early stage which makes HE progression unlikely or very difficult. In the senior cycle, class groupings, if not 'mixed ability', are often based around the level at which Leaving Certificate papers are offered ('higher', 'ordinary' or 'foundation' levels); in essence, this constitutes another form of 'ability grouping'. The taking of 'grinds' (private, supplementary, examination-focused tuition) by significant numbers of post-primary students, in preparation for State examinations, is also of concern from an equality perspective, as only those who can afford to, can pay.
- 2.10 Research in Ireland has found that it is during the junior cycle that many young people begin to have particularly negative schooling experiences, becoming increasingly disaffected, experiencing negative relationships with teachers, attending poorly, and falling behind with academic work (Smyth et al., 2004; Smyth, 2009). Research has consistently found that those from lower socio-economic groups report more negative school experiences than other students (e.g. Keane, 2011b, 2009b). This, along with underachievement at school, and a lack of family experience of educational success and HE participation, negatively affects their academic self-confidence, and their expectations relating to academic achievement and progression to FE or HE (c.f. *ibid.*). Further, the teaching and learning approach, particularly the perceived lack of focus on thinking and the over-focus on rote-learning, causes many students to disengage, although this has been found to have a particularly strong effect on those from lower socio-economic groups (c.f. *ibid.*). The Leaving Certificate has been the subject of long-standing criticism by educators, students and employers, for its apparent encouragement of rote learning, dependent learning approaches, and 'teaching to the test' learning and teaching methodologies, particularly due to the link between performance in the Leaving Certification (via the 'points system') and progression to HE. The apparent under-preparedness of students for HE has been noted (c.f. in the

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<sup>9</sup> Youthreach was established in the 1980s and provides a 'second chance' for early school-leavers. See: <http://www.youthreach.ie/>

National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, DES, 2011a)<sup>10</sup> and Hyland (2011)) and curriculum reform is underway at both junior and senior cycle levels. Significant changes to the points system and first year HE provision have recently been announced (DES, 2013).

- 2.11 There is significant recognition of the need for a more coherent and integrated approach to inclusion and equality in education in Ireland, throughout the lifecycle of a particular individual. This was reflected in the DEIS Action Plan (DES, 2005). The DEIS scheme was established in 2005, and in 2012 over €158 million was made available under the scheme to provide additional teaching and other forms of support to primary and post-primary schools included in the scheme. Six hundred and seventy primary and 195 post-primary schools are part of the DEIS School Support Programme (SSP). The DEIS initiative evaluation reports (DES, 2012a, 2012b; Weir & Archer, 2012) found that DEIS had had an overall positive effect on tackling educational disadvantage. Almost all of the primary schools demonstrated significant improvements in student attendance, whilst the majority of the post-primary schools had effective schemes in place aimed at improving attendance. Achievement gains were found with respect to the literacy and numeracy levels of pupils in DEIS primary schools in all three evaluation reports. With respect to literacy, in 11 of the 18 sample schools, good to very good improvements were found, and significant improvements regarding numeracy were identified in eight of the 18 schools. Statistically significant improvements were identified for primary pupils in 2nd, 3rd and 6th class in Mathematics and Reading (Weir & Archer, 2012).

## Progression to Higher Education and Prior Educational Attainment

- 2.12 Performance in the Leaving Certificate is the key determinant of HE participation. Admission to full-time undergraduate programmes in the university and Institute of Technology (IoT) sectors is generally based on a student's points-based performance in the Leaving Certificate. Grades achieved in each subject are awarded a certain number of points, and a student receives a points tally for their best six subjects (up to a maximum of 600 points). This total is then considered against their course choices. Points for particular courses are based on a supply and demand system, with the minimum points level for a programme fluctuating from year to year. The Central Applications Office (CAO), established in 1976, is a nationally administered system and manages the (anonymous) application process for all undergraduate programmes. Immigrant students must fulfil certain criteria with respect to years of residency and citizenship status if they are to be eligible for the 'Free Fees' initiative. There are unofficial school 'league tables' published in national newspapers each year, identifying (very crudely, and not always accurately) the numbers of students progressing from each school to HE. These are the subject of massive opposition from the educational community, as the 'results' do not take into account the very different socio-demographic intake of student populations.

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<sup>10</sup> Also known as the Hunt Report, as the group which worked on the report was chaired by Dr. Colin Hunt, an economist.

2.13 The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES, 2011a) noted that a key barrier to HE entry for those from lower socio-economic groups was their lower levels of school completion and lower attainment levels in the Leaving Certificate examination. In this context, the report emphasised the need for interventions to support student retention and achievement at school level, as well as supplementary entry routes to HE. In Ireland, for those who remain in school to complete the Leaving Certificate, those from lower socio-economic groups achieve significantly lower examination grades relative to their initial 'ability' levels than those from higher socio-economic groups (Smyth, 1999; Hannan et al., 1996; Technical Working Group, 1995). Indeed, based on the annual School Leavers' Survey in 2006 and 2007, Smyth & McCoy (2009, p. 15) reported that;

'... young people from manual backgrounds are much less likely to achieve at least one 'honour' (grade C3 or better on a higher level paper) in the Leaving Certificate examination. While 58% of students from higher professional backgrounds achieve four or more 'honours' grades in the Leaving Certificate, this is the case for just 16% of those from semi and unskilled manual backgrounds.'

2.14 There is a lack of solid data with respect to the performance of immigrant and other minority ethnic in Irish schooling. Traveller students have very low achievement scores in English Reading and Mathematics standardised tests in comparison with the general population and their low participation in senior cycle contributes to a significant achievement gap. A recent, and indeed key strategy in Irish educational policy has been the development of a national Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2011-2020 (DES, 2011b), which aims to improve Irish children's literacy and numeracy performance.

## 3| Higher education

### Overview

- 3.1 The Irish HE sector consists of seven universities<sup>11</sup>, 14 Institutes of Technology (IoTs)<sup>12</sup>, four Colleges of Education (initial teacher education (ITE), mostly primary), and three designated institutions: the Royal College of Surgeons Ireland, the National College of Art and Design, and the Royal Irish Academy. The HEA is the statutory body for HE in Ireland. Under the Universities Act (1997) and the Institutes of Technology Act (2006)<sup>13</sup>, the HEA allocates funding to Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) and lays a particular emphasis on equality in HE.
- 3.2 The HE sector has witnessed massive expansion in recent decades: 20% of 17-19 year olds progressed to HE in 1980 whilst this figure was 53% in 2009/2010 (O'Connell et al., 2006, Byrne et al. 2009, HEA, 2010a). Ireland is currently at a 65% participation rate when taking into account the number of mature students and those entering via FE and alternative entry routes. The 2007/2013 National Development Plan states that the 'national objective for Ireland's higher education system is to be at the front-rank of performance within the OECD' (Government of Ireland, 2007, p. 204), taken to mean being in the top five countries (Boland, 2007). A target 72% participation rate by 2020 for the relevant age cohort was set by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007), endorsed by HEA (2008) and a commitment to this objective was also found in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES, 2011a). However, there has been a lack of critical discussion about the rationale for, and the implications of, such a target.
- 3.3 The 2004 OECD review of Irish HE informed key developments throughout the last decade. Following the economic crisis in and since 2008, the first National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES, 2011a) has formed the cornerstone of Irish HE policy. Significant spending cuts, and initiatives to achieve savings, have underpinned the resulting actions.
- 3.4 Full-time enrolments in Irish HEIs in the 2011-2012 year totalled 163,046, and part-time enrolments totalled 40,557. Full-time undergraduate new entrants totalled 40,865. In the 2011/2012 academic year, over 196,000 full-time and part-time students were enrolled in HEA-funded HEIs (HEA, 2013a). However, despite 'massification', there remain significant social class, ethnic, disability and gender disparities in terms of access to and progression within HE.

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<sup>11</sup> University College Cork (UCC), National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG); National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM), Dublin City University (DCU), University of Limerick (UL), University College Dublin (UCD), and Trinity College Dublin (TCD)

<sup>12</sup> Similar to the UK's 'post-1992' universities.

<sup>13</sup> Previously, the IoTs were funded by the then Department of Education and Science (now, DES)

- 3.5 A number of alternative entry routes to HE exist, from FE (via FETAC<sup>14</sup> qualifications), specific pre-entry access courses, mature entry and via HEAR) and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE)<sup>15</sup>. Some institutions have developed pre-entry access or foundation courses which aim to prepare students who have not met ‘traditional’ eligibility requirements for HE. These courses are usually at least several months to one year in duration, and progression to an undergraduate programme at that (or a linked) institution is generally the next step for students who successfully complete the course. Different groups (younger and/or mature) are sometimes emphasised in different HEIs. In Ireland, those over 23 years of age on January 1st in the year of entry to first year undergraduate level are defined as mature students.

### Implications of Education System on Access to Higher Education

- 3.6 Participation and achievement at school level is particularly strongly linked to socio-economic status, and ethnicity in terms of membership of the Travelling community. As noted earlier in this report, educational disadvantage starts very early in a child’s life, and intervention at the earliest possible stage is recommended.
- 3.7 Over 90% of new entrants to HE are from the school system (Mooney et al., 2010), and this entry system is based on performance in the Leaving Certificate. Under-participation and under-achievement at school level results in a significant proportion of young people from lower socio-economic (and other disadvantaged) groups not being eligible for entry into HE (McCoy et al., 2010). The non-manual socio-economic group is a key target group in terms of WP in HE in Ireland. Research (c.f. *ibid.*; McCoy & Byrne, 2011; Byrne & McCoy, 2013<sup>16</sup>) has emphasised the central importance of the ‘value’ placed on HE by different groups. Students from the non-manual group progressing to HE express much more positive views about education than those who do not progress. Research in this area has found that non-HE participants from the ‘lower’ non-manual group experience significant disaffection and alienation at school from an early age. McCoy & Byrne’s (2011) interviews with non-HE participants from the lower non-manual group reveal experiences of skipping school, boredom, poor behaviour, low motivation, and negative interactions with teachers (especially amongst males). The SLA students in Keane’s<sup>17</sup> (2009b, 2011b) study also reported very negative school experiences relative to their traditional-entry peers. They commonly talked about having ‘hated’ school, perceiving that their teachers had low expectations of them and reporting difficult relationships with teachers generally. For example, ‘Marianne’<sup>18</sup> (3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate access student) explained that she ‘didn’t think the teachers had any confidence in me’. ‘Jamie’ (a 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate access student) remarked that ‘...the few that they considered wouldn’t go on to university ... slowly were pushed out or left’ (Keane, 2011b, p. 709). Low expectations from teachers were also perceived by non-HE participants in McCoy & Byrne (2011): some

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<sup>14</sup> Further Education and Training Awards Council

<sup>15</sup> Further information will be provided on these routes in section 7 of this report

<sup>16</sup> These papers draw on quantitative data from national surveys as well as interviews with students.

<sup>17</sup> Keane’s (2012, 2011a, 2011b, 2009b) study consisted of a three-year, in-depth, constructivist grounded theory study of the academic and socio-relational university experiences of 23 school-leaver-aged access students, and a matched group of traditional-entry students.

<sup>18</sup> Student names cited in this report are pseudonyms.

felt under pressure to choose certain subjects at a lower level (which would result in lower Leaving Certificate points). Some perceived that students were treated differently by teachers depending on whether or not they were expected to progress to HE. For example, 'Sharon' remarked that '... they had their favourite kids, if they thought like you were academic like they'd love you but if they thought you were a bit laid back they'd just leave you' (McCoy & Byrne, 2011, p. 150). In the latest Trinity College Dublin (TCD) study (Share & Carroll, 2013), many access graduates also reported similarly negative experiences of school.

- 3.8 In contrast, the traditional-entry students in Keane's (2009b, 2011b) study talked about having 'loved' school, having found the teachers 'very good . . . very interested in what you were doing' ('Marcella', a 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate traditional-entry student). Further, in terms of HE progression, 'Fiona' (a 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate traditional-entry student) remarked that 'we're almost just programmed to think that's the next step' (ibid., p. 710). Family history of HE experience was also a factor in students' perceptions of the possibility or certainty of HE progression (Keane, 2012). For most of the access students in her study, the 'normal' choice was to progress to employment after school, not HE. 'Jamie' (a 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate access student), explained:

'I was 15 when I left [school] ... I was glad, I thought 'I can get out now and get a trade like everybody else in the household'. ... College wasn't even a thought at the back of my mind, nor was it anything like that in the family ... it was just more normal or accepted to go and start working.' (Keane, 2012, p. 153)

- 3.9 TCD access graduates in Share & Carroll (2013) made very similar remarks regarding expectations about HE progression relative to employment:

'Like, there would be an expectation, like, you finish school, you go out to work or you'd become part of the productive economy, as opposed to going on to college, like ... I know blokes who were bricklayers who were bringing in €1,400 a week and so, you know, that was a barrier.' (p. 48)

- 3.10 In contrast, the traditional-entry students in Keane's study viewed HE as 'the natural thing to do after secondary school' ('Liam', a 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate traditional-entry student) (Keane, 2012, p. 153). 'Nadine' (a 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate traditional-entry student) explained:

'...There was never a question of me not going ... we always talked about college at home. It's just what happened ... went to primary school, went to secondary school, went to college. So it was just an assumption that it would happen. I never thought about not going ... it seemed to be the done thing ... Everyone around me ... they were all going to college and all the older people in my family ... it seemed to be like a natural progression. It was always going to happen.' (ibid.)

- 3.11 The non-HE participants in McCoy & Byrne (2011) were also very critical of teaching and learning methodologies in school, which they felt over-relied on textbooks and note-taking, and of the subjects on offer. Similarly, Keane (2011b) found that the school-leaver-aged access students in her study were highly critical of what was perceived as a highly-dependent, rote learning and examination-focused approach to teaching, or as ‘Duncan’ (a 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate access student) called it, the ‘read, remember and regurgitate’ approach (a new type of ‘3Rs’, perhaps) with ‘not enough emphasis on thinking’ (‘Derrick’, a 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate traditional-entry student). Interestingly, the traditional-entry students in Keane’s study were just as critical of the system. However, the two groups dealt with it very differently: for the access students, this approach was an important contributor to their disengagement from school, whereas, despite being critical of it, the traditional-entry students stuck with it and succeeded within the system. Both groups perceived the approach to learning in HE as being completely independent in numerous ways, but their pre-entry experiences positioned them differentially with respect to transitioning successfully to the approach required by HE, and in somewhat unexpected ways. Keane (2009b, 2011b) explained that the access students adjusted to the academic practices required by HE much more easily than the traditional-entry students, having received direct instruction in the nature of HE learning during their access course. However, she argued that their smoother transition was also a result of the access students *not* having been successful in the school dependent approach. The traditional-entry students, in contrast, encountered significant academic culture shock, and spent a significant amount of time having to ‘unlearn the rigidness of school’ (‘Eileen’, a 3<sup>rd</sup> year traditional-entry student), and be ‘deconstructed’ (‘Fiona’, a 3<sup>rd</sup> year traditional-entry student) (Keane, 2011b, p. 711).
- 3.12 McCoy & Byrne (2011) highlighted the role that a lack of access to information about the HE application process, the various options, routes, and programmes, costs and financial supports, plays in constituting a barrier to HE entry for those from lower non-manual groups, even amongst those who *are* eligible to progress to HE. Those with lower levels of family history of HE participation are also more reliant on information provided at school level. McCoy & Byrne (ibid.) reported very different experiences of school-based career guidance amongst lower and intermediate non-manual group students. Lower non-manual group students reported being directed away from HE options (for example, towards apprenticeships and FE courses, instead) and noted generally negative experiences of the process, whereas those from the intermediate non-manual group reported positive experiences of specific and active information provision and support in relation to HE progression. McCoy & Byrne (ibid.) emphasised that ‘the availability of information and advice on higher education is a key factor in the decision to enrol’ (p. 152).
- 3.13 An important issue with respect to the progression of immigrant students from school to HE is that of differential fee levels to which they may be subject, relative to their Irish peers. Children of migrant workers have to wait until they are 16 years old before they can begin building the years of residency required to be eligible for ‘Free Fees’; otherwise they are subject to EU or (even higher) non-EU fees. For asylum seekers, full refugee status must have been granted, if they wish to access HE via Free Fees.

Clearly, this acts as a major disincentive to the relevant students in aiming to progress to HE.

- 3.14 Thus, it is unsurprising that access to and participation in HE in Ireland is highly differentiated by socio-economic status, ethnicity, and to a lesser extent by gender. Those from certain lower socio-economic groups, students with disabilities, those from minority ethnic groups and mature learners are significantly under-represented in HE. It is also recognised that those from under-represented groups who do progress to HE are already exceptions relative to their peers. Those from under-represented groups progressing to HE also do so in a differentiated fashion, with higher proportions progressing to IoTs than universities, and populating different sorts of programmes (Mooney et al., 2010)<sup>19</sup>.

### Student Mobility between Providers

- 3.15 The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was set up in 2003 and consists of a system of 10 award levels: levels 1-6 are generally awarded by FETAC and levels 6-10 are awarded by the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). While the seven universities and Dublin Institute of Technology accredit their own rewards, they are linked to the NFQ levels (generally level 8 and above). The NFQ system is seen as facilitating student mobility and progression from one level up to the next, and is intended to map onto the European Qualification Framework. A key objective of the FE and Adult Education sectors is access, transfer and progression (particularly for those who left school early) through the provision of educational qualifications to upper post-primary level or equivalent, and other courses which allow individuals to up-skill and access the labour market.

### Funding for Higher Education, including Student Contribution and Financial Support

- 3.16 The HEA funds the universities, the IoTs and a number of other designated colleges through core recurrent, and other, grants. Up until 1996, students were liable for tuition fees, but those whose parents' income was below a certain level were eligible for tuition fee and, under certain conditions, maintenance grants. Through the 'Free Fees' initiative first instituted in 1996, the DES covers the cost of tuition fees of first-time, full-time undergraduate students pursuing a programme of at least two years' duration who hold EU nationality (or official Refugee status) and who have been resident in an EU member state for at least three years prior to entry to their first year. The scheme does not cover the fee charged by institutions for registration, examinations and student services and this has increased substantially in recent years. It was less than €300 when introduced in 1994, but increased to €900 in the 2008/2009 academic year. In 2009, the HEA announced that HEIs would have the power to set their own registration fee level – of between €900 and €1,600 – in the 2009/2010 year. For students who are in receipt of the grant, this fee is covered by their local authority. The 'Free Fees'

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<sup>19</sup> See Section Four of this report for more information in this regard

scheme only applies to full-time, and not part-time, students, and part-time students are not eligible for maintenance grants or other financial supports.

- 3.17 There have been many calls for the return of fees in recent years, and this was also recommended by the OECD review of Irish HE in 2004. Whilst not a panacea for the sector's funding ills, it is regularly noted that HE cannot continue to be so heavily dependent on public resources. In 2009, the then Minister for Education and Science, Batt O'Keefe, TD, argued that the abolition of fees had not achieved greater equity of access to HE for under-represented groups, which he felt could be better facilitated by instead directing funding towards access programmes, student grants and other student supports. At this time, and since the abolition of fees, Ireland had witnessed improvement in the rates of representation in HE of several under-represented groups (see Section 4), meaning it cannot be argued that the abolition of fees had no positive impact. The increased focus on re-introducing fees was likely more a result of the lack of capacity in the public purse to continue to fund 'free' HE. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES, 2011a, pp. 15-16) stated that:

'The only realistic option to support growth in participation is to require students or graduates to directly share in the cost of their education, reflecting the considerable private returns that they can expect to enjoy. A direct student contribution, based on a combination of upfront fees and an income-contingent loan scheme, is recommended as an essential element of future funding arrangements for the system.'

- 3.18 In terms of financial support to students (see Section 9), individual students may apply for a means-tested maintenance grant, which supports living and educational costs. There is also a range of schemes which students may apply to, including the Student Assistance Fund, and the Fund for Students with a Disability. Ireland's economic crisis has had a negative impact on the availability of resources for student supports, and recent years have seen changes in grant entitlements. However, a positive development has been the provision, for the first time, of financial support to students on part-time courses (under the Springboard scheme, 2011) as part of a labour market activation measure for adults who have become unemployed.

## 4| Widening participation data

### Data Collection Systems

- 4.1 An important strategic goal in Irish HE and WP policy (c.f. National Access Plan 2008-2013<sup>20</sup>, HEA, 2008) is the improvement of data systems and, thus, of evidence bases. Prior to 1992, the CAO collected information on the parental occupation of all applicants, but not subsequently (Clancy, 2001). The Equal Access Data Initiative was introduced into the registration process of institutions in 2007/2008 with 26 HEIs. Using a common template, it collects information from first time students about their social, economic and cultural background as well as information about disability. The survey is voluntary and completion rates vary widely, depending on institutions' approach to implementation. Data collection is managed by the National Access Office and the Statistics Unit of the HEA annually.
- 4.2 A new Student Record System (SRS) (including both universities and IoTs) has also been developed by the HEA in recent years, and Tom Boland (Chief Executive, HEA) claimed that the SRS now used in Irish HE 'compares favourably with the best systems internationally' (Mooney et al., 2010, p. 1). The HEA (2013a, p. 64) has explained:
- 'The SRS is an electronic Student Record System devised by the institutions and the HEA to allow detailed reporting of higher education students. It introduced the ISCED reporting scheme, and replaced the previous paper-based mode of data collection. To complete the SRS submission, the Registrar (or equivalent) of each institution certifies the dataset as being a true and accurate reflection of that academic year's student cohort.'
- 4.3 Funding for institutions with respect to access and WP is via the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM). Since 2011, Equal Access Data have been used to fully implement the access element of the RGAM for universities, as well as phase one of access funding for the IoTs (HEA, 2013a). This funding supports access and lifelong learning initiatives, including outreach programmes and post-entry supports.

### Access/Participation Rates for all Students

- 4.4 As previously noted, the HE sector has witnessed a massive expansion in recent decades: 20% of 17-19 year olds progressed to HE in 1980 whilst this figure stood at 53% in 2009/2010 (O'Connell et al., 2006, Byrne et al. 2009, HEA, 2010a). Ireland is currently at a 65% participation rate when taking into account the number of mature students and those entering via FE and alternative entry routes. According to Mooney et al. (2010, p. 9) 'The proportion of 18 year olds entering higher education is

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<sup>20</sup> The National Access Plan for the period 2008-2013 is set within the objectives and timeframe of the current National Development Plan (Government of Ireland, 2007)

approaching two thirds', and 45% of young adults aged 25-34 have obtained a HE qualification (OECD, 2010, in Mooney et al., 2010, p. 9). There is now a higher proportion of females than males in HE. Based on the latest figures available from the HEA (c.f. HEA, 2013a, pp. 13-25), for the HEA-funded sector (universities, IoTs and other colleges):

- > There are currently approximately 196,000 students enrolled (including both part- and full-time students).
- > Overall enrolment increased by 15.2% between 2007/8 and 2011/12, compared to a 2.7% increase from 2009/10 to 2010/2011.
- > Full-time undergraduate enrolments increased by 18.2% and full-time postgraduate enrolments increased by 14.6% between 2007/08 and 2011/12.
- > Part-time undergraduate enrolments have decreased by 1.9% and part-time postgraduate enrolments have increased by 16.5% between 2007/08 and 2011/12.
- > New entrants in 2011/2012 totalled 40,865. Females dominate Humanities and Arts, Social Sciences, Business and Law, Education and the Health and Welfare categories, while males dominate the Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction and the Science categories.
- > Almost 72% of full-time new entrants to undergraduate level are between 17-19 years of age.

4.5 For those on the borderline of qualifying for a grant (to cover fees), it is likely that 'Free Fees' impacted significantly on their choice to progress to HE. Many of those from lower socio-economic groups would have qualified for a grant in any case, so 'Free Fees' may not have been a direct factor in their improved progression rates. However, it may well have played a role indirectly, particularly at a psychological level, especially where information and understanding about grant application processes was lacking (as is often the case amongst under-represented groups). For those from groups over-represented (e.g. higher socio-economic groups) in HE, it has been suggested that the finance previously (prior to 'Free Fees') used by families to fund HE has since been used to fund full- or part-time private tuition (e.g. 'grinds'), or other educationally-supportive activities at pre-entry level, leading to further inequalities in terms of achievement at school level, as well as some segregation in an era of increasing social and ethnic diversity. Further, Keane (2009b) argues that 'Free Fees' may well have solidified a conception of HE as merely an assumed 'rite-of-passage'.

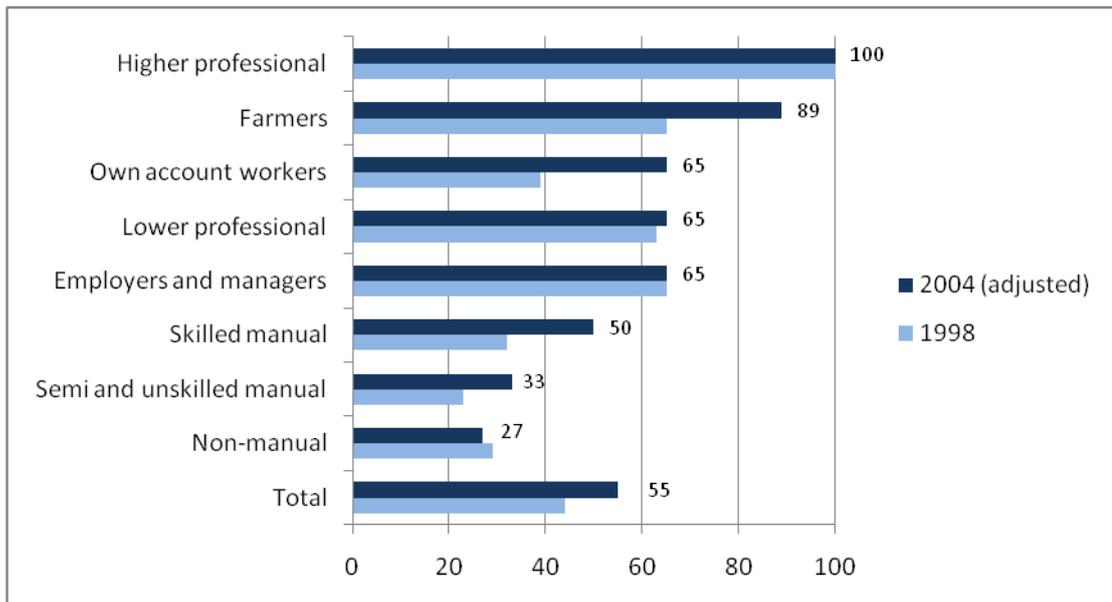
### Access/Participation Rates for Targeted Groups

4.6 Data with respect to new entrants' socio-economic, ethnic and disability characteristics are derived from the Equal Access Data Initiative. The figures below are from the Equal Access Data Collection 2011-2012, as reported in HEA (2013a). For each group, a table is included from an appendix to a background document of the National Access Office (National Access Office, 2012b, p. 18), which provides an update on progress with respect to 13 targets identified in the 2008-2013 National Access Plan. It is important to note that these latter figures are based on data from 2010-2011, as the 2011-12 data are not yet available.

## Lower socio-economic groups

4.7 Certain socio-economic groups constitute an important target in Irish WP policy. Clancy (2001) identified six under-represented socio-economic groups: unskilled manual workers, semi-skilled manual workers, 'other' non-manual workers, intermediate non-manual, skilled manual and agricultural workers. Clancy (2001) found that 100% of the children of higher professional groups progressed to HE. The figure for children of employers and managers is 80%, and for children of semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers it is 20%. Improvements in the participation rate of several lower socio-economic groups can be seen from 1998-2004 from Figure 4.1 below.

**Figure 4.1: Entry rates to HE by Socio-Economic Group, 1998 & 2004**



Source: HEA, 2008, p. 25

4.8 As seen above, for the period 1998-2004:

- > The higher professional group had already reached full participation by 1998.
- > Farmers' participation increased from 65% to 89%. They had the second highest participation rate.
- > Own account workers (self-employed) saw their participation rate increase from 39% to 65%.
- > Lower professionals experienced only a marginal increase, from 63% to 65%.
- > Employers and managers remained static at 65%.
- > The skilled manual group increased its participation from 32% to 50%.
- > The participation of the semi- and unskilled manual group (a policy priority group) increased from 23% to 33%.
- > The non-manual group's participation rate *decreased*, from 29% to 27%. Accounting for approximately one-fifth of Irish households, it includes diverse groups such as clerical

and office workers, those working in sales, personal services, and childcare, social workers, lower ranking Gardaí and soldiers (HEA, 2008).

- 4.9 Improving the participation rate of the non-manual group has become a policy priority. At the time, this group's low participation rate was seen to be, in part, a result of not qualifying for various financial supports, due to being just above income thresholds (ibid.). Research on this group (see Byrne & McCoy, 2013; McCoy & Byrne, 2011; McCoy et al., 2010) has suggested that there are two sub-groups to this category, the 'intermediate non-manual' group (comprising relatively high ranking administrative and executive positions, e.g. Garda Sergeants), and 'other/lower non-manual' (comprising lower level service workers, for example, waiters). It has been found that the latter group's participation in, and experience of, education is very close to that of lower socio-economic groups, in terms of school experiences of disaffection, alienation, drop-out and under-achievement. In contrast, the experiences of the intermediate non-manual group are closer to those of higher socio-economic groups.
- 4.10 In terms of the most up-to-date figures, as can be seen in Table 4.1 below (HEA, 2013a, p. 86), the participation rates of the Employers and Managers, the Higher Professional and the Own account workers groups have increased slightly since 2010/2011. While the participation rates of Manual skilled, Semi-skilled, and Unskilled groups have remained at similar levels, the Non-manual group's participation rate has decreased slightly again.

**Table 4.1: Socio-Economic Group of Respondents 2011/12 and 2010/11**

<b>Socio-economic group</b>	<b>% of new entrant respondents socio-economic group 2011/12</b>	<b>% of new entrant respondents socio-economic group 2010/11</b>
Employers and managers	18.9	17.9
Higher Professional	11.0	10.7
Lower Professional	9.3	8.8
Non-manual	9.3	9.7
Manual skilled	11.9	12.1
Semi-skilled	5.5	5.3
Unskilled	2.4	2.4
Own account workers	8.4	7.6
Farmers	7.6	7.9
Agricultural workers	0.8	0.8
All others gainfully occupied and unknown	15.0	16.8

Source: HEA, 2013a, p. 86

- 4.11 There is significant *sectoral* differentiation in terms of the representation of different socio-economic groups in HE in Ireland. Equal Access Data for the last several years clearly demonstrates that the participation of students from lower socio-economic groups is much higher in the IoT sector than in the university, or other, sectors (Mooney et al., 2010). From the HEA (2013a) data, one can see that while the largest socio-economic group in both the university and IoT sector is Employers and Managers, in the university sector this is followed by the Higher Professional group, whereas in the IoT sector, the second biggest socio-economic group is the Manual skilled group.
- 4.12 It has traditionally been, and continues to be, the case that higher proportions of those from higher socio-economic groups progress to the universities than the IoTs and higher proportions of those from lower socio-economic groups progress to IoTs than the universities. In the past, IoTs focused on the provision of more technically and vocationally-oriented programmes. Currently, they offer both these as well as the sorts of programmes more traditionally offered by the universities, albeit to a lesser extent in terms of the latter. It may be that programmes in the IoTs appear more attractive to those from lower socio-economic groups (or that they are more directed towards them), and it should also be noted that these programmes generally require lower Leaving Certificate points' scores.
- 4.13 A background document (National Access Office, 2012b, p. 18) in preparation for the 2014-2016 National Access Plan provides an update on targets based on 2010-2011 data:

**Table 4.2: National participation targets: Socio-economic background**

<b>National participation targets: Overall, target socio-economic, mature and part-time students</b>	<b>2006 (Base)</b>	<b>2010 Target</b>	<b>2010 Outcome</b>	<b>2013 Target</b>	<b>2012 Outcome</b>
<b><i>Overall participation rate and under-represented socio-economic groups</i></b>					
National Participation Rate (includes mature students)	55%	61%	<b>72%</b> (overall)	65% (overall)	72%
National Participation Rate (17-to19-year-olds)			53%	N/A	52% (provisional)
Participation of the age cohort from non-manual socio-economic backgrounds	27%	37%	pending census 2011	42%	pending census 2011
Participation of the age cohort from semi-skilled and unskilled socio-economic backgrounds	33%	41%	pending census 2011	45%	pending census 2011

## Disability

- 4.14 Again, based on the Equal Access Data collection 2011/2012 reported in HEA (2013a), approximately 5.5% of new entrants to Irish HEIs indicated one or more disabilities. Table 4.3 shows that *of those who indicated one or more disabilities*, the largest group (46%) reported a learning difficulty and the second largest group reported a psychological/emotional condition (17.2%).

**Table 4.3: Respondents with a disability 2011/12**

Type of disability	% of respondents	% of new entrants
Blindness, deafness, severe vision or hearing impairment	9.1	0.5
Physical condition	10.6	0.6
Specific learning difficulty	46.0	2.5
Psychological/Emotional condition	17.2	0.9
Other, including chronic illness	26.9	1.5

Source: HEA, 2013a, p.88

- 4.15 The background document (National Access Office, 2012b, p. 18) in preparation for the 2014-2016 National Access Plan provides additional information, but again it should be noted that this document was developed in 2012, and as such the figures in The Ireland country report for the OECD study on *Pathways for Disabled Students to Tertiary Education and Employment* (National Access Office, 2012) also highlights the relative educational disadvantage suffered by students with a disability:

‘... of the total with a disability almost 37% had ceased education after primary education level, compared to 15% of their peers. Additionally, the data shows that 8.3% of people with a disability had attained a third level degree or higher compared to 16% of their peers.’ (p. 10)

4.16 Table 4.4 overleaf are based on 2010/2011 data.

4.17 The Ireland country report for the OECD study on *Pathways for Disabled Students to Tertiary Education and Employment* (National Access Office, 2012) also highlights the relative educational disadvantage suffered by students with a disability:

‘... of the total with a disability almost 37% had ceased education after primary education level, compared to 15% of their peers. Additionally, the data shows that 8.3% of people with a disability had attained a third level degree or higher compared to 16% of their peers.’ (p. 10)

**Table 4.4: National participation targets: Students with disabilities**

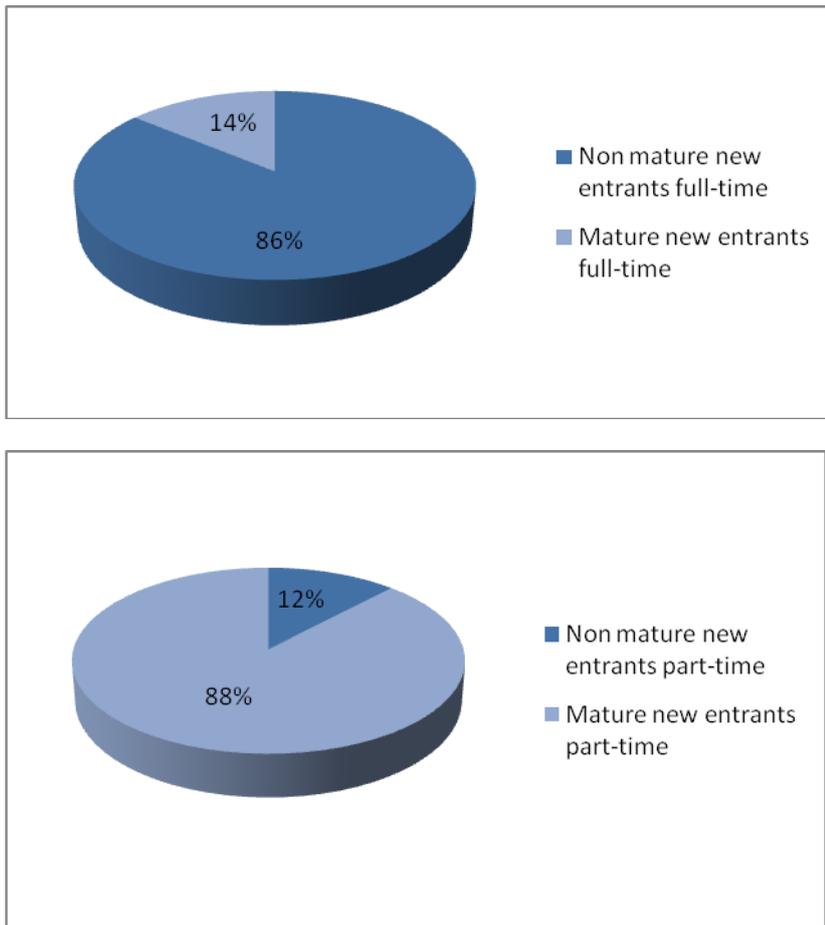
<b>National participation targets:</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2012</b>
<b>Students with disabilities</b>	<b>(Base)</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Students with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities (combined)	466	699	668	932	<b>979</b>
<b>Of whom</b>					
Students with a physical disability/mobility impairment	190	285	235	380	<b>317</b>
Students who are deaf/hard of hearing	126	189	173	252	<b>190</b>
Students who are blind/have a visual impairment	65	98	<b>116</b>	130	<b>138</b>
Students with multiple disabilities	85	127	<b>144</b>	170	<b>334</b>

### **Maturity**

4.18 As previously noted, in Ireland a mature student is defined as a student who was 23 years of age or over on 1<sup>st</sup> January on the year of entry to first year undergraduate level. The HEA (2013a) presents data with respect to mature student new entrants in 2011/2012 and trends over previous years, based on the SRS.

Figure 4.2 below shows the proportions of mature and non-mature full-time and part-time new entrants to all HEIs: 14% (5,500) of all full-time entrants and 88% (1,412) of all part-time new entrants were mature in the academic year 2011/2012.

**Figure 4.2: Proportion of mature and non-mature entrants for all HEA institutions, full-time and part-time 2011/12**



Source: HEA, 2013a, p.65

4.19 In terms of sectoral differences, 10% of full time new entrants to the universities are mature-aged, while 18% of full-time new entrants to IoTs are of mature age. Of part-time new entrants in the universities, 96% are mature students compared to 77% in the IoTs (HEA, 2013a).

4.20 The majority of full-time new entrant mature students are between the ages of 23-25, and there is a greater proportion of males to females amongst mature new entrants to HEIs. Of full-time new entrant mature students, 7.7% indicate that they have a disability, a higher rate than among non-mature students who responded to the survey. The largest group of full-time mature new entrants is from a manual skilled socio-economic background. The most popular subject area for full-time mature new entrants group is Humanities and Arts in the university sector, and Health and Welfare in the IoT sector. For part-time mature new entrants, it is Social Science, Business and Law in the university sector, and Engineering, Manufacturing and Technology in the IoT sector (HEA, 2013a).

4.21 The background document (National Access Office, 2012b, p. 18) in preparation for the 2014-2016 National Access Plan provides the following data for the 2010/2011 academic year for mature students and lifelong learning:

**Table 4.5: National participation targets: Mature students**

<b>National participation targets: Overall, target socio-economic, mature and part-time students</b>	<b>2006 (Base)</b>	<b>2010 Target</b>	<b>2010 Outcome</b>	<b>2013 Target</b>	<b>2012 Outcome</b>
<b>Mature students and lifelong learning</b>					
Full-time mature student entrants	13%	17%	14%	20%	15%
Full and part-time mature student entrants	18%	23%	19%	27%	21%
Enrolments on flexible/part-time courses	7%	13%	<b>14%</b>	17%	16%
Non-standard entry routes as a % of all acceptances/entrants	24%	27%	25% (estimate)	30%	24% (estimate)
Target for lifelong learning	7%	13%	6% (9% EU)	17%	7% (10% EU)

### **Ethnicity**

4.22 These data are based on the Equal Access Data collection 2011/2012, reported in HEA (2013a). As can be seen from

Table 4.6: Participation in HE by ethnicity, 90.9% of new entrants to Irish HEIs are settled (i.e. non-Traveller) White Irish, with this group constituting almost 93% of the student population, and almost 88% of the population within the IoT sectors. As can be seen below, Irish HEIs have very low participation of those other than Irish. Irish Travellers (at 0.1% in both sectors) are tied at the bottom with those from 'Any Other Black Background'.

**Table 4.6: Participation in HE by ethnicity**

<b>Ethnic group</b>	<b>Universities (%)</b>	<b>Institutes of technology &amp; National College of Ireland (%)</b>	<b>All institutions (%)</b>
Irish	92.9	87.9	90.9
Irish Traveller	0.1	0.1	0.1
Any other White background	3.4	7.1	4.8
African	0.8	2.3	1.4
Any other Black background	0.1	0.1	0.1
Chinese	0.6	0.4	0.5
Any other Asian Background	1.0	1.3	1.1
Other	1.1	0.8	1.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: HEA, 2013a, p. 89

4.23 Drawing on Census 2011 data, as well as Equal Access data for 2011/2012, and 2010/2011, the HEA (2013a) notes that the participation of those from Any Other White Background increased by almost 1% between 2010/2011 and 2011/2012, and marginal increases in participation were experienced by those from other ethnic groups. In previous National Plans, no targets were set for minority ethnic groups or members of the Travelling community, but it is likely that such targets will be set in the 2014-2016 National Plan.

### Retention and Completion and Specifically Targeted Groups

4.24 Mooney et al.'s (2010) report on progression in Irish HE constitutes the first national report on *all* publicly-funded HEIs. Previously, research has been conducted separately in the university and IoT sectors. In the university sector, Morgan et al. (2001) examined completion rates of full-time undergraduates who entered in the 1992/1993 academic year, and found that approximately 68% of students graduated on time, a further 15% graduated late, and 17% did not complete. Mooney et al. (2010) note that a comparison with results from a HEA study of students entering university in 1985 suggested an improvement in completion rates. Studies have also been conducted in the IoT sector (c.f. Morgan et al., 2000; 2002). Morgan et al. (2000) found that 52% graduated on time, 5% late, and 43% did not complete. They also noted significant gender and field of study differences in completion rates. In terms of reasons for non-completion, their follow-up study (Morgan et al., 2002) highlighted perceived difficulties of the course, particularly in certain subjects, for example, those related to Mathematics, especially in courses such as Computing and Electronics. A third of respondents felt that the workload was greater than they had expected. Kinsella et al. (2006) conducted a further study into retention in the IoT sector, which estimated completion rates between 73% and 75% for the years 2002-2004. In terms of reasons for non-completion, students' views were not included in the latter study, but IoT staff

pointed to perceived low quality of school-level career guidance, resulting in students' low 'awareness of both the demands and the rewards of studying in the sector' (ibid., p. 45). Staff were also concerned about the high level of student part-time work. Fleming & Finnegan (2011b) found that student resilience was a key factor in the retention and success of the 'non-traditional' students in their study. They emphasise that students' reasons for withdrawal were *multi-factorial*, generally including a financial aspect, but also relating to other issues, including, for example, caring duties, significant life events, mental health issues, and academic and workload difficulties.

- 4.25 Mooney et al. (2010) present the most up-to-date empirical evidence relating to retention and progression in HE in Ireland, based on the academic years 2007/2008 and 2008/2009, between 1st March 2008 and 1st March<sup>21</sup> 2009, across a range of fields of study, NFQ levels and all HEA-funded institutions. It draws on the SRS as well as on data from the CAO. Mooney et al. observe that full information on retention rates will be possible in the future as the SRS 'matures'.
- 4.26 In terms of 'non-presence' rates, it has been discovered that on average 15% of new entrants in 2007/08 across all sectors and NFQ levels were not present one year later. Non-presence rates are different across NFQ level: 25-26% at levels 6-7 and 4-16% at level 8. Non-presence rates are also different across sectors: 22% in IoTs, 9% in universities, and 4% in teacher education institutions.
- 4.27 However, McCoy & Byrne (Chapter 6, Mooney et al., 2010) noted that major differences *between institutions* decline significantly once the characteristics of enrolled students are taken into account and the results appropriately adjusted<sup>22</sup>. Following such adjustments, they point to the significant *sectoral* differences, with significantly higher retention rates in the Colleges of Education and the National College of Art and Design, and lower retention levels in the IoTs. Mooney et al. note that non-presence rates decline as students advance through their programme – while non-presence rates for new entrants are 15%, 7% for second years, 4% for third years, and 5% for fourth years. In terms of repeats, it is interesting to note that those who repeated a first year of study were far more likely not to progress to the subsequent year than those repeating other years of study.
- 4.28 Mooney et al. found that prior educational attainment (defined as Leaving Certificate points) is the strongest predictor of successful progression in HE, especially the likelihood that a new entrant will progress beyond the first year. In both sectors, those entering with lower points are less likely to progress to the next academic year, with higher Leaving Certificate points in Mathematics, and then English, being the strongest predictors of successful progression in HE.

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<sup>21</sup> The choice of a March date is of note, considering that those withdrawing from HE most often do so in their first semester. Mooney et al. (2010, p. 63) also note that: 'In view of the fact that 4% of full-time first-year students in both the university and institute of technology sectors dropped out prior to the census date of 1st March, the total proportion of students not progressing to March of their second year of study was 13% in the universities and 26% in the institutes of technology. The proportion of students discontinuing their studies between the second and third years of their course declined to 7%; and the proportion not progressing from their third to their fourth year of study was just 4%'.

4.29 The report also notes differential non-presence rates across fields of study, with the highest rates of progression notes in professionally-oriented programmes (e.g. Medicine, Education and Healthcare) and the lowest rates of progression in Computer Science (at 27%), Engineering and Construction programmes. McCoy & Byrne (Chapter 6 in Mooney et al., 2010) note that this is even when the gender, 'ability', and social class composition of these courses are taken into account. These findings are in line with previous research in Ireland: Morgan et al. (2001) have found low levels of drop-out from Medicine, Law, Dentistry and Veterinary Science (7.3%), which are considered to be prestigious courses and require a high points level for entry. In both sectors, the highest rate of non-completion in the past was in subjects such as Computer Science, Mathematics and Engineering. Mooney et al. (2010) note that the higher rate of non-completion in technology-based subject areas:

'... represents a mis-match between identified priorities in terms of economic and enterprise development strategy and our areas of greatest vulnerability in terms of competence development. The importance for economic recovery of creating a strong foundation in science and technology in Ireland renders this a matter of particular concern.' (p. 59).

4.30 The report recommends a focus on the development of mathematical competence for relevant disciplines, and on academic writing and research skills in other disciplines.

4.31 In terms of student characteristics and retention, Mooney et al. note that females have a higher rate of progression than males, although it is observed that this difference is largely a function of males' lower Leaving Certificate performance, and their higher level of entry into HE sectors and courses which have a higher non-completion level. Mature students have better progression rates in the IoT sector at levels 6 and 7 and lower progression rates at level 8 in all sectors.

4.32 Mooney et al. (2010) report that those socio-economic groups with the highest entry rates (Higher Professionals and Farmers) display the highest progression rates whilst lower socio-economic groups have the lowest rates of progression, with non-presence rates between 17% and 19% among the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled, the traditional working classes. While the non-manual group has the lowest levels of access to HE, their non-presence rate is equivalent to the national average. It has been found that the influence of gender and socio-economic status on progression in HE is mediated by prior achievement, specifically in Mathematics, followed by English, at Leaving Certificate level in both IoT and university sectors. McCoy & Byrne (in Mooney et al., 2010), note that once Leaving Certificate points are taken into account, there are no significant social class differences in progression, except for the skilled manual group, which has a significantly lower progression rate than the semi-skilled manual group. The authors note the declining level of grant eligibility for this group as a key factor. They also note greater progression rates for grant recipients in the IoTs, indicating the key role played by financial support in student retention. The authors postulate that this may be:

'... due to greater financial security, reduced reliance on (increasingly difficult to secure) part-time work or simply students ensuring that they fulfil the requirements of their courses to retain grant eligibility (since students who fail

their exams and are required to repeat the year lose their eligibility for a grant).’ (p. 45)

- 4.33 Thus, as noted by the authors, once students from lower socio-economic groups enrol in HE, there are few social class differences in progression, and it is noted that this is quite contrary to the international research in the area. Mooney et al. thus note the importance of supporting student achievement at school level. Mooney et al. (2010) also found that non-Irish students are more likely to progress at levels 6 and 7, but less likely to progress at level 8 when compared to Irish students across all sectors.
- 4.34 A study (O’Grady & Twomey, 2011) tracking the progression, retention and success of students with disabilities in nine HEIs has found that students with disabilities are high achievers, with over 90% of entrants graduating successfully.
- 4.35 Progression rates from pre-entry access courses and programmes to, and within, undergraduate level are also relevant. There is consistent evidence from institutional studies of very good (often better than for the mainstream student populations) retention and progression rates at undergraduate level for students entering HE via access programmes. In a nationwide evaluation of access courses, Murphy (2009) reported that 80% completed the access or foundation course, 62% progressed to HE, 21% graduated with a degree from HE, and 32% remained in the system at the time. At the National University of Ireland (NUI) Galway, in a study of school-leaver-aged access (SLA) students (who did a pre-entry course) compared to a matched sample of traditional-entry students, Keane (2009b, 2011b) found that while all SLA students completed their degree (one switched to part-time), one of the traditional-entry students did not complete. Trinity Access Programme (TAP) (2010) (in a review of the TAP at Trinity College Dublin (TCD)) found that the retention of access students is increasing annually and is higher than the national average for the mainstream student population. In 2008/2009, the retention rate for TAP undergraduates was 89%, higher than the national average of 83.2% (as reported in Morgan et al. 2001), and higher than the average current retention rate of 85% (Mooney et al., 2010). UCC (University College Cork) PLUS+ (2011) reports that the retention of their access graduates matches that of mainstream cohort, at 89%. In Keane & Byrne (2013<sup>23</sup>) (based on a review of access and foundation programmes at, or affiliated to, NUI Galway), one student withdrew at access level, whilst 21 failed to progress from access to undergraduate level. At the time of the survey, almost 80% had successfully completed, or were still completing, their undergraduate degree. The Dublin City University (DCU) Access Service (2011) found that only 7% of their students failed to complete their studies, either at DCU or at another HEI.
- 4.36 There are also consistently positive findings with respect to access students’ undergraduate degree performance from the various institutional studies. In terms of end degree results, Keane (2009b, 2011b, 2012) also found that both access and traditional-entry groups at NUI Galway performed similarly in terms of end degree results, with the majority of both groups obtaining 2.1s, and a small minority of both obtaining first class honours and 2.2s. At NUI Galway, Keane & Byrne (2013) also

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<sup>23</sup> Please note that these are provisional results as analysis is ongoing.

found that the majority of access students obtained first class honours or 2.1s. The UCC PLUS+ (2011) reports that 95% of (access) students received an honours degree, with 15.1% obtaining first class honours and the majority obtaining 2.1s, with their access students now outperforming mainstream students. TAP (2010) reports similar patterns at TCD, with 5% obtaining first class honours, and 58% achieving a 2.1. The report notes that their access students' achievement mirrors the mainstream population, although fewer students obtained first class honours. Staunton (2009) reports that 58% of the mature students in his study achieved either a first or second class honours degree. DCU access graduates were found to outperform traditional-entry students, on average, with just over 14% obtaining first class honours, 47% achieving a 2.1, just over 28% obtaining a 2.2, 6.6% a third class honour, and just under 4% obtaining a pass degree. Access graduates outperformed their traditional-entry route counterparts with respect to 2.1 and 2.2 degrees, although they achieved fewer first class and pass degrees (DCU Access Service, 2011).

- 4.37 Most HEIs offer a mix of pre-entry (including access courses), and post-entry activities and supports<sup>24</sup>. However, the various institutional reports do not generally differentiate between, for example, those who enter via traditional-entry reduced points routes such as HEAR and are supported at post-entry level, and those who do a full pre-entry course, and are then also supported at post-entry. Other differentiations are also not made. As a result, it is not possible to identify which specific interventions of wider programmes may have been particularly effective. One exception to this is research at NUI Galway (c.f. Keane, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Keane & Byrne, 2013), as these studies focused on students entering HE following the completion of specific access courses (not programmes more widely). Hence, it could be argued that the positive impact is potentially, at least in part, attributable to the quality of the pre-entry access courses (although post-entry supports are also provided). It should also be noted that students from these (and other: c.f. Kenny et al., 2010) access programmes emphasise that access supports (of varying kinds) played a vital role in their retention and success. Students' views about what they found particularly useful in these programmes will be considered in the Widening Access and Retention sections of this report.

## Progression to Postgraduate Study and Employment

- 4.38 Progression to postgraduate study and employment for those from under-represented groups constitute very new, and under-explored, areas of focus in Ireland to date.
- 4.39 Overall, 34% of graduates in Ireland with a Bachelor's degree progressed to postgraduate study in 2008 (HEA, 2010b). These data are not disaggregated in such a way as to allow an examination of rates of progression for those from under-represented groups. Information is, however, available from a number of institutional reports. In the TCD study (TAP, 2010), it is found that a significant proportion of access students engaged in postgraduate study and high employment levels were found amongst graduates: 57% of graduates had progressed to postgraduate level or some

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<sup>24</sup> More detailed information about these activities and support in general is available in the Widening Access section of this report).

form of further education and training; 41.1% progressed to programmes at levels 8, 9, and 10; 31.9% to 'Other training qualifications', and 19.5% to 'Professional training qualifications'. Participants' main reason for opting for postgraduate study was that they perceived that a postgraduate qualification was required for entry into graduate professions, and it was also seen as way of advancing in their current roles. In the UCC (UCC PLUS+, 2011) study, the majority continued in HE after undergraduate level, with only 28% seeking employment and not seeking any postgraduate study; 72% of survey participants were pursuing some form of postgraduate study. The number of UCC PLUS+ (access) students pursuing postgraduate studies was twice that of mainstream students in 2008. Reasons given for pursuing further study were to be more competitive in the labour market, to specialise in an area, the expectation of a higher income with higher qualifications, to assist in getting full-time employment, and encouragement from staff and peers. The DCU Access Service (2011) found that over 53% of access graduates progressed to further study. Keane & Byrne (2013) found that over half of those who had graduated had undertaken further studies or training. Reasons given included the perception that a postgraduate qualification was needed for employment, to improve job prospects, and having an interest in a specific area.

4.40 As 34% of graduates (overall) progress to postgraduate study, it would seem that access graduates have higher rates of progression to postgraduate level when compared to mainstream students. However, it should be noted that the institutional studies cited above are more recent than the HEA (2010b) study (which looked at progression to postgraduate study in 2008). Moreover, as there are fewer employment opportunities since 2008, owing to the recession, it is likely that the overall percentage of graduates now progressing to postgraduate studies is higher than 34%. In any case, access graduates would seem to be at least on a par with other graduates, in terms of rates of progression to postgraduate study.

4.41 In terms of progression to employment, for students generally, overall, 50% of graduates in Ireland with a Bachelor's degree progressed to employment either in Ireland or overseas in 2008 (HEA, 2010b). For under-represented groups, again we turn to the institutional studies. In the TCD study (TAP, 2010), 75% of graduates were employed at time of participation in the survey and of those who were not, the majority were pursuing further study. In the UCC (UCC PLUS+, 2011) study, the majority of access students continued in HE after undergraduate level, with only 28% seeking employment immediately afterwards. Of the 65% in employment at the time of the survey, the vast majority were working full-time. Keane & Byrne (2013) reported that of those who responded to the question, the majority were in employment (36%) or were engaged in further studies (approximately 20%). Of DCU's access graduates, 96% were found to be in employment<sup>25</sup>, with 4% unemployed (DCU Access Service, 2011). Based on their study of mature students in NUI Maynooth, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and TCD, Kenny et al. (2010, p. 11) reported that 'though levels of unemployment are low among graduates (8%) these figures are higher than expected when compared to the information available from the colleges'. Share & Carroll (2013) noted that the minority of TCD access graduates who were unemployed, while acknowledging the impact of the economic recession, experienced difficulty reconciling

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<sup>25</sup> Note, it is unclear if this figure includes students engaged in further study, as well as full- or part-time work.

their employment status with holding a degree from TCD. Share & Carroll also reported that those who were unemployed had not anticipated that they might also need to obtain a postgraduate qualification.

- 4.42 TCD, UCC and NUI Galway access graduates were found to be predominantly in 'graduate' forms of employment. In the UCC study (UCC PLUS+, 2011), only 12.3% were in jobs where degrees are not necessary and most were in graduate occupations. The majority of participants' first jobs were relevant to their degrees. For DCU access graduates, of those in employment, 85% reported that they were working in an area directly related to their degree programme (DCU Access Service, 2011). Keane & Byrne (2013), in the NUI Galway study, found that over 65% of those in employment were in graduate occupations (as defined by Elias & Purcell, 2004) with the vast majority of these (40% overall) being in 'traditional' graduate occupations, a category which comprises occupations such as teacher, social worker, nurse, doctor, and special needs assistant. From the NUI Maynooth, DIT and TCD study, Kenny et al. (2010, p. 11) reported that 'many students were focused on using their qualification to escape from low-status, unstimulating and low-paid work. A degree was a bridge to finding work that was more meaningful'. Seventy one percent of their participants agreed, or strongly agreed, with the statement that 'It was necessary for me to have a degree for the type of job I wanted'. TCD access graduates were generally in the non-market sector, and mostly working in the education or healthcare sectors, with some in the financial, legal, and social and community sectors, and their mature students were more frequently employed in the education sector (TAP, 2010). Both Kenny et al. (2010) and Keane & Byrne (2013) observed the marked number of graduates choosing to work in the field of education.
- 4.43 'Mobility', in terms of socio-economic status, was also considered in some of these studies. For example, TAP (2010) reported that participants' current employment was coded to ascertain current socioeconomic group, and most were now in lower and higher professional and non-manual groups. While no comparison has been made with participants' original socio-economic group, a comparison with the parents of HEAR applicants showed that the latter are mostly in lower professional employment. Of those now in graduate occupations, in terms of their original socio-economic status, Keane & Byrne (2013) noted that seven were from Manual Skilled, four were from Semi-skilled, five were from Unskilled, and 15 were from Unemployed (or no information), socio-economic groups (all of which are important target groups for WP policy) thus demonstrating upward social mobility. However, downward mobility was also noted for some: of those currently in non-graduate occupations, three were originally from Higher Professionals, two were from Employers and Managers, and one was from a Lower Professional socio-economic group.
- 4.44 In terms of current salary levels, the vast majority (generally 60-70%) of access graduates from the UCC (UCC PLUS+, 2011), TCD (TAP, 2010), NUI Galway (Keane & Byrne, 2013), NUI Maynooth (Kenny et al., 2010) studies were earning €35,000 or less, broadly in line with national starting salaries for HE graduates. TAP (2010) reported that mature students earned less than younger students and the study found a 9% increase in the rate of unemployment for mature students compared to young adults.

- 4.45 While international research, particularly English research, suggests that those from lower socio-economic groups encounter, or perceive that they encounter, labour market discrimination, research in Ireland is contrary. The majority of participants from the TCD study perceived that their age, location, or gender did not disadvantage them in accessing graduate level employment, although mature students noted that personal and family responsibilities could hinder their progression. Participants believed that they had the types of skills which were required by employers. They acknowledged that they had fewer networks upon which to draw and also lacked professional work experience and that this hampered their progress initially, but they did not accept the idea that they were hindered in the labour market and in their career progression. The UCC study did not address this issue directly, although the authors of the report claimed that their findings are in line with the TCD study, and noted that participants felt that postgraduate education, work experience and ability in interviews were very important for employers. Keane & Byrne (2013) found that 70% did not, and 30% did, perceive that socio-demographic factors such as social class and ethnicity had impacted on their labour market experiences. Of the 30% (35) who did, one was a Traveller, five were non-Irish White, and one was Black Irish. The majority were from manual skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled or unemployed backgrounds, whilst half were mature-aged and half were younger. When asked to explain their answer, being 'older' was highlighted as being potentially both negative and positive, whilst being female (particularly with children) was noted as a drawback. Social class was also highlighted: where one was from, one's address, one's 'name', and having 'fewer contacts' (e.g. in the field of Law) were all noted as being problematic. In addition, one participant remarked that 'coming from a working class background I felt I didn't fit in, in the financial sector'.
- 4.46 In the UCC study, almost 75% of those graduates working felt their job was varied and stimulating, 78% felt their job was important and that they had responsibility, and 56% felt their job was stressful. In the TCD study, overall, significant satisfaction rates were expressed about their employment, in terms of a range of factors. Keane & Byrne (2013) found that 86% were either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with their current role. Participants generally agreed that their work was challenging and that they had an opportunity to use their knowledge and skills, with slightly less agreement about the possibility of future career prospects, and anticipating a higher income in the next three years. Participants were distinctly less positive about expecting to be promoted in the next three years. These results should be interpreted in the context of the current economic recession in Ireland. Further, many of those in employment were in 'traditional' graduate occupations, very often in public service roles, where job losses and pay cuts have had a significant impact in recent years.
- 4.47 A recent TCD study (Share & Carroll, 2013) found that while some access graduates were reluctant to reveal their HE access route to their employer, others were comfortable doing so and even 'used this as "other capital" in their jobs. They brought their life experiences to their employment and had an edge that other traditional graduates appeared to lack' (ibid., p. 11).

4.48 The institutional studies above all employed a questionnaire (mostly paper-based), and the TCD (TAP, 2010) study also involved a focus group<sup>26</sup>. Response rates were variable: in the TCD study 71% (171 graduates) participated, whilst in the UCC study this figure was almost 46% (144 graduates), and in the DCU study, the researchers made contact (via a phone survey) with 64% of former students. The NUI Galway study is currently on-going, and at the time of writing 189 students had responded to the questionnaire (just under 10% of the full 2,000 population – the largest access population of all studies). The UCC, TCD and NUI Galway studies all highlighted the difficulties experienced in contacting former students; in many cases, individuals were no longer at the addresses held on file and so did not receive a questionnaire. Apart from the NUI Galway study which is still ongoing at the time of writing, the other institutional studies achieved reasonable, good or very good response rates. Despite this, it is of course possible that those graduates who had experienced the most success made up a large proportion of those who chose to respond.

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<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that the NUI Galway study is still on-going and that phase two will involve individual and/or focus group interviews with students.

## 5| Widening participation policy

### Policy Development

- 5.1 In Ireland, a focus on under-represented groups' HE access and participation can be traced back to the 1971 HEA Act, which identified 'equality of opportunity' in HE as a key function for the HEA. An emphasis on measures to achieve greater equality of participation can be seen in the Education Green Paper (Department of Education and Science, 1992), the Report on the National Education Convention (Coolahan, 1994), the research of the Technical Working Group (1995), the White Paper on Education (DES, 1995), and the final report of the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education (1995). Early school-leaving, under-achievement at Leaving Certificate level, and a lower transfer rate to HE even where requisite grades were obtained, were identified as markers of the educational experience for those from lower socio-economic groups (Coolahan, 1994). In the mid-1990s, recommendations included the annual reservation of 500 HE places, along with appropriate alternative entrance requirements (including access courses) and post-entry supports, with a particular focus on semi- and unskilled manual groups (DES, 1995; Steering Committee, 1995). It was anticipated that such access courses would be aimed at students '... with the necessary ability to benefit from higher education, but with lower academic achievement levels than their peers' and would 'provide the necessary learning skills and competence to enable students to successfully complete third level programmes' (Steering Committee, 1995, p. 22).
- 5.2 Policy development and implementation (including target-setting) has been supported by research at regular intervals on the participation rates of various socio-economic groups by Clancy (2001, 1999, 1995, 1988, 1982; Clancy & Wall, 2000). Various legislative developments have also played a part: Sections 12, 18 and 36 of the Universities Act 1997 pertain to the promotion of equality of opportunity, and aspects of the Regional Technical Colleges<sup>27</sup> Act 1992 lay similar responsibility on the IoT sector. This emphasis is also seen in the Education Act 1998, the Equal Status Acts 2000 and 2004, as well as in the White Paper on Adult Education (DES, 2000). The national evaluation of access initiatives by Osborne & Leith (2000) and the international perspective provided by Skilbeck & Connell (2000) also contributed significantly to policy development. The reports of the Action Group on Access to Third-Level (2001) and the High Level Group on University Equality Policies (HEA, 2004a), and the establishment of the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education<sup>28</sup> (within the HEA) in 2003 were very important steps forward. Emphases on access and WP in HE are found in legislation including the Institutes of Technology Act (2006) (Sections 21D and 21 F), the Universities Act 1997 (Section 36), and the Student Support Bill

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<sup>27</sup> Now, Institutes of Technology

<sup>28</sup> Hereafter, the National Access Office

2008 (Section 25). In 2004, the National Access Office set out its rationale and goals for the following three years in its first Action Plan (HEA, 2004b). The Educational Disadvantage Committee and Forum (2002-2005) laid the groundwork for the DEIS initiative (DES, 2005), which has emphasised the need for joined-up, integrated approaches across the lifespan for those experiencing educational disadvantage.

- 5.3 The HEA's (2006) evaluation of access programmes<sup>29</sup> (as opposed to courses) put forward four criteria for successful access programmes, i.e. relating to policy, practice, targeting, and partnership. It pointed to the need for a clear statement of the institution's access policy, relevant resources, a plan for staff training with respect to diversity and inclusion, together with clear and monitored targets for specific groups. It noted that access programmes consist of pre-entry activities, aimed at those from under-represented groups, and post-entry activities at personal, social, financial and academic levels throughout programmes, including with respect to careers and postgraduate study. The evaluation pointed to the need for institutions to develop clear statements and plans about links between their access programmes and community and other education partners, the involvement and commitment of all HEI staff in access activities, and clear routes of progression to HE for targeted groups. In terms of targeting, institutions were to set clear targets, including timescales, for the admission and graduation of specific target groups, plans to meet these students' needs based on research, and to develop a systematic approach to data collection to monitor activities. An important finding of the evaluation was that mainstreaming access in institutional policy was not enough and that targeted resources and supports for under-represented groups were still required at institutional level. Murphy's (2009) evaluation of access courses also informed the HEA's policy development in the area.

## Current Policy

- 5.4 The second (and current) national plan for equity of access to HE 2008-2013 (HEA, 2008) emphasises target setting, funding, mainstreaming and embedding access policy within institutions, as well as the importance of the post-entry stage. It lays down a number of priority objectives under five 'high-level' goals, which are aligned to important educational objectives in the National Development Plan (2007-2013), and many of which build upon goals set and progress made in the first national plan. They are<sup>30</sup>:
- > *Institution-wide approaches to access*: This goal aimed at having HEIs develop an institution-wide, integrated annual access plan, integrated in their Strategic and Operational Plans, to include full information on institutional data, targets, strategies, supports and resources. The emphasis is on an institution-wide approach (in line with the 2006 evaluation report), the engagement of all staff, better links between support services, enhancing the learning experience for all learners (rather than emphasising specialised approaches for 'distinct' needs, *ibid.*, p. 41), capacity-building amongst access personnel, and building a research network. In the 2010 Mid-Term Review

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<sup>29</sup> Conducted in 27 HEIs, using a collaborative, self-evaluation approach to identify what was working well and to identify gaps in practice.

<sup>30</sup> Note that several key initiatives mentioned in this section are considered in more detail in later sections of this report.

(HEA, 2010a), progress was noted with respect to many aspects of the above goal, noting a range of innovative initiatives<sup>31</sup> running in HEIs, although not all HEIs had yet fully embedded access plans in their institutional strategies.

- > *Enhancing access through lifelong learning:* This goal aimed to broaden ‘non-traditional’ routes into HE, including part-time and flexible programmes in a lifelong learning context, and supplementary links from schools to HE. The NFQ is seen as playing an important role in building opportunities for access, transfer and progression, particularly strengthening links between FE, community education and HE. The 2010 HEA Mid-Term Review noted progress on this goal, including: the quadrupling in the number of part-time, short duration, distance and e-learning programmes 2008-2010, the position paper on *Open and Flexible Learning* (HEA, 2009) which advocates parity of treatment for part-time students in public funding allocations, significant progression rates from supplementary/‘non-traditional’ routes, including HEAR, DARE, the Higher Education Links Scheme, and key information websites, including <http://www.bluebrick.ie> and <http://www.studentfinance.ie>
- > *Investment in WP in HE:* The need to align institutions’ strategies to national priorities, such as WP, led to the institution of an ‘access weighting’ in terms of core funding for access to HEIs, based on the number of students from under-represented groups at a particular HEI. These funding changes were introduced in January 2011, based on Equal Access data. Over €21 million was awarded to support access projects directly in Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) Cycles I and II. However, as noted in the HEA 2010 Mid-Term Review, investment in projects focused on learning and teaching more generally also support student learning in a WP context. In total, 22 projects, fully or partially focused on access or lifelong learning, were funded by SIF (HEA, 2010a). The Mid-Term Review (HEA 2010a) and Davies (2010) reported that SIF funding had had a positive impact on access.
- > *Modernisation of student supports:* This objective related to improving financial supports for students from under-represented groups. The grant system was recognised as needing to be reviewed and modernised, including its means-testing element. The under-representation in HE of the Non-manual group and the relative lack of support for this group were noted in particular. The Mid-Term Review (HEA, 2010a) noted that the user-friendly <http://www.studentfinance.ie> website launched by the HEA won an eGovernment award in 2009, and the new, online grant application system developed by the DES was added to the website in autumn 2010. Ireland’s economic crisis has since turned the Government’s focus to labour market initiatives, and as part of this, part-time labour market activation programmes have been provided free (or have been subsidised), whilst students have also been able to keep their social welfare supports (HEA, 2010a).
- > *WP in HE for people with disabilities:* This objective relates to increasing the participation and support of people with disabilities in HE. The 2008 National Plan noted the significant under-representation of those with sensory and physical disabilities, and voiced particular concern for those from lower socio-economic groups with learning difficulties, and the absence of learning supports for part-time students with disabilities. The 2010 Mid-Term Review noted that all HEIs had a

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<sup>31</sup> Examples are highlighted throughout this, and subsequent, sections.

Disability Officer and reported an improvement in the implementation of the Fund for Students with Disabilities. Other developments include AHEAD's (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability's) Charter for Inclusive Teaching (AHEAD, 2009) which included recommendations on reasonable accommodations and good pedagogical practice which benefit all students.

- 5.5 More integrated and 'joined-up' approaches to provision are also called for, across all education sectors and Government providers, in order to address educational disadvantage at a much earlier stage (HEA, 2008, 2007, 2006; DES, 2005).

## Towards the 2014-16 National Plan

- 5.6 Prior to 2008, the discourse in relation to HE and WP linked social equality, lifelong learning and economic competitiveness. Since the economic crash, the economic, political and social landscapes have changed considerably, and this was emphasised and taken into account in the 2010 HEA Mid-Term Review of the National Plan 2008-2013. Not all of the 2008-2013 actions were being achieved by the time of the Mid-Term Review in 2010, and 2011 saw the initiation of a 'recovery strategy' to identify actions to progress. Preparations for the third National Plan (2014-2016) are well under way, with significant consultation and meetings taking place with key stakeholders, all in the context of the significant change and reform of HE governance, structures and funding required by the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. Significant reform of the FE sector is under way, with a new coordinating body, Solas, planned, as previously outlined. Six possible goals are set out in a background document (National Access Office, 2013, pp. 6-8) of the National Access Office in preparation for the 2014-2016 National Plan. These encompass: restating the rationale for access, focusing on building a 'joined-up' education system with comprehensive pathways of access, building on initiatives for equality of access for certain groups, focusing on developing an inclusive student experience for all in HE (including continuous professional development (CPD) for academics), developing a robust evidence base for policy and practice, including data and targets, for entry, progression and into employment, and developing financial resources to support access. A continuing theme from the first to the current (and into the next) national plans is the need to develop better data and monitoring systems.

## Policies to Widen Access and Support Retention<sup>32</sup>

- 5.7 Irish HEIs conduct wide-ranging activities at pre-entry, admission and in-course stages (Murphy, 2009; HEA, 2006). Policies to widen access are generally known as 'access programmes' and comprise pre-entry and post-entry activities, undertaken by HEIs, either alone, with other HEIs, or in partnership with FE, schools and the community. At pre-entry level, many HEIs run pre-entry, preparatory *courses* undertaken in order to facilitate access to undergraduate level. Pre-entry activities also include links to and activities with DEIS post-primary (and sometimes primary) schools, and support for

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<sup>32</sup> More detailed information about *strategies* to widen access, and support retention and progression, is provided in the relevant sections of this report.

students including learning support, homework clubs, summer or other holiday courses and various orientation-type programmes.

- 5.8 Supplementary direct-entry routes have also been developed in recent years. For school leavers, HEAR and DARE constitute supplementary admission routes for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and for students with disabilities respectively. Relevant students compete for entry into participating HEIs on reduced Leaving Certificate points, whilst a range of financial, academic and other support is also generally available to those students. There is also a policy commitment to more flexible, part-time and distance/e-learning provision. Part-time provision is a significant focus in HE, and in the past part-time students have been ineligible for fee-support, grants and other financial supports. The 2004 OECD review of HE in Ireland recommended parity of consideration for part-time students, with respect to fees and grant supports. There is an explicit emphasis on the provision of more flexible programme offerings and financial support for approved part-time courses in both the National Development Plan (2007-2013) and the 2007-2012 Programme for Government.
- 5.9 Supporting the retention and success of all students is an important policy concern. While the Irish HE retention rate is higher than in other countries, several reports and initiatives have been undertaken over the last 10-15 years to enhance retention, particularly in the IoT sector. Many of the 2008-2013 National Access Plan goals directly or indirectly support retention and completion, though the focus on enhancing the learning environment for all students and wide range of post-entry supports are available to students from target groups.

## Policies to Improve Progression to Postgraduate Study and Employment

- 5.10 As previously noted, progression to postgraduate study and employment is an emerging area of interest in Ireland. Ireland does not have official policy or targets in these areas but several relevant research studies have been conducted in recent years in relation to those from under-represented groups (e.g. TAP, 2010; UCC PLUS+, 2011; DCU Access Service, 2011; Keane & Byrne, 2013; Share & Carroll, 2013). The research to date suggests that access graduates, contrary to the English experience, do not perceive that they experience labour market discrimination. Background documents (National Access Office, 2012c, 2013) developed by the National Office in preparation for the next National Plan (2014-2016) signal the intention to collect and monitor data relating to the progression of students through the system, as well as into employment, in the context of improving data monitoring systems more widely.

## Funding to Widen Access

- 5.11 From 1996-2005, initially through the HEA's 'Targeted Initiatives', then through the 'Strategic Initiatives' schemes, increasing levels of funding were made available to Irish HEIs to focus on raising the participation rate of students from lower socio-economic groups. These schemes invited proposals from institutions on a competitive basis in relation to a number of themes. Universities received funding to address socio-economic disadvantage of £260,000 in 1996, £475,000 in 1997, £695,000 in 1998, and

£785,000 in 1999 (Osborne & Leith, 2000). The HEA (2008, p. 82) noted that institutional funding for access in 2006 was €8 million for the universities and HEA-funded institutions, whilst the DES spent €1.3 million in the IoTs on access and retention. The Institutes of Technology Act (2006) led to the HEA taking over funding responsibility for the whole HE sector.

- 5.12 SIF was introduced in 2006 as an important way of addressing the HE objectives in the National Development Plan (2007-2013). It was intended to provide €510 million to the HE sector over the period spanning 2006-2013. SIF explicitly promotes and rewards inter-institutional collaboration and innovation and the formation of strategic alliances, with a key objective being to support access, retain and progress (HEA, 2008; Government of Ireland, 2007). Key themes supported were: supporting institutional restructuring, the enhancement of teaching and learning, supporting access and lifelong learning, supporting HE's research capacity and enabling 'fourth level' (doctoral level). In total, 22 projects, fully or partially focused on access or lifelong learning, were funded by SIF (HEA, 2010a). SIF Cycle I in 2006 provided €42 million to HEIs, €10.3 million of which was dedicated to improving access and lifelong learning. SIF Cycle II, announced in 2008, provided €97 million to HEIs, of which €11.8 million was allocated to WP for under-represented groups, and €15.7 million awarded to lifelong learning and up-skilling<sup>33</sup>. SIF funds were 'frozen' in 2009.
- 5.13 The Mid-Term Review (HEA, 2010a) claimed that the Interim Evaluation of SIF (Davies, 2010), supported by HEIs' progress reports, had found that 'the access agenda has advanced as a result of the investment' (p. 12). The Interim Evaluation (Davies, 2010) highlighted the positive role SIF had played in developing new mechanisms to widen access and support success for students in HE. It also highlighted the number of projects which had since been mainstreamed. Moreover, it noted that an additional positive outcome had been the better appreciation of the positives of collaboration between institutions. HEIs, in groups of two or more, jointly developed and implemented projects on SIF themes. HEIs could choose to work together in whatever collaborative formations they wished, but many chose to do so on a regional or sectoral basis. For example, Davies (2010) noted four key groups of HEIs which managed numerous SIF projects. They were: the Irish Universities Association (IUA), Institutes of Technology, Ireland (IoTI), the Dublin Regional Higher Educational Alliance (DRHEA), and the Shannon Consortium. While noting that 'collaboration between institutions sometimes has been weak', Davies (2010, p. 5) emphasised that HEIs 'are learning that collaboration with one another can lead to stronger academic programs and research, increased operating efficiency, and significant cost savings'. Davies reported that projects undertaken on a regional or sectoral basis tended to be more successful than others.
- 5.14 In a background document (National Access Office, 2012b) prepared by the National Access Office in preparation for the 2014-2016 National Access Plan, it was noted that €2.4 million from Dormant Accounts<sup>34</sup> supported access services in the IoTs through

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<sup>33</sup> From: <http://www.heai.ie/en/sif>

<sup>34</sup> 'Dormant accounts legislation in Ireland enables unclaimed funds lodged in financial institutions to be disbursed to projects and programmes designed to alleviate poverty and social exclusion' (HEA, 2010a, p. 12).

56 projects since 2009, with a particular emphasis on the HEIs working at pre-entry level with primary and post-primary schools. The National Office plans to gather formal data on the outcomes from SIF, but feedback to date suggests it has had a positive impact.

- 5.15 As previously noted, institutional funding to support WP was previously provided through the core grant from the HEA and through SIF. In 2006 RGAM was instituted and access funding to institutions was allocated through the core, annual recurrent grant. A new funding model, partly based on statistics from the Equal Access Data Initiative was phased in, with core funding for access linked to the number of students from under-represented groups enrolled in each HEI. The need to align institutions' strategies to national priorities, such as WP, led to the institution of an 'access weighting' in terms of core funding for access to HEIs, based on the number of students from under-represented groups at a particular HEI. The 2008-2013 National Plan stated that:

'The access weighting is a mechanism which will reflect and support institutional success in broadening access. It is an explicit acknowledgement of the institutional investments and supports that are and will be required to ensure greater equality in higher education. It will result in a shift in resources towards institutions that succeed in promoting greater equality within their student bodies over those that do not.' (HEA, 2008, p. 48)

- 5.16 These funding changes were introduced in January 2011, based on the Equal Access data. An external audit of the Equal Access data was first completed in 2010, and found that the data are robust and appropriate for funding allocations use. Based on the Equal Access data, core funding for access of a combined value of €29 million is now fully integrated into the RGAM of HEIs.
- 5.17 Funding for access has supported the development of a significant numbers of WP-related posts in HEIs; all or most HEIs now have an access officer, and/or disability officers and mature student officers, along with other support staff, who together constitute the 'front-line' of an institution's access programme. Access staff have developed a range of pre- and post-entry supports.

## 6| Target groups for widening participation

### Overall Participation Target

6.1 The National Access Plan for the period 2008-2013 is set within the objectives and timeframe of the current National Development Plan. It intends that its actions will contribute to the achievement of the 72% participation target (from 55% in 2004) and sets targets for the various socio-economic groups (non-manual, semi- and unskilled), mature students, students with disabilities, and lifelong learning. These groups are targeted due to their proportional under-representation in HE relative to their representation in society. An emerging target group is that of minority ethnic, including Traveller, students. The rates of participation for target groups presented in this section are based on those set in the current National Plan 2008-2013 (HEA, 2008). As well as targets for the participation of particular groups, important targets in the 2008-2013 plan included institutions developing and evaluating access plans, and enhancing data collection systems to build a better evidence base. The Mid-Term Review (HEA, 2010) emphasised the extremely difficult economic circumstances in which Ireland found itself subsequent to the publication of the 2008-2013 Plan; a significant number of targets were not reached by 2010, despite significant progress, in difficult circumstances, in several areas<sup>35</sup>.

### Lower Socio-economic Groups

6.2 Considering the saturation points of many higher socio-economic groups, a very important contributor to the achievement of the 72% overall participation target rate will be lower socio-economic groups (Boland, 2007). Michael Kelly, Chairman of the HEA, made the following point in the preface to the 2008 National Access Plan (HEA, 2008, p. 7):

'We are approaching the point of full participation among the traditional groups represented in higher education. Attaining the national targets for participation of 72 percent by 2020 will require significant increases in participation by under-represented groups.'

6.3 In Ireland, studies including a focus on social class have generally used either the Central Statistics Office measure of socio-economic status or its social class scale (or both)<sup>36</sup> (e.g. O'Connell et al., 2006). Clancy (2001) identified six under-represented

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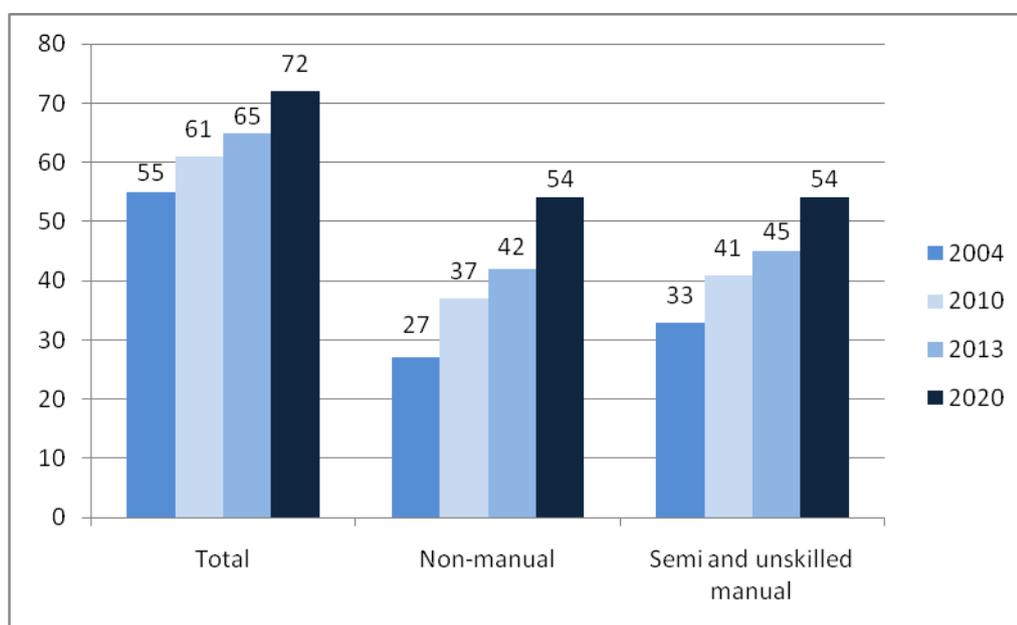
<sup>35</sup> Note that the most up-to-date figures for the various groups are presented in Section 4, Widening Participation data, based on HEA (2013).

<sup>36</sup> Since 1996, the census in Ireland has used three different social class measures: occupation (largely based on the UK Standard Occupational Classification, 2nd ed. HMSO, London (1995), socio-economic group, and social class (defined on the basis of occupation). The socio-economic groups are: Employers and managers, Higher professional, Lower professional, Non-manual, Manual skilled, Semi-skilled, Unskilled, Own account workers, Farmers, Agricultural workers, All others gainfully occupied and unknown. The social class scale is as follows:

socio-economic groups: unskilled manual workers, semi-skilled manual workers, ‘other’ non-manual workers, intermediate non-manual, skilled manual and agricultural workers. As previously noted, while improvements have been noted with respect to the participation of some lower socio-economic groups in recent years, the participation rate of the ‘non-manual’ group has declined, and as a result they constitute a key target group.

- 6.4 An important target is that *all* socio-economic groups will have an entry rate of at least 54% by 2020, based on the principle that no group should have a participation rate less than three-quarters of the national average. This implies a target of 42% entry rates within the non-manual group and 45% within the semi- and unskilled manual group by 2013.

**Figure 6.1: Target entry rates to HE for under-represented socio-economic groups**



Source: HEA, 2008, p. 60

## Mature Students

- 6.5 As previously noted, in Ireland, a mature (new entrant) student is defined as someone who is 23 or over on January 1<sup>st</sup> on the year of entry to first year undergraduate level. The target with respect to mature students is that they will comprise at least 17% of full-time entrants (from a base of 13% in 2006) by 2010, and 20% by 2013. A further target is that they will comprise at least 23% of all (full- and part-time) entrants by 2010, and 27% by 2013 (from 18% in 2006). The 2010 Mid-term Review (HEA, 2010a) reported that mature students comprised 13.6% of full-time entrants in 2010, and 18.9% of all full-time and part-time entrants.

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Professional workers, Managerial and technical, Non-manual, Skilled manual, Semi-skilled, Unskilled, All others gainfully occupied and unknown. (Central Statistics Office, 2004)

## Students with a Disability

- 6.6 The Plan outlines a target of doubling the number of students with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities in HE by 2013. This includes increasing the number of students with physical and mobility impairments from 190 in 2006/2007 to 380 in 2013/2014, of those with sensory (including hearing and sight) impairments from 191 in 2006/2007 to 382 in 2013/2014, and those with multiple disabilities from 85 in 2006/2007 to 170 in 2013/2014.

**Table 6.1: Disability targets – number of students enrolled in HE**

Category of disability	2003/04	2006/07	2010/11	2013/14
Physical disability/Mobility impairment	175	190	285	380
Deaf/Hard of hearing	94	126	189	252
Blind/Visual Impairment	76	65	98	130
Multiple disabilities	48	85	127	170
Total	393	466	699	932

Source: HEA, 2008, p. 65

- 6.7 The Mid-Term Review (HEA, 2010a) reported that 668 students with disabilities were in HE by 2010.

## Lifelong Learning

- 6.8 Targets relating to lifelong learning include increasing flexible/part-time provision from 7% of undergraduate students to 17% by 2013, with an interim target of 13% by 2010. In addition, the Plan identifies a target that Ireland will achieve average EU levels for lifelong learning by 2010 and will be in the top quartile of EU countries by 2013. There is also an emphasis within the Plan to develop 'non-standard' entry routes to HE (c.f. HEA, 2008, p. 62), so that they account for 30% of all entrants by 2013 (from approx. 24% at 2006). 'Non-standard' includes all those routes outside the 'traditional' Leaving Certificate route, including transfer and progression routes from FE and mature student entry, and entrants from the HEAR and DARE schemes.
- 6.9 The 2010 Mid-Term Review reported that 'non-standard' entry routes had increased to 25% by 2010, and that flexible/part-time provision was at 14.1%. Indeed, particular emphasis was placed on the need to focus on providing for up-skilling opportunities for those who became unemployed during the economic crisis, as well as focusing on previously-set access targets.

## Minority Ethnic Groups

- 6.10 The 2008-2013 National Plan noted the lack of targets set in the 2005-2007 Plan for members of the Travelling community, or ethnic minority groups, and pointed to the

lack of adequate data in this context. The 2008-2013 Plan also failed to set targets, instead noting the 'tiny minority' of Travellers in Irish HE. It was pointed out that most Travellers do not complete post-primary education, and their poor literacy levels, their wider societal marginalisation and their poor living conditions were also highlighted. The Plan noted that important work in this area is linked to primary and post-primary schools. The Mid-Term Review (HEA, 2010a) reported that there were 33 Travellers in HE in 2007/2008, 24 in 2008/2009, and 27 in 2009/2010. A National Office background document (National Access Office, 2013) in preparation for the next National Plan suggested that Travellers may constitute a specific target group, among others, for the first time, in the next National Plan.

- 6.11 Similarly, Ireland does not have specific targets for other ethnic minority groups<sup>37</sup>. The 2008-2013 National Plan reported that 'over 10 per cent of higher education students are originally from outside the state compared to just 4 per cent ten years ago' (HEA, 2008, p. 37). As noted in Section 2, the rapid diversification of Ireland's population and thus education system has presented both challenges and opportunities at school level. The current National Plan noted that this will also become the case in HE. As previously noted, an important issue is that of differential fee levels to which an immigrant student may be subject. This clearly acts as a major disincentive to the relevant students in aiming to progress to HE. The National Plan noted that other issues such as the recognition of prior qualifications and language barriers. The National Office committed to building good relations with representatives of minority ethnic groups throughout 2008.

## 7| Widening access

### Priority Groups and Widening Access Approaches Strands

7.1 Work to widen access to HE has focused on the identified target groups, of certain lower socio-economic groups, students with disabilities, mature learners, and more recently the unemployed via part-time and flexible routes. While official targets have not been set for Travellers or minority ethnic groups, work on widening access has also tended to include them. The HEA (2006) defined an 'access programme' as:

'... all actions taken by higher education institutions to increase the participation of students from four specific under-represented target groups: students who experience socio-economic disadvantage, members of the Traveller community and ethnic minorities, students with a disability, and mature students ... institutions' access strategies, policies and practices as well as specific initiatives and activities that aim to increase the participation of the target groups.' (HEA, 2006, p. 9)

7.2 The National Office of Equity of Access to Higher Education has led all work in this area but work to widen access pre-dates its establishment in 2003; significant work at institutional and community levels has been underway since the 1990s. Work to widen access to HE in Ireland consists of three strands: 1) work with schools and communities, 2) pre-entry access/foundation courses, and 3) alternative entry routes. Efforts to widen access to HE for target groups have addressed a lack of economic capital through various financial supports, including funded pre-entry activities, funded access courses, and specific funding supports available at the post-entry stage. A lack of social or cultural capital has also been addressed through efforts to increase understanding of HE. Approaches include work with schools and communities, and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) module on HE in Transition Year. Work has also addressed the lack of HE progression routes for early school-leavers, and others who had 'non-traditional', or inadequate, qualifications to enter through the traditional system. In terms of 'levers' or incentives to engage HEIs in widening access, HEIs are required to have access plans in place (c.f. HEA, 2006, 2008) and since 2011, part of HEIs' funding for access is based on their returns via the Equal Access Data Initiative.

7.3 Before looking at these strands, it is important to note that the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF), introduced in 2006, has played an important role in encouraging HEIs to collaborate on projects, both in general, and in relation to the theme of access and lifelong learning. As previously noted, SIF explicitly promoted and rewarded inter-institutional collaboration and innovation and the formation of strategic alliances, and a key theme was access and lifelong learning. The HEA 2010 Mid-Term Review

provides information on all SIF-funded projects<sup>38</sup>, from Cycles I and II, with respect to the theme of access and lifelong learning. The vast majority of access and lifelong learning-related projects funded by SIF were focused on the widening access level (rather than the post-entry support level), although inevitably, there is some cross-over and they cannot be fully separated.

## Work at School- and Community-Levels

7.4 As part of their wider access programmes, HEIs in Ireland commonly work with DEIS primary and post-primary schools, individually and sometimes collaboratively, with the aim of improving progression to and performance in HE. Such work generally includes the provision of guidance and informational support with respect to HE options and processes, general and academic support, and familiarisation with HE generally and the relevant campus particularly. Typically, access staff (and sometimes access students) visit schools and community groups, whilst school pupils visit the campus on short visits for specific events such as Open Days and Sports Days, ongoing courses (for example, study skills, revision courses in preparation for the Leaving Certificate), and longer courses during holidays, such as 'summer schools'. Other pre-entry work linked to schools involves student-to-student mentoring, and shadowing and orientation programmes (HEA, 2006).

7.5 The 2006 HEA evaluation of access programmes highlighted good practice with respect to working with primary schools, as follows:

'Some institutions have introduced activities such as sport and summer camps for primary school pupils, which have helped to raise educational aspirations by familiarising pupils with the college campus and introducing the idea of higher education as a real possibility for them. One institution also runs an extensive programme with forty designated disadvantaged schools in its area, most of which are primary schools. The institution provides structured professional development and networking opportunities for teachers and principals, as well as supporting school-based curriculum enhancement projects and facilitating teachers to undertake research. The programme encourages schools to set specific goals for their projects and to monitor their achievement of the goals each year.' (HEA, 2006, p. 35)

7.6 An example of a collaborative outreach project is the 'Take 5' summer project, in which UCD, DCU, DIT, TCD and NUI Maynooth participate. Students from DEIS schools attend each of the HEIs for a day. The project aims to introduce students to the physical, academic, cultural, sporting and social environments of the different institutions through a range of activities, such as academic workshops, laboratory sessions, and project group work.

7.7 The HEA evaluation of access programmes found a need for additional emphasis from HEIs on pre-entry activities, and at an earlier stage (i.e. at primary, or at the latest, in

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<sup>38</sup> Please see Appendices 2 and 3 in the HEA (2010) Mid-Term Review for a list of SIF 1 and SIF 2-funded, as well as Dormant Account-funded projects in the area.

junior cycle at post-primary level), because ‘many potential students are “lost” by the time the access programme starts to work in a concentrated way with senior cycle second-level pupils’ (ibid., p. 24). This is in line with more recent research which has found that students become disaffected during the early junior cycle level (c.f. Smyth, 2009). The HEA (2006) evaluation also highlighted the need to work with teachers and career guidance staff on raising expectations, and aspirations, with regard to progression to HE for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- 7.8 Since 2009, the IoT sector has expanded its outreach work in a number of ways, in projects funded by the Dormant Accounts Fund. At pre-entry level, this work has included an expansion of work with primary and post-primary schools in disadvantaged communities, including a range of after-school activities and summer programmes. It has also strongly focused on enhancing the provision of guidance and information for mature students. Project Orange (IoT Blanchardstown, Dublin) aimed to address HE information gaps for parents from ethnic minority backgrounds (HEA, 2010a). Galway-Mayo IoT has integrated measures for students from ethnic minority backgrounds into its mature student support programme. Both of these projects were funded by the Dormant Accounts Fund.
- 7.9 Also relevant at school level is the Transition Year curriculum unit on ‘*Exploring Options in Further and Higher Education*’. This was launched in September 2010, and was collaboratively developed by NCCA, the National Access Office, and a group of HE access officers and post-primary career guidance counselors. A transition year is offered by many, but not all, schools in the senior cycle, after the Junior Certificate year. It aims to allow students opportunities for further development, including a space to reflect on their educational and future life goals. Students may access a number of subjects, but the approach taken is more practical than in other school years. The access to FE and HE module aims to provide students with an opportunity to learn about FE and HE options and future careers, and to explore possible services and supports for different needs. It is aimed particularly at those students who have little or no family experience of HE<sup>39</sup>.
- 7.10 Many HEIs have also worked at community-level to widen access. For example, the DIT Community Links programme consists of a number of different programmes all aimed at supporting individuals in the community to reach their potential through education. Programmes include the Computer Learning in Communities (CLiC) programme, and a service learning module (run by students and staff of DIT, in collaboration with community groups). The School of Education at NUI Galway also offers an elective service learning module in one of its teacher education programmes, through which homework, academic and general support is provided to school students from disadvantaged and minority ethnic backgrounds, through various homework club-type activities, for example, in the community-based Galway Traveller Movement (c.f. Boland & Keane, 2012).

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<sup>39</sup> The full unit and materials are available on the HEA website at <http://www.heai.ie/files/files/file/TU%20Handbook%202010.pdf>

7.11 The Shannon Regional Learning Gateway (University of Limerick, Limerick IoT and IoT Tralee) built on the institutions' community-based initiatives and focused on creating regional pathways for under-represented groups and raising educational aspirations. In SIF Cycle II, this scheme was extended to Clare and Kerry, with plans to work with specific cohorts of students in primary and post-primary schools.

## Pre-entry Access Courses

7.12 Many HEIs have developed pre-entry access or foundation courses, individually and/or in partnership with each other, FE and/or the community. These aim to prepare students for HE and are usually of several months to one academic year in duration. Progression to an undergraduate programme at the institution running, or affiliated to, the access course, is generally the next step for students who successfully complete the course and/or achieve to a certain level. Different groups are sometimes emphasised in different HEIs. For some universities, mature students are the priority (Osborne & Leith, 2000). Access courses typically provide opportunities for students to become familiar with HE and provide tuition in areas such as Mathematics, English and Applied Writing, Information Technology, Study Skills and Career Guidance. Additional support is also often provided on personal, academic and financial levels and there is a strong focus on confidence-building.

7.13 There is a wide range of pre-entry access courses offered in Ireland. Murphy (2009) noted that three models of access course delivery are evident: 1) courses delivered by individual HEIs, 2) courses delivered by a partnership of HEIs, and 3) courses delivered by a HEI in partnership with one or more FEI. There are several examples of HEIs working in partnership on access courses. The Border, Midlands and Western (BMW) Access Partnership (formerly, the Lionra/Equal Ireland Access to Third Level Programme), provided access courses through a blended-learning model to rural and dispersed mature learner populations throughout the region. The seven HEIs in the region, led by NUI Galway, recognised the 10 relevant access courses and all were considered for direct-entry into each of the participating HEIs. NUI Galway and Galway-Mayo IoT have run collaborative access courses in both Commerce/Business and Science/Engineering, from which successful participants can progress to both HEIs. The University of Limerick and Shannon Consortium (consisting of the HEIs in the South West of Ireland – University of Limerick, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick IoT and IoT Tralee) delivered cross-institutional programmes, including a mutually recognised foundation course. Three of these examples were supported with SIF funding, but they pre-dated the Fund. DRHEA (comprising the eight HEIs in the Dublin region) proposed the formation of a Higher Learning Network linking partner institutions and other regional educational providers, with a focus on supporting adult learners in the workforce and ethnic minorities wishing to enter HE within the SIF funding framework. A significant part of their work on the WP Strand is the Progression Pathways project, which is aimed at supporting clear progression pathways into HE for students in the Dublin region<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> See: [http://www.drhea.ie/widening\\_participation.php](http://www.drhea.ie/widening_participation.php)

- 7.14 HEIs also work with one or more FE partners in access courses. An example is TCD with Liberties College (young adults) and Pearse/Plunket Colleges (mature learners), delivered by and in the City of Dublin Vocational Educational Committee (CDVEC), with aspects delivered in TCD.
- 7.15 Murphy (2009) reported on an evaluation of 37 access and foundation courses in Ireland across five universities, two Colleges of Education and ten IoTs. The study terms of reference were to: a) describe and quantify access course provision by HEIs nationally, b) describe and quantify access, transfer and progression via FETAC level 5 and 6 awards to HE, c) compare benefits and challenges for both providers and learners when access/foundation or FETAC level 5 or 6 courses are delivered by HE or FE providers, alone or in partnership, and d) provide an overview of policy and provision supporting progression to HE from other comparative settings internationally (Scotland). Murphy (2009) reported a high level of success in terms of the outcomes of access courses, including high levels of transfer from the pre-entry courses to HE, and high levels of retention and completion in HE (see Section 7.5 for further information). She also commented that:
- ‘From a qualitative perspective the evidence also points to positive impacts for individual students, their communities and for the providing institution. Furthermore the research suggests that the access programmes make a significant contribution to the National Access Plan in relation to widening access for underrepresented groups in higher education, and also to the stimulation of demand for higher education among new constituencies of learners.’ (Murphy, 2009, p. 7)
- 7.16 Various challenges were also identified in this evaluation. Murphy (2009) noted the rather fragmented nature of access/foundation course offerings and of transfer and progression routes across institutions and sectors. A barrier to their effectiveness has been access and foundation courses not being linked to the NFQ and some lack of mobility between courses and other institutions (see also McIver, 2006). The ‘qualification’ was not part of the NFQ (HEA, 2008); hence, other progression possibilities were unclear. The HEA (2007) has argued that access courses should be positioned at level 5 or 6 on the NFQ and suggested that they be delivered by the FE rather than HE sector. HEIs argued for their continued positioning within the HEI, due to their unique potential to familiarise prospective students with HE from ‘the inside’<sup>41</sup>.
- 7.17 To address these issues, sub-degree programmes were mapped to the NFQ, and partnerships between institutions occurred within and across sectors (FE and HE). While Murphy’s data did not allow her to report on the number of students progressing from FETAC level 5 or 6 to HE, she pointed to the McIver Review (2006), which reported small numbers of students progressing to HE from FETAC level 5 or 6, and to subsequent HEA documents which suggest that numbers are increasing. The HEA Mid-Term Review (2010a, p. 11) reported that the HEA Taskforce on access courses finalised new policy advice for the DES on access courses in 2010, and recommended

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<sup>41</sup> See Appendix 1 in Murphy (2009) for the consultation paper from the National Office on the new policy for access courses.

that 'new, enhanced partnership agreements are developed between further and higher education providers on access provision and on routes of progression from further to higher education'.

- 7.18 A key issue reported by Murphy (2009) was the lack of data available from institutions, particularly in relation to tracking students from access/foundation into HE, and particularly when students progressed to institutions other than those in which they completed their pre-entry course.
- 7.19 Another key issue for students doing access courses is that they are ineligible, at access level, for the financial supports normally available to HE participants, such as the various grants schemes, the Student Assistance Fund, or the Fund for Students with Disabilities. In its wider evaluation of access programmes (as opposed to courses), the HEA (2006) reported that foundation and access courses were regarded by some school teachers as a limited entry route, particularly as the extra year of study after school could act as a barrier to some.

## Alternative Entry Routes to HE

- 7.20 For school leavers, HEAR and DARE constitute supplementary admission routes for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and for students with disabilities respectively. Relevant students compete for entry into participating HEIs on reduced Leaving Certificate points, and a range of financial, academic and other supports are also generally available to them.
- 7.21 HEAR is a scheme through which places are reserved for students from lower socio-economic groups at reduced CAO points' levels. Certain supports at post-entry stage are also made available to students. Three hundred students entered HE through this route in 2001 and over 800 offers were made in 2007 (HEA, 2008). However, until 2010, for a student to have the possibility of progressing through this route, he or she had to be attending a DEIS post-primary school linked to one of the HEIs in the scheme, and thus, the scope of the scheme was relatively limited. With support from SIF since 2005, the HEAR institutions and the IUA (through the 'Equity of Access Project') explored how this entry route could be extended and formalised through the CAO. The scheme has now extended (since autumn 2010, through the CAO) to include all 730 post-primary schools in Ireland, in recognition that individuals from different types of schools may experience educational disadvantage. It is now considered as the national HEAR scheme. The HEA (2010) Mid-Term Review reported that in 2010, 8,401 students applied through HEAR, and 1,009 students accepted a place, representing a 32% increase in the number of students entering HE via HEAR in 2009. In a background document (National Access Office, 2012b, p. 4) prepared by the National Office in preparation for the 2014-2016 National Plan, it is reported that there were 7,278 applications and 1,383 acceptances in 16 institutions through HEAR in 2011.
- 7.22 A further supplementary entry route is DARE. This is a supplementary admissions scheme through which it is aimed to offer 5% of first year places on reduced Leaving Certificate points to students with a disability. The HEA (2010) Mid-Term Review

reported that in 2010, 2,324 students applied through DARE, and that 385 students accepted a place, representing a 44% increase in entry via DARE in 2009. In a background document (National Access Office, 2012b, p. 4) prepared by the National Office in preparation for the 2014-2016 National Plan, it was reported that there were 2,160 applications and 753 acceptances in 13 institutions through DARE in 2011<sup>42</sup>.

- 7.23 HEAR and DARE were launched nationally in 2009. The HEA (2006) evaluation of access programmes did not examine the effectiveness of alternative routes of access, such as HEAR, although some school teachers involved in the review felt that many of the students entering HE via HEAR would have entered HE anyway. A national evaluation of HEAR and DARE is currently being conducted.
- 7.24 The HEA evaluation of access programmes (2006) noted a growing trend towards increased partnership between HE and FE, aimed at increasing access, transfer and progression routes within the NFQ. The development of the NFQ itself is seen as a key element in facilitating access to HE from FE, particularly for mature learners. The NFQ also provides for the recognition of prior learning. The 2011 National Strategy for HE to 2030 (DES, 2011a) also heavily emphasised the need for more flexible progression routes from school and FE to HE. The HEA (2010) Mid-Term Review reported that 3,000 students progressed to HE in 2008/2009 via routes such as the Higher Education Links Scheme, the Pilot Scheme for IoTs, and through other informal routes agreed between FE and HE. In a HEA background document in preparation for the 2014-2016 National Plan, significant rises in the number of students with FETAC awards applying for HE have been noted.
- ‘In 2011 there were 14,680 applicants with FETAC awards. 6,498 of these received an offer based on their FETAC score/points of which 2,757 accepted. A large proportion of applicants with FETAC awards (at least 40%) are being offered places through this route.’ (National Access Office, 2012b, pp. 4-5)
- 7.25 There is also a growing number of flexible, part-time options. In 2009, the HEA published the position paper ‘*Open and Flexible Learning*’. In this paper, it called for parity of treatment in terms funding for part-time students and ways in which HEIs could progress flexible learning were outlined.
- 7.26 The Recognition of Prior Learning project (led by Cork IoT, with a number of other HEIs) commenced, as one strand of a SIF Cycle I-funded project called ‘Education in Employment’. It then developed into the Roadmap for Employer-Academic Partnership (REAP) project in SIF Cycle II, which focuses on identifying learning needs in workplaces and developing a plan for partnership between HEIs and employers so that these needs can be addressed.
- 7.27 The Regional Assistive Technology Connection to Higher Education (REACH) project (Athlone IoT and Letterkenny IoT) was funded by SIF Cycle II, and focused on the progression and achievement of individuals with specific learning difficulties from post-

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<sup>42</sup> There are a number of reasons why demand exceeded supply. On the supply side, the quota of places set aside by the HEIs for HEAR and DARE places, related resources issues, and issues to do with eligibility are key factors.

primary to FE and HE. It also sought to address the lack of information about assistive technology support. It followed on from the SIF Cycle I-funded project, ASCENT (Regional Assessment and Resource Centre) led by Athlone IoT (along with Galway-Mayo IoT, Letterkenny IoT, IoT Sligo, and NUI Galway) which developed a regionally-based needs assessment service to support access and retention in HE of those with disabilities.

- 7.28 In 2009, a new website, <http://www.bluebrick.ie>, was launched by the IoTs to assist those looking for more information about part-time study options in HE. The HEA Mid-Term Review (2010) reported that almost 40,000 accessed the site in 2010, and that 'the number of part-time, short duration, distance and e-learning programmes has more than quadrupled in the institutes of technology since 2008.' (p. 10).
- 7.29 The HEA Mid-Term Review (2010) reported a significant increase in part-time HE programmes, and student enrolment therein (1,700 in 2009/2010, and an expected 2,400 in 2010/2011) following specific funding in 2009 and 2010 (total of €11 million for HEIs) to promote labour market initiatives. Undergraduate part-time students were not charged tuition fees and could keep their social welfare payments under the above scheme. In May 2011, the Minister for Education and Skills launched Springboard as part of the Government's Jobs Initiative. Springboard offered 5,875 free, part-time places in HE leading to awards at certificate, degree and post-graduate level in seven identified skills areas where there are employment opportunities in Ireland. Springboard places were aimed at unemployed people who had lost their jobs as a result of the recession and who would benefit from up-skilling in their efforts to get back into sustainable employment. Over 200 courses, all designed to meet current and future skills needs, are available nationally at levels 6-9 on the NFQ. Feedback on the initiative on the first evaluation stage from participants, colleges, partner agencies and industry representatives has been positive. Although not all available Springboard places were taken up, over 80% of respondents to a participants' survey indicated that they are pleased with their decision to take up a Springboard place (c.f. HEA, 2012). The second stage evaluation, published in March 2013, also reported positive results: it was found that 40% of participants had returned to employment within six months (c.f. HEA, 2013b).

## Effective Interventions

- 7.30 The formal evaluation of interventions is rather limited in the Irish context, and hence evidence relating to its effectiveness is likewise relatively limited.
- 7.31 The HEA's (2006) evaluation of access programmes (as opposed to courses) was conducted via a collaborative self-evaluation of practice within the 27 HEIs. Two of the reasons for the approach taken were: 1) to 'foster ownership among the institutions of both the process and its findings and to encourage them to take responsibility for implementing the recommendations' and 2) 'to change thinking and practice within institutions by treating access as a mainstream, rather than a peripheral, issue.' (HEA, 2006, p. 10). Institutions were asked to self-evaluate in terms of their stage of progress in relation to a set of indicators attached to four criteria (policy, practice, targeting, and partnership). Moreover, the evaluation team from the HEA also conducted focus groups with students who had participated in access programmes, students and

teachers from a designated disadvantaged post-primary school, and school staff from a range of post-primary schools with links to access programmes in HEIs. While certainly a useful exercise, some reports on the ground related to a perception of an overly-bureaucratic and time-consuming exercise, which lacked adequate consultation with key stakeholders in terms of the design and implementation of the evaluation. Since that time, wide and very significant consultation with many groups and stakeholders has formed a central plank of the approach employed by the National Access Office in the development of national policies, plans, and procedures.

- 7.32 With respect to evidence of impact at widening access level, Murphy's (2009) evaluation of access and foundation courses nationally suggested a significant positive impact. Based on her review, for the data available (relating to 12 courses nationally, including both part-time and full-time offerings), of a total of 2,142 students registered, 80% completed the access or foundation course, 62% progressed to HE, 21% graduated with a degree from HE, and 32% remained (at that time) in the system. In Keane's (2009b) study, the SLA (course) students fared better than the matched group of traditional-entry students in terms of retention (none withdrew, one switched to part-time, whereas one of the traditional-entry students withdrew).
- 7.33 The supplementary direct entry schemes, HEAR and DARE, are currently being evaluated at a national level, but the increasing number of students progressing to HE via these schemes suggests significant positive impact. The various institutional studies have also demonstrated that the number of students entering HE via access programmes has increased significantly, since the inception of such activities in the 1990s. For example, Share & Carroll (2013) noted that while 10 students progressed to TCD via the TAP programme in 1998, the figure for 2012 was 234.
- 7.34 Further, in all of the institutional studies (TAP, 2010; Denny et al., 2010<sup>43</sup>; Kenny et al., 2010; UCC PLUS+, 2011; DCU Access Service, 2011, Keane, 2009b, 2011b, Keane & Byrne, 2013) students themselves reported very high levels of satisfaction with support through all aspects of the various access programmes, and generally attributed their initial progression to HE (as well as their retention and success) to the general and targeted supports of the access programme. Students typically expressed how grateful they were for the opportunity, emphasising that without the access programme, they would not have progressed to HE in the first instance. For example, a UCC PLUS+ student noted that:

'Due to an anxiety I had in school about exams I did not meet my full potential, in the Leaving Certificate. Without the support of the Access Programme I would not have been able to go to UCC.' (UCC PLUS+, 2011, p. 14)

- 7.35 Catherine (a 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate access student at NUI Galway (Keane, 2009b, p. 163) explained that she was:

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<sup>43</sup> Denny et al. (2010) constitutes the first quantitative evaluation of an access programme, i.e. the New ERA (Equal Right to Access) programme, at UCD. As specific aspects of the programme are not separated out (for example, pre-entry vs. post-entry supports and activities), the findings are discussed further in the Retention and Progression section of this report.

‘... excited just to be there and ... appreciative ... past the university and like I just nearly started crying because I was like “I’m so lucky to go there” ... to be given such a chance ... It just makes you thankful for everything.

7.36 While grants and other supports were seen as vital by students in terms of their retention and success, they were also regarded as crucial at the access level itself. For example, Kenny et al. (2010, p. 74) noted that the ‘BTEA<sup>44</sup> was seen as extremely important (according to 80 per cent) and was often crucial to these students’ choice to *enter* Higher Education’ (my emphasis).

7.37 There is also evidence of a positive intergenerational impact of access programmes at widening access level. Findings from both the UCC (UCCPLUS+, 2011) and NUI Galway (Keane & Byrne, 2013) suggested that individuals’ participation in the access programmes subsequently influenced their siblings to enter HE. For example, over half of the study participants in the UCC study were the first in their immediate family to attend HE, and almost 45% of these students’ siblings have since entered HE themselves. Other access programmes have also experienced this phenomenon to a lesser extent. In TCD, Share & Carroll (2013) found evidence of progression to HE amongst TAP graduates’ wider families, especially amongst cousins. They also found evidence of ‘a second-generation influence’ (p. 10); some siblings of TAP graduates subsequently progressed to TCD via TAP. Share & Carroll (2013) noted the ‘ripple effect’ within families, as individuals (who are first generation HE participants) passed on knowledge and understanding about the education system to their children. The potential intergenerational impact was also seen in the increased aspirations and expectations that TAP graduates expressed for their own children’s educational progression (relative to those of their own parents) and in their stated additional involvement in their children’s education. Share & Carroll (2013) further found that foundation course TAP students tended to remain in their original communities following graduation, which, they felt, suggests the possibility of harnessing a ripple effect at community level. They noted that:

‘... participants acted as ‘sites of information’ for those interested in returning to education, essentially bridging an information gap and ‘demystifying’ third level education for others in their families and communities.’ (Share & Carroll, 2013, p. 34)

7.38 More information on the findings from the various institutional studies is presented in the following section, because as previously noted, the access programmes evaluated generally consist of both pre- and post-entry activities; thus, it is not possible to completely separate the potential impact on widening access from that on retention and completion.

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<sup>44</sup> Back to Education Allowance

## 8| Retention, completion and progression

### Retention and Achievement

- 8.1 While attention has been paid to improving non-completion rates in both the university and IoT sectors, this has been a general policy as opposed to one specifically from a WP perspective. For example, there are no retention targets for specific under-represented groups in Ireland. However, the IoT sector has a significantly higher non-completion rate (22% at degree level) compared to the universities (9% at degree level) (Mooney et al. 2010), and, as previously noted, the IoT sector comprises a significantly higher proportion of students from under-represented groups. As previously noted, based on Mooney et al. (2010), gender and socio-economic impact on retention is mediated by prior academic attainment at school, although mature students and non-Irish students have lower completion rates in longer courses (level 8, degree-level) than younger students. Ninety percent of entrants with disabilities graduated successfully in the Pathways to Education study (2010).

### Supporting Retention and Completion

- 8.2 The highest rates of non-completion in both HE sectors are in subjects such as Engineering, Computer Science and Mathematics (though these are significantly higher in the IoT than in the university sector). This situation resulted in the IoT sector making significant attempts to support student retention. Fleming & Finnegan (2011a, p. 6) reported that these included 'the introduction of mentoring for all first year students, orientation programmes for new students, supplementary modules in Mathematics for those at risk, and staff development programmes'. The latter is important in the context that lecturing and teaching quality was the most frequently mentioned potential change by students in Morgan et al. (2002).
- 8.3 The Inter-Universities Retention Network consisted of representatives from each of the seven universities, although this has not been particularly active in recent years. A common 'exit-interview' schedule for students who withdrew was developed by the Network and used across the sector, although it is unclear if this is still in use. Moore (2004) reported at the time that universities had introduced a range of interventions to support retention, including reviews of the literature on retention (including the transition from school to HE, cognitive styles and learner processes), and the introduction of centralised formative teaching evaluations and retention-related staff roles in universities. Other interventions noted are peer supported learning systems, professional development for staff, the provision of study skills, life skills and career development supports, the enhancement of general student support initiatives, the establishment of centres to support those with specific learning challenges, for example, Mathematics learning centres), and the diagnosis of 'at risk' students. Moore (ibid.) also reported that the universities sought data and feedback from graduates to

ascertain factors enabling successful completion. In an evaluation of retention-focused initiatives, Flanagan & Morgan (2004) deemed them to have been successful.

- 8.4 A number of projects and initiatives focus on supporting student retention and successful completion at the post-entry stage<sup>45</sup>. The current National Access Office policy focus on the mainstreaming of access in HE in Ireland has, among other factors, led to an important focus on examining and adapting, and sometimes transforming, pedagogical practice generally, and the curriculum, and learning and teaching methodologies, in HE. These are not explicitly positioned as retention support for target groups, but instead tend to be presented as general pedagogical good practice, to benefit all students. However, indirectly, if not directly, they do support retention and successful completion for those from under-represented groups. The HEA (2006), in its evaluation of access programmes, emphasised the importance of an institutional commitment to improving the mainstream learning and teaching environment for all students as a key aspect of good practice in access programmes, and in supporting retention. This work has included the establishment of 'Learning and Teaching Centres' in most HEIs, an important development in enhancing the learning experience for all students. Many of these centres offer Postgraduate Certificates/Diplomas in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education for academic staff and while they are generally not compulsory like they are in the UK, anecdotal evidence suggests that they are heavily subscribed and feedback from staff is very positive. The HEA (2006) noted that institutional self-evaluation reports contained many examples of good practice with respect to inclusivity in learning and teaching, including the reformulation of curricula based on learning outcomes, the constructive alignment of assessment with learning outcomes, the development of more diverse and continuous (vs. terminal) assessment methods, and the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), such as Blackboard and Moodle, across much of the sector. A great deal of this work has been conducted through the Learning and Teaching centres, and the Centres also play a key role in providing support to academics developing their pedagogical and student support practice, and in supporting student evaluations of teaching systems.
- 8.5 The transition from school to HE, particularly in terms of adjusting to the more independent approach to learning (particularly compared to what is regarded as the 'rote learning' and 'dependent' approach (c.f. Keane, 2011b) in schools), is problematic for very many students in Ireland, and certainly not just for those from traditionally under-represented groups in HE. Indeed, Keane (2009b, 2011b) found that traditional-entry students were more likely to experience severe 'academic culture shock' than students entering HE via an SLA programme, as the former required significantly more 'deconstruction' from the dependent learning approach at school, in which they had been (contrary to the access students) very successful. In contrast, the access students had received explicit instruction and support at the pre-entry stage regarding the nature of academic practice in HE, and how it differed to school; this also benefitted the access students in this context. As a result, the access students 'hit the ground running' and attributed much of their success at the post-entry level to their pre-

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<sup>45</sup> Insofar as can be ascertained, there are no formal levers or incentives to encourage HEIs to support retention. However, as general funding to HEIs is based on student numbers, evidently it is in the institutions' interest to keep retention at as high a rate as possible. In terms of access funding, as previously noted, part of this is now based on Equal Access Data, and so again, retention of students from under-represented groups impacts this.

entry access course. Not all students have the benefit of such pre-entry preparation, however, and a key concern in Irish education for many years has been the under-preparedness of students entering HE from school (c.f. Keane, 2006; Hyland, 2011) and the 'backwash effect' of the points system on teaching and learning methodologies, leading to narrow, 'teaching to the test' methodologies (Points Commission, 1999). A SIF-funded project, the Eastern Regional Alliance Access Project (led by the IoT Blanchardstown, in collaboration with IoT Carlow, IoT Tallaght, and Dundalk IoT), consisted of research on the concept of academic and social 'readiness' for HE, with the particular aim of supporting retention and progression in the relevant IoTs. In March 2013, the DES, in a paper on better supporting the transition from post-primary to HE, signalled agreement between key partners at post-primary and HE on a commitment to addressing any problematic predictability, and to reduce the number of grading bands, in the Leaving Certificate examination. The paper also committed to reviewing and significantly reducing the number of HE programmes at level 8, and to encouraging a broader, less specialised, undergraduate entry into the Arts, Business, Science and Engineering disciplines (but not highly contested disciplines, such as Medicine). It is intended that the changes at post-primary will take some 'heat' out of the points system and reduce 'teaching to the test' approaches. In HE, it is hoped that the changes will simplify the first year experience for students and reduce early over-specialisation in the identified areas.

- 8.6 Much of the support at the post-entry level specifically targets students from under-represented groups, and supports, both directly and indirectly, their retention and success. The HEA (2006) evaluation of access programmes identified a range of such supports: first year orientation programmes, ongoing pastoral/general support and guidance from an access staff member and/or tutor or mentor, mentoring and peer-mentoring schemes, additional tuition, study skills workshops, assistive technology, financial support (e.g. for transport, childcare, and educational resources), reasonable accommodations/adjustments for students with disabilities (which are, of course, legally required), and learning supports (diagnosis and tuition). In terms of the latter, through a project in Letterkenny IoT, all first years had the opportunity to be screened and uncover their unique learning profile (c.f. McGonagle, 2011). Students are also referred to various student support services, including counselling and Career Development centres. Another SIF-funded project (Online Mental Health), led by NUI Galway, in collaboration with TCD, Dundalk IoT, and UCC) developed a portal to improve access to mental health services and psycho-educational supports for an increasingly diverse student population. As previously noted, many HEIs also include academic staff development courses, through Teaching and Learning Centres, and some of these include diversity training. The Dormant Accounts Fund has supported work in the IoTs relating to support for mature students and the Travelling community. All such post-entry supports facilitate and enhance student retention.
- 8.7 ASCENT Regional Assessment and Resource Centre (REACH project in SIF Cycle II) led by Athlone IoT (along with Galway-Mayo IoT, Letterkenny IoT, and IoT Sligo) and NUI Galway) developed a regionally-based needs assessment service to support access and retention in HE of those with disabilities. In SIF Cycle II, this became the REACH project (Athlone IoT and Letterkenny IoT) and in this phase it focused on the progression and achievement of individuals with specific learning difficulties from post-

primary to FE and HE and to address the lack of information about assistive technology supports.

- 8.8 There also has been specific work on a pedagogical and curriculum level targeted at those from under-represented groups. The HEA (2006) noted that a project on supporting ‘non-traditional groups’ in HE was under way in four institutions: compiling case studies of practice in enhancing the learning experience for increasingly diverse student populations. This included the publication of a resource of activities for engagement and WP in HE (Coughlan et al., 2006), the result of a collaborative Strategic Initiatives project of NUI Galway, DIT and NUI Maynooth. AHEAD, (2009)<sup>46</sup> developed the Charter for Inclusive Teaching and Learning, to support the participation and success of students with disabilities in HE. In the foreword to the Charter, Dr. Mary-Liz Trant, Head of the National Access Office, observed that:

‘A positive outcome of our collective work on educational equality is the increasing diversity of students participating in higher education. This means, however, that practices in teaching and learning must continue to adapt and be inclusive of a range of student needs and learning styles, and so enable students to reach their full potential as graduates, post graduates, workers and members of society.’ (p. 1)

- 8.9 The Charter, launched in 2009, has been disseminated to all HEIs.
- 8.10 An important project at the post-entry level is the Trinity Inclusive Curriculum project (TCD, 2008-2011) (c.f. Garvey & Treanor, 2011). A key feature of this project is its aim to embed inclusive practice in the mainstream curriculum of the university as opposed to only ‘responding to’ individual needs and making reasonable adjustments and accommodations in that context. Further, the intended scope is wider than students with disabilities; it encourages staff to consider that all students have varying needs and responsibilities. The website states that the inclusive curriculum ‘aims to break down barriers to learning by providing a range of teaching and assessment methods, thus allowing all students to work to their strengths’. The website contains a self-evaluation tool which invites users to consider and evaluate the level of inclusivity at programme or individual lecturer level. Upon submission of the report, users then receive a report with suggestions about how they might enhance their practice in this area. Numerous guidelines regarding inclusive practice are also available on the site. As part of the project, ‘Accessible Information’ guidelines<sup>47</sup> were developed. These provide important support for academics in designing and formatting documents in Microsoft Word and pdf, PowerPoint presentations, webpages, and even writing emails. The project also offers an interesting case study on the topic of choice in assessment<sup>48</sup>. Garvey & Treanor (2011) noted that phase three of the project will entail piloting the self-evaluation tool in other Irish HEIs with the aim of mainstreaming inclusion across the HE sector.

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<sup>46</sup> <http://www.ahead.ie/>

<sup>47</sup> Available at: <http://www.tcd.ie/CAPSL/TIC/accessible-info/>

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.tcd.ie/CAPSL/TIC/guidelines/assessments/assessment-choice.php>

## Remaining Challenges

- 8.11 There is still some way to go to build inclusivity into the heart of the Irish HE system. The remaining challenges relate to the pedagogical and socio-relational realms.
- 8.12 Fleming & Finnegan (2011b) reported on a study drawing on 125 interviews with ‘non-traditional’ students in three HEIs. Two thirds came from working class backgrounds and the sample included young adults and mature learners as well as a small number of students with disabilities and from minority ethnic backgrounds. While they found that targeted funding and the work of access offices were successful in supporting those from under-represented groups, their research
- ‘... also indicates that there is still a number of pedagogical, institutional and policy issues that need to be addressed in order to meaningfully support non-traditional students and to create fully inclusive and genuinely open third level institutions.’ (ibid., p. 1).
- 8.13 Similarly, Share & Carroll (2013, p. 13) noted that the access graduates in their study
- ‘... experienced their TCD undergraduate education in a system established for traditional students that enter on high Leaving Certificate points. In this system educational provision tends to be geared to the majority group. This is an important consideration for any HEI in the context of policy that endorses lifelong learning.’
- 8.14 Fleming & Finnegan (2011a) explained that for the students in their study (a small majority of whom were mature-aged), a lack of recognition by lecturers of the relevance of the students’ wider life experiences led to them questioning their suitability for HE. Fleming & Finnegan (2011a) also highlighted the need for time to be spent by staff, including lecturers, with students from under-represented groups building relationships and fostering confident and successful learner identities. They also noted that the typical large-group lecture approach, and the increasingly busy schedules of academic staff, generally do not allow the time and space for this sort of support. This issue can be particularly problematic for some students who have entered HE via pre-entry access programmes, where the approach taken is often very learner-centred, and based on small-group, developmental teaching and learning methodologies. For example, access graduates from the TAP programme in TCD (Share & Carroll, 2013) found the transition from small-group and interactive teaching and learning methodologies at access level to large lectures in first year at undergraduate level challenging at first. They reported being more comfortable with the pedagogical approach in later years of their degree, when project and small-group work were more prevalent. A key finding from Keane’s study (2009b, 2011b) with both access and traditional-entry students was their emphasis on the need for academic staff to be more explicit with respect to academic processes and practices.
- 8.15 Challenges also remain at the level of socio-relational. The access and traditional-entry students in Keane’s study differentially prioritised academic and social realms, with the access students ‘frontlining’ the academic, to the neglect of the (campus-based) social,

realm, which was, relative to their traditional-entry peers, 'sidelined' (c.f. Keane, 2009b, 2012). Extremely conscious of the high stakes involved in their HE participation, and perceiving this as their second (and last) chance, their approach was 'head down, and work, work, work' ('Marianne', a 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate access student) (Keane, 2012, p. 154). A significant 'compartmentalisation' approach was also enacted, by these students: they aimed to keep their HE and outside lives separate, with many noting they treated HE like a job. As 'Gary', a 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate access student explained:

'... I come into college, I do my work, I can go home, I had friends at home ... treat it like a job, do as much as you can in college, then go home and forget about it.' (Keane, 2011a, p. 456)

- 8.16 Examples of this compartmentalisation strategy (deliberating keeping HE and outside lives separate), and of a lack of engagement in social activities on campus, have also been reported in the recent Share & Carroll (2013) study of TCD access graduates.
- 8.17 Keane (2009b, 2011a) also reported significant 'distancing' behaviours within the socio-relational realm on campus. Many of the access students in her study tended to 'stick to their own' (with each other) on campus, rather than integrating in meaningful ways with traditional-entry students. They talked about feeling 'safe' and 'comfortable' with other access students and of 'other' student groups being exclusive and impenetrable. Indeed, both access and traditional-entry students in her study talked at length about the 'wealthy, snobby students' (who they termed 'the Abercrombie and Fitch type of people' and 'the Plastics') who, they believed, deliberately exhibited (through 'social peacocking' behaviours) their perceived high social status through their physical appearance, clothes and material possessions (c.f. Keane, 2009b, 2011a). Keane suggested that in an era of increasing credentialism, it may be that more privileged students, seeing working class students 'catching up' via their HE participation and achievement, have moved the 'game' of status-reckoning to the socio-relational realm, in which working class students may be more reluctant to engage. With social and socio-relational disengagement identified as impacting negatively on academic outcomes, retention, and employment outcomes in the international literature, Keane (2011a) suggested that a relative lack of social and extra-curricular engagement, including networking and relationships with 'other' students, may ultimately be a form of self-sabotage.
- 8.18 Academics have also voiced concerns about different student groups, particularly some international students, self-segregating and isolating (Keane, 2006), and distancing behaviours have also been found amongst students from other under-represented groups (c.f. Keane, 2009a).
- 8.19 This distancing from other students and 'sticking to their own' was due to their need to self-protect, a function of a feeling of inferiority, both academically and socio-economically (c.f. Keane, 2009b, 2011a). Access students feeling academically inferior once in HE is an important emerging finding from the Irish research on WP. Several studies have reported that these students, not having obtained the same Leaving Certificate points as their traditional-entry peers, worry about not being 'able for it'

(academically), and/or worry about being perceived (by others – students, staff) as not 'able for it'. Most of the access students in Keane's study explained that they deliberately failed to disclose their entry route (at least initially) as a result of this, and the few who did were met with negative reactions. For example, 'Leanne' (a 1<sup>st</sup> year undergraduate access student) explained that:

'... there's a lot of, em, resentment ... towards Access students ... a lot of the girls can be very bitchy towards it ... 'How did you get that like? How? Why?' Ugh ... 'It's not fair, I had to work my ass off to get it'. Good for you.' (Keane, 2011b, pp. 455-456)

- 8.20 In Share & Carroll's (2013) study, the access graduates (especially those who were mature-aged) expressed similar fears about their capability when faced with their traditional-entry peers who had achieved the requisite points' levels in their Leaving Certificate. One student explained:

'Oh yeah, without a doubt. Even though I had friends in first year I still felt quite lonely as in, it was just a huge place and I was thinking I am after coming from the Trinity Access Programme and these people are here after getting 550, 560 can I compete with them, am I on their level? And you try and justify your position really. I did in first year anyway, I found it ... God do I really deserve to be here, because these are proper intellects, do you know like, they are proper people.' (Share & Carroll, 2013, p. 54)

- 8.21 Despite very good academic outcomes (the access students in her study achieved very similarly to the matched group of traditional-entry students in terms of end degree results) and despite feeling more prepared than the traditional-entry students for HE (as a result of their pre-entry access course), the access students in Keane's study struggled significantly with a lack of academic self-confidence. It was only with repeated evidence (via feedback and results) that they gradually came to believe that they were 'able for it'.
- 8.22 There is also evidence of access students not wanting to reveal that they had entered HE via an access case due to feeling inferior in socio-economic terms. In Keane's study, 'Duncan' (a 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate access student) emphasised that 'no one wants to be tagged that they're poor' or feel like 'a charity case' (Keane, 2009b, p. 180). In both Share & Carroll's (2013) and Keane's (2009a) study, the access students were highly conscious of being in HE with students who came from very different socio-economic backgrounds, with very different lifestyles, to themselves. In Share & Carroll's (2013) study, students talked about feeling that they did not belong. For example, some were very aware of their accent differing to that of other students.
- 8.23 In this context, work remains to be done on many levels within institutions to create a more inclusive environment where all students feel accepted, and comfortable to fully engage in all realms, such that an integrated and transformative student experience becomes the norm for all students. A pedagogical issue which connects to the important socio-relational issue is that of the need for academics to engage in teaching and learning methodologies which require students to engage co-operatively and

collaboratively. Drawing on Thomas (2002) in the UK, Keane (2009a) has noted ways in which HEIs can work to promote social networks (and therefore integration) amongst students: through students' living arrangements, by providing appropriate facilities, and, importantly, through collaborative and more experiential teaching and learning practices. Carefully-designed academic tasks which require meaningful collaboration between students would contribute much as part of a wider pedagogy of inclusivity. Keane (2009b, p. 276) also emphasised the need to

'... make it explicit to students from under-represented groups that while self-protective, some of their distancing strategies may also be *self-limiting*. We need to emphasise the importance of building social and cultural capital. Encouraging those who are not interested in (or who are intimidated by) the socio-relational realm to become involved in campus activities and to integrate in a meaningful way with other students is important. However, I have noted the apparent power of homophilic tendencies. Perhaps the limit of what we can do is to ensure that nothing at institutional or pedagogic levels fosters exclusion.'

## Supporting Progression to Professions and Employment

8.24 In Ireland, supporting the progression to postgraduate study, and employment, for students from under-represented groups constitutes a very new, and emerging, area in terms of policy and research foci. Data presented in Section 4 shows very good progression for these students, once in HE, to both postgraduate study and into employment, including into graduate occupations. However, it is recognised that high-prestige professional occupations (such as Medicine, Law, Veterinary Science etc.) are very disproportionately composed of individuals from higher socio-economic groups. Under the National Development Plan (2007-2013), there is a stated national policy to encourage greater participation by those from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds in professional groups in society. A background document (National Access Office, 2013, p. 3) developed in preparation for the new National Access Plan (2014-2016) acknowledges the lack of data on the socio-economic status of individuals accessing programmes which are regarded as high status, and for which high points are required, such as Physiotherapy, Psychology, Law, Medicine and Veterinary Studies. However, there are, as yet, insofar as could be identified, no formal interventions to facilitate this.

8.25 With this said however, research is commencing in the area, particularly in relation to the under-representation of certain groups amongst the teaching profession. The Diversity Profiling in the Initial Teacher Education (DITE) project at NUI Galway (Keane & Heinz) is collecting and analysing socio-demographic data from all applicants and entrants to a wide range of ITE programmes nationally via the Postgraduate Application Centre (PAC) in order to explore their diversity profiles (social class, ethnicity, nationality, religion, language, sex, disability etc.). Key aims are to review entry procedures and selection criteria for teacher education courses, and to explore ways of facilitating entry to the profession by under-represented groups. The survey is currently being implemented. A background document developed in preparation for the

new National Access Plan (2014-2016) also highlight the importance of a diverse teaching population, notes the importance of ensuring that our school-level teaching population is 'inclusive in make up as well as practising inclusive, progressive teaching and learning methodologies' (National Access Office, 2013, p. 13). Moreover, on the topic of diversifying the teaching population, in May 2012, AHEAD published a report on access to teacher education for students with disabilities, following their conference on this theme in March, 2012. One of the issues highlighted in the Foreword to the report by Ann Heelan (Director, AHEAD), was the inflexibility of the entrance policy to teacher education (particularly primary teacher education). It was noted that the current policy does not serve the needs of students with disabilities.

## Evidence of Effectiveness

- 8.26 There has been a dearth of evaluation studies in the Irish context. This was noted in the HEA evaluation of access programmes:

'The evaluation indicates that access programmes are working efficiently in that the range of activities is impressive; the staff are dedicated and hard-working; students and others who participate in the programmes are by and large satisfied with the service they receive; the available resources are well-managed. In short, access programmes appear to be "doing things right". However, since there is still a shortage of quantitative data that provide evidence about the relative effectiveness of different activities, it is difficult to show that they are "doing the right things"'. (HEA, 2006, p. 47)

- 8.27 The evaluation also noted that some of those involved in the self-evaluation exercise felt that 'self-evaluation has limited value and that there is a need for comparability across institutions to establish definitively what works and to find out where the most effective practice is happening' (p. 48). The HEA evaluation report noted that this would require a common approach to data collection from all HEIs.
- 8.28 In 2013, there remains a lack of data providing evidence regarding the relative effectiveness of different access activities. The studies of access programmes cited throughout this report (TAP, 2010; Denny et al., 2010; Kenny et al., 2010; UCC PLUS+, 2011; Keane & Byrne, 2013; Share & Carroll, 2013) have provided evidence of significant positive impact of institutional access *programmes* (in general) on outcomes such as access students' academic results, retention levels, progression to postgraduate study, and progression to the labour market (and experiences therein, with little evidence of a perception of labour market discrimination, contrary to international research findings). Thus, there is evidence from these studies about the positive impact of the aforementioned access programmes *overall*. However, most of the various programmes encompass different aspects, comprising both activities at pre- and post-entry, some with and some without pre-entry access courses and/or direct-entry routes, offering a range of supports, and also targeting different groups (which are sometimes not distinguishable from each other in the reports). Unfortunately, therefore, it is not possible to disentangle the multiple strands to identify the specific impact of *particular* aspects of these programmes. The most that can be

said is that the programmes are having a very positive overall impact in terms of the outcomes identified above.

- 8.29 An exception is the Denny et al. (2010) report, which constitutes the first quantitative evaluation of an access programme in Ireland, the UCD 'New ERA'<sup>49</sup> WP initiative (established in 1997) between 1999-2004, based on a 'a quasi-experimental design' (using a matched sub-sample from the general university population) to establish the effect of the programme on progression to university and students' academic outcomes at the end of their first and final years. Through the New ERA scheme, numerous financial, informational, academic and social supports are provided to disadvantaged students both at school (36 linked schools, primary and post-primary) and university levels. New ERA students, who may enter as 'merit' (achieved relevant points) or 'direct' (reduced points) New ERA students, all receive the 'top-up' grant (as well as the government grant) and a contribution towards additional course costs.
- 8.30 The study found that the programme had positive effects on first year examination performance (shifting students up the grade distribution). Indeed, it reduced first year withdrawal rates, improved progression to second year, and final year graduation rates, and the impact was often stronger for 'merit' (higher points students) than 'direct' (reduced points) students. It was found that a student entering UCD via the New ERA scheme was between 10% and 15% more likely to graduate than a similarly disadvantaged student who did not participate in the scheme. Participation in New ERA increased the likelihood of achieving higher grades in first year. Whilst there was no impact on final degree classification, merit students did have an increased chance of higher grades. Denny et al. (2010) noted that there was no significant difference in student performance when the financial support package was *increased* from around €5,000 to €6,000. They suggested that financial aid combined with academic support provided the greatest positive impact on the retention and grades, especially in the first year, of access students.
- 8.31 Denny et al. (2010, p. 49) emphasised that while their study explored the impact of the New ERA access programme on performance,

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<sup>49</sup> Equal Right to Access (ERA)

‘... it was not possible to determine which specific components of the programme are most effective. Further research is needed to determine whether, for example, is it mentoring, financial aid, academic support or a combination of these that improves student outcomes? To consider this one needs variation in the level of support that students receive so that some students get different combinations of supports from others. This should be best evaluated as part of a randomized control trial. While recognizing the practical and ethical difficulties inherent in such an experiment, a well designed trial could provide valuable information on the design of access programme.’

- 8.32 As previously noted, financial support (via the grant) has been found to have a positive effect on student retention, especially in the IoT sector, on a national level, Mooney et al. (2010) study.

‘Grant aid contributes to progression in the institute of technology sector: at level 6, the progression rates of grant-aided students 5% better, at level 7 they are 4% better, and at level 8 they are 3% better. Thus overall in the institute of technology sector being in receipt of a grant increases a student’s chance of progressing and has a positive effect on non-presence rates.’ (Mooney et al., 2010, p.19)

- 8.33 It is likely that financial support is effective as a retention mechanism not only directly in terms of practicalities but also indirectly in terms of students not having to engage in so much part-time work. It may also impact positively on the level of debt a student has incurred upon graduation.
- 8.34 While the NUI Galway studies (Keane, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, and Keane & Byrne, 2013) also encompassed a range of pre- and post-entry supports, all students in these studies had completed a pre-entry access *course* (none were direct-entry students). They achieved very positive results in terms of degree performance and retention, and progression to postgraduate study and graduate employment. The students themselves emphasised the very positive impact they perceived the access course had on their post-entry experience and ultimate achievement. For example, they reported being far more prepared for HE than did the traditional-entry students in the study, and dealt with the transition to HE much more comfortably, all of which they attributed directly to their pre-entry access course, emphasising that they were at an advantage to other students, and were ‘hitting the ground running’, rather than coming in to the university ‘raw or cold’ (‘Paul’, a 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate access student). The traditional-entry students, in contrast, reported that they felt overwhelmed, lost and ‘left to our own devices’ (‘Liam’, a 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate traditional-entry student). Access was regarded as ‘the perfect stepping stone’ (‘Paul’) and it ‘bridged the gap’ (‘Joseph’, a 1<sup>st</sup> year undergraduate access student) between school and HE. They explained that as a result of their pre-entry access course, they were familiar with the campus generally, as well as with the library and ICT systems, and that they had experience of subjects having attended some ‘taster’ lectures during the access course. Joseph remarked:

‘... that’s where I come in at an advantage than other people that just go straight from the Leaving Cert into college ‘cause I know the college grounds, I know where A, B, and C is and I know what the lecturers are going to be like and, eh, just basically I suppose knowing where to go and what to do ... and how to do it. And how the college runs ...the [Virtual Learning Environment], email address, your own account and everything.’ (Keane, 2009b, p. 231)

- 8.35 The access students also explained that because of the access course they felt more confident about approaching lecturers to ask questions, and about giving their opinions in tutorials. They emphasised that having had instruction in and experience of academic writing was a great advantage. They also noted they had made friends during their access course. They stressed that had they come into university immediately after school (or work) they would not have felt at all prepared, and several claimed they probably would not have lasted very long. Indeed, both groups (access and traditional-entry students) emphasised that school failed to prepare students for HE and pointed to the need to bridge the gap. On hearing about the access course, the traditional-entry students felt that it would be a very good preparation for HE for *all* students.
- 8.36 Specific foci during pre-entry access courses have also been reported by students as vitally important to them at access, but especially at post-entry, levels. For example, access students in both Keane’s (2009b, 2011b, 2012) and Share & Carroll’s (2013) study emphasised the importance of learning about academic writing, and academic practice more generally, during their pre-entry access course. Indeed, in Keane’s study, the access students transitioned much more easily and more comfortably to HE relative to their traditional-entry peers, skipping stage one of a three-stage process of ‘figuring out and enacting academic practice’ (Keane, 2011b). Having been given explicit guidance about the nature of learning in HE (and how it differed from the more dependent learning approach they reported experiencing at school), they confidently skipped the ‘regurgitation’ stage in which the traditional-entry students commenced, and progressed directly to the ‘experimental enactment’ of academic practice stage (c.f. Keane, 2011b). Both groups talked about having to be ‘deconstructed’ from the dependent school learning approach, and for the access students, this commenced during their access course, though having been ‘unsuccessful’ in the school approach, they required less deconstruction. Share & Carroll (2013) also reported that TAP graduates highlighted the importance during their access programme of learning about academic writing and academic practice in HE, particularly in terms of how it was different to the school approach:

'Debriefing from school learning into academic learning it's not just rote learning and then learning the skills to critically analyse, to get over the fact that just because somebody writes something in a book doesn't mean that your opinion on it is wrong. You know, you could argue with them as long as you back it up somehow and that's what I learnt on the foundation course, that skill to appreciate my own opinions and arguments and make them.'

(ibid., p. 51)

- 8.37 Notwithstanding the problem of not being able to separate out specific aspects of access programmes, the various institutional evaluations all suggest significant positive impact in terms of retention, academic achievement in end degree results and, where relevant, progression to postgraduate level and employment. In terms of post-entry supports, students in all of these institutional studies highlighted in particular the vital role played by the pastoral/personal/emotional support from access staff, the additional financial support, and the additional academic support in supporting their retention and success. For example, a UCC PLUS+ student noted:

'Without the Access Programme I would have never got the course I chose in UCC. Through the Access Programme giving me the course and providing financial support I have since got my degree and have gone on to get work with a top accountancy firm.' (UCC PLUS+, 2011, p. 14)

- 8.38 The UCC PLUS+ (2011) study found that 90% of the access students in their research rated financial support as the most useful post-entry support. This was followed by extra tuition (which they felt they would not otherwise have been able to access, due to costs), and thirdly by the orientation week in the first year. All three supports were noted by students as being very important, as was the individual support and meetings with access staff.
- 8.39 In their study of mature students at three HEIs, Kenny et al. (2010) found that financial support was a key factor for the students. However, supports from the State, such as the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) and other grants, did not suffice and the majority of students in this study worked throughout their degree. Kenny et al. (2011) emphasised that without the grants and other supports of the access offices in the various HEIs, HE would not have been possible for the relevant students.

## 9| Financial support

### Payment of Fees

- 9.1 As previously noted, through the 'Free Fees' initiative first instituted in 1996, the DES covers the cost of tuition fees of most first time, full-time undergraduate students pursuing a programme of at least two years' duration. The scheme does not cover the fee charged by institutions which covers registration, examinations and student services, a fee which has increased substantially in recent years.

### Supports for Target Groups

- 9.2 Maintenance grants were introduced, following the enactment of the Local Authorities (Higher Education grants) Act in 1968 (HEA, 2008) to address the financial barriers to HE participation. Eligibility for the grant is means-tested and based on family and/or personal income. Maintenance grants aim to assist with living expenses, such as rent and food etc, and are available at different rates (adjacent and non-adjacent), with graduated cut-off points. Approximately 41% of students are in receipt of the maintenance grant and have their fees or student contribution paid. Mooney et al. (2010, p. 33) reported that 32% of students are in receipt of grant but note sectoral variation, with 40% of new entrants to IoTs in 2007/2008 in receipt of grant compared to 25% of new entrants to universities. Maintenance grants are widely regarded as inadequate (McGuire et al., 2003; Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998). In 2000, an additional Special Rate of Maintenance or 'top-up' grant was introduced, targeted at students from households at the lowest income levels and in receipt of long-term social welfare payments. The numbers benefiting from the Special Rate of Maintenance increased steadily since its introduction and reached 13,299 students in 2006/2007 (HEA, 2008).
- 9.3 Individual students may also apply for financial support to a range of schemes (including the Student Assistance Fund, the Fund for Students with Disabilities, and the community-based Millennium Partnership Fund), all of which are administered by the National Access Office under the European Social Fund (ESF) Third Level Access Measure, which was a core part of the Government's National Development Plan (2000-2006).
- 9.4 The Student Assistance Fund (established by the DES, 1994) provides financial aid for students who experience 'hardship' during their HE programme. Students apply at institutional level, and funding allocated may cover living and academic (e.g. books) expenses. In the 2006/2007 academic year, over €6 million was allocated to the participating institutions. Since 2011/2012, 50% of the Fund is allocated on full-time enrolments and 50% on Equal Access Data numbers. Prior to that, it was 100% based on FTEs (full-time equivalents, in terms of enrolment). In 2011/2012, the Fund increased from €5-9million, as HEIs were experiencing unprecedented levels of demand. The Fund is co-financed by European Structural Funding.

- 9.5 The Fund for Students with Disabilities (established by the DES, 1994) provides financial aid for students with a disability. In the 2006/2007 academic year, over €10 million was allocated to students with a disability in FE and HE. The Fund helps institutions to provide additional support and services to address the learning needs of students with disabilities. The Fund is co-financed by European Structural Funding. In 2008, 3,257 students in HE and 432 in FE were supported by the Fund, and these figures were 6,006 and 843 respectively in 2011/2012, constituting increases of 84% and 95% respectively (National Access Office, 2012b, p. 12).. More flexibility, including decentralisation of assessment of eligibility, in the implementation of the Fund has been enacted in recent years.
- 9.6 The Millennium Partnership Fund for Disadvantage was launched by the DES in 2000 to support the retention and participation in FE and HE of students from disadvantaged areas. Funding was allocated on a competitive basis to partnerships and community organisations whilst 37 partnerships and 22 community organisations received approximately €1.836 million in 2003 (Phillips & Eustace, 2005). In their evaluation, Phillips & Eustace made an important difference to student beneficiaries, in terms of reducing the level of financial hardship they may otherwise have experienced. However, due to inadequate data, they noted that 'there is insufficient impact and follow-up evidence gathered to back up the occurrence of more substantive effects' (p. 32). The Fund was co-financed by European Structural Funding, and was discontinued in the 2010/2011 academic year.
- 9.7 Since 1990, through BTEA, those in receipt of long-term social welfare benefits could retain social welfare payments and access maintenance grants while participating in approved full-time courses in FE and HE. 'In 2011, 24,666 people received income support under the BTEA to attend full-time courses in further and higher education, an increase of 213% on the numbers in 2008' (National Access Office, 2012b, p. 8).
- 9.8 There is also a range of bursary and scholarship schemes available which are targeted at students from lower socio-economic groups and students with disabilities, funded by various groups. Details are available at <http://www.studentfinance.ie/mp9490/other-finance/index.html>
- 9.9 As noted by the HEA (2008), the various student support schemes were seen to be complex, whilst students and their families experienced difficulties accessing the required information and making applications. To address this, in 2008, the HEA set up <http://www.studentfinance.ie>, a user-friendly website, through which users can access comprehensive and up-to-date information on financial support schemes for students in FE and HE.
- 9.10 The grant system was also acknowledged as requiring simplification (HEA, 2008) and came under considerable criticism in the 2011 National Strategy for HE:

'The very considerable inefficiencies in the current arrangements for administering student grants reflect the incremental and sector-based growth of higher education in Ireland, and the current means assessment model does not command public confidence. For these reasons, the means

assessment model must be reformed, and the processes relating to higher education grants must become more streamlined and timely, and must be delivered by a single agency. Such reform is essential to supporting equity of access to higher education and to wider social inclusion goals.’ (DES, 2011a, p. 114)

9.11 The Student Support Act (2011) led to the establishment of a single, unified and more efficient grant application scheme and put student support schemes on a statutory basis. Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), the online grant application portal, was set up through the studentfinance.ie website, which was launched in 2008. This website is also the first port of a call to students seeking information on financial supports for FE and HE in Ireland. All grant applications are now made online via SUSI<sup>50</sup>. Since June 2012, studentfinance.ie has been the gateway to SUSI.

Simultaneously, as a result of serious pressure on State finances, a range of changes and reductions to student finance options came about following the publication of the national Budget 2010. For example, there have been changes in grant entitlements in the last year couple of years. As noted in a background document (National Access Office, 2012b, p. 8) by the National Access Office in preparation for the 2014-2016 National Plan, these have included:

- > A doubling of the distance requirement to qualify for a non-adjacent grant
- > Abolition of automatic entitlement to a non-adjacent grant for mature grant-holders
- > Abolition of maintenance entitlement for BTEA participants
- > Abolition of maintenance for postgraduate students
- > Reductions in fee support for postgraduate students (except those on social welfare income up to an overall limit of €22,703).

9.12 In April 2012, Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn, as part of Budget 2012, committed to replacing all scholarship schemes with a new set of bursaries aimed at students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The bursary set at €2,000 per student is based on Leaving Certificate results for students from DEIS schools who hold medical cards, and they will still be able to apply for grants. As previously noted, for the first time, financial support to students on part-time courses was provided under the Springboard scheme in year, as part of a labour market measure for adults who have become unemployed.

9.13 The various financial support schemes are generally seen as vital by students (and HEIs) in supporting their retention and success, as well as their initial access to HE.

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<sup>50</sup> Media reports have indicated a negative reception of SUSI with reports of students waiting very prolonged periods for their grant. See: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/quinn-apologises-for-grant-delays-1.551423>

### Critical Evaluation Summary

- 10.1 An important point noted throughout this report is the relative lack of evaluative research conducted in Ireland in relation to WP (access and post-entry) interventions, and thus the relatively limited evidence base which can be drawn upon to demonstrate impact. A key challenge for the sector is to develop robust data collection and monitoring systems. A sustained focus on and commitment to 'what works and why', a core aspect of English policy, is just beginning to emerge. It is increasingly frequently recognised that the sector needs to better develop their data gathering and evaluative systems in this regard.
- 10.2 Ireland has enjoyed a very significant overall increase in HE participation during recent decades, and increases in the numbers of our target groups participating in HE is evidence of some success in terms of WP. Particular increases in the participation of target groups has been witnessed since the inception of formalised WP activities (e.g. access programmes in HEIs) in the 1990s, and again since the institution of the National Office for Equity of Access (National Office) in the HEA in 2003. While some of our target groups continue to enjoy an increase in their participation levels, some do not, and some groups' participation has declined. To an extent, this needs to be understood in the context of the significant funding challenges in the HE sector as a result of the economic crisis in Ireland since 2008. In the context, Ireland has made good progress in recent years, and there is a strong national policy commitment to WP, at access, retention and progression levels. However, Lynch (2004) has long argued that despite gains along the way, significantly more work, investment and institutional change is required if the structural inequalities inherent in society are to be truly overcome.
- 10.3 Increases in target group participation rates have been supported by the development of alternative and supplementary entry routes, such as HEAR, DARE and via FE, as well as a very significant expansion in part-time and flexible programme offerings. Part-time enrolments for mature learners who became unemployed were significantly boosted by the recent Springboard initiative. Research has shown that there is a very good progression rate from pre-entry access courses to HE. Better informational supports, through specific, student-friendly, websites, have also supported widening access rates.
- 10.4 Research has also shown that students entering HE via access routes have retention rates at least equal to the mainstream cohort, and perform at least as well overall in terms of end degree results. As noted throughout this report, evaluations of access programmes generally do not differentiate between different aspects (i.e. pre-entry access courses, other pre-entry activities, specific types of post-entry supports), meaning it is not possible to ascertain what aspect, if any, of the wider aspect programmes, may be contributing to this situation. However, Keane (2011b) pointed to

two factors which she felt explained the relatively similar academic performance and retention of the access and traditional-entry students in her study – preparation for HE and academic self-confidence. As considered in more detail previously, her access students reported feeling at an advantage to traditional-entry students in terms of being prepared for HE, an advantage which they attributed directly to their pre-entry access course (both access and traditional-entry groups were clear that school did not prepare students for HE) during which they were introduced to the university campus, subject areas, and were given explicit instruction about the nature of HE learning (e.g. through, *inter alia*, study skills and academic writing-type modules). They also noted the additional funding to which they were entitled as access students. Keane argued, however, that they were also advantaged, relative to the traditional-entry students, due to having not been successful in the dependent school learning approach; as a result, they required less ‘deconstruction’ from the school approach and suffered less ‘academic culture shock’ than did the traditional-entry students upon transition to the more independent academic approach required by HE. However, the access students were disadvantaged by their much lower levels of academic self-confidence, relative to their traditional-entry peers, despite confidence-building being an important focus during their pre-entry access course. Both groups’ confidence levels could be traced to their prior (very different) school experiences and performances. This lack of confidence led the access students to experience significant stress and over-work when completing assessment tasks. In this way, differential preparedness and academic self-confidence levels balanced each other out, in a sense, and led to quite similar retention and academic performance levels in HE for both groups. Again, the need to improve the school experience for those from disadvantaged groups comes to the fore. Access students’ similar, and sometimes better, retention and performance levels (despite lower entrance points), relative to traditional-entry students, strongly demonstrates the need to reform the post-primary summative assessment system (the Leaving Certificate, in particular). Our school system is clearly failing many students ‘if failures at 18 are redefined as successes three years later’, as Williams (1997, p. 31) has put it, in the UK.

- 10.5 A key challenge is to further improve the Irish schooling system. Inequalities in education in terms of participation, experiences and outcomes commence early in an individual’s educational career in Ireland. Those from disadvantaged and minority groups have significantly poorer school-level experiences and outcomes relative to their more privileged peers. The majority of those leaving school early and under-achieving (in terms of State examination results) are from lower socio-economic backgrounds and minority ethnic groups, most particularly Travellers. Those from these groups who do progress to HE are, in a sense, the ‘lucky survivors’. It has been found that targeted initiatives at an earlier stage, no later than junior cycle at post-primary school level, are vital. Funding cuts for access in HE make this pre-entry work with schools particularly challenging. Through DEIS, and recent developments focusing on the transition from school to HE, one could argue that Ireland is on the road to developing the ‘student lifecycle’ approach noted in English policy. It is certainly acknowledged that much more cohesion and communication between sectors is needed, and there is very significant recognition of the need to target educational disadvantage at as early a stage possible in an individual’s educational career. The need to improve the school experience for those from lower socio-economic and

minority groups is clear, as is the need to focus on raising academic attainment, particularly in Mathematics and English. Working with teachers and other school staff on areas including the role of teacher expectations, understandings of 'ability', the implications of processes such as 'ability' grouping, and, importantly, the educational impact of structural inequalities on families and individuals, will also be very important. Improving disadvantaged and minority students' experience of career guidance and related support at school is also crucial, particularly given that these students are generally more reliant upon this service at school level than are other students, given their lack of family history of HE.

- 10.6 Once in HE in Ireland, the impact of socio-economic status and gender on retention is mediated by prior attainment at school level, again pointing to the importance of remedying educational disadvantage at school level. Access students' success in HE is likely very much attributable to the impact of their pre-entry access course, and/or the various (including financial) supports received. Significant post-entry support (financial, academic, social and personal) is available to target group students via their access programmes. Students reported that these supports, and general support from their access programmes, have been instrumental in their success. From the research in the Irish context, students from lower socio-economic groups were especially clear that the financial supports available to them, while not sufficient, were crucial in allowing them to consider the possibility of HE progression and in supporting their retention and success once in HE. Financial support (e.g. the grant) to students has been found to be crucial in supporting retention for those from lower socio-economic groups (Mooney et al., 2010). It is likely that the availability of additional financial supports means that these students work fewer hours in part-time employment than would otherwise be the case, as noted by Mooney et al. (2010). Efforts to simplify and streamline the grant application have taken place, but the recent cuts in grant eligibility for some are very problematic, particularly for mature learners.
- 10.7 Access students' success is also attributable to improvements in HE pedagogy and student support more broadly over the past 10-15 years. A focus on transforming the learning experience for all students, including through academic staff development, and technology-enhanced learning, underpins our relatively high retention rate. Challenges remain with respect to embedding inclusivity in all aspects, and understandings, of our HE curricula, and the student academic and socio-relational experience. In terms of the English policy of mainstreaming WP, there is an increased focus on embedding inclusivity in HE, and thus it could be argued that this represents a shift from a more deficit view of access and WP towards a more relativist perspective. HEIs are required to have access plans embedded in their wider institutional plans. However, much more work needs to be done for a transformative approach to become truly embedded, particularly as there is a perception that access remains a peripheral activity in reality, irrespective of its position in an institution's strategic and operational plans. The Trinity Inclusive Curriculum project provides an example of good practice in terms of curriculum inclusivity. These students' success is also, importantly, linked to their determination and resilience, particularly as negotiating feelings of 'not-belonging' form a core part of their HE experience. At post-entry level, research also tells us students from under-represented groups suffer from a lack of confidence and may experience some difficulties integrating with 'other' students. As noted, therefore, work

is also required on the socio-relational level to embed inclusivity, and preferably, at least in part, this should be approached via the curriculum and inclusive learning and teaching methodologies. In an era of cuts, increasing workloads and time-pressures, engaging all staff in inclusive practice may be challenging, particularly in a context where research output is *perceived* to be of the highest value (relative to teaching and student support) in promotional schemes.

- 10.8 As previously noted, there has been a relative lack of focus on the progression to postgraduate study and employment of students from under-represented groups. Again, a key challenge here is the improvement of data collection and monitoring systems. The research which has been conducted suggests very good progression rates and little perception of disadvantage in the labour market, the latter of which is contrary to the UK experience. However, this area needs to be researched much more rigorously. This is a new area of focus in HE research in Ireland, and it should also be noted that, like in similar studies internationally, it is possible that the very positive results may be a result of those more successful graduates being more likely to respond to participate in the relevant research. It may also be that while a university degree may, in some eyes, hold a higher 'prestige' value than one from an IoT, employers in Ireland do not seem to have the same focus on 'where one did one's degree' as may the case in the UK.
- 10.9 It was found that the SIF(2006-2013) contributed to widening access, and supporting retention and success (c.f. Davies, 2010). It also facilitated (by requiring) inter-institutional collaboration through projects on a range of issues, including WP. Davies suggested that inter-institutional collaboration, where it occurred, resulted in stronger academic programme offerings, increased efficiency, and reduced costs.

### Potential Transferability to the English Context

- 10.10 An important finding from the Irish context, which is likely to be very transferable to the English context, is that of the necessity of focusing on improving the school-level academic attainment of those from disadvantaged and minority groups. Firstly, this would, evidently, lead to more of these students possessing the requisite qualifications in order to progress to HE. Secondly, research from the Irish context suggests that student retention, once in HE, is influenced by prior attainment in Mathematics and English. It would be important that this be addressed, however, in a holistic fashion; raising the achievement of these students requires much more than a surface focus on improving results in these subject areas. Through CPD initiatives, work with teachers (including, and importantly, career guidance teachers) on the role of teacher expectations, as well as improving teacher-pupil relationships, in a context of educational disadvantage and student diversity, would constitute an important start in this area. There are also, inevitably, implications for ITE, both in terms of the socio-demographic composition of entrants to ITE, and with respect to ITE foci, content, and methodologies.
- 10.11 Focusing on the development of students' competence and attainment in Mathematics and English at school level is also, of course, important. In Ireland, the recent National

Strategy for Literacy and Numeracy 2011-2020 explicitly recognises this. Under 'Project Maths'<sup>51</sup>, revised post-primary schools Mathematics curricula have been introduced on a phased basis since 2008 (due to be fully implemented in 2015), with the focus on improving students' understanding of mathematical concepts and their ability to use and apply these concepts to everyday experiences. Significant up-skilling and continuing professional development for teachers is underway. While it is very early days in terms of ascertaining impact, reports suggest that students are responding positively and their attitudes to Mathematics are also becoming more positive (c.f. Jeffes et al., 2012). There may well be potential for transferability to the English context in this regard. Additional focus on and support in Mathematics once in HE, particularly for those engaged in subjects such as Computing and Electronics (or any subject related to, or involving, Mathematics), would also likely be useful, given the link between students' perceptions of difficulties with Mathematics aspects of these courses and non-completion in Ireland.

- 10.12 In terms of English, while basic literacy is an important and necessary focus, the research suggests that more work with students in schools is required to better develop their critical literacy, critical thinking, and academic writing and related research skills in that context. Students experience very different approaches (from lecturers) and expectations (in terms of what they need to produce in assessment) in HE relative to school. As well as improving basic literacy skills in schools, there must be an increased focus on students developing critical thinking and critical writing and research skills, *inter alia*, sourcing, evaluating and drawing upon multiple texts, constructing arguments based on evidence, and so forth. Crucially, this needs to be, and to be perceived to be, rewarded in assessment at school level (c.f. Keane, 2011b). Once in HE, such processes of academic practice need to be made explicit to students, preferably through modelling within discipline-specific examples. Similar to the focus on developing Mathematics competence, there may well be potential for transferability to the English context in this area.
- 10.13 As achievement at school level plays such an important role in so many ways, and as that is related to social class and other socio-demographic factors, it would seem that interventions ought to be concentrated at the pre-entry level, in order to broaden the pool of potentially qualified applicants to HE. Working at school level, as early as possible, and in particular on a cross-sector partnership basis, on informational, aspirational, academic, and financial levels is recommended, and this would likely also benefit the English system. In this context, the ending of Aimhigher and similar schemes is very unfortunate, particularly when the fees increase is taken into account.
- 10.14 Ireland's seemingly relative high retention and progression rates for students from under-represented groups suggest that initiatives employed to widen and support access to and participation in HE have been quite successful, although any success to date is now seriously at risk due to funding cuts in the sector. Unfortunately, as previously noted, apart from grant support, one cannot say which specific aspect of interventions may have made most impact.

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<sup>51</sup> <http://www.projectmaths.ie>

- 10.15 Work also remains to be done at post-entry level in Ireland; while support via the various access offices is very good, embedding inclusivity at the heart of HE, to enhance the student experience for all, requires significant attention, and this is also most likely the case in HE in England. However, work completed by the Higher Education Academy in the area of inclusivity and the curriculum is already far more advanced than in Ireland. Attending to the socio-relational realm of the student experience is also an important point in terms of transferability to the English context. The importance of students from under-represented groups feeling that they 'belong' in a HEI is well-established in the UK, as well as the Irish and international literature. The need to more directly foster positive peer relationships and the building of social networks between 'different' student groups (to improve the student experience generally and to support HE retention and progression to postgraduate level and the professions) has emerged as an important finding from the Irish context, and it is suggested that this can be addressed, in part, through more inclusive pedagogical approaches. As previously noted, while England, and the UK more broadly, is more advanced with respect to embedding inclusion in HE, more focus on socio-relational outcomes may be worth considering in the English context.
- 10.16 A funding measure requiring HEIs in England to collaborate, on a regional basis, on access and WP projects, may be meritorious of consideration, based on the Irish experience of SIF funding.

## The Evidence Base

- 10.17 The evidence base has been highlighted as slightly problematic throughout the various sections of this case study. The problem relates to a) inadequate data collection systems which allow for the required level of disaggregation to monitor the progression and performance of specific target groups, and specific interventions (e.g. different entry routes, different supports), and b) a dearth of robust evaluative studies of specific interventions. Work in relation to the former is currently underway by the National Access Office.
- 10.18 There is also an urgent need for ongoing data collection and interpretation of different student groups' participation and achievement throughout their educational careers, collected in such a way to allow for disaggregation in terms of specific variables. While significant work has taken place in this regard via the Equal Access Data Initiative and the SRS, and data is collected on students' socio-economic status, age, gender, ethnicity, there is still a lack of data. Some institutional reports suggest that students who have entered their institutions via their *access programmes overall* are tracked, but the tracking mechanisms do not seem to separate out students entering via different schemes and who have received different supports. Hence, for example, in the evaluation of an access initiative, it is sometimes impossible to identify a student entering via a HEAR (direct-entry) scheme compared to one who has completed a pre-entry access course, and in some cases, young adults and mature students are not identifiable separately. This means that there is a lack of evidence when trying to evaluate the impact of a specific intervention, for example, a pre-entry access *course* vs. a direct-entry route with supports, and distinguishing between different post-entry supports.

10.19 Many useful presentations of WP practice (as well as research reports) are presented in Flynn et al. (2011). The national reports conducted (for example, HEA, 2006; Murphy, 2009) consist of both qualitative and quantitative data and are very useful. The regular and comprehensive HEA reports are generally (but not only) quantitative-based and are regarded as being robust and of high-quality. The Mooney et al. (2010) study was the first national retention study of all Irish HEIs. While also of very high quality, the selection of the March date of two academic years (for comparison of 'non-presence' rates) means that the findings may be rather flattering to the system. Further, longitudinal analysis will only be possible as the SRS matures. Many of the reports cited are institutional evaluations, based on qualitative and quantitative data from relatively small numbers of participants. In Denny et al.'s (2010) study, the first quantitative evaluation of an access programme in Ireland, the authors are clear about this:

'Quantitative evaluations of other access programmes would contribute significantly to the current understanding of the effectiveness of access initiatives. This would help inform policymakers in relation to the national widening participation agenda. HEIs differ in their approach to access both in terms of their history and approach. Measuring their impacts, aside from its direct relevance to the particular institution, could be very informative about which type of access programmes are most effective. Research undertaken on a national level on the impact of the different support measures would inform national policy for the longer term and would help to identify the best practice in support provision for students from lower socio-economic groups.'

(p. 49)

10.20 As previously noted, it is possible that the very positive results of the numerous institutional studies cited throughout this report may be a result of those more successful graduates being more likely to respond to participate in the relevant research. However, the 'good' to 'very good' response rates of several of the studies would suggest that these results are relatively representative of the institution's population of access graduates.

## 11| Conclusions

- 11.1 This report has considered policy, practice and research in Irish HE with respect to widening access, and supporting retention and progression for those from under-represented groups. A significant literature (both formal and 'grey') has accumulated, particularly in the last decade. This argues very well for the development of WP in Ireland in the future. As noted in the introduction, the report does not purport to be fully comprehensive; it is somewhat inevitable that examples of good practice may not be represented.
- 11.2 As highlighted throughout this report, research in Ireland on WP initiatives has tended not to 'separate out' interventions focused specifically on the access versus the retention and progression levels. This has made it somewhat difficult to report on these aspects separately, as required by the template in this report. As also noted throughout, Ireland is still in the process of developing rigorous and useful data collection systems which enable the disaggregation of specific variables, which is necessary in order to establish the impact of a specific intervention. Further, Ireland has a rather small evidence base, as the majority of evaluations have been institutional-based, to date.
- 11.3 Some key points of learning are, however, evident:
- > Ireland, despite difficult economic circumstances, continues to have a strong commitment, in both policy and practice, to WP, and to supporting the retention and progression of students from under-represented groups.
  - > Progress has been made with respect to the participation in HE of many of our target groups, through significant work at pre-entry level, with schools, via access courses, and via new supplementary direct-entry routes. However, much work remains to be done to improve the participation rates of some target groups. A key focus needs to be improving the school experience of those from disadvantaged and minority groups, and this work will need to include professional development work with all school staff.
  - > Financial support (the grant) has been found to have a positive impact on the retention of students from lower socio-economic groups.
  - > An important finding has been that prior (school) achievement in Mathematics and English impacts upon retention in HE, again pointing to the need to focus on raising the academic attainment of disadvantaged and minority groups at school-level.
  - > Post-entry targeted supports (financial, academic and personal) have all been found to be very important, and students report that these are central to their retention and success.
  - > There has been a more recent move towards embedding inclusivity in the curriculum in HE, in a context of enhancing the learning experience for all. Despite this,

significant work remains to be done in the Irish context, in terms of embedding inclusivity at curricular, pedagogic and socio-relational levels.

- > Finally, it is vitally important not to lose sight of the importance of investment in HE generally, and WP particularly, if the broader structural inequalities inherent in Irish society are to be overcome.

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## Appendix 2 | List of abbreviations

AHEAD	Association for Higher Education and Disability
BTEA	Back to Education Allowance
CAO	Central Applications Office
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DCU	Dublin City University
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills (also denotes: Department of Education and Science – previous name)
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology
DRHEA	Dublin Regional Higher Educational Alliance
EAL	English as an additional language
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
EU	European Union
FE	Further Education
FEI	Further Education Institution
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution

HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
IoT	Institute of Technology
IoTI	Institutes of Technology, Ireland
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
IUA	Irish Universities Association
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCE	Leaving Certificate
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NUI	National University of Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
RGAM	Recurrent Grant Allocation Model
SLA	School-leaver-aged Access
SIF	Strategic Innovation Fund
SRS	Student Record System
SSP	School Support Programme
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
TAP	Trinity Access Programme (Trinity College, Dublin)
TCD	Trinity College, Dublin
UCC	University College, Cork
UCD	University College Dublin
VEC	Vocational Educational Committee
WP	Widening Participation