External Audit of Equal Access Survey

JUNE 2010

Acknowledgements

Summary of abbreviations used for the higher education institutions in this report

Institutes of Technology

AIT	Athlone Institute of Technology
CIT	Cork Institute of Technology
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology
DLIADT	Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology
DKIT	Dundalk Institute of Technology
GMIT	Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology
ITB	Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown
ITC	Institute of Technology, Carlow
ITS	Institute of Technology, Sligo
ITTALL	Institute of Technology, Tallaght
ITTRA	Institute of Technology, Tralee
LYIT	Letterkenny Institute of Technology
LIT	Limerick Institute of Technology
WIT	Waterford Institute of Technology

Universities

UCD	University College Dublin
UCC	University College Cork
NUIG	National University of Ireland, Galway
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
NUIM	National University of Ireland, Maynooth
DCU	Dublin City University
UL	University of Limerick

Other Colleges

MIC	Mary Immaculate College
SPD	St Patrick's College, Drumcondra
MDI	Mater Dei Institute
NCAD	National College of Art & Design

Terms of Reference

The summary terms of reference are to assess the robustness of the Equal Access Survey as a means of judging the diversity of participation in higher education and as a means of allocating funding to support and incentivise Access initiatives.

The detailed terms of reference are set out in **Appendix I**.

Institutions

The institutions involved comprise the seven universities, the fourteen institutes of technology and five other associated colleges (MIC, MDI, NCAD, SPD, St Angela's).

The universities (€7.82m) and the other colleges (€0.72m) receive specific Access allocations, representing approximately 1.7–1.9% of core grant funding (excluding fees). Specific additional Access funding is not allocated to the Institutes of Technology (IoTs); the pre-HEA general funding model to date for this sector is assumed to take into account the Access support requirements of the Institutes. However, it is intended in future to make specific allocations also in the institutes of technology.

The specific allocations currently being made are based largely on the historical level of such allocations rather than by reference to specific student numbers in the Access categories in each institution. The HEA intends to alter the method of allocation to take account of the relevant student numbers and it is in this context that the robustness of the Equal Access Survey data is being assessed in the audit.

It is also the intention of the HEA to use student numbers as a basis for the allocation of the Student Assistance Fund.

Documentation

The Audit Panel was provided with extensive documentation comprising correspondence, minutes and numerical data relevant to Access data, with particular reference to the use of such data as part of the HEA Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM); the documentation included additional information sought by the Audit Panel in the course of its work. A list of the documentation is contained in **Appendix II**.

Approach of Audit Panel

The Panel recognised that, while there were four groups of Access students to be considered, different issues were involved in each case.

- The reckoning of mature students was reasonably straightforward, numbers being related to the age of 23 or older (as on 1 January) prior to first undergraduate entry to third level; however, a number of issues do arise and these need to be considered

- Students with a disability have been reckoned as being those in receipt of support from the Fund for Students with Disabilities. Assuming that this method of reckoning continues to be acceptable to the HEA, determining the actual count of these students is facilitated; however, the institutions argue that the actual numbers of students with a disability which need to be (and are being) supported by their student support offices are far greater than the numbers supported by this Fund

- The third group, students with a socio-economic status in the Non-manual, Semi-skilled and Unskilled manual worker categories, presents the greatest challenge in determining reliable data and the Audit Panel paid particular attention to processes involved in this area

- The fourth group, referred to in the documentation as those from specific ethnic or cultural backgrounds, is intended at this time mainly to glean information on the number of students from the Traveller community who are participating in higher education. It will also help to measure the extent of ethnic diversity in higher education with reference to National Census data.

Data Collection

Access data have been collected by the institutions in consultation with the HEA for submission to the Authority as part of the general statistical data collection for higher education institutions (HEIs). The data relate to first year intake (i.e. first admission to full-time undergraduate programmes); part-time students are not included in the data.

The process started in 2007 and complete data for the sessions 2007/08 and 2008/09 are now available. The data for 2009/10 are in the process of being analysed by the HEA. The data are collected in the institutions, in most cases as part of the admission process. In most cases data entry is automated although paper records are used in a small number of cases.

For 2009/10, on a pilot basis, an attempt to collect Access data through the CAO application process resulted in a very low response rate, resulting in the data not being usable.

An essential feature of this data collection is that it is on a voluntary disclosure basis and the sensitive nature of some of the required data leads to reluctance on the part of some students (and their parents) to provide the necessary information, although the anonymity of the resulting data is emphasised in the process.

A leaflet published by the HEA entitled 'Equal Access – Student Information and Access to Higher Education for All' is provided to students and the objective of the information gathering on '… students' social, economic and cultural background' is stated clearly to be for the purpose of measuring '… equality of Access to higher education and to help to put in place the resources needed to attract and support students of all backgrounds.'

The collection of the data is a matter of ongoing consultation between the HEA and the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner.

The definitions used in framing the questions asked in the process are those used by the Central Statistics Office in the Population Census. The socio-economic data submitted by the institutions are coded, on behalf by the HEA, by an external consulting firm, Insight Statistical Consulting.

Data Handling

Time did not permit the Panel to give detailed consideration to the handling of Access data in the context of the Student Record System. However, in seeking additional data and analyses, the Panel was able to observe the handling processes indirectly and found them very satisfactory.

Institutional Strategic Plans

The Panel was provided with a summary of references to Access in the most recent institutional plans. Perusal of this summary shows for a group of twelve institutions (six universities and six institutes of technology) that all focus to a degree on Access. In most cases quantitative targets for Access for various groups are stated in absolute or percentage terms with dates indicated for their attainment. Objectives are stated in regard to mature students and to students from socio-economic groups (SEGs) under-represented in higher education. Students with a disability figure less prominently as do students from the Traveller community.

Coding

The Audit Panel met Mr Peter Ross, Insight Statistical Consulting. Insight has a contract from the HEA for the coding of the occupational data collected by the institutions on behalf of the HEA. Mr Ross described in detail the process used in coding the data for HEA purposes. The large 'Unknown' category basically reflected an inadequate response and was equivalent to non-response in regard to occupational information. Insight was constantly in touch with the CSO whose occupational coding system is used by Insight.

The Panel was satisfied following the discussions with Mr Ross that the coding process is handled in a very professional manner and every effort is made to follow CSO procedures.

Meetings with Institutions

The Audit Panel, at its request, met separately with representatives of NUIG, TCD and UL to discuss their processes in collecting Access data. In addition, the HEA issued an open invitation for representatives of the institutions to participate in a meeting with the Audit Panel and the HEA secretariat; five institutions were represented at this meeting.

The Panel greatly appreciates the helpful interactions at these meetings, during which the following issues emerged:

(1) In regard to smaller than average response rates in the first two years, considerable improvement was expected for 2009/10.

(2) The voluntary nature of the process was seen as an inhibiting factor but the need to comply with data protection legislation was noted.

(3) The incidence of reluctance to give information varied considerably across the sectors.

(4) A number of institutions (generally those with the higher response rates) gave particular attention to the resources required to gather the data, to explain the rationale for the process and to the organisation of the data collection process.

(5) A number of institutions also used prizes as an incentive to students to provide the data.

(6) The lack of verification of the data was emphasised.

(7) Reckoning disability numbers on the basis only of the students supported by the separate Fund for Students with Disability was stated to be inappropriate. While acknowledging that this methodology provided a very firm statistical basis for the number of students with a disability, it understates to a considerable extent the numbers of student availing of the services of the disability support office in each institution. For example, many students present only late in the academic year when they become aware of their needs and the availability of services.

(8) An argument was advanced that, since the data could not be regarded as being definitive or as comparable across all the institutions (particularly in the early years of data collection), the proportion of student numbers (by reference to response rates) should be used rather than the actual numbers.

(9) Concern was expressed by some of the institutions regarding the intention of the HEA to use the socio-economic group data to allocate the Student Assistance Fund; at present, the allocation is on the basis of total full-time enrolment. However, it was noted that this concern is not shared across all of higher education; the Institutes of Technology, in particular, welcome the linking of the allocation of the Fund to the numbers of student from targeted socio-economic groups.

(10) Difficulties in matching the returns from the coding consultant with the Institutional record system were mentioned but these seem to be confined to one institution.

(11) The seeking of data on the parents of mature students was seen as particularly problematical.

Many of these issues were also raised by institutions in their responses to a letter from the Chief Executive of the HEA in December 2009, updating them on the Equal Access data that have been gathered since 2007 and on the next steps towards full implementation of the Access funding element in the HEA Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM). The Audit Panel took full account of the matters raised in these responses.

Double-counting

The issue of double-counting has been raised by a number of institutions. A student reckoned as mature may also be reckoned as from one of the relevant socio-economic groups (SEGs) and, indeed, could also be counted as disabled. It is arguable that a student who falls under a number of headings will result in a greater demand on the institution than a student who is counted under only one heading. For this reason and as the incidence of double-counting is likely to be insignificant, the Panel recommends that no action be taken in regard to this feature.

Mature Students

Adult/mature student participation is monitored on the basis of numbers of students who are 23 years of age or older on 1 January of the year of first-time undergraduate entry to higher education. The definition used does not include those re-entering as repeat students or who have been previously enrolled in higher education either on another programme in the same higher education institution or in another institution. However, the definition does include students who attended higher education but withdrew without receiving an award and are re-entering as mature students following a gap of five years since their previous attendance. The definition follows that used for eligibility under the Higher Education Grants Scheme. Non-EU students (not ordinarily funded by the HEA) are not excluded from the mature student numbers.

The average entry rates for all institutions recorded in the first two years for which complete information is available is:

2007/08	11%
2008/09	13%

The target rates set by HEA (and national) policy is that mature students should represent 20% of full-time students and that, by 2013, should represent 27% of full-time and part-time student numbers.

Students with a Disability

The data questions in regard to disability are those used by the Central Statistics Office in its Census of Population. The data processed to date show the following entry rates:

2007/08	4%
2008/09	5%

The target for this group is a doubling of the entry rate by 2013.

The largest sub-group, representing over 50% of the total in 2008/09, comprises those with specific learning difficulties; the smallest sub-group (9% in 2008/09) have sensory disabilities.

However, the allocation of funding to support disability services has to date been based on the number of students who receive specific supports on an individual basis from the separate Fund for Students with Disabilities; the number in this category is on average 46% of the total reported as having a disability.

A number of institutions have pointed out that reckoning only the number of students supported from the separate Fund understates by a considerable margin the actual needs on the ground.

The Panel notes the difficulties in considering the data collected in regard to disabilities. The present practice of the HEA, in reckoning only the number of students supported from the Fund for Students with Disabilities, is sound in that the applications from the individual students are considered in detail. However, the students so reckoned tend to be those who have sensory disabilities or who have been certified as disabled arising from a specific learning difficulty, although not all of the latter are supported from the separate Fund. Furthermore, students frequently present with disability issues throughout the academic session (e.g. just prior to examination time) and would thus not be included in the statistical returns. The Panel is satisfied that the disability support services in the institutions cater for a significantly larger number of students than are reckoned for additional Access funding.

Students from Socio-economically Disadvantaged Backgrounds

The current national Access strategy has set targets for increased participation by students from three socio-economic groups (SEGs): students from Non-manual worker backgrounds and those from Semi-skilled and Unskilled manual worker backgrounds. The entry rates recorded in the surveys are as follows:

2007/08	20.4%
2008/09	22.6%

The target (54%) is expressed in terms of the percentage of 'Non-manual and Semi-skilled and Unskilled' social groups who should access higher education by 2020.

Reference has already been made to the sensitivity of the data being collected under this heading and to the reluctance of some students (and parents) to provide the required information. Another issue raised by institutions is the fact that the data are not independently verified and that queries are often raised as to the appropriateness of seeking data on the parents of mature students. The use of the Father's data only (as distinct from that of the Mother or the data of the parent with the higher socio-economic group) is also often queried.

In the foregoing context, a major focus of the Audit Group has been an assessment of the data collected at registration on the socio-economic background of students. These data collected for 2007/08 and 2008/09 were examined with particular reference to the representation of the 'Non-manual' and 'Semi-skilled and Unskilled manual' groups, the target groups identified for additional funding. The objective of the registration survey is to collect data comparable with those which are collected in the national Census of Population.

Response Rates

The non-mandatory nature of the questions on socio-economic background poses a particular difficulty in eliciting the required data. While it is imperative for every HEI to provide a suitable opportunity to all new entrants to complete the survey questions on socio-economic background, it is accepted that a minority of students may choose not to respond. Additionally, in some cases, the poor quality of the data provided by individual students may not allow for a correct socio-economic group coding. Cumulatively, these twin problems accounted for an 'achieved response rate' of 66% in 2007/08 and 58% in 2008/09. While, in aggregate, these response rates are relatively high for a non-mandatory question there are significant differences between institutions in the level of response achieved (see **Table 1** overleaf). Within the university sector the response level achieved in TCD, DCU and NUIG is low, ranging from 15% in TCD in 2008/09 to 33% in DCU in 2008/09. Within the IOT sector, response rates exceed 50% in all cases with the exception of DIT in both 2007/08 and 2008/09 (28% and 34%) and LIT (44%) and WIT (44%) in 2008/09. The response rates achieved in the Other Colleges are significantly higher with the exception of NCAD (36%) in 2007/08.

Table 1. Representation of Targeted Socio-economic Groups (Non-manual and Semi/Unskilled manual) among New Entrants in 2008, 2007, 2004 and 1998 and Achieved Response Rates in 2008 and 2007

HEIs	2008/09	2007/08	2004	1998	Response Rate 08/9	Response Rate 07/8
DCU	0.209	0.175	0.197	0.187	0.330	0.281
NUIG	0.204	0.083	0.158	0.175	0.379	0.282
NUIM	0.290	0.225	0.218	0.249	0.760	0.85
TCD	0.140	0.114	0.145	0.129	0.145	0.168
UCC	0.195	0.183	0.173	0.168	0.805	0.577
UCD	0.160	0.135	0.124	0.152	0.786	0.946
UL	0.210	0.176	0.197	0.178	0.830	0.948
Total Universities	**0.199**	**0.16**	**0.165**	**0.17**	**0.587**	**0.587**
MIC	0.199	0.185	na	0.169	0.820	0.95
MDI	0.259	0.215	na	0.235	0.569	0.728
NCAD	0.193	0.109	na	0.16	0.897	0.355
SPD	0.243	0.213	na	0.172	0.796	0.969
Total Other Colleges	**0.217**	**0.18**	**0.190**	**0.197**	**0.749**	**0.884**
AIT	0.287	0.403	0.266	0.215	0.588	0.543
CIT	0.213	0.368	0.225	0.235	0.569	0.773
DIT	0.224	0.189	0.175	0.198	0.335	0.284
DLIADT	0.190	0.177	0.230	0.156	0.648	0.754
DKIT	0.266	0.259	0.241	0.283	0.701	0.944
GMIT	0.264	0.21	0.200	0.211	0.527	0.758
ITB	0.297	0.163	0.327	0	0.646	0.829
ITC	0.279	0.167	0.284	0.24	0.641	0.778
ITS	0.280	0.212	0.212	0.243	0.727	0.907
ITTALL	0.286	0.216	0.222	0.239	0.670	0.841
ITTRA	0.266	0.252	0.260	0.216	0.785	0.963
LYIT	0.348	0.244	0.277	0.318	0.594	0.709
LIT	0.231	0.285	0.232	0.236	0.436	0.944
WIT	0.249	0.243	0.235	0.233	0.437	0.653
Total IoTs	**0.259**	**0.245**	**0.227**	**0.23**	**0.546**	**0.721**
Grand Total	**0.226**	**0.204**	**0.195**	**0.2**	**0.576**	**0.658**

Representation of Target Groups

Summary data are presented in **Table 1** which shows the representation of the combined target groups (Non-manual and Semi-/Unskilled manual) in both 2007/08 and 2008/09. For comparison purposes we also show the representation of the target groups in 2004 and 1998 as measured in the major HEA-commissioned surveys carried out in those years (O'Connell et al 2006; Clancy 2001)[1]. It is the view of the Audit Group that the new methodology has generated robust data with a high level of 'face validity'. For all colleges the target groups represent 23% of all new entrants in 2008/09 and just over 20% in 2007/08. This compares with a representation of about 20% in 2004 and 1998[2]. Consistent with our expectations, the representation of the target group is highest in the IOT sector and lowest in the University sector while the representation in the Other Colleges sector is somewhere between these levels. With the single exception of NUIG (for 2006/07), the representation of the target group in the University sector is lowest in TCD for all years, followed by UCD while NUIM shows the highest representation. Notwithstanding some minor anomalies it would appear that DLIADT, DIT and NCAD have somewhat lower levels of representation of the target groups than the other colleges in their sectors. The finding of a low level of representation of the target groups in ITB and ITC in 2007/08 is out of line with the data for all other years.

Representativeness of Survey Respondents

In spite of achieving response rates of 58% and 66%, there is a concern that the non-responses are not randomly distributed. This is a problem which all surveys of higher education entrants have and is also an increasing problem for the Census of Population. In the 2006 Census 18% of the population were classified as 'all others gainfully occupied and unknown'. In the 1998 and 2004 surveys it was possible to test for the representativeness of the achieved sample by comparing the distribution of respondents and non-respondents on type of post-primary school attended, higher education sector and financial aid status, three characteristics which are known to vary by socio-economic groups. In both cases it was concluded that there was little evidence of bias in respect of the response pattern.

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[1] O'Connell, P., *et al. Who Went to College in 2004? A National Survey of New Entrants to Higher Education,* Dublin: HEA, 2006; Clancy, P. *College Entry in Focus: A Fourth National Survey of Access to Higher Education*, Dublin: HEA, 2001.

[2] The representation of these groups in the national Census of Population is not constant. The representation of these combined groups among the under-15 age group (an approximate comparator group) has changed from 34% in 1996 to 31% in 2002 to 34% in 2006.

Students with a Registration Grant

For the purposes of the present audit it was possible to correlate the response pattern with the data on the receipt of a registration grant. In respect of 2007/08 new entrants, 32% of those for whom data on socio-economic background were available were in receipt of a grant while for those for whom no data on socio-economic background were available 35% qualified for a grant. This suggests that respondents to the survey were broadly comparable to the total population of new entrants. The differences were more significant for 2008/09 entrants. In this instance the percentage in receipt of grants for whom no socio-economic group (SEG) data were available was 39% in comparison with 29% for those for whom SEG data were available. This comparison suggests that these data collected from the registration survey may underestimate the percentage of students coming from the targeted socio-economic groups. The more detailed breakdown of the data (see **Table 2** overleaf) suggests that this possible underestimation may be more of a problem in the Other Colleges sector (especially in the NCAD) and, while it may also be a factor in the universities and institutes of technology, it would seem to be a less significant factor.

Table 2. Percentage of Grant Holders among New Entrants by Availability of Data on Socio-economic Background in 2007 and 2008

	New Entrants 2007/08		New Entrants 2008/09	
	SEG Data Available	SEG Data Not Available	SEG Data Available	SEG Data Not Available
DCU	9	14	19	21
NUIG	27	31	25	37
NUIM	28	49	28	51
TCD	14	16	14	16
UCC	26	35	19	42
UCD	11	34	14	27
UL	30	56	27	46
Total Universities	**21**	**28**	**20**	**28**
MIC	33	68	30	58
MDI	31	34	22	48
NCAD	50	26	18	63
SPD	28	49	23	49
Total Other Colleges	**31**	**46**	**26**	**53**
AIT	41	51	44	69
CIT	NA	NA	73	86
DIT	19	23	17	24
DLIADT	24	40	18	42
DKIT	35	58	32	54
GMIT	39	53	40	53
ITB	19	52	25	45
ITC	37	55	34	58
ITS	48	77	49	75
ITTALL	26	49	22	49
ITTRA	51	79	44	71
LYIT	59	76	57	64
LIT	95	93	NA	NA
WIT	39	51	34	45
Total IoTs	**43**	**47**	**40**	**51**
Overall Total	**32**	**35**	**29**	**39**

Type of Second-level School Attended by Students

As a second check on the representativeness of the SEG data collected, we were able to correlate the pattern of response with the second-level school from which the students came. It is well established that higher socio-economic groups are most likely to attend Fee-paying Secondary schools while lower socio-economic groups are more heavily concentrated in Vocational schools. (By comparison both Non-fee-paying Secondary schools and Community and Comprehensive schools attract a more representative socio-economic profile.) A comparison of the incidence of attendance at Fee-paying Secondary schools and Vocational schools among respondents and non-respondents provides a check on the representativeness of the data. Data for 16 colleges were available for 2007/08 while data from 19 were available for 2008/09 (**Tables A1** and **A2** – see *Appendix III*). The results of our analysis are summarised in **Table 3** overleaf. For the 2007/08 new entrants we note that those for whom we have no SEG data are more likely to have come from Fee-paying Secondary schools and are less likely to have come from Vocational schools. This suggests that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may be over-represented among those for whom we have SEG data. The pattern is replicated for the 2008/09 new entrants. Again we note that students for whom we have no SEG data are more likely to have come from Fee-paying Secondary schools and slightly less likely to have come from Vocational schools.

The more detailed data on which these conclusions are based are presented in **Tables A1** and **A2** (*Appendix III*). In respect of 2007/08, data for seven colleges suggest that lower socio-economic groups may be somewhat over-represented among respondents (with fewer students coming from Fee-paying Secondary schools and more students coming from Vocational schools) while in three colleges there was an indication that lower socio-economic groups may be over represented among non-respondents. In the case of six colleges the two indicators reveal conflicting trends. In respect of 2008/09, data for seven colleges suggest that lower socio-economic groups may be under-represented among respondents while in three colleges there was an indication that lower socio-economic groups may be under-represented among non-respondents. For nine colleges the two indicators reveal conflicting evidence.

Table 3. Distribution of New Entrants by Type of Secondary School Attended by Availability of Data on Socio-economic Background 2007/08 and 2008/09

	2007/08 New Entrants *		2008/09 New Entrants *	
	SEG Data Available %	SEG Data Not Available %	SEG Data Available %	SEG Data Not Available %
Fee-paying Secondary	5.6	14.2	7.0	13.5
Non-fee-paying Secondary	55.7	53.0	55.1	51.9
Vocational	21.9	17.5	20.9	19.6
Community & Comprehensive	16.7	15.3	17.1	15.1
Total %	100	100	100	100
Total N	8,655	7,577	12,526	7,879

* The 2007/08 figures refer to data from 16 colleges while the 2008/09 figures come from 19 colleges; missing school data from these colleges are excluded.

Table 4. Percentage of New Entrants Attending DEIS Schools by Availability of Data on Socio-economic Background 2007/08 and 2008/09

2007/08 New Entrants		2008/09 New Entrants	
SEG Data Available	SEG Data Not Available	SEG Data Available	SEG Data Not Available
14.5	12.5	12.1	14.5

Students who Attended DEIS Schools

In a further test of the representativeness of the response pattern, we also examined the distribution of new entrants who attended DEIS schools[3] (see Table 4 above). These data were only available from those colleges which were included in our previous analysis by school type. For 2007/08 new entrants, 14.5% of those for whom we had SEG data came from DEIS schools while 12.5% of those for whom we had no SEG data came from DEIS schools. This difference is consistent with the results for the school type analysis, suggesting that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may be over-represented among those who reported SEG data. However, data from the 2008/09 new entrants point in the opposite direction suggesting that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may be slightly over-represented among those for whom we have no SEG data.

While accepting that our representativeness checks using school type and the DEIS/non-DEIS distinctions are not as comprehensive as we might wish for, they do provide a complement to the use of grant data and enable us to make a tentative judgment about the implications of the missing SEG data. The conflicting evidence from our analysis of the grant data and

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[3] DEIS schools are those which qualify for a special Student Support Programme designed to tackle educational disadvantage.

from our analysis of data on second-level schools attended suggests that there is no clear pattern of bias evident. This increases our confidence in the representativeness of the data collected. In addition, as we noted above, the trends revealed in the registration survey data are consistent with results from the earlier HEA-commissioned surveys. While it must remain a clear objective to increase the response rate and to continuously strive for an improvement in the quality of the data supplied, we are confident that the registration survey is producing robust data which can be used as a basis for funding decisions.

Students from Specific Minority Ethnic and Cultural Backgrounds

The data definitions used in gathering the data on minority ethnic and cultural backgrounds are again those used by the Central Statistics Office. The entry rates under this heading are:

2007/08	7%
2008/09	8%

There are no specific targets for participation by any of the sub-groups involved and the data are intended largely to inform future policy-making in this area. In the short term, the data are used to identify the number of students from the Traveller community. The numbers reported are very small, the number of entrants in 2008/09 for all sectors totalling 24. There may, however, be significant non-declaration of Traveller status.

Part-time Students

Current policy does not take part-time Access students into account in the development of the new funding model for the allocation of Access funding. In future, the Panel suggests, it will be necessary to develop specific policies in respect of part-time students from all categories of Access groups. In the light of this, it is very desirable that data needs be determined and collected on a trial basis.

Communication

As already mentioned, the HEA has issued a leaflet explaining the rationale for the collection of Access data. The leaflet also reproduces an abbreviated form of the data questions (the full version is used in the actual data-gathering process) on Disability, Socio-economic background, and Cultural and Ethnic background. This area is the subject of a recommendation below.

Appreciation

The Audit Panel wishes to extend its appreciation for the excellent support provided by the staff of the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, the HEA Statistics Section and other units within the HEA secretariat during the course of the audit. In particular, we received ongoing support from Dr Mary-Liz Trant, Head of the National Access Office, Dr Vivienne Patterson, Head of Statistics Section, Ms Orla Christle, Senior Policy Analyst, National Access Office, and, from the Recurrent Funding section, Ms Mary Armstrong and Ms Jennifer Gygax.

Conclusion

The Audit Panel is of the view that the Access data currently available to the HEA is sufficiently robust to be appropriate for use for the allocation of Access funding within the overall Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM). This conclusion is in the context of the recommendations which follow.

Principal Recommendations

Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM)

The Access funding element in the RGAM model should be phased in over a period of two years.

Mature Students

The Panel recommends that the present methodology for reckoning mature student numbers be retained, subject to non-EU students being excluded, in line with overall funding policy.

Students with a Disability

The Panel is impressed by the argument advanced by several institutions at the use of student numbers supported (individually) by the Fund for Students with Disabilities understates the demand for services under this heading. It is inclined to the view that the present methodology should continue in use but that some form of weighting is desirable; a weighting in the order of 2.0 is recommended, the exact weighting to be determined by the HEA in the light of its experience. The new weighting could be introduced for a set period and kept under review.

Students from Socio-economically Disadvantaged Backgrounds

(a) Current proposals suggest that the premium paid for students from targeted socio-economic groups would be based on the number of students from the 'Non-manual' and 'Semi-skilled and Unskilled manual' groups identified in the registration survey. Because of the non-response problem the Panel recommends that, for a transitional period of two years, the premium would be paid in respect of the *proportion* of new entrants from the designated target groups as identified in the registration survey. Economic-fee-paying students should be excluded in the calculations of the number of students who attract a funding premium.

(b) The Statistics Section in the HEA should continue vigorously to pursue on-going monitoring of the quality of the data collected in respect of socio-economically disadvantaged students.

(c) Current proposals are for the use of SEG data on fathers as a basis for the funding model. The objective should be to move towards utilising data for both parents/guardians. Since these data are currently collected and coded, there is a need to analyse these data with a view to suggesting the optimum way of combining fathers' and mothers' data. It may be that the best solution would be to accept the higher of the two codes as a basis for the classification of each student. A statistical analysis of these data combined with an analysis of best practice in other countries will be necessary before making a final decision on this.

(d) While the reported resistance by some mature students to providing data on the socio-economic background of their parents is understandable, there is a clear rationale to requesting these data as they facilitate an assessment of the extent to which the admission of mature students offers a 'second chance' opportunity to those from lower socio-economic groups. The likely continuing low response from mature students is not a serious problem as these students will already attract a funding premium as mature students. We would not recommend the introduction of an opt-out for mature students as this might influence other students not to respond.

Students from Specific Minority Ethnic Backgrounds

In view of the increasing ethnic diversity of the national population, future policy will require monitoring of the participation of other ethnic minorities in addition to that of Travellers.

Communication

To facilitate higher response rates, the Panel recommends that the explanatory leaflet, which refers to the non-mandatory nature of the survey, be amended to include a reference to the fact that while 'non-response will not impede your registration or affect your eligibility for financial assistance schemes, it may have implications for the level of state funding allocated to your institution', a note that should also be included in the questionnaire itself. In that part of the leaflet which deals with the socio-economic background and the 'principal occupation of … parent(s)/guardian(s)', it should be indicated that examples of occupation descriptions are set out in the questionnaire itself.

Other Recommendations

Double-counting

The Panel considers that the incidence of double-counting is likely to be insignificant and recommends that no action be taken in regard to this feature.

Part-time Students

The Panel suggests that it will be necessary to develop specific policies for part-time students from all sectors of the Access groups. In the light of this it is very desirable that data needs be determined and collected on a trial basis.

Audit Panel Professor Patrick Clancy Mr John Hayden Mr Michael F. Kelleher

June 2010

APPENDIX I

Terms of reference – Audit of Equal Access Survey 2010

Aim of the audit: To assess the robustness of the Equal Access Survey as a means of judging the diversity of participation in higher education and as a means of allocating funding to support and incentivise Access initiatives.

Tasks to assist assessment of the survey

1   Auditors to assess the registration process as a procedure for conducting the Equal Access Survey (EAS). The exercise will primarily be desk-based, with any follow-up meetings as required. A range of documentation will be made available to the auditors, including recent feedback to the 7 December 2009 letter to all participating institutions.

Three to four institutions of varying size and with varying response rates to the EAS will be selected for detailed examination.

- Method of collection during registration
- Method of loading into HEI IS systems
- Method of transfer to external consultants

All institutions are also invited to send additional feedback to the auditors in writing or to meet the team/members of the team over the course of 1-2 scheduled days in the HEA offices.

2   Auditors to meet with the external coding consultants (Insight Statistical Consulting) to examine the methodology of coding socio-economic group and class.

- Method of coding
- Handling of unknowns
- Consistency with other organisations (CSO)
- Method of return to higher education institutions

3   Auditors to examine Equal Access Survey data in the Student Record System

- Method of loading of data
- Summary data tables
- Consistency of data in relation to similar surveys

4   Auditors to report on the outcome of their assessments and their conclusions as to:

(i) the Survey as a means of judging diversity in participation in higher education and

(ii) as a means of allocating funding to support Access initiatives by higher education institutions

(iii) any guidance and recommendations that may be necessary to assist future development of the Equal Access Survey by the HEA and higher education institutions

APPENDIX II

List of Documentation reviewed by the Audit Panel

- 2006 Data Collection and Allocation of Additional Funding for Under-represented Students to Higher Education – Issues regarding Clarity/Additional Questions/ Potential Difficulties.

- Registration Process – Response Rate.

- 2007 Data Collection: Students from under-represented groups in higher education.

- HEA to Data Protection Commissioner: Letter dated 22 February 2007.

- Draft Note of Meeting of Data Implementation Sub-group: 24 May 2007.

- (Untitled Document) Format, Count, Dates of Returns and other data – 2007 Equal Access Data Collection 2008.

- HEA National Access Office to Registrars: E-mail dated 15 April 2008.

- Questionnaire – Feedback on 'Equal Access' Data Collection Initiative 2007-08.

- HEA to Registrars and other officers: Equal Access Student Data Collection Initiative 2007-2008 – E-mail dated 15 April 2008.

- HEA National Access Office to Office of Data Protection Commissioner: E-mail dated 3 October 2008.

- Part Memo (undated) from HEA National Access Office to institutions, requesting that socio-economic data for 2008 be returned to Peter Ross at Insight Consulting for coding.

- Memo on General Comments from the institutions on the 2007/08 Data Collection Initiative.

- Equal Access Data Collection 2007/08: Presented to the HEA by Peter Brown, National Access Office, and Muiris O'Connor, Policy and Planning, dated 25 November 2008.

- 07/08 and 08/09 Data.

- HEA Implementation Guidelines for the 2009/10 Equal Access Data Collection Process.

- HEA to President, Registrars, Chief Financial Officers: Letter dated 7 December on Equal Access – funding, data and the current environment, with 2007/08 Data attached.

- President, DCU, to Chief Executive, HEA: Letter dated 22 December 2009, in response to previous item.

- President, NUIG, to Chief Executive, HEA: Letter dated 29 January 2010, in response to HEA letter of 7 December 2009.

- Note on Internal Meeting on Recurrent Grant Allocation Model and Access Element, 16 February 2010.

- Academic Registrar, AIT, to Chief Executive, HEA: Letter dated 18 February 2010, in response to HEA letter of 9 December 2009.

- HEA to Presidents of institutions, inviting representatives to a meeting on 24 May 2010, to brief institutions on the outcomes of the audit and on other developments *(subsequently re-arranged for 31 May 2010).*

- Table showing Core Grants and Fees Grants 2010 allocations to the universities, associated colleges and other designated institutions.

- Table showing Recurrent Grants Outturn and Fees Grants 2009 allocations to the institutes of technology.

- Equal Access 2010 allocations to the universities and associated colleges.

- HEA internal e-mail dated 30 April 2010, summarising the treatment of Access students in the Resource Allocation Models of the universities.

- Extracts from the Strategic Plans relating to Access of ITC, CIT, DIT, DKIT, ITTRA, WIT, NUIG, NUIM, UCC, UCD, UL and TCD.

- HEA Leaflet on Equal Access – 'Student Information and Access to Higher Education for All'.

Table A1. Percentage Distribution* of Students by Type of Second-level School Attended by Availability of Data on Socio-economic Background, 2007/08 New Entrants.

	SEG Data Available					SEG Data Not Available				
	Fee Sec	Voc	Non-fee Sec	C&C	Missing	Fee Sec	Voc	Non-fee Sec	C&C	Missing
UCC	6	16	51	13	14	9	15	47	11	17
	7	19	61	15		12	18	57	13	
TCD	20	9	40	10	22	21	7	34	10	28
	26	12	51	13		29	10	47	14	
NCAD	14	0	44	25	17	14	5	45	8	25
	17		53	30		19	7	60	11	
AIT	3	24	54	11	9	1	17	46	15	21
	3	26	59	12		1	22	58	19	
ITB	6	24	32	12	25	5	12	21	9	53
	8	32	43	16		11	26	45	19	
ITC	3	21	50	13	12	2	18	39	10	31
	3	24	57	15		3	26	57	15	
DLIADT	18	9	48	16	9	19	7	41	15	19
	20	10	53	18		23	9	51	19	
DKIT	4	21	50	13	11	4	14	38	9	34
	4	24	56	15		6	21	58	14	
DIT	15	15	45	15	8	18	11	42	11	16
	16	16	49	16		21	13	50	13	
GMIT	1	16	50	17	15	1	14	40	13	32
	1	19	59	20		1	21	59	19	
LIT	1	25	51	17	6	0	25	44	17	14
	1	27	54	18			29	51	20	
LYIT	0	28	36	25	11	0	20	26	22	31
		31	40	28			29	38	32	
ITS	1	24	52	18	5	0	20	44	12	9
	1	25	55	19						
ITTALL	11	18	44	24	4	3	25	40	20	13
	11	19	46	25		3	29	46	23	
ITTRA	1	26	54	11	8	1	22	49	7	21
	1	28	59	12		1	28	62	9	
WIT	2	22	55	8	14	2	18	45	6	29
	2	26	64	9		3	25	63	8	

* In the second row the percentages exclude the missing school data for each college.

Table A2. Percentage Distribution* of Students by Type of Second-level School Attended by Availability of Data on Socio-economic Background, 2008/09 New Entrants.

	SEG Data Available					SEG Data Not Available				
	Fee Sec	Voc	Non-fee Sec	C&C	Missing	Fee Sec	Voc	Non-fee Sec	C&C	Missing
UCC	8	12	50	12	18	5	7	37	7	45
	10	15	61	15		9	13	67	13	
UL	2	18	52	16	11	1	19	41	14	26
	2	20	58	18		1	26	55	29	
TCD	16	12	36	8	28	23	12	34	9	25
	22	17	50	18		31	16	45	12	
MIC	1	17	58	13	11	1	10	57	10	23
	1	19	65	15		1	13	74	13	
MDI	3	12	66	12	7	0	16	50	11	23
	3	13	71	13			21	55	14	
NCAD	21	6	37	13	23	11	11	21	5	53
	27	8	48	17		23	23	45	11	
AIT	2	21	53	15	9	2	20	44	13	20
	2	23	58	16		3	25	55	16	
ITB	6	26	34	17	18	4	12	26	18	39
	7	32	41	21		7	20	43	30	
CIT	6	25	46	17	6	4	23	38	15	20
	6	27	49	18		5	29	48	19	
ITC	5	22	52	9	8	3	22	36	14	30
	5	24	57	10		4	31	51	13	
DLIADT	24	11	43	13	10	17	6	34	15	28
	27	12	48	14		24	8	47	21	
DKIT	4	21	50	13	12	4	18	38	9	31
	5	24	57	15		6	26	55	13	
DIT	18	15	43	16	9	18	11	39	12	20
	20	16	47	18		23	14	49	15	
GMIT	2	20	48	19	11	1	14	40	14	31
	2	22	54	21		1	20	58	20	
LYIT	1	28	33	29	9	1	20	28	16	35
	1	31	36	32		2	31	43	25	
ITS	2	19	53	19	7	2	21	37	12	29
	2	20	57	20		3	30	52	17	
ITTALL	11	17	46	21	6	5	22	40	21	13
	12	18	49	22		6	25	46	24	
ITTRA	2	23	53	13	9	1	36	35	7	21
	2	25	58	14		1	46	44	9	
WIT	3	26	55	8	6	3	21	50	8	19
	3	28	59	9		4	26	62	10	

* In the second row the percentages exclude the missing school data for each college