Statement by the National Athena SWAN Ireland Intersectionality Working Group on the Use of Ethnicity Categories in Irish Higher Education

May 2020

Background

The Intersectionality Working Group was established in 2019 by the National Athena SWAN Ireland Committee in conjunction with the HEA. Membership of the group is outlined in Appendix 1. While the work of the group will evolve over time, the primary goal of the group has been to develop a cross-sectoral approach to collecting data on staff and student ethnicity in the Irish higher education sector.

We understand the collection of staff and student ethnicity data to be central to the implementation of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, deriving from section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014. Under this Act, all public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must undertake assessment and monitoring, and have policies and plans to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of staff, students and the wider public that are served by the work of HEIs.

HEIs in Ireland have become accustomed, in recent years, to collecting and monitoring data on the gender of staff and students for equality purposes. This data has become useful to pinpointing where inequalities exist in the sector, and to informing system-wide and institutional actions to combat gender inequality.

Given international evidence of the ways gender and ethnicity inequalities interact in higher education, we regard it as particularly important that higher education institutions and the HEA develop greater understanding of our staff and students’ experiences in relation to ethnicity. But there are limitations and ethical dilemmas involved in asking people to identify with a particular

---

category for the purposes of equality monitoring. This is particularly true in the case of ethnicity categories.

The limitations and ethics of using ethnicity categories

It is important first of all to acknowledge that taking action against racism and for equality does not require us to wait for establishment of a data collection system. Perhaps more profoundly, we need to acknowledge that the institutionalising of modern racism has involved the state-sanctioned use of pseudoscientific categories in data collection, which falsely divide populations into superior and inferior groups. The concept of ethnicity has been foregrounded in contemporary public and policy discourse as a means of refuting connotations of biological hierarchy in populations, and to foreground the importance of descent, place and heritage to one’s experience. Nonetheless, social movements and individuals often identify with categories of race and ethnicity interchangeably and in multiple ways, to reflect specific forms of shared historic and ongoing experience of society not least including the experience of institutionalised racism and related inequalities in work, study, health, housing, education and geographic location.

Ireland’s Central Statistics Office (CSO) has developed ethnicity census categories over the past twenty years in consultation with community groups and individuals, and with some considerable reliance on the British approach to census classifications. The most recent revision of ethnicity categories for Census 2021 is noted in Appendix 2. The invitation to identify one’s ethnicity in the census has largely involved a mix of physical characteristics (or race; White, Black, Asian etc), subcategorised by nationality (e.g. Irish, Chinese) and in the case of Irish Travellers, further subcategorised by a specific ethnic identifier. The 2021 categories also include the grouping Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi as a subcategory of ‘Asian’ for the first time.

These categorisations are inevitably contested, not least when one’s only option is to identify as ‘other’. The question of how to recognise those who are part of diverse but small population groups while retaining their anonymity also raises further question. Terms such as ‘Traveller, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic’ (TBAME), or ‘racialised minority’ are heavily contested, not least when used to refer to individuals, as opposed to very broad groups. Terms such as ‘global majority’ are also increasingly being used to avoid overemphasising national minority status in a globalised world.

International evidence, and the working group’s own experience also indicates there can be reluctance, not least amongst advantaged and majority groups, to identify with categories that denote one’s skin colour. However, since skin colour is one of the ways in which groups experience advantage and disadvantage, it is important to take into account. Thus, while there is an ethical purpose to collecting data on people’s experiences by race/ethnicity, this purpose needs to be guarded carefully through a process of consultation with diverse constituencies, education at national and institutional level, responsible reporting and media engagement, and conviction to take action against institutional racism at all times.

---


Statement of the Working Group’s position

It is our view that the following actions should be progressed:

1. The Irish higher education sector moves to create an evidence base regarding staff and student representation, access and outcome by ethnicity with the explicit purpose of recognising and tackling institutionalised racism and advancing equality in higher education;
2. For comparability purposes with CSO figures, the HEA use CSO categorisations of ethnicity to conduct this work, and provide feedback to the CSO on the use of these categories in the national census as appropriate;
3. The HEA work with HEIs and representative bodies to advise on the establishment of ethnicity categories in staff and student data systems, policies and forms, and to raise awareness of the legitimate purpose of using ethnicity categories under GDPR legislation;
4. The HEA work with higher education institutions and representative bodies to conduct a ‘voluntary disclosure’ campaign, which supports staff and students to voluntarily disclose their ethnicity at multiple opportunities (e.g. reminders at registration, recruitment, personal staff/student profile, requests for leave of absence, conferring);
5. The HEA reports on staff demographics and outcomes should include guidance on the limitations, and ethical use of, ethnicity data;
6. Individual institutions monitor staff and student demographics and outcomes by ethnicity, with the purpose of tackling institutionalised racism and advancing equality through targeted actions;
7. Individual institutions may include further ethnicity categories than those provided by the CSO (including broad identifiers such as ‘TBAME’ or ‘MEGs’ (Minority Ethnic Groups)) in consultation with staff and students and local community groups, and drawing on the advice of the national intersectionality working group;
8. Individual institutions to advance the recruitment, retention and progression of staff and students from minority ethnic groups through dedicated actions, and equality action plans, as appropriate.
9. The Irish higher education sector, over time, develops a strong capacity to monitor staff and student outcomes across a range of equality grounds and protected characteristics.

Suggested Reading


Other resources

This statement has been endorsed by the following institutions and organisations:

Athlone Institute of Technology
Cork Institute of Technology
Carlow College
Dublin City University
Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology
Dundalk Institute of Technology
Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology
Institute of Technology, Carlow
Institute of Technology, Sligo
Institute of Technology, Tralee
Irish Universities Association
Letterkenny Institute of Technology
Limerick Institute of Technology
Mary Immaculate College
Maynooth University
National College of Art and Design
National College of Ireland
National University of Ireland, Galway
Royal College of Surgeons Ireland
St Angela’s College, Sligo
Trinity College Dublin
Technological Higher Education Association
Technological University Dublin
University College Cork
University College Dublin

University of Limerick

Waterford Institute of Technology
Appendix 1: National Intersectionality Working Group Membership

Sam Blanckensee (MU)
Victoria Brownlee (Advance HE, Chair).
Jennifer Byrne (TU Dublin)
Kim Connick (DCU)
Sarah Fink (RCSI)
Ebun Joseph (RCSI/UCD)
Su-ming Khoo (NUIG)
Karl Kitching (UCC)
Sarah Hawes (NCI)
Chandana Mathur (MU)
Modesta Mawarire (HEA)
Claire McGing (IADT)
Philip Owende (TU Dublin)
Kalpana Shankar (UCD)
Ross Woods (HEA)
Appendix 2: Census 2021, Question 12

Q. 12 “What is your ethnic group/background?” will have new tick boxes for Roma, Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi, Arabic, and Mixed ethnic group/background.

The Census Pilot survey report details the new categories as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish Traveller</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roma</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any other White background</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or Black Irish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any other black background</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Asian Irish:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Pilot A only)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any other Asian background</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, including mixed group/</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>background</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic (Pilot A only)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed background</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: