



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.¹ But there are limitations and ethical dilemmas involved in asking people to identify with a particular

¹ Bhopal, K. and Henderson, H. (2019) Competing inequalities: Gender versus race in higher education institutions in the UK. *Educational Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2019.1642305>
Zambrana, R.E. and MacDonald, V-M (2019) Staggered inequalities in access to higher education by gender, race and ethnicity. In Thornton Dill, B. and Zambrana, R.E (eds) *Emerging Intersections*, Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, pp. 73-100.

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.² 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.

² Doane, A.W. and Bonilla-Silva, E. (eds) (2003) *White out: The continuing significance of racism*. New York: Routledge.

Pauker, K., Apfelbaum, E.P. and Spitzer, B. (2015) When societal norms and social identity collide: The race talk dilemma for social minority children. *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 6(8): pp. 887-895.

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

Bhopal, K. and Henderson, H. (2019) *Advancing equality in higher education: An exploratory study of the Athena SWAN and Race Equality Charters*. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/reports/advancing-equality-and-higher-education.pdf>

Crenshaw, K (1989) 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: vol.1989: Iss.1, Article 8.

<https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf>

Garner, S. (2004) *Racism in the Irish experience*. London: Pluto Press.

King-O'Riain, R.C. (2007) Counting on the 'Celtic Tiger': Adding ethnic census categories in the Republic of Ireland. *Ethnicities* 7(4): pp. 516-542.

<https://doi-org.ucc.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/1468796807084015>

Nobles, M. (2000) *Shades of citizenship: Race and the census in modern politics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Other resources

K. Crenshaw, 'The urgency of intersectionality', Ted Talk:

https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality?language=en

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 Mwarire (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:

Ethnicity	
White	Irish
	Irish Traveller
	Roma
	Any other White background
Black or Black Irish	African
	Any other black background
Asian or Asian Irish:	Chinese
	Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi (Pilot A only)
	Any other Asian background
Other, including mixed group/background	Arabic (Pilot A only)
	Mixed background
	Other

Source:

https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/census2021/Census_Pilot_Survey_Report_2018_V1.pdf