

STUDY OF MATURE STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Indecon



An Roinn Breisoideachais agus Ardoideachais,
Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta
Department of Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science

HEA | HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY
AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS

STUDY OF MATURE STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

REPORT

Prepared by Indecon International Research Economists

June 2021

CONTENTS

Executive Summary	i
1 Introduction and Background	1
1.1 Introduction	2
1.2 Definition of Mature Students	2
1.3 Methodology	4
1.4 Structure of Report	6
1.5 Acknowledgements	6
2 Educational Attainment in Ireland	7
2.1 Overall Educational Attainment Levels	8
2.2 Education Attainment by NAP Groups	9
2.3 Geographic Analysis and Levels of Attainment	10
2.4 Summary of Findings	12
3 Trends in Mature Student Participation	13
3.1 Overall Trend in Participation Rates	14
3.2 Age and Gender Composition	16
3.3 Participation Rates by Institution	17
3.4 Participation Rates by County	19
3.5 Participation Rates by Field of Study	21
3.6 Full-Time / Part-Time Participation Rates	22
3.7 Summary of Findings	25
4 Challenges and Barriers to Participation	26
4.1 Barriers to Participation	27
4.2 Issues faced by Members of the Traveller Community	30
4.3 Issues faced by Persons with a Disability	31
4.4 Issues faced by Lone Parents	32
4.5 Issues Faced by People from Areas of Economic & Social Disadvantage	33
4.6 Impact of Covid-19	34
4.7 Summary of Findings	35
5 Assessment of Funding Supports	36
5.1 Overview of Funding Supports	37
5.2 SUSI Grants	37
5.3 BTEA	41
5.4 Integration of SUSI and BTEA Supports	43
5.5 Free Fees Initiative	44
5.6 Springboard+	44
5.7 Part-Time Education Option	45
5.8 National Childcare Scheme	45
5.9 Financial Supports for Students with Disabilities	46
5.10 Student Assistance Fund	46
5.11 Charitable/Philanthropic Organisations	47
5.12 Financial Supports for Studying Abroad	47
5.13 Overall Views on Funding Supports	48
5.14 Summary of Findings	49

CONTENTS

6	Supporting Structures & Guidance Systems	51
6.1	Role and Support Structures	52
6.2	Supports for Mature Students Internationally	52
6.3	Routes to Higher Education for Mature Students	54
6.4	Information on Careers Available to Mature Students	56
6.5	The Effectiveness of Supports Provided to Mature Students	60
6.6	Summary of Findings	63
7	Models of Education Delivery	64
7.1	Role of Models of Delivery	65
7.2	International Models of Delivery	65
7.3	Assessment of Models of Delivery	67
7.4	Role of Other Education Providers	71
7.5	Summary of Findings	74
8	Conclusions and Recommendations	75
8.1	Introduction	76
8.2	Conclusions	76
8.3	Recommendations	78
8.4	Specific Supports for NAP Groups	80
8.5	Longer-Term Impact	82

TABLES, FIGURES & BOXES

Table 1.1: Individuals Belonging to Different NAP Groups	5
Table 2.1: Pobal HP Deprivation Index, 2016	10
Table 3.1: Population without a Higher Education Qualification by Age, 2009 and 2019	15
Table 3.2: Distribution of Mature Students by Institution, 2018/19	18
Table 3.3: Percentage of New Entrants that are Mature Students by Institution, 2018/19	18
Table 3.4: Distribution of Mature Students, 2018/19	20
Table 4.1: Survey of Mature Students on the Top 5 Major (4-5 on Likert Scale) Barriers to Participation in Higher Education, by Age Group	28
Table 4.2: Respondents' Views on Impact of Covid-19 Crisis on Ability to Participate in Higher Education	35
Table 5.1: Means Test Limits for Student Grants for families with < four children	38
Table 5.2: Maintenance grant rates for 2020-2021	38
Table 5.3: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on how they would rate SUSI Grants	41
Table 5.4: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on how they would rate BTEA	43
Table 5.5: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on Financial Supports for Mature Students with a Disability	46
Table 5.6: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on how they would rate supports for studying abroad	47
Table 6.1: Guidance Counsellors Views on Impact of Following Career Information and Guidance Mechanisms for Helping Individuals Makes Informed Career Decisions	56
Table 7.1: Current and Former Mature Students by Whether their Previous Experience as a Mature Student involved On-Campus or Distance Learning	67
Table 7.2: Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on Likelihood of Going on to Higher Education Without Doing Previous Course(s), by NAP Group	73
Table 8.1: Key Conclusions from Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education	76
Table 8.2: Recommendations for the Future - Mature Student Participation in Higher Education	83
Figure 1.1: Methodological Approach	4
Figure 2.1: Persons Aged 20-64 (%) by Age Group and by Highest Educational Level, 2011 Q2 and 2019 Q2	8
Figure 2.2: NAP Group by Highest Education Level, 2011 and 2016	9
Figure 2.3: NAP Group by Principal Economic Status in 2016	9
Figure 2.4: Total Enrolments (2017/18) in Higher Educational by Institution	11
Figure 3.1: Rate of First-Time Students in HEIs who are Mature Students, 2007/08 to 2017/18	14
Figure 3.2: Participation rate as First-Time Mature Students in HEIs, 2008/09 to 2017/18	15
Figure 3.3: Age and Gender of First-Time Mature Students in HEIs, 2017/18	16

TABLES, FIGURES & BOXES

Figure 3.4: Gender of First-Time Mature Students in HEIs, 2007/08 to 2017/2018	17
Figure 3.5: Average Road Distance from Home to Institution, 2017/18 Enrolments	19
Figure 3.6: Mature Student Areas of Study, 2018/19*	21
Figure 3.7: Percentage of Mature Students within each field of study, 2018/19*	22
Figure 3.8: Full and Part-Time Current and Former Mature Students by Gender, 2020	22
Figure 3.9: Full and Part-Time Current and Former Mature Students by Age, 2020	23
Figure 3.10: Employment Rate by Age Group, 2016	23
Figure 3.11: Full and Part-Time Current and Former Mature Students by NAP Group, 2020	24
Figure 4.1: Survey of Barriers to Participation in Higher Education	27
Figure 4.2: Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on the Top 5 Major (4-5 on Likert Scale) Barriers to Participation in Higher Education	28
Figure 4.3: NAP and Non-NAP Mature Students on Whether Certain Factors Were Major (4-5 on Likert Scale) Barriers to Participation in Higher Education	29
Figure 4.4: Mature Traveller Students on Whether Certain Factors Were Major (4-5 on Likert Scale) Barriers to Participation in Higher Education	30
Figure 4.5: Mature Students with a Disability on Whether Certain Factors Were Major (4-5 on Likert Scale) Barriers to Participation in Higher Education	31
Figure 4.6: Lone Parents Receiving Welfare Mature Students on Whether Certain Factors Were Major (4-5 on Likert Scale) Barriers to Participation in Higher Education	32
Figure 4.7: Mature Students from Areas of Socio-Economic Disadvantage on Whether Certain Factors Were Major (4-5 on Likert Scale) Barriers to Higher Education Participation	33
Figure 4.8: Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on Whether the Covid-19 Restrictions are a Barrier to their participation in Higher Education	34
Figure 5.1: Age and Gender of SUSI Award New-Starter Grantees, 2018/19	39
Figure 5.2: Gender of SUSI Award Grantees, 2012 – 2019	39
Figure 5.3: Non-Approval rate for SUSI Grants, 2012/13 to 2019/20	40
Figure 5.4: Refusal rate for SUSI Grants by status, 2019/20	40
Figure 5.5: Age and Gender composition of BTEA beneficiaries, December 2019	42
Figure 5.6: Proportion of Mature Students in Receipt of BTEA or SUSI Grants	43
Figure 5.7: Proportion of Mature Students by Membership of NAP Target Groups in Receipt of BTEA, SUSI Grants or both	44
Figure 5.8: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on Whether Financial Supports for Mature Students were Working Poorly/Very Poorly, by NAP Group	48
Figure 5.9: Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on Whether Financial Supports for Mature Students were Working Poorly/Very Poorly, by Age Group	48
Figure 6.1: Context Factors taken into Account in the University of Southampton	53
Figure 6.2: UCL Strategy Aimed at Broadening Access	54

TABLES, FIGURES & BOXES

Figure 6.3: Views of Higher-level Students on Importance of Following Career Choice Influences	57
Figure 6.4: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on the Quality of Careers Information Made Available to Them	58
Figure 6.5: Views of Current, Former and Potential Traveller Mature Students on the Quality of Careers Information Made Available to Them	58
Figure 6.6: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students with a Disability on the Quality of Careers Information Made Available to Them	59
Figure 6.7: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students who are Lone Parents on the Quality of Careers Information Made Available to Them	59
Figure 6.8: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students from an Area of Economic or Social Disadvantage on Careers Information Made Available to Them	60
Figure 6.9: Current, Former and Potential Mature Students Rating of the Supports Provided to Mature Students	61
Figure 6.10: Current, Former and Potential Mature Traveller Students Rating of the Supports Provided to Mature Students	61
Figure 6.11: Current, Former and Potential Mature Students with a Disability Rating of the Supports Provided to Mature Students	61
Figure 6.12: Current, Former and Potential Mature Students that are Lone parents in Receipt of Welfare Rating of the Supports Provided to Mature Students	62
Figure 6.13: Current, Former & Potential Mature Students from An Area of Economic or Social Disadvantage Rating of Supports Provided to Mature Students	62
Figure 7.1: Views of Mature Students on the Suitability of Aspects of the Delivery of Higher Education	68
Figure 7.2: Views of Traveller Mature Students on the Suitability of Aspects of the Delivery of Higher Education for Mature Students	68
Figure 7.3: Views of Mature Students with a Disability on the Suitability of Aspects of the Delivery of Higher Education for Mature Students	69
Figure 7.4: Views of Mature Students who are Lone Parents in Receipt of Social Welfare on the Suitability of Aspects of the Delivery of Higher Education for Mature Students	70
Figure 7.5: Views of Mature Students from an Area of Economic or Social Disadvantage on the Suitability of Aspects of the Delivery of Higher Education for Mature Students	71
Figure 7.6: Percentage of those who Previously Completed FET or Other Courses by Provider	72
Figure 7.7: Views on Likelihood of Going on to Higher Education if Respondent had not Participated in Prior Course, by Provider	72
Figure 7.8: Percentage of those who Previously Completed FET or Other Courses by Provider and NAP Group	73

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Indecon International Research Economists were appointed by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to undertake an independent research study on mature student participation in higher education. The main aims of the project are to: (i) examine levels of educational attainment of the Irish population; (ii) analyse the trends in mature student participation; (iii) investigate the barriers and challenges for mature students, especially for NAP target groups; (iv) assess funding supports; (v) review supporting structures; (vi) examine models of delivery; and (vi) develop recommendations to inform future policy initiatives.

This study is of particular importance as access to higher education is critical in ensuring that individuals realise their potential and are not left behind. Access to higher education also impacts on employment prospects and on overall productivity and growth in the Irish economy. As noted by the US Nobel Prize Winner, economist Kenneth Arrow, in a review of the Irish economy, “education is important in increasing individual productivity and higher education is now playing a more important role in increasing labour productivity than in the past.”¹

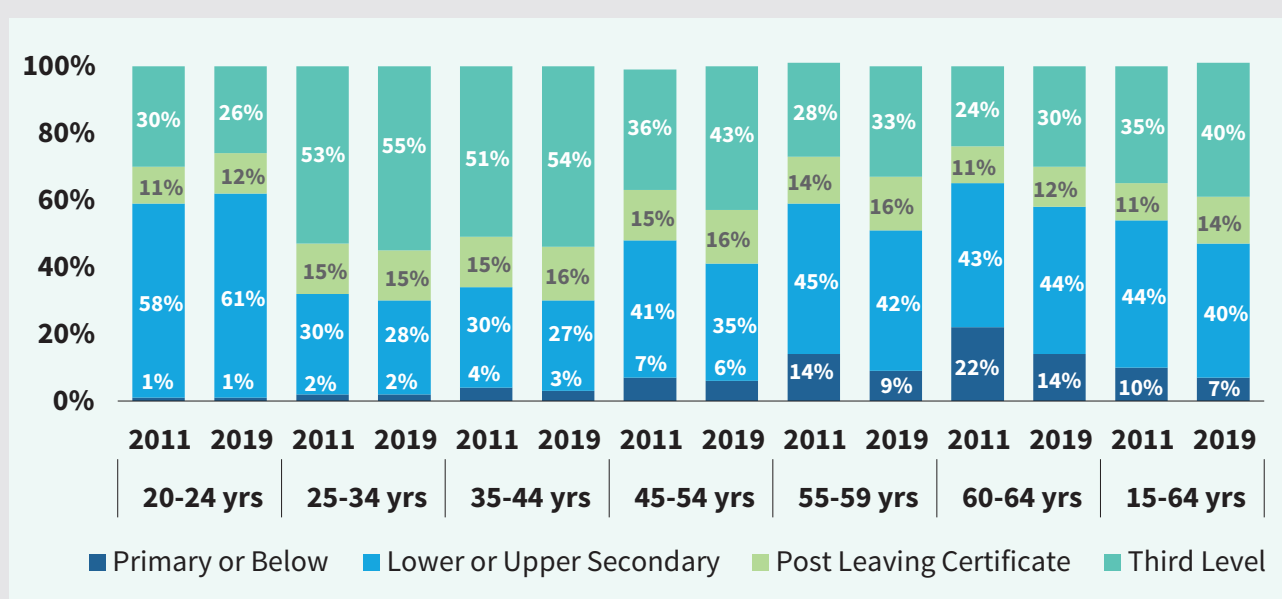
As background to the research, it is informative to analyse the definition of mature students currently used in Ireland. The HEA defines mature students as those 23 years or over on 1 January of their year of entry to higher education. The targets as set out in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (National Access Plan or NAP) uses a definition of those students who are first-time entrants.

Indecon applied a rigorous methodological approach to delivery on the key evaluation requirements. This included a detailed stakeholder engagement programme and a review of national and international research. Existing databases were investigated and new empirical research with over 1,900 students was completed. This provides important evidence to support the analysis and to inform future policy.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT LEVELS IN IRELAND

Overall, 40% of the Irish population in 2019 aged 15-64 years have achieved a third-level qualification, an increase of 5% since 2011. Over the last 10 years, participation levels in higher education increased across all age cohorts and the percentage within the 25-44 years old age cohort has surpassed 50%.

Persons Aged 20-64 (%) by Age Group and by Highest Educational Level, 2011 Q2 and 2019 Q2

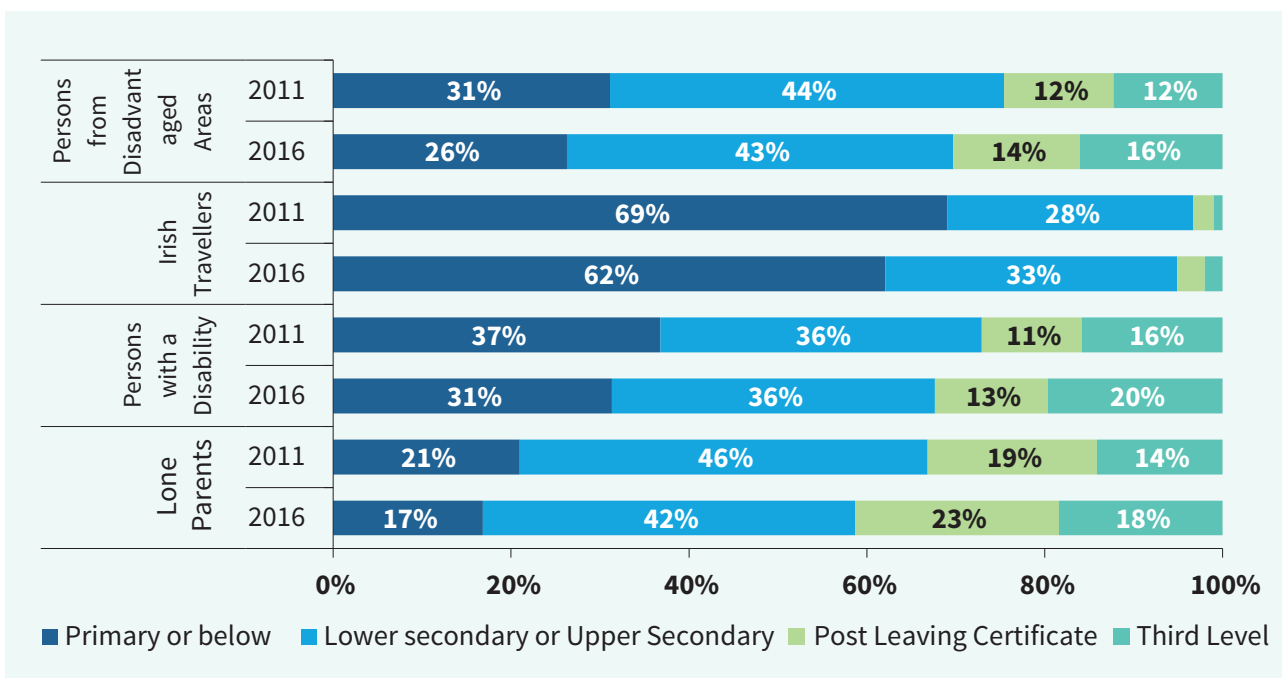


Source: CSO

¹ See Arrow, Kenneth J., Stanford University, Economic Growth Policy for a Small Economy in Alan Gray (ed) (1997), ‘International Perspectives on the Irish Economy’ ISBN 0 9531318 07.

The four NAP target groups (namely persons from disadvantaged areas, Irish Travellers, persons with a disability and lone parents) recorded lower educational attainment levels than the national average. This is particularly the case for members of the Traveller Community, where in 2016 a majority of the population had a highest educational level of primary-school education or below. Lone parents, persons with a disability and individuals from disadvantaged areas also had low levels of educational attainment.

NAP Group by Highest Education Level, 2011 and 2016

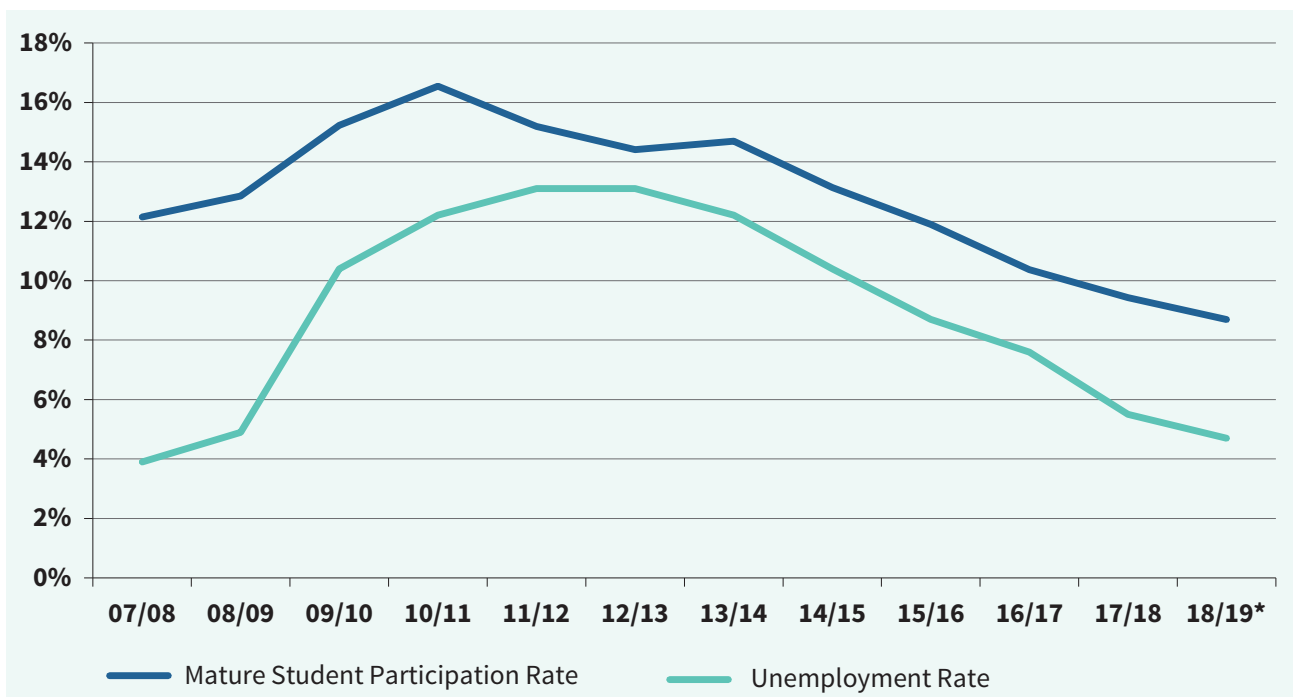


Note: In the case of Irish Travellers and persons with a disability, the category “Post-Leaving Certificate” includes: Technical/Vocational, Advanced Certificate/Completed Apprenticeship. Statistics from CSO also report “Other” and “Not stated” as additional categories which we exclude from the graph. **Source: Indecon Analysis of CSO data.**

TRENDS IN MATURE STUDENT PARTICIPATION

The rate of participation of mature students in higher education rose to a peak in 2010/11, and subsequently declined as a percentage of new entrants. The initial increase occurred at a time of rising unemployment following the onset of the recession. The subsequent decline in participation coincided with a fall in unemployment, suggesting that the availability of employment opportunities may have an impact on the numbers of mature students participating in higher education. Indecon’s analysis supports the assessment in the NAP Progress Review which noted that the decline in mature student participation coincided with “with a period of economic recovery and labour market reactivation that was not foreseen when the targets for the National Access Plan were being set and this may be an influencing factor in the declining number of mature students.”

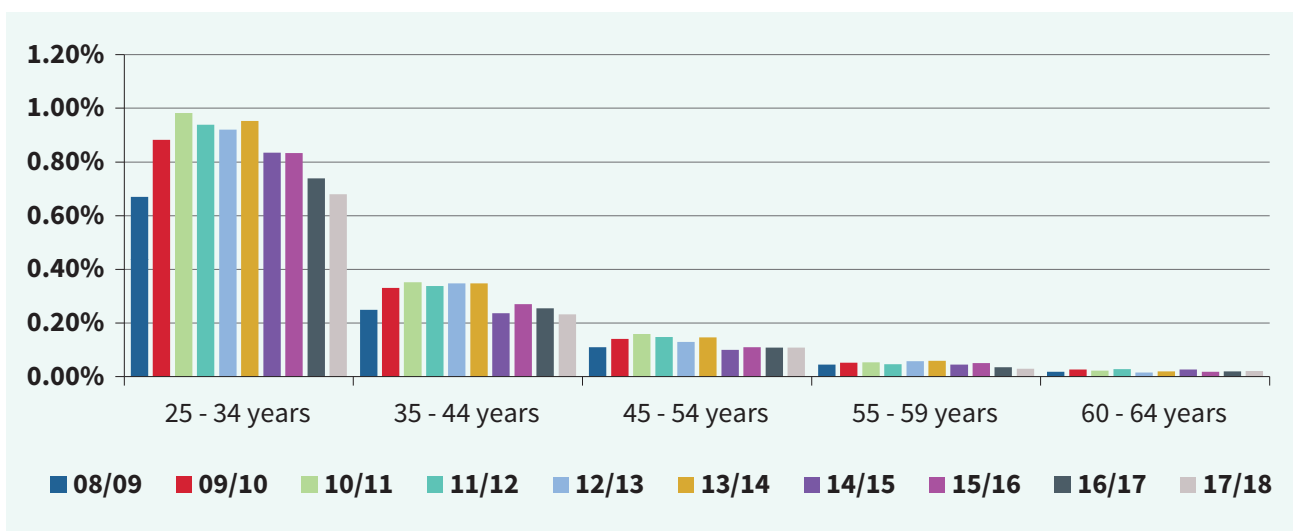
Rate of First-Time Students in HEIs who are Mature Students, 2007/08 to 2017/18



Source: HEA* Note: Figure for 2018/19 is based on % change for students excluding TCD, applied to overall figures for 2017/18.

As well as short-term changes in economic conditions, longer-term changes in population structures may also impact on the rate at which mature students participate in higher education. First-time new entrant mature students are primarily drawn from the population of those aged 23+ whose highest educational attainment level is Further Education and Training (FET) or lower. From 2009 and 2019, there has been a decline in the size of this potential pool of mature students by 7%, from 1.44m to 1.34m.

Participation rate as First-Time Mature Students in HEIs, 2008/09 to 2017/18



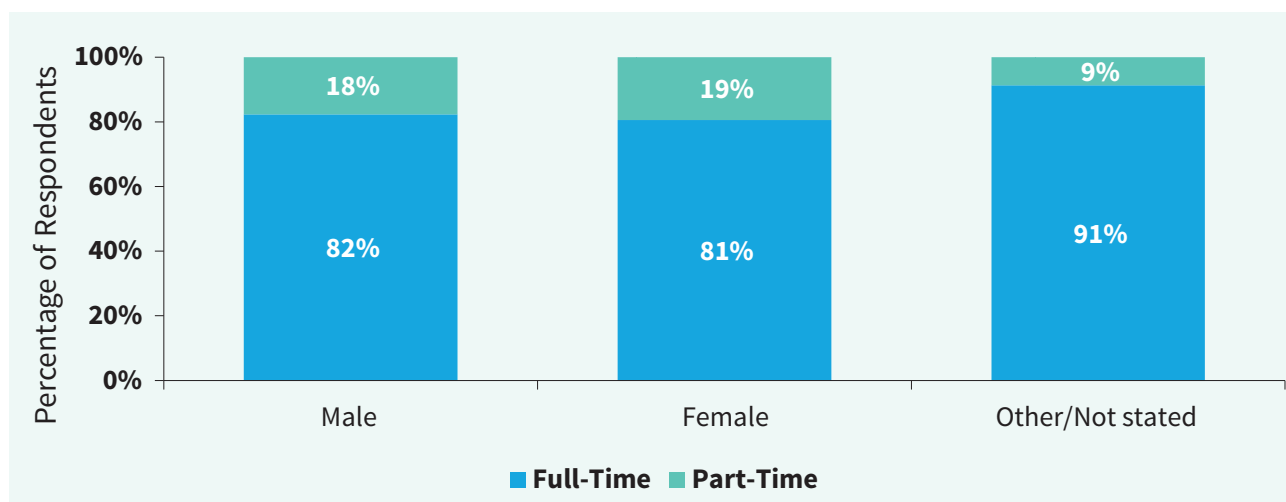
Source: Indecon analysis based on HEA and CSO data

Over half of all mature students attend an institute of technology and in 2018/19 6.8% of new entrants in universities were mature students, compared with 12.3% in colleges and institutes of technology. This may, in part, reflect differences in courses on offer. Institutes of technology offer programmes from certificates (Level 6) to masters/PhD (Level 9/10).

Most mature student participation currently is full-time, although they constitute a large majority of those who choose to study part-time. The proportion of mature students who study full-time and part-time is shown in the next figure.

HEA data shows that in 2019/20 students aged 24+ made up 12% of full-time student enrolments and 87% of part-time students in higher education. In the case of new entrants, in 2019/20 7% of full-time new entrants and 86% of (year 1) part-time new entrants were mature students. Older students are more likely to participate in HE through part-time study. 90% of those aged between 23-29 are full-time students compared to 68% of those aged 50-59.

Full and Part-Time Current and Former Mature Students by Gender, 2020

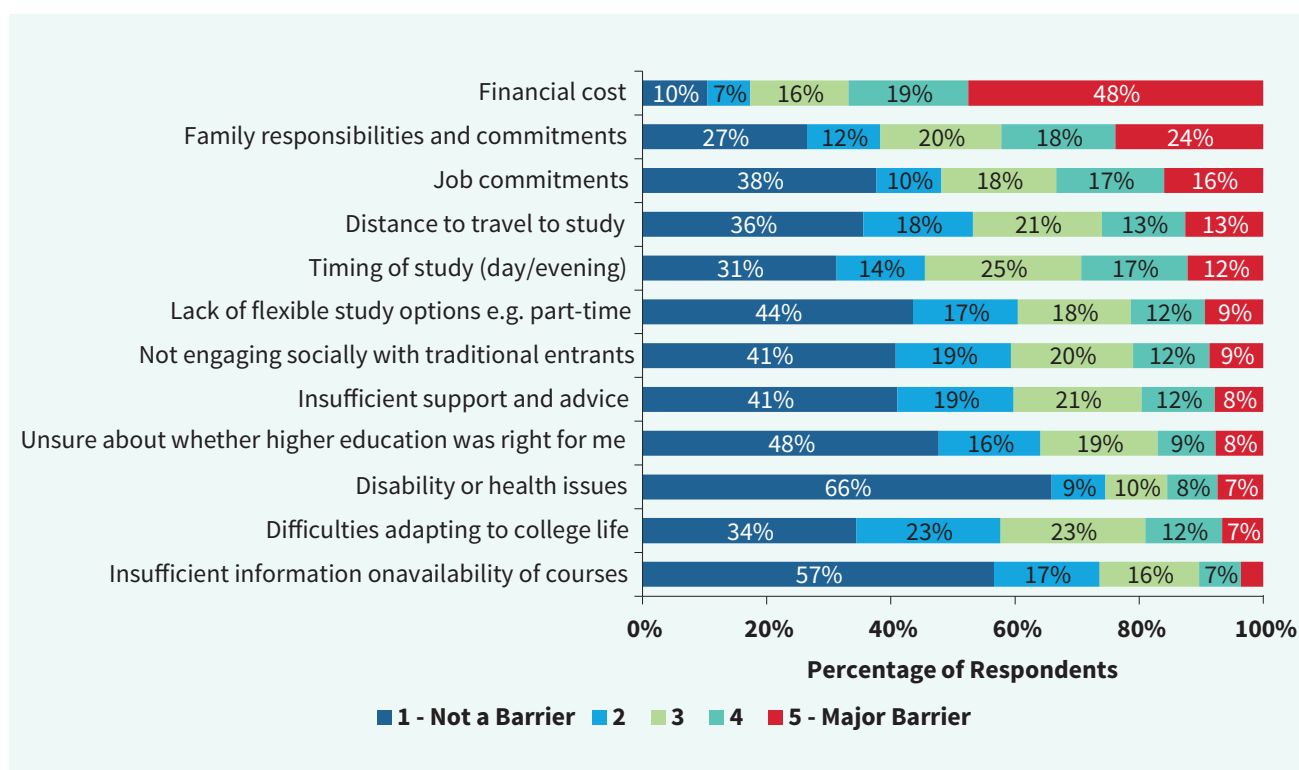


Source: Analysis of Indecon survey of Mature Students

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Mature students report a wide range of barriers to participation in higher education, and financial costs and family/work responsibilities were identified as the two most important.

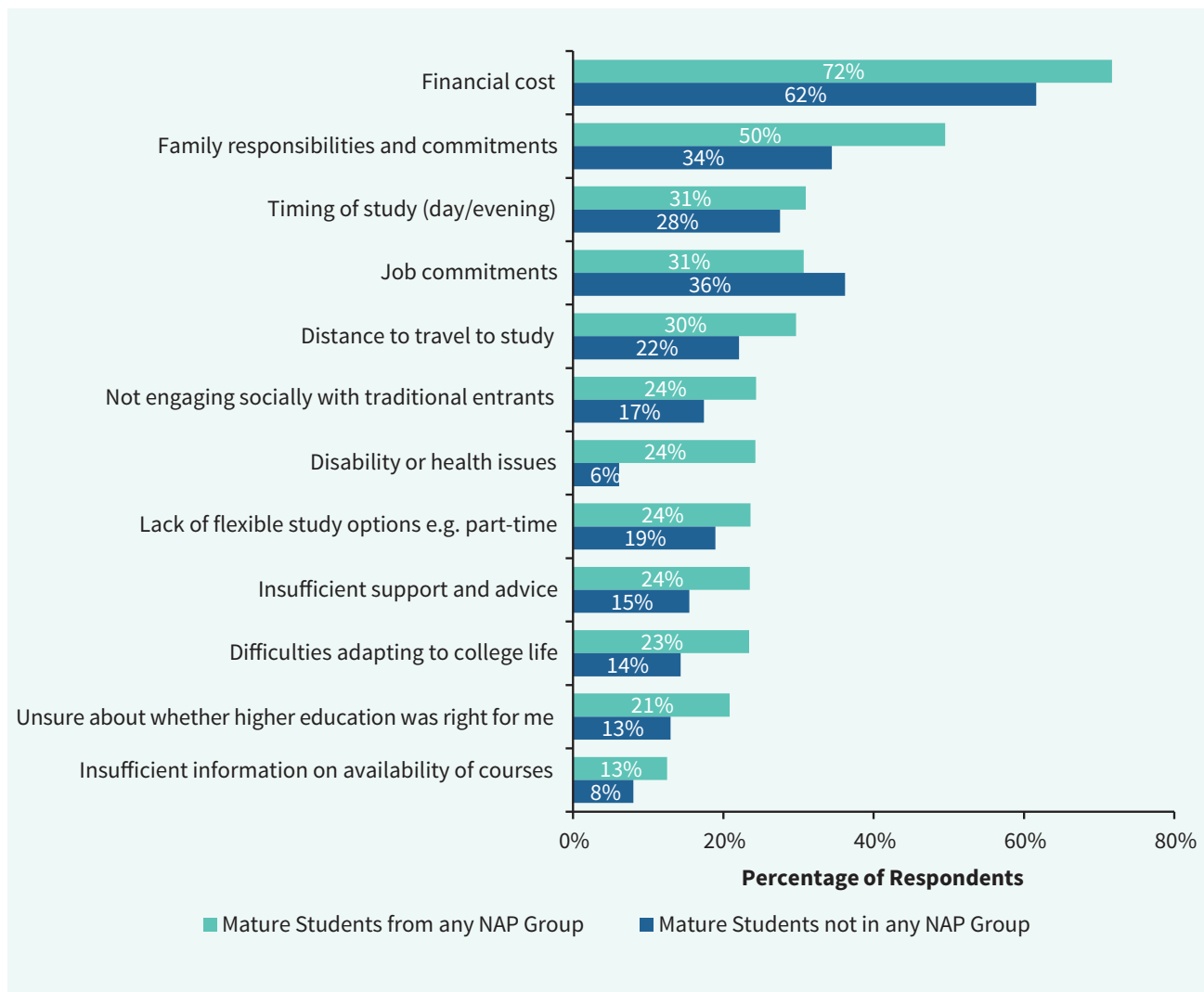
Survey of Barriers to Participation in Higher Education



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

Respondents who belonged to one or more NAP groups generally reported much higher barriers than respondents who did not. Financial costs were seen as a barrier to participation and family responsibilities and commitments were identified as a barrier by half of NAP respondents. Given the extent to which mature students cite family and work pressures as barriers, the option of part-time and flexible learning may be particularly relevant. One in four mature students from one of the NAP target groups responded that a lack of part-time/flexible learning options were a barrier.

NAP and Non-NAP Mature Students on Whether Certain Factors Were Major (4-5 on Likert Scale) Barriers to Participation in Higher Education



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

The issues faced by members of the individual NAP target groups showed some variance in the importance of different factors. Almost two thirds of Traveller mature students saw financial cost as a major barrier to participation in higher education, with job commitments and family responsibilities seen as a major barrier by half of respondents. Health related problems were reported as significant by a large majority of mature students with a disability (59%), though financial barriers remained the single most cited barrier. Family responsibilities and commitments were rated by 68% of lone parents as being a major barrier to participation in higher education, though financial cost was also seen by this group as a major barrier. Students who were from a geographic area of economic or social disadvantage reported that financial cost was a major barrier to participation in higher education.

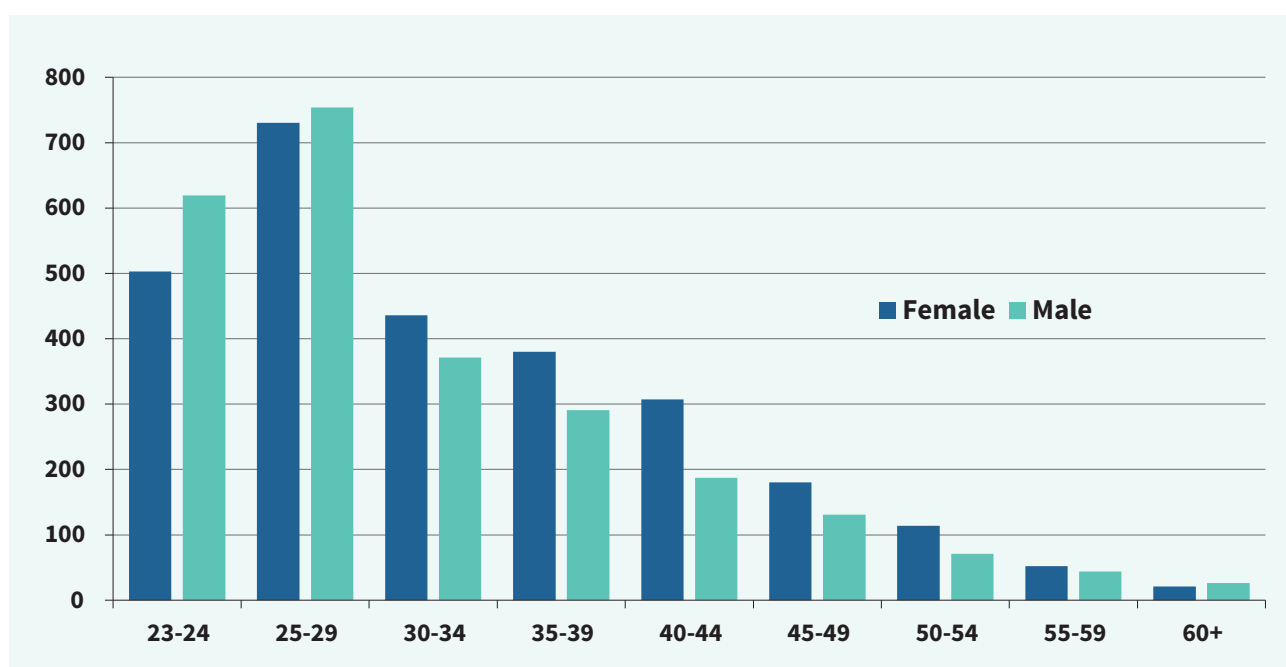
Covid-19 restrictions were seen as a significant barrier to participation in higher education by half of respondents. Since the conduct of this survey, higher education institutions have put in place significant adaption and adjustment measures to ensure that courses could be delivered in the 2020/21 academic year in line with public health regulations. These initiatives may help in overcoming some of the other barriers to participation by mature students.

ASSESSMENT OF FUNDING SUPPORTS

There are a wide range of funding supports available to mature students. Two of the most important are the Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant and the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA). While mature students with a disability, lone parents and students from an area of disadvantage are more likely to benefit from these supports, half of all mature students who are not in a NAP target group benefit from one, or both, of these supports.

The Student Grant Scheme (SUSI) is the centralised financial support scheme for students in Ireland² and was established under the Student Support Act 2011. Undergraduate students are potentially eligible for maintenance grants and fee grants. Generally, students who qualify for a maintenance grant will also qualify for all elements of the fee grant. However, students may qualify for a fee grant, but not a maintenance grant. Different rates of support are paid based on the financial circumstances of students, where they live relative to their place of study, and whether they are classed as independent. There are slightly more female (52%) than male (48%) mature student recipients of SUSI awards. Males outnumber females in younger age groups (23-30), though a high number of females is noticeable in the 40-44 age group.

Age and Gender of SUSI Award New-Starter Grantees, 2018/19

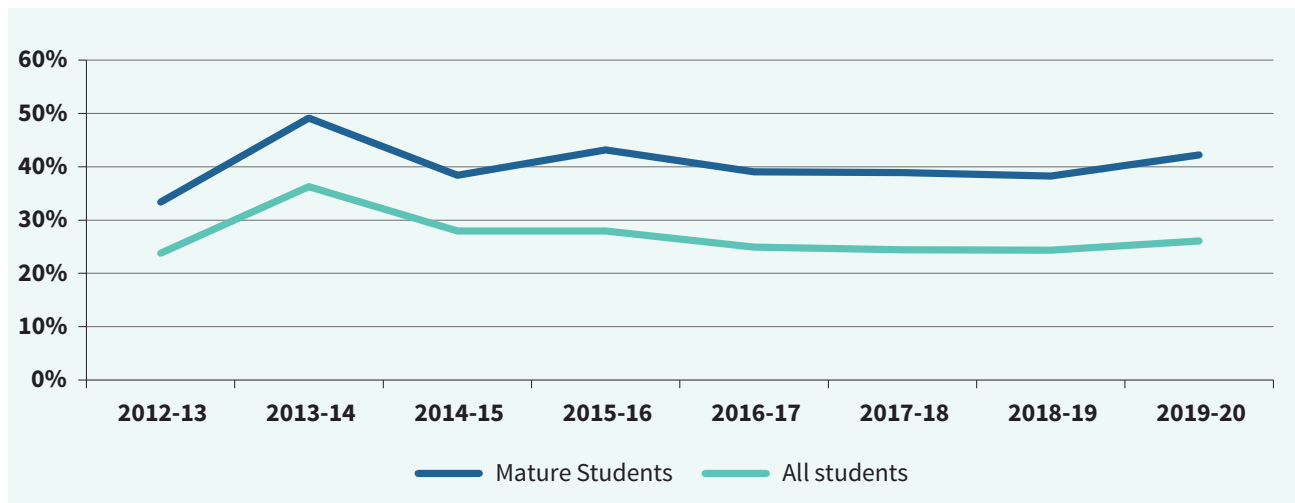


Source: SUSI. Note: New Starter refers to 1st Year Students. Data on gender was not collected by SUSI for 2019-2020.

² Indecon understands that there is to be a review in 2021 of this important SUSI support scheme.

The number of non-approvals of grant applications are higher for mature students than for students more generally. This is illustrated in the following figure. SUSI is a demand-led scheme and eligibility is based on specific criteria. The SUSI website contains an 'Eligibility Reckoner' which allows potential applicants to check their eligibility prior to submitting a formal application.

Non-Approval rate for SUSI Grants, 2012/13 to 2019/20



Source: SUSI

Indecon's survey asked mature students how they would rate the Student Grant Scheme (SUSI). The responses show that 48% of mature students have positive views on SUSI grants compared to 29% who rated grants as poor. There was, however, some variance by NAP groups.³

Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on how they would rate SUSI Grants

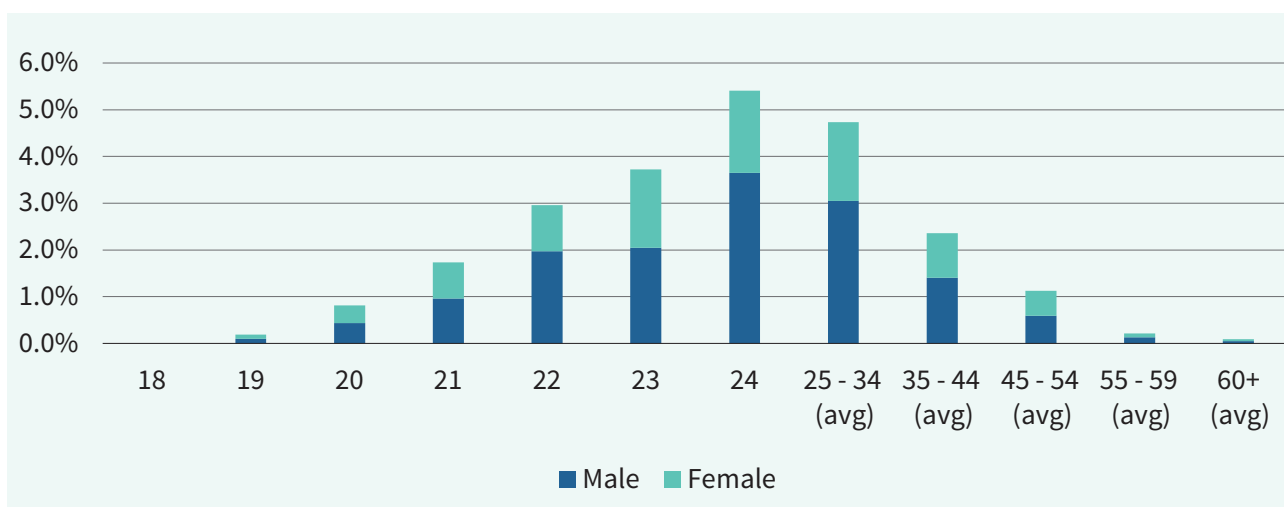
	Very Good	Good	Neither Good nor Poor	Poor	Very Poor
All mature students	21%	27%	22%	14%	15%
Traveller Mature Students	14%	27%	41%	5%	14%
Mature Students with a Disability	26%	28%	15%	14%	16%
Lone Parents	29%	35%	16%	9%	11%
Area of economic/social disadvantage	22%	28%	20%	15%	15%

Source: Indecon analysis of responses to survey of Mature Students (2020)

People who are unemployed, parenting alone, or have a disability and who are obtaining certain payments from the Department of Social Protection, may participate in a third-level education course which is eligible for a Back to Education Allowance (BTEA). This is open to students in any approved Higher Education Institution (HEI). The course must be a full-time day course and be approved for the Student Grant Scheme or be approved by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). BTEA beneficiaries are predominantly male, with age-related participation peaking in the mid-20s. This is in contrast to beneficiaries of SUSI, a majority of whom are female.

³ Indecon notes that on 12th November 2020 the Government announced a €300,000 fund to help members of the Traveller Community pursue third-level education.

Age and Gender composition of BTEA beneficiaries, December 2019



Source: Department of Social Protection

Indecon's survey asked mature students how they would rate the BTEA scheme. The responses show that 38% rated BTEA support as good compared to 28% who rated it as poor.

Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on how they would rate BTEA

	Very Good	Good	Neither Good nor Poor	Poor	Very Poor
All mature students	16%	22%	35%	14%	14%
Traveller Mature Students	14%	14%	52%	10%	10%
Mature Students with a Disability	16%	18%	34%	16%	17%
Lone Parents	17%	26%	32%	14%	12%
Area of economic/social disadvantage	16%	24%	31%	16%	13%

Source: Indecon analysis of responses to survey of Mature Students (2020)

In addition to SUSI and BTEA, there are also a range of other important supports available for certain mature students. For example, under the Free Fees Initiative, tuition fees are paid in respect of full-time students, whether mature students or otherwise. Most colleges charge an annual student contribution of up to a maximum of €3,000, covering student services and examinations.⁴ Tuition fees are generally only paid in respect of full-time undergraduate courses of a minimum of two years duration, and only for first-time students.

Springboard+ provides free higher education courses for the unemployed and those looking to return to the workforce. Springboard+ courses can also be availed of by those who are in employment, though a 10% contribution towards the course fee is required in these cases. Most of the courses are part-time and last for one year or less, but there is an increasing number of full-time courses.

There is also a Part-Time Education Option (PTEO) which allows an unemployed person to keep their Jobseeker's Allowance or Jobseeker's Benefit and attend a part-time day or evening course of education or training, as long as they continue to meet the conditions for Jobseeker's Benefit or Jobseeker's Allowance.

Also relevant is the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) which provides financial support to help parents to meet the costs of childcare and will replace all existing targeted childcare support programmes and the current universal childcare subsidy by 2021. It gives financial support towards the cost of childcare in approved providers for the hours spent outside of pre-school or school. The NCS provides two types of childcare subsidy for children over six months of age: a universal subsidy for children under age three which is not means-tested; and an income assessed subsidy for children up to age 15 which is means-tested.

⁴ <https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/course-fees/>

There are also specific measures aimed at certain NAP groups. For example, students with disabilities benefit from the mainstream supports as well as supports provided under the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD). The FSD exists to support HEIs to meet the additional costs of providing supports to students with disabilities. Funding can be used to provide assistive technology, equipment and software, non-medical helpers, academic or learning support, deaf supports and transport.

The views of current, former and potential mature students on the cumulative effectiveness of the financial supports for mature students with a disability are shown in the next table. 39% of students rated financial supports as poor or very poor. This may reflect the additional barrier and costs faced by mature individuals with a disability in participating in higher education. It should also be noted that as the FSD is not a form of financial support for students, respondents may not have had this in mind, or even be aware of it, when making their responses.

Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on Financial Supports for Mature Students with a Disability

	Very Good	Good	Neither Good nor Poor	Poor	Very Poor
Mature Students with a Disability	13%	21%	27%	21%	18%
All mature students	11%	19%	50%	13%	8%

Source: Indecon analysis of responses to survey of Mature Students (2020)

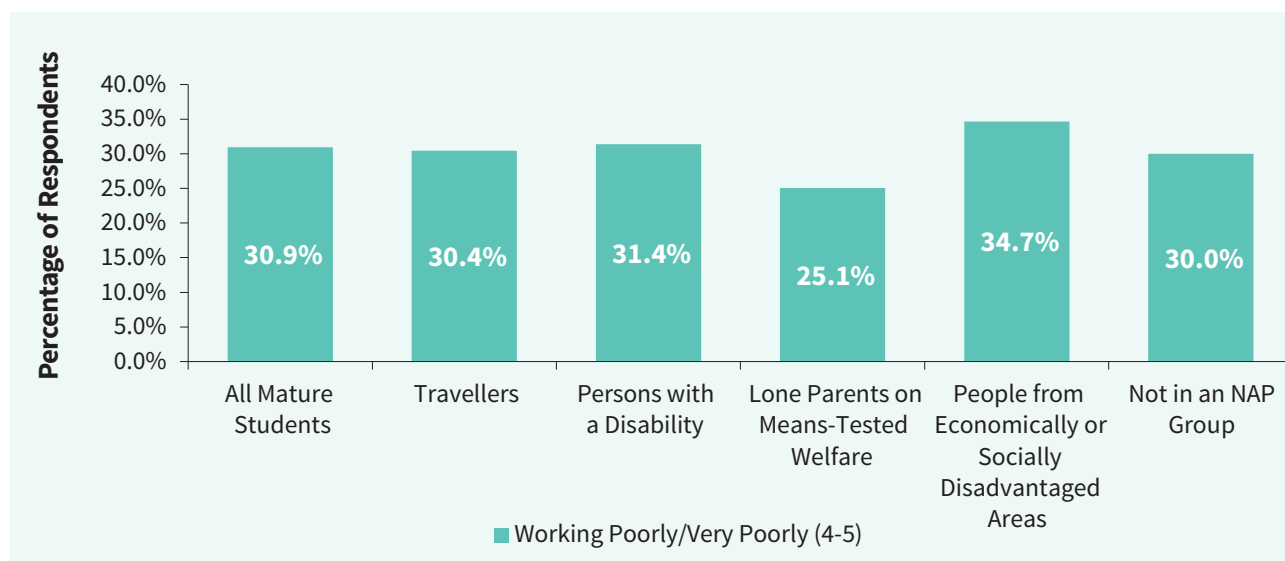
There is also a Student Assistance Fund (SAF) which provides financial support to full or part-time students who are experiencing financial difficulties while attending college. The use of SAF is for expenses such as: books, rent, food, medical costs, class materials, light and heat bills, essential travel, and childcare. The State allocates approximately €9.1m per year through the SAF including €1m ring-fenced for part-time students who are lone parents or members of other NAP target groups. In response to Covid-19, the core SAF allocation was doubled from €8.1m to €16.2m for the 2020/21 academic year. In the 2018/19 academic year, just under 14,000 students were supported under the SAF.

There are also a range of charitable/philanthropic bodies which run schemes to support access to education for students from disadvantaged communities. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has established an education bursary scheme which helps low-income students with the cost of fees as well as accommodation, transport, books and materials. Uversity's scholarships are also for adult learners to acquire a bachelor's degree for the first time. Scholarships enable students to pursue a degree in any discipline in selected institutions on the island of Ireland. The scholarships comprise financial support and programming throughout the course of the degree. The value of the scholarships, which are funded privately, depends on the successful recipients' circumstances and need.

The 1916 Bursary Fund provides financial support to 200 of the most economically disadvantaged students annually. The 1916 Bursaries are targeted at non-traditional entry and can support study on either a full or part-time basis. Mature students are one of the target groups for the bursary.

Despite the various supports available the research evidence indicates that financial barriers were seen as an important obstacle by mature students. The views of students on the overall financial supports offered is presented below. For a significant minority of respondents across the NAP target groups, financial supports were perceived as working poorly or very poorly.

Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on Whether Financial Supports for Mature Students were Working Poorly/Very Poorly, by NAP Group



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

SUPPORTING STRUCTURES & GUIDANCE SYSTEMS

Apart from funding supports and changes to delivery options there are three main methods of facilitating increased participation among mature and other students:

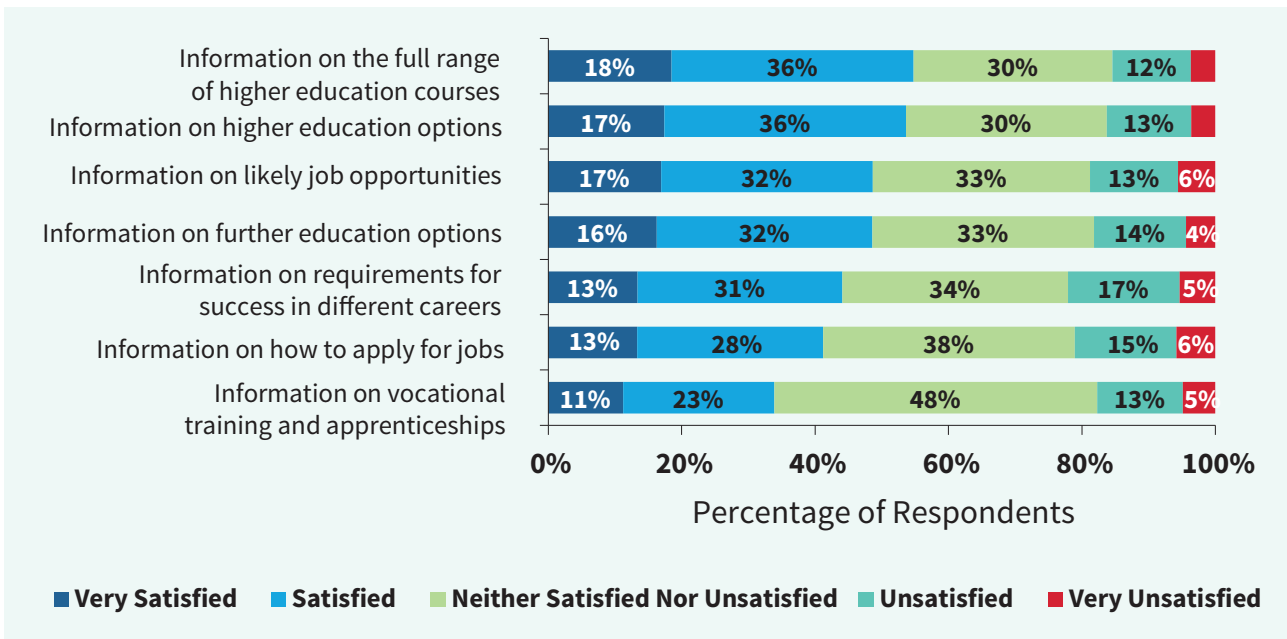
- Method 1 – In-reach: In-reach refers to actions on the part of HEIs which relate to existing supply, creating new ways for mature students to access programmes that are already part of provision. These include alternative entry tests for adults, customised courses, and other procedures that allow a second opportunity to demonstrate potential. They are often accompanied by a relaxation of entry requirements.
- Method 2 – Outreach: Outreach relates to more proactive efforts to widen participation and create partnerships with one or more of employers, schools and the wider community. Examples include work-based initiatives, FET⁵/HE links and community-based access programmes. The primary objective of outreach initiatives in the context of this study, is to target individuals over 23 years of age who believe that HE is ‘not for them’. This could be particularly relevant for members of NAP groups.
- Method 3 – Flexibility: Flexibility means making changes that allow students access to education in locations and modes and at times of their own rather than institutions’ choosing. Flexibility also refers to the mechanisms that challenge prevailing constructions of what constitutes knowledge at HE level and the means by which knowledge can be acquired and demonstrated: most notably, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNIL). For some NAP groups such as lone parents, members of the Traveller Community, or individuals with a disability, such flexibility can be critical.

The majority of courses require an application to the Central Applications Office (CAO); an interview for some or all courses chosen; additional suitability tests; and attendance of access/foundation courses. Mature students can also directly contact higher education institutions. Many HEIs have developed offices and support centres which offer guidance and advice to support mature students.

Mature students generally report satisfaction with the quality of information available on education options, as shown in the next figure. The highest satisfaction ratings were in relation to information on the higher education courses and options, where 54% and 53% of respondents, respectively, indicated that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the quality available. In relation to information on likely job opportunities, half of respondents indicated that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the quality of information.

⁵ Further Education and Training

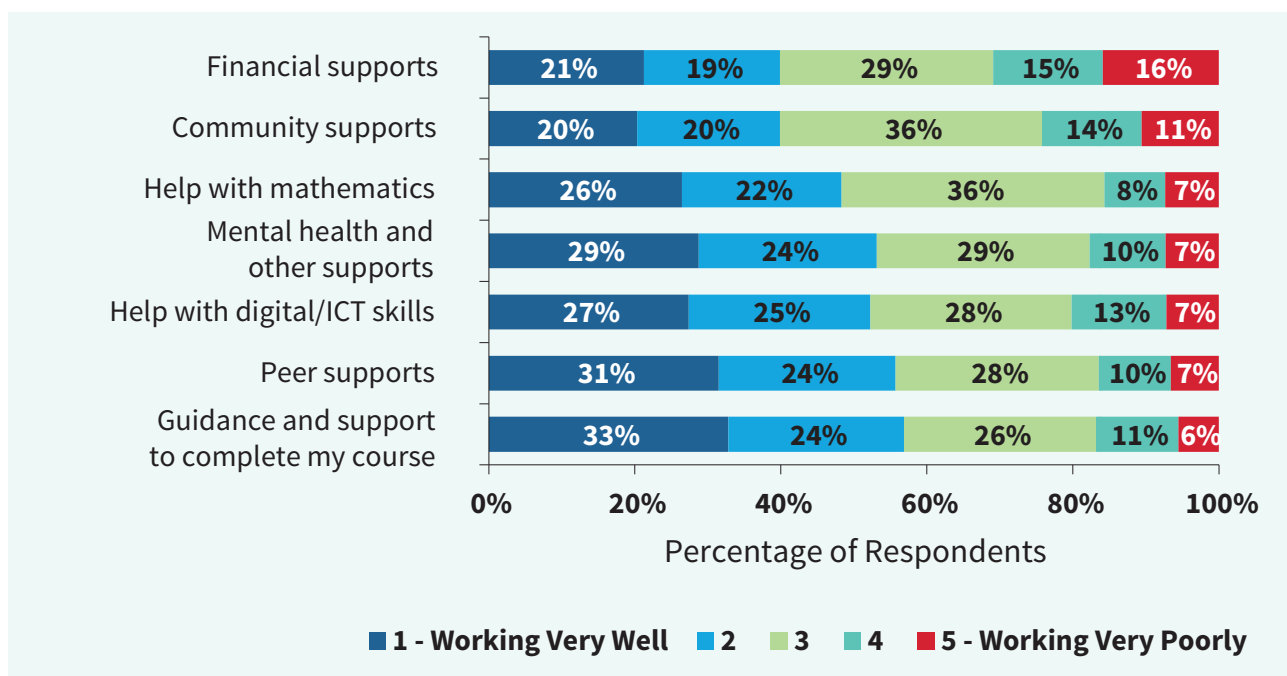
Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on the Quality of Careers Information Made Available to Them



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

In the figure below, the views of mature students on the overall level of supports that are provided to mature students are displayed. One third of respondents stated that guidance and support to complete their course worked very well, while the equivalent figure for peer supports was 31%. 27% and 29% thought that supports for help with digital/ICT skills and mathematics worked very well, while mental health supports were regarded as working well by 29% of respondents. While 21% of respondents believed that financial supports worked very well, 16% thought they worked very poorly.

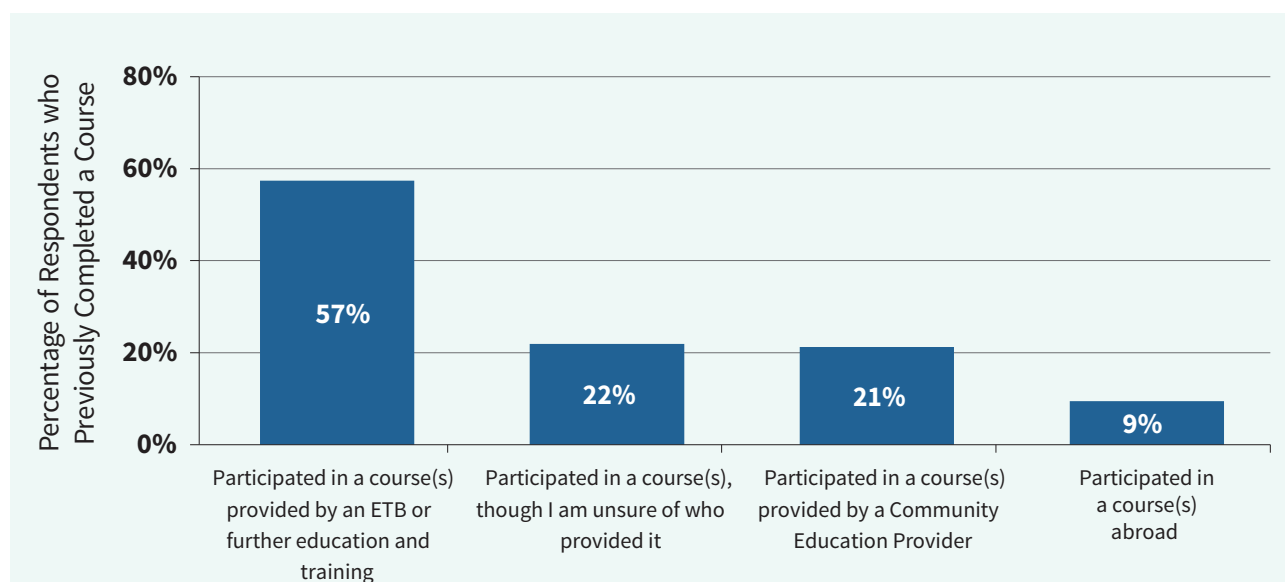
Current, Former and Potential Mature Students Rating of the Supports Provided to Mature Students



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

Further education and community education providers play an important role in encouraging students to participate in HE. 72% of respondent mature students reported having participated in education and training prior to engaging in HE. The next figure shows that over half (57%) participated in a course in an Education and Training Board (ETB) or provided by other types of Further Education and Training (FET) bodies, while 21% participated in a course provided by a community education provider. For those who did courses provided by an ETB, or provided by a community education provider, a majority of respondents indicated that they would have been unlikely or very unlikely to go on to higher education without having completed their courses.

Percentage of those who Previously Completed FET or Other Courses by Provider



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

MODELS OF EDUCATION DELIVERY

Changes to the models of education delivery can assist mature students in overcoming barriers to participation in higher education. These changes could include flexible timetables and blended distance/in-person learning that fit the needs of learners. Accelerated degrees are another form of flexibility and can be offered alongside, or are built upon, other flexibilities. Accelerated degrees can be defined as delivering the same number of credits and teaching weeks as a traditional degree programme, but scheduled to be completed in a shorter period, reducing full-time study time. Accelerated degrees could facilitate some mature students who wish to minimise their time out of the workplace. Short-cycle provision, where institutions provide one or two-year programmes, provide disproportionately greater access for the most disadvantaged and could help overcome barriers to participation particularly for certain NAP groups. These can provide locally accessible HE, a less intimidating starting point, less challenging entry requirements and opportunities to exit with a qualification or transition to a degree programme. The experience of higher education in Ireland has, prior to Covid-19, been mainly that of a traditional on-campus education. Overall, 93% stated that their former experience as a mature student involved on-campus learning, with the equivalent figures in the range of 88% to 95% for the NAP target groups.

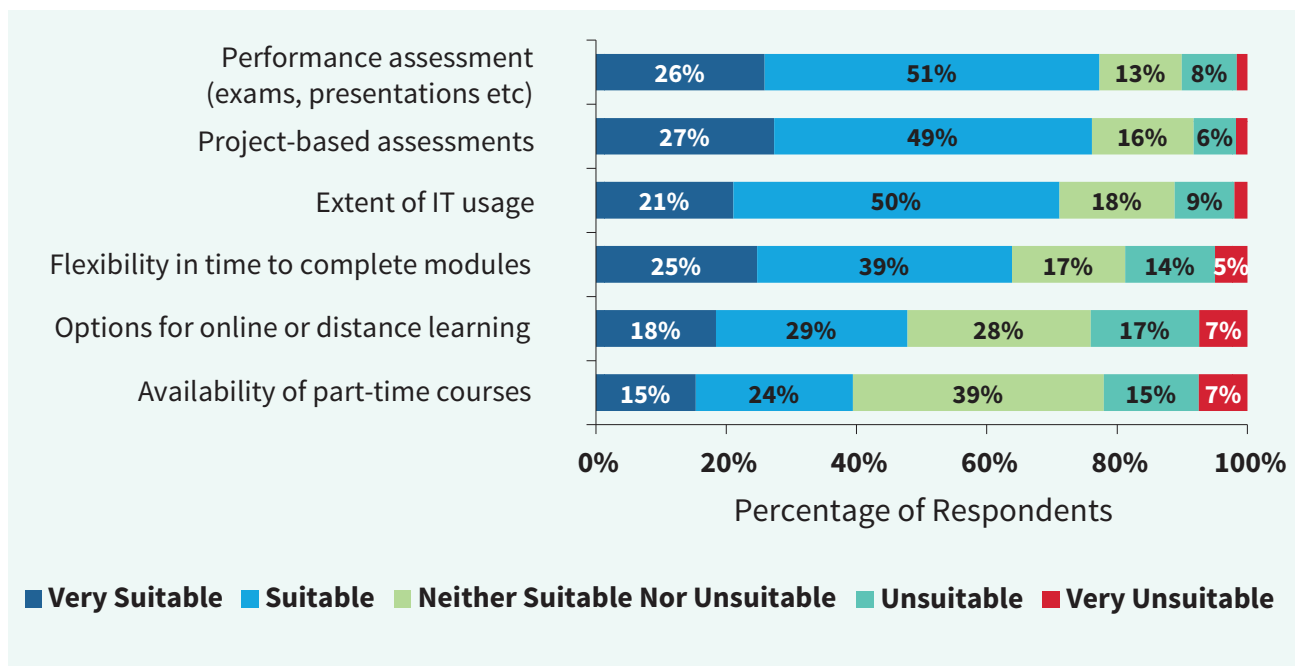
Current and Former Mature Students by Whether their Previous Experience as a Mature Student involved On-Campus or Distance Learning

	Current and Former Students	Member of the Traveller Community	Having a disability	Lone parent	Area of economic and social disadvantage
On campus	93%	88%	95%	94%	93%
Distance or online learning	7%	13%	5%	6%	7%

Source: Indecon analysis of responses to survey of Mature Students (2020)

For some mature students, aspects of the current model of education delivery represent barriers to participation. These areas were seen as needing adjustment/development by 20% or more of mature students, namely availability of part-time courses, the options for online or distance learning and flexibility in time to complete modules.

Views of Mature Students on the Suitability of Aspects of the Delivery of Higher Education



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Mature Students

CONCLUSIONS

A summary of the conclusions of the study based on Indecon's analysis of the evidence is presented in the next table.

Key Conclusions from Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education

1	Efforts internationally to promote access focus on disadvantaged communities
2	Educational attainment rates in Ireland are high
3	Number of mature students in HE in recent years declined as unemployment fell
4	More mature students attended institutes of technology than universities
5	A majority of mature students attend HE on a full-time basis
6	Financial cost viewed as the single greatest barrier to participation
7	There are existing supports available to encourage mature student participation in HE
8	Non-acceptance rates of SUSI grant awards are higher for mature students than for other students
9	There are three main methods of increasing participation rates: In-reach; Outreach; and Flexibility
10	Guidance and peer support deemed to work well
11	Participation in a FET course or through community education is an important pathway to HE
12	Issues concerning part-time, online learning and flexibility relevant for some mature students

1 | Efforts internationally to promote access focus on disadvantaged communities

The Irish National Access Plan has overall targets for mature students, defined as first-time new entrants who are 23 years or over in January of their year of entry. Internationally, efforts to increase participation by students are generally aimed at those from more disadvantaged communities, whether they are mature students or not. This is also reflected in the focus on specific NAP groups within the Irish National Access Plan.

2 | Educational attainment rates in Ireland are high

Educational attainment rates in Ireland are very high, with 40% having achieved third-level education and only 7% have primary level or below. Within the 25 - 44-year age cohort, levels of participation in higher education have surpassed 50%. However, despite the overall levels, NAP target group members have relatively low levels of educational attainment.

3 | Number of mature students in HE in recent years declined as unemployment fell

The number of mature students in higher education declined as unemployment rate fell. The evidence also shows greater volatility among males than females. The decline in the number of mature students may in part reflect the significant increase in overall higher educational attainment.

4 | More mature students attended institutes of technology than universities

More mature students attended institutes of technology than universities and represent a larger portion of student intake in their respective institution type. The greater number of mature students attending institutes of technology is likely to have been influenced by the duration and type of programmes provided.

5 | A majority of mature students attend HE on a full-time basis

While a majority of mature students participate in higher education on a full-time basis, older candidates and members of the Traveller Community are more likely to participate on a part-time basis. 90% of part-time undergraduate courses are undertaken by mature students, whereas 15% of full-time undergraduate students are mature students.

6 | Financial cost viewed as the single greatest barrier to participation

Financial cost is viewed as the single greatest barrier to participation by mature students. This is a particularly important barrier for the NAP target groups. Other barriers include family responsibilities, job commitments, timing of study, and distance. Those in NAP groups reported higher barriers than other respondents.

7 | There are existing supports available to encourage mature student participation in HE

There are existing supports available to mature students. These include: SUSI, BTEA, Free Fees Initiative, Springboard+, Part-time Education Option, National Childcare Scheme and the Student Assistance Fund, as well as a number of charitable/philanthropic bodies which support access (e.g., St. Vincent de Paul, Uversity). There is also funding to support higher education institutions to facilitate students with disabilities. The main support is through SUSI grants which have remained unchanged for a number of years. The Government has initiated a review of SUSI, the terms of reference for which include examining the value of the maintenance grants and income thresholds, the availability of grants for part-time students, supports for postgraduates, and how Ireland compares against other jurisdictions.

8 | Non-acceptance rates of SUSI grant awards are higher for mature students than for other students

The number of refusals of SUSI grant awards is higher for mature students than for other students. This may, in part, be because of eligibility criteria for different programmes.

9 | There are three main methods of increasing participation: In-reach; Outreach; and Flexibility

Apart from funding supports and changes to delivery options there are three main methods of facilitating increased participation among mature and other students: **In-reach** - actions by HEIs to create new ways for students to access existing programmes; **Outreach** - proactive efforts to widen participation and create partnerships with wider community; and **Flexibility** - providing education in locations, modes and at times that best suit students.

10 | Guidance and peer supports deemed to work well

Positive views were expressed for mature students on guidance and support, including career information, community supports and help with specific skills. However, for a minority percentage of mature students, some aspects of supports were perceived as working poorly.

11 | Participation in a FET course or through community education is an important pathway to HE

Further Education and Training providers play an important role in encouraging students to participate in HE. Almost three in four mature students reported having participated in education and training prior to engaging in HE. Over half participated in a FET course, while 21% participated in a community education course.

12 | Issues concerning part-time, online learning and flexibility relevant for some mature students

For some mature students, certain aspects of the current model of education delivery represent barriers to participation. Some areas were seen as needing adjustment/development by 20% or more of mature students, namely availability of part-time courses, the options for online or distance learning, and flexibility in time to complete modules.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A summary of Indecon's recommendations based on our detailed research evaluation of participation by mature students in higher education in Ireland is presented below. While these are presented in order of priority Indecon believes that they are all important to ensure individuals are facilitated to realise their potential and to address equity concerns. The research undertaken as part of this study shows that in many cases the low levels of participation by certain groups reflect specific barriers and challenges rather than a lack of interest. If measures are taken to reduce these barriers, Indecon believes that there would be increased demand for participation in higher education.

Recommendations for the Future - Mature Student Participation in Higher Education

1	Focus access targets and supports on disadvantaged communities
2	Promote and fund part-time learning
3	Greater provision of flexible learning opportunities
4	Institution-level support for mature students should continue
5	Strong national provision of guidance and support
6	Increase provision of foundation/bridging courses
7	Consider ways to secure greater involvement by communities and employers for NAP groups
8	Seamless pathways between FET and HE should be developed
9	Improve data availability

1 | Focus access targets and supports on disadvantaged communities

Lower levels of educational attainment of students from disadvantaged communities and NAP groups has important consequences for the individual's ability to realise their potential and represent a risk of increased poverty, as well as wider negative impacts on productivity and economic development. Evidence from Indecon's study shows that respondents who belonged to one or more NAP group reported much higher barriers than respondents who did not. Indecon recommends that scarce Exchequer resources should be focused on supporting the most disadvantaged and underrepresented communities to access HE. There needs to be an equitable, coherent, realistic and flexible funding model for mature students from disadvantaged communities. The economic and social risk of participation for these groups needs to be mitigated by an appropriate financial support package. There is also, importantly, a need to accommodate re-entry and second chance provisions for those from disadvantaged communities and groups with low levels of educational attainment.

2 | Promote and fund part-time learning

Full-time HE participation for all may not be consistent with the need to maximise upskilling and retraining opportunities, while full-time learning may not be feasible or appropriate for many potential mature students. Currently, only students on full-time programmes are eligible for the Free Fees Scheme, SUSI, BTEA, and this effectively disincentivises part-time/flexible study. Focusing some of existing public resources on expanding the opportunities for part-time learning may be an efficient means of promoting participation. This could include examining access routes; increasing financial support for part-time learning (e.g., through an expansion of SUSI, the Student Assistance Fund or other means); institutional level targets and other measures.

3 | Greater provision of flexible learning opportunities

Flexible/part-time higher education needs to be made accessible to a more diverse range of students, including for the benefit of mature students. The current Covid-19 pandemic has seen impressive achievements by the HEIs in Ireland in introducing measures to ensure that education is accessible to students, and in upskilling lecturing staff with online delivery and IT skills to meet such challenges. These investments can now be used to provide greater flexibility to those students for whom fixed calendar learning is not feasible, including many mature students. There also needs to be a clear definition of what constitutes part-time learning and flexible learning.

4 | Institution-level support for mature students should continue

All mature students, whether from disadvantaged communities or not, face challenges and issues in participating in HE. Further, many mature students return to education due to the need to make a career change in order to gain secure employment. HEIs should continue to provide appropriate levels of support and guidance to all mature students, such as through dedicated Mature Student Offices where appropriate.

5 | Strong national provision of guidance and support

HEIs should continue to enhance student advisory support programmes to ensure that mature students can access appropriate support and information on an ongoing basis throughout the duration of their studies, both through undergraduate programmes and post-degree (i.e., postgraduate and employment opportunities). This should include, where appropriate, the provision of relevant supports outside of regular hours, possibly on an online basis. This would require significant investment and systemic change, so careful consideration would need to be given as to how this could be delivered.

Guidance also plays a critical role in the decisions of individuals to engage in FET as a pathway to HE and to consider HE opportunities while engaging in Further Education and Training. It is important that guidance services are accessible to all prospective mature students, including those not linked with their local Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI) through community initiatives or through a formal programme of study.

6 | Increase provision of foundation/bridging courses

International experience, and the experience of successful courses already run by many institutions in Ireland, suggests that the funding and provision of foundation/bridging courses in advance of attending a mainstream HEI course can greatly assist students. This can involve partnerships between the higher and further education/community education sectors in the running of access/foundation courses that will provide a range of options to meet the specific needs of disadvantaged communities.

7 | Consider ways to secure greater involvement by communities and employers for NAP groups

National and international practice suggests the importance of developing community structures that foster greater demand by mature students. In December 2020 it was announced that PATH 3 was being funded for a further three-year period with an additional allocation of €7.5m. An updated evaluation of PATH 3 may help guide policy for future access strategy. Ensuring mature students have access to information on careers, and to employers directly, is also important.

8 | Seamless pathways between FET and HE should be developed

Facilitation of enhanced progression from further education and training to higher education should be put in place. It is imperative that both the higher education and further education sectors work in tandem, and that a clear vision and set of principles between these two sectors is agreed to ensure that those students that want to progress are given the information and opportunity to do so. An FET-HE Transitions Reform Sub-Group was established in 2017, and in 2020 issued a report setting out potential action areas to promote transition.⁶ Indecon believes that the outputs of the group should be considered carefully as a means of promoting transition from FET to HE as a priority in the context of mature student and wider educational and skill objectives. This should build on recent achievements which have taken place.

9 | Improve data availability

The HEA and SUSI collect very useful information on the participation of mature students in third-level institutions. However, data on the progression of students into HE, data on part-time students, and data on what happens to mature students post-qualification requires further development. This data will be important in understanding how best to recognise the impact that participation in HE subsequently had on learners' lives. There also needs to be a review of how data on mature students is collected and reported within institutions themselves to ensure that a consistent approach is being followed across institutions.

Specific Supports for NAP Groups

The recommendations outlined above will assist in supporting mature students from each of the NAP target groups. In addition, there will be a need for targeted supports to be tailored to meet the more specific needs of members of each of the NAP target groups. Specific recommendations for consideration aimed at each of the NAP target groups are outlined below. However, future National Access strategy may identify different categories of target groups, who in turn may require targeted supports reflecting their own circumstances. More generally, a Universal Design approach by education institutions may help improve access, participation, and success for all groups, whether identified as NAP target groups or not.

Recommendations specific to participation by members of the Irish Traveller Community who are mature students

- > Aligned with Indecon's general recommendation to target resources on NAP groups, we support the increased targeting of financial supports to facilitate full and part-time access to higher education for members of the Irish Traveller Community who are mature students.
- > Ensure easy access to literacy and numeracy supports.
- > Support HEIs to continue and widen research and programme development aimed at members of the Traveller Community.
- > Resource relationship building with community development organisations that represent Traveller organisations.
- > Support Traveller Graduate Network that can increase visibility and provide role models within the community and HEIs.
- > Bridge the gap from early school leaving to entering HE by pre-development capacity building and personal development to ensure students are college-ready.
- > Include Irish Travellers as role models in HE mentoring programmes for students in second-level and FE.

⁶ <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/b63d2338fd/des-transitions-sub-group-working-paper-june-2020.pdf>

Recommendations specific to participation by students with disabilities who are mature students

- > Increased targeting of financial supports to facilitate full and part-time access to higher education for mature students with a disability.
- > Ensure post-entry support for students with disabilities including access to Occupational Therapists and Assistive Technologists as well as facilitating flexible requirements to take account of health issues.
- > Consistently apply the principles of Universal Design for Learning to ensure a positive impact for individuals with disabilities.
- > Ensure easy access to literacy and numeracy supports to support learners with disabilities.
- > Provide supports for learners with disabilities to pursue non-linear educational pathways.
- > Increase awareness of staff or impact of specific conditions (e.g., dyslexia).

Recommendations specific to participation by persons from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who are mature students

- > Increased targeting of financial supports to facilitate full-time and part-time access to higher education for individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who are mature students including former children in care, ethnic minorities as well as for individuals from other NAP groups.
- > Support representative organisations to highlight opportunities for individuals from disadvantaged groups to participate in higher education.
- > Ensure easy access to literacy and numeracy supports for individuals.
- > Provide support for mature learners from disadvantaged groups to pursue non-linear educational pathways.

Recommendations specific to participation by lone parents who are mature students

- > Provide flexibility in timing of requirements to ensure barriers related to co-ordination with childcare are addressed and/or support additional college-based childcare provision.
- > Increased targeting of financial supports for lone parents to facilitate full and part-time participation in higher education.
- > Support lone parents' families to participate in HE.
- > Include lone parent students as role models in HE mentoring programmes for students in second-level and FET⁷ and highlight case studies to show the financial impact of higher education and how barriers to learning were overcome.
- > Provide support for lone parent mature students to pursue non-linear educational pathways.
- > While lone parents are identified as a specific target group in the National Access Plan, it is important also to identify the broader costs of caring (for example, for elderly parents) which may also particularly impact on mature students.

⁷ <https://assets.gov.ie/24760/5c424910fec84e6c9131d40081b3ff48.pdf>

Longer-Term Impact

The policy proposals recommended in this report are aimed at supporting greater participation by mature students in higher education in Ireland, particularly those from disadvantaged communities. However, it should be noted that policy interventions take place in an existing social and economic context, and that certain key factors which influence participation rates are not as amenable to direct policy control. Most notably, there are cultural and social reasons behind lower participation among certain groups, for example, the younger age of marriage and family formation of members of the Traveller Community. Further, the prevailing economic environment and labour market has a huge impact on participation rates. As such, policy measures should be targeted and aimed at increasing longer-term participation in HE by sections of the Irish population which may not otherwise get that opportunity. The potential medium and long-term impact of Covid-19 on HE participation rates also remains to be seen and should be carefully monitored.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Indecon would like to acknowledge the assistance provided by the HEA and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in preparing this report. In particular, we would like to thank Caitríona Ryan, Neil McDermott, Denise Frawley, Mark Carroll, Kate Weedy, Mariana Reis-Efinda, Alissa Fitzsimons and Victor Pigott of HEA, Eilish Bergin, Enda Hughes, Niamh Desmond, Bernadette Madden and Stacey Cannon of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Mary Cregg and Patricia Sheehan of the Department of Education and Skills; and Ronan Harney of the Department of Social Protection. We would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Philip Connolly and Vincent Downey from SUSI for the provision of statistics relating to the take-up of grants by mature students. We would also like to thank Professor Mike Osbourne for his valuable inputs to the study. In addition, Indecon would also like to thank all of those who contributed to submissions made to the Indecon team as part of the research process. These included: Dara Ryder (AHEAD); Niamh O'Reilly and Sam O'Brien-Olinger (AONTAS); Deirdre Creedon and Sinead O'Neill (MTU - Cork Campus); Eithne Guilfoyle (DCU); Rosie Bissett (Dyslexia Ireland); Rosario Ryan, Fergal Finnegan, Fearga Kenny and all those who participated in the online workshop in May 2020 (Maynooth University); Geraldine Brosnan (Mary Immaculate College); Robbie Irwin (Marino Institute of Education); Damian Butler and Rhona McCormack (Mature Students Ireland); Terry McGuire and Eileen McEvoy (National Forum for Enhancement of Teaching and Learning); Marion E. Wilkinson (National Disability Authority); Sheila McGovern (The SOAR Project); Marcella Stakem (Society of St. Vincent de Paul); Anna Kelly, Bairbre Fleming, Catherine Tormey, Thomond Coogan and Gillian Lamb (UCD); Megan Reilly and Marie Lyons (USI); Colleen Dube (Uversity); Grainne Burke (TU Dublin) and Richard Hayes, Nuala Lennon and Laura Keane (WIT). Indecon would like to thank Lewis Purser and Colm Downes of the IUA, Jackie Stewart of THEA, Bob Ó Mhurchú (TU Dublin) and Roisin Doherty of SOLAS for their valuable inputs and advice. Indecon would also like to thank all those involved in the distribution of the survey of mature students, and all the learners who participated in the survey, in particular those mature students who took the time to send in comments directly to the Indecon team. The exceptional levels of responses from students and the very helpful engagement from higher education institutions and other stakeholders has been very important and reflects the levels of interest in this assignment. Finally, we would like to note our appreciation of the support and thanks to the CSO as well as inputs from the Steering Committee for the Study and to the representative organisations and other stakeholders.

The usual disclaimer applies and the views and assessment presented is the sole responsibility of Indecon research economists.

1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Indecon International Research Economists were appointed by the HEA to undertake an independent research study on mature student participation in higher education. The main aims of the project are to: (i) examine levels of educational attainment of the Irish population; (ii) analyse the trends in mature student participation; (iii) investigate the barriers and challenges for mature students, especially for NAP target groups; (iv) assess funding supports; (v) review supporting structures; (vi) examine modes of delivery and (vii) develop recommendations to inform future policy initiatives.

This study is of particular importance as access to higher education is critical in ensuring that individuals realise their potential and are not left behind. Access to education also impacts on employment prospects and on overall productivity and growth in the Irish economy. As noted by the US Nobel Prize Winner, economist Kenneth Arrow, in a review of the Irish economy, “education is important in increasing individual productivity and higher education is now playing a more important role in increasing labour productivity than in the past.”⁸ National access policy is focused on facilitating mature students who have not previously benefited from higher education and who enter college to complete a full-time course. Adults return to education for a variety of reasons including: second chance education; upskilling; employment; promotion; personal growth; learning of new skills; improving on old skills; or significant life events.

1.2 DEFINITION OF MATURE STUDENTS

As background to the research, it is informative to analyse the definitions of mature students currently used in Ireland. The HEA defines mature students as those “23 years or over on 1 January of their year of entry to higher education.”⁹ The targets as set out in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 uses the narrower definition of students who are first-time entrants. There are two separate targets contained in the National Plan, one for full-time entrants, and one for the combined total of full and part-time/flexible entrants as a percentage of all new entrants.

The application criteria for SUSI grants applies a somewhat different definition (see Section 5.2 for an overview). For eligibility for SUSI grants, courses must represent progression from previous courses, though second-chance students, who are returning to pursue a course after a full break in studies of at least five years, may qualify.¹⁰ This allowance for students who have had a break of at least five years is not included in the HEA or National Plan definitions. This is relevant in the context of policy attention, at national and EU level, on promoting opportunities for lifelong learning.¹¹

Further Education and Training providers have their own definitions of what constitutes a mature student, while a number of FET providers refer to mature students without defining the term. Examples of definitions which are provided include:

- Blackrock Further Education Institution: Mature student is someone over 21;¹²
- Killester College: Mature student is someone over 21;¹³ and
- Carlow Institute of Further Education & Training: Mature students is someone over 23 years old.¹⁴

⁸ <https://assets.gov.ie/24760/5c424910fec84e6c9131d40081b3ff48.pdf>
cy for a Small Economy in Alan Gray (ed) (1997), ‘*International Perspectives on the Irish Economy*’ ISBN 0 9531318 07.

⁹ “National-Plan-for-Equity-of-Access-to-Higher-Education-2015-2019”

¹⁰ <https://susi.ie/previous-education-and-progression-postgraduate/>

¹¹ For example, Education and Training 2020 is the current overall framework for EU political cooperation in education, and includes as one of its four priorities “Making lifelong learning and learner mobility a reality.”

¹² <https://www.bfei.ie/about-bfei/support-services/mature-students>

¹³ <https://killestercollege.ie/mature-students/>

¹⁴ <https://www.carlowfet.ie/entry-requirements/>

The age at which students are defined as mature students by the HEA is over two years younger in the United Kingdom. According to Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), mature students are those who are over 21 years old at the beginning of their undergraduate studies. The definition does not distinguish among the different motives behind the choice of applying to university at an older age. However, some of the underlying reasons identified by UCAS are that a student might apply to attend university after a period of time out of full-time education; the lack of a previous qualification to access HE; or returning to pursue higher education in a new subject area as part of their career progression.¹⁵

While there is no official definition, there are specific rules for adult learners in Spain.¹⁶ The government defines mature students as those who do not have a prior qualification and divides them into two age cohorts: candidates over 25 years old and over 45 years old. Based on a quota of reserved places for adult learners which vary by university, a mature student can apply after he/she has successfully passed specific tests to access higher education¹⁷ set by the Government.¹⁸

In other EU countries, such as Germany and Italy, there is very little emphasis on mature students. For instance, Italy lacks a specific definition for mature students.^{19,20} However, current research on adult learners by Almalaurea²¹ suggests that enrolled students in Italian universities should be divided into three clusters based on the year of entry to higher education relative to a “standard age” per the following: i) regular or 1 year later; ii) 2-10 years later; iii) 10 years later. The standard age, according to Italian’s Ministry of Education (Ministero dell’Istruzione), is set at 19 years old for bachelor’s degrees and 22 years old for master’s degrees. Due to the length of tertiary education, Germany has a relatively older profile of graduates compared to other countries. Since it is more common to have older graduates, Germany does not define an age threshold for a student to be considered mature.²²

In Canada and Australia, as with Spain, the definition of a mature student is those above a specified age who do not possess qualifications to enter higher education. The main focus of such countries is to provide an opportunity to access higher education to students who have not completed high school. Canadian universities refer to mature students as those who are 19 years old and do not have a high school diploma or GED.²³ If a student, for other reasons, holds a high school diploma and decides to delay their application to university for a number of years after leaving school, they will not be granted the status of mature student. As with Canada, Australian universities have in place a Mature Student Entry Scheme, where learners can apply as a mature age student if they are over the age of 21 and do not have a prior qualification for admission to higher education.^{24,25} Finally, New Zealand defines mature students as those over 20 years old who have been out of education for some years, though focuses on learners under 25 in higher education.²⁶

¹⁵ <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/student-life/mature-undergraduate-students>

¹⁶ https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/bachelor-79_en

¹⁷ <https://www.upf.edu/en/web/graus/acces-per-als-mes-grans-de-25-anys-mes-de-40-anys-i-mes-de-45-anys>

¹⁸ <https://web.ua.es/en/oia/faqs/tests-for-people-over-25.html#pruebas>

¹⁹ https://www.almalaurea.it/sites/almalaurea.it/files/docs/universita/profilo/Profilo2016/cap_13_gli_adulti_alluniversita.pdf

²⁰ https://www.ires.piemonte.it/pubblicazioni_ires/CR2942020_Adulti-Univ_Stanchi.pdf

²¹ Italian entity which connects Higher Education to labour market.

²² An example of an institution specific age of 55 is the FAU, see: https://www.fau.eu/education/degree-programmes/guest-students/#collapse_0

²³ <https://www.ontariocolleges.ca/en/apply/mature-students#:~:text=Mature%20student%20status%20may%20be,have%20acquired%20since%20leaving%20school.>

²⁴ <https://www.anu.edu.au/study/apply/mature-age-student-entry-schemes>

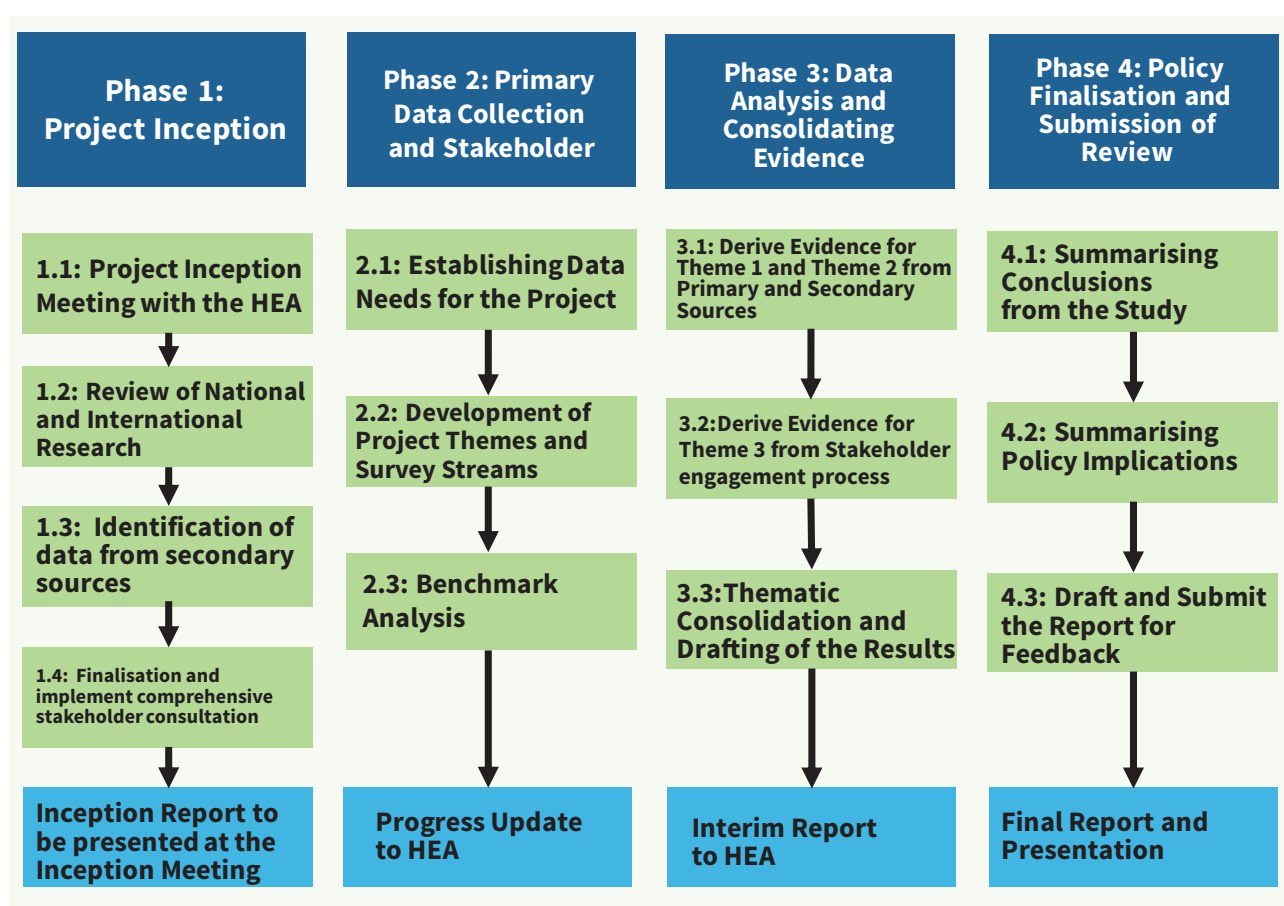
²⁵ <https://www.sydney.edu.au/content/dam/corporate/documents/study/how-to-apply/admission-pathways/mature-age-entry-scheme.pdf>

²⁶ [http://www.cad.vuw.ac.nz/wiki/Mature_students.html#:~:text=Mature%20students-,Mature%20students,of%20education%20for%20some%20years.&text=New%20Zealand%20and%20Australian%20citizens,VUW%20website%20Special%20Admissions%20page\).](http://www.cad.vuw.ac.nz/wiki/Mature_students.html#:~:text=Mature%20students-,Mature%20students,of%20education%20for%20some%20years.&text=New%20Zealand%20and%20Australian%20citizens,VUW%20website%20Special%20Admissions%20page).)

1.3 METHODOLOGY

Indecon has applied a rigorous methodological approach to delivering on the key evaluation requirements set out by the HEA. A summary description of this approach is presented in the next figure, which highlights the phases and work tasks undertaken during the evaluation process. Our approach triangulates evidence from a range of sources to ensure that our findings and recommendations are robust and provide a solid basis for policy conclusions. Our approach involved extensive stakeholder engagement both directly with key representative bodies and via new empirical survey research of mature students. An additional important element of our approach was a review and analysis of international practice with respect to promoting engagement of mature students in higher education.

Figure 1.1: Methodological Approach



Source: Indecon

In addition to the primary research programme, Indecon has utilised a wide array of data to help inform this evaluation. The primary datasets utilised were as follows:

- HEA data on mature student participation;
- Census and other CSO data;
- Data on BTEA recipients from Department of Social Protection; and
- Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI).

New empirical research was completed via a survey of past, current and potential mature students to learn more about mature students' experiences in accessing higher education. Indecon are very appreciative of

the input from over 1,900 learners who took part in the survey, and which provides important new insights to support the analysis. Responses were received from approximately 1,390 current mature students, 368 past mature students, and 147 potential mature students. In relation to National Access Plan target groups, the survey received responses from: 23 students identifying as members of the Traveller Community;²⁷ 315 students with disabilities; 285 lone parents; and 684 students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background.

It should be noted that there is a high level of cross-over between NAP target groups, with many members of one group also being a member of another, as illustrated in Table 1.1. It shows, for example, that 45% of all respondents with a disability were from an area of socio-economic disadvantage. While the very high overall level of responses provides important new evidence, caution is needed in interpreting the results for the numbers of the Traveller Community, given the lower number of responses. However, detailed insights from these students are of value to the study.

Table 1.1: Individuals Belonging to Different NAP Groups

	Percentage of Each Group				
	Total	Travellers	Persons with a disability	Lone Parents	Persons from Disadvantaged areas
Members of Traveller Community	1%	100%	2%	1%	2%
Persons with a disability	17%	22%	100%	19%	21%
Lone Parents	15%	17%	17%	100%	23%
Persons from Disadvantaged areas	36%	70%	45%	54%	100%

Source: Indecon analysis of responses to survey of Mature Students (2020)

As part of the study, a very wide range of stakeholders were invited to provide written responses on any aspects of the terms of reference for the study. This process represented an opportunity for individuals and organisations to provide additional data and research, or other inputs and perspectives. The public invitation for submissions was published on the HEA website on 26 February 2020 with a closing date for submissions on 30 April 2020. In response to this call, Indecon received 17 submissions from stakeholder organisations, and a number of additional comments from individuals, including from mature students. Indecon also held a video conference workshop with a range of stakeholders in one higher education institution in May 2020, as well as a presentation to the project Steering Committee. A number of organisations made a submission. These include: AHEAD, AONTAS, CIT, DCU, Dyslexia Ireland, Maynooth University, MIC, MIE, MSI, National Forum for Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, NDA, SOAR, SVP, UCD, USI, Uversity, and WIT.

In addition, the 2020 National Access Forum was held on 27 February 2020 with a specific focus on mature student participation. The Forum included a student panel comprising mature students from a range of target group backgrounds, as well as a presentation from Professor Ellen Boeren (University of Glasgow) on adult participation in higher education.

²⁷ While the total number of respondent members of the Traveller Community is small, this is reflective of the very small number of this community which engages in HE. According to Census 2016, 161 members of the Irish Traveller Community have an ordinary bachelor's degree or higher.

1.4 STRUCTURE OF REPORT

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 presents an analysis of educational attainment levels in Ireland;
- Section 3 examines the trends in mature student participation in HE;
- Section 4 investigates the barriers and challenges in participation;
- Section 5 assesses the range of funding supports;
- Section 6 reviews supporting structural guidance systems;
- Section 7 examines the modes of education delivery; and
- Section 8 sets out the conclusions and recommendations.

1.5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Indecon would like to acknowledge the assistance provided by the HEA and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in preparing this report. In particular, we would like to thank Caitríona Ryan, Neil McDermott, Denise Frawley, Mark Carroll, Kate Weedy, Mariana Reis-Efinda, Alissa Fitzsimons and Victor Pigott of HEA, Eilish Bergin, Enda Hughes, Niamh Desmond, Bernadette Madden and Stacey Cannon of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Mary Cregg and Patricia Sheehan of the Department of Education and Skills; and Ronan Harney of the Department of Social Protection. We would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Philip Connolly and Vincent Downey from SUSI for the provision of statistics relating to the take-up of grants by mature students. We would also like to thank Professor Mike Osbourne for his valuable inputs to the study. In addition, Indecon would also like to thank all of those who contributed to submissions made to the Indecon team as part of the research process. These included: Dara Ryder (AHEAD); Niamh O'Reilly and Sam O'Brien-Olinger (AONTAS); Deirdre Creedon and Sinead O'Neill (MTU Cork Campus); Eithne Guilfoyle (DCU); Rosie Bissett (Dyslexia Ireland); Rosario Ryan, Fergal Finnegan, Fearga Kenny and all those who participated in the online workshop in May 2020 (Maynooth University); Geraldine Brosnan (Mary Immaculate College); Robbie Irwin (Marino Institute of Education); Damian Butler and Rhona McCormack (Mature Students Ireland); Terry McGuire and Eileen McEvoy (National Forum for Enhancement of Teaching and Learning); Marion E. Wilkinson (National Disability Authority); Sheila McGovern (The SOAR Project); Marcella Stakem (Society of St. Vincent de Paul); Anna Kelly, Bairbre Fleming, Catherine Tormey, Thomond Coogan and Gillian Lamb (UCD); Megan Reilly and Marie Lyons (USI); Colleen Dube (Uversity); Grainne Burke (TU Dublin) and Richard Hayes, Nuala Lennon and Laura Keane (WIT). Indecon would like to thank Lewis Purser and Colm Downes of the IUA, Jackie Stewart of THEA, Bob Ó Mhurchú (TU Dublin) and Roisin Doherty of SOLAS for their valuable inputs and advice. Indecon would also like to thank all those involved in the distribution of the survey of mature students, and all the learners who participated in the survey, in particular those mature students who took the time to send in comments directly to the Indecon team. The exceptional levels of responses from students and the very helpful engagement from higher education institutions and other stakeholders has been very important and reflects the levels of interest in this assignment. Finally, we would like to note our appreciation of the support and thanks to the CSO as well as inputs from the Steering Committee for the Study and to the representative organisations and other stakeholders.

The usual disclaimer applies and responsibility for the analysis and findings in this independent report remains the sole responsibility of Indecon.

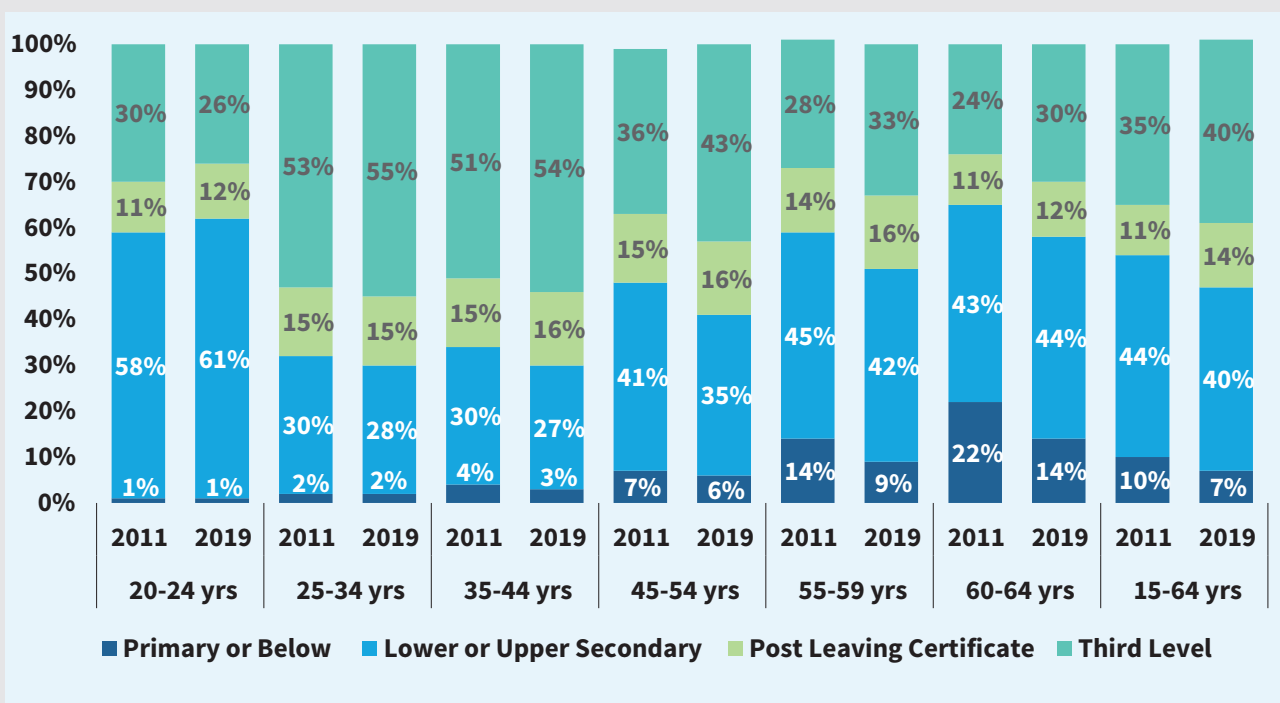
2

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN IRELAND

2.1 OVERALL EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT LEVELS

Overall, 40% of the Irish population aged 15 – 64 years have achieved a third-level qualification, an increase of 5% since 2011. Only 7% of the population highest educational level was primary level or below. There are, however, differences in educational attainment by age cohort. The percentage of persons who have attended higher education within the 25-44 years old age cohort was between 54 and 55%. However, older age groups had lower levels of educational attainment. The variance in levels of educational attainment is important. For example, the US Nobel Prize Winner, Kenneth Arrow, in a review of the Irish economy, indicated that “there is no question of the extreme importance of achieving a very high level of second-school education” and “that universities are now moving into a more important role in increasing labour productivity than they have in the past.”²⁸

Figure 2.1: Persons Aged 20-64 (%) by Age Group and by Highest Educational Level, 2011 Q2 and 2019 Q2



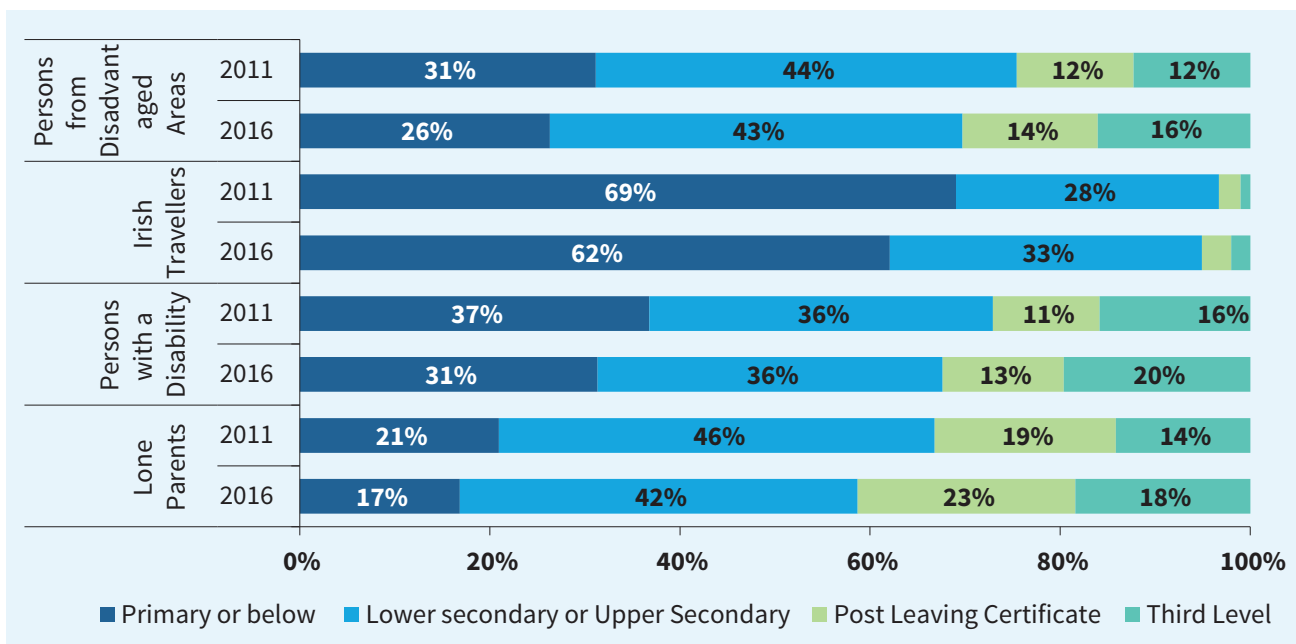
Source: CSO

²⁸ See Kenneth, J. Arrow, Stanford University, Economic Growth Policy for a Small Country, in Alan W. Gray (ed), *International Perspectives on the Irish Economy* (1997) ISBN 0 953131807

2.2 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT BY NAP GROUPS

The four NAP target groups recorded lower educational attainment levels than the national average. This is particularly the case for members of the Traveller Community, most of whom in 2016 had a highest educational level of primary education or below. Lone parents, persons with a disability, and individuals from disadvantaged areas also had low levels of educational attainment.

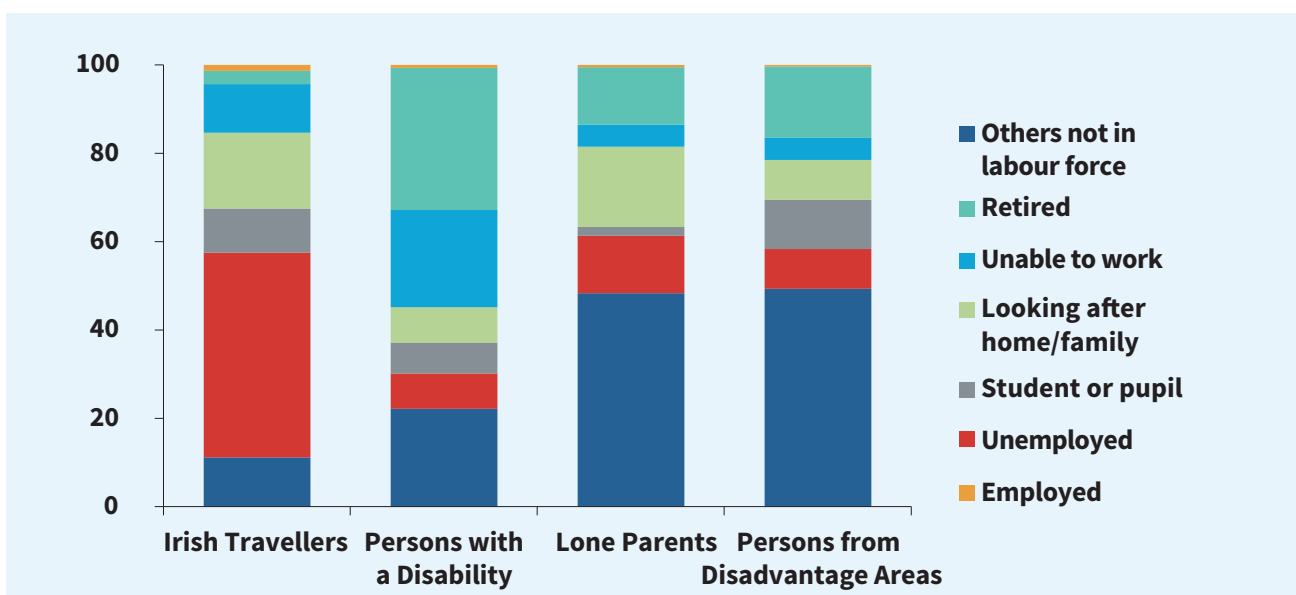
Figure 2.2: NAP Group by Highest Educational Level, 2011 and 2016



Note: In the case of Irish Travellers and Persons with a disability, the category “Post Leaving Certificate” includes: Technical/Vocational, Advanced Certificate/Completed Apprenticeship. Statistics from CSO also report “Other” and “Not stated” as additional categories which we exclude from the graph. **Source: Indecon Analysis of CSO data.**

Members of the four NAP target groups are far more likely to be unemployed than other members of the labour force. This is illustrated in Figure 2.3. Members of the Irish Traveller Community report by far the highest unemployment rate (46%) and lowest employment rate (11%) of the NAP target groups. One in three (32%) people reporting a disability are retired, while 22% are at work and 7% are students.

Figure 2.3: NAP Group by Principal Economic Status in 2016

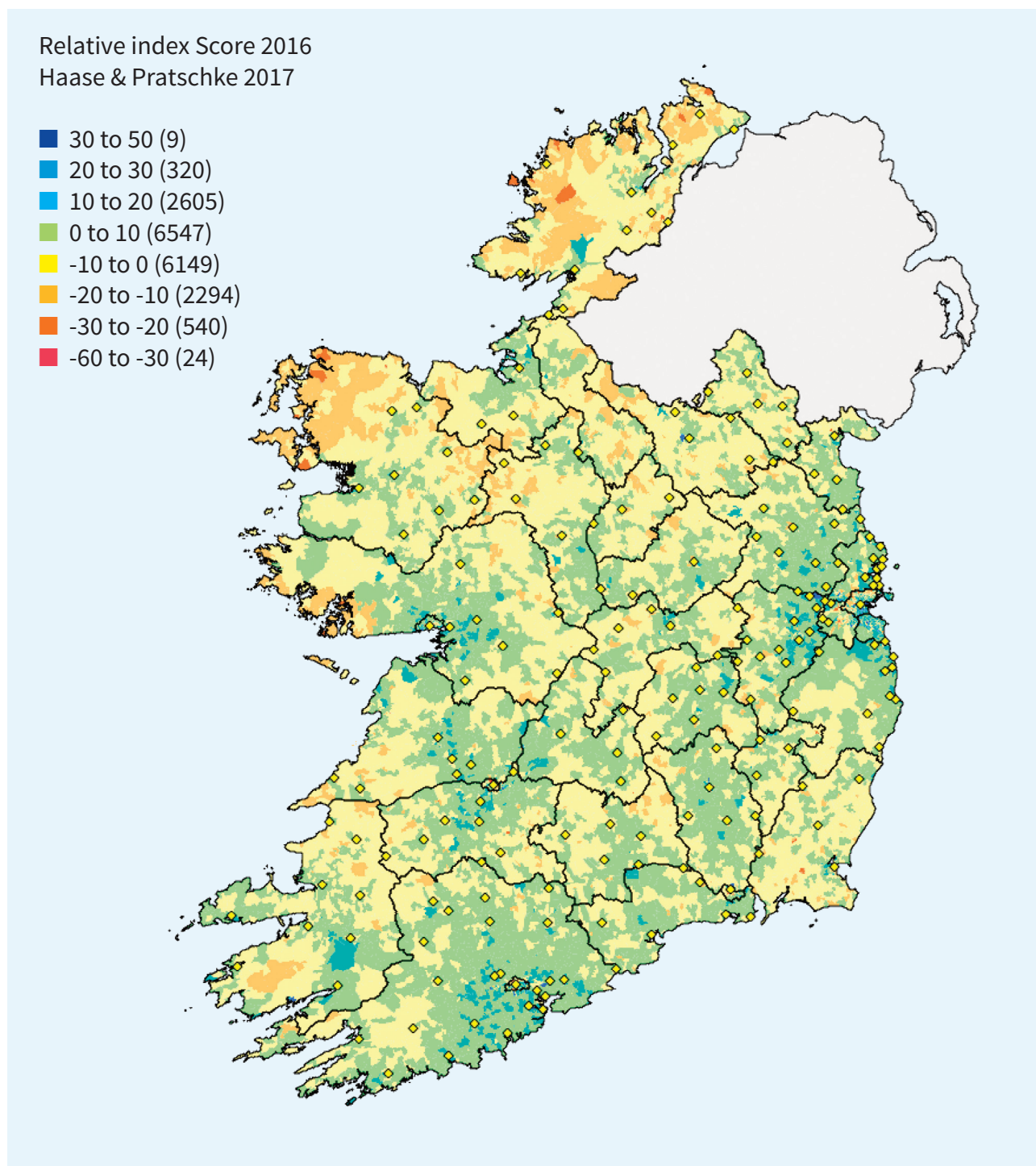


CSO distinguishes unemployed persons between i) unemployed having lost or given up previous job, and ii) unemployed looking for first regular job. For facilitation purposes, we aggregate the two under one category “unemployed”. **Source: Indecon Analysis of CSO data**

2.3 GEOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS AND LEVELS OF ATTAINMENT

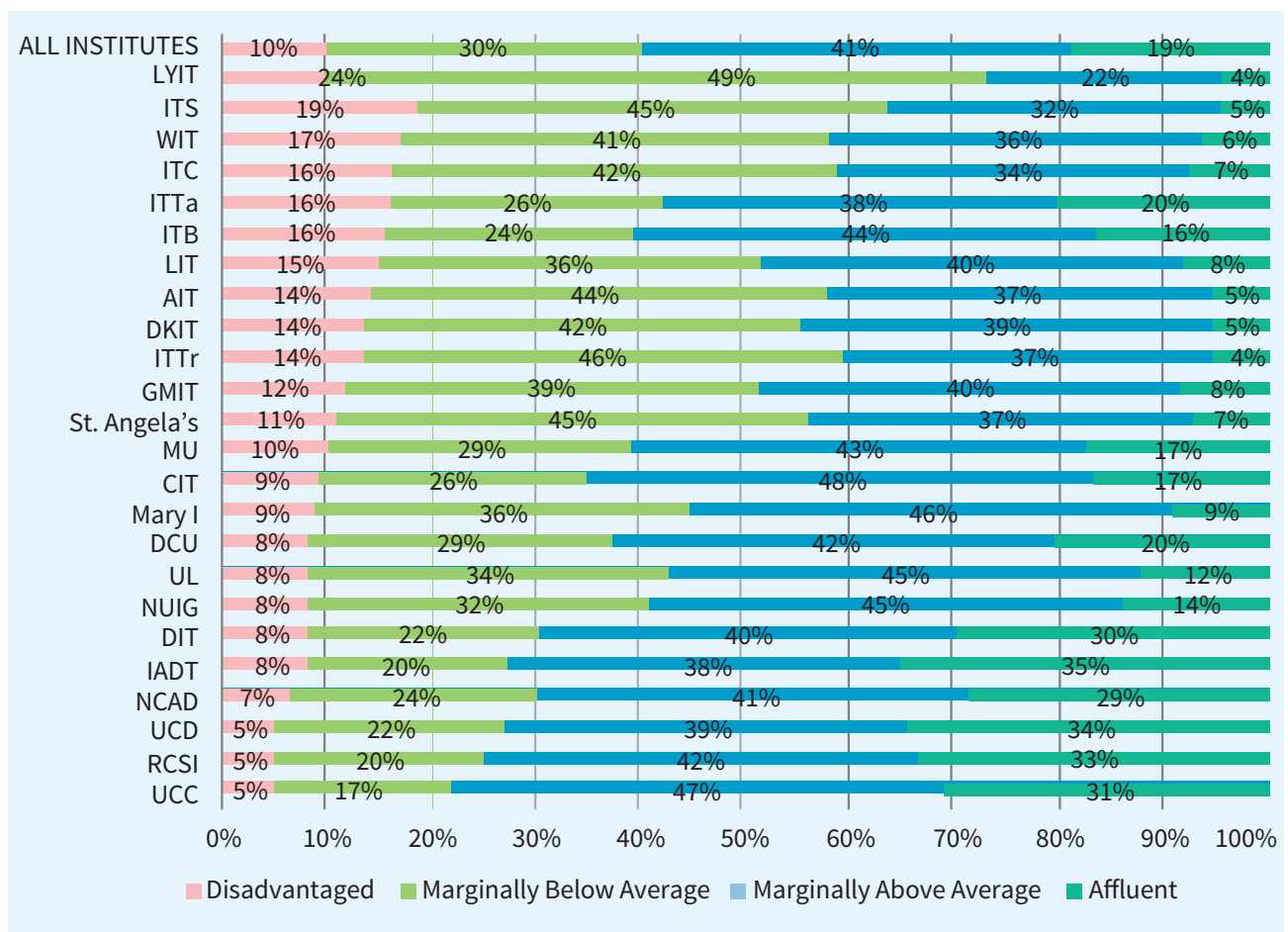
There are significant geographic disparities in terms of levels of deprivation. Table 2.1 shows the map of the Pobal HP Deprivation Index, an indicator used to highlight the most disadvantaged areas based on educational level, labour market situation, as well as the skill/occupational profile. One of the targets of the National Access Plan is to encourage participation by mature students from areas of economic and social disadvantage.

Table 2.1: Pobal HP Deprivation Index, 2016



Access to higher education is also correlated with the level of deprivation observed in households. Students from households in relatively deprived areas are less likely to attend higher education institutions than students from households in relatively affluent areas.²⁹ This is shown in Figure 2.2 below. The level of deprivation also predicts which institutions students are likely to attend, with universities generally attracting students from more affluent areas than institutes of technology.

Figure 2.4: Total Enrolments (2017/18) in Higher Education by Institution



Note: All analysis in this profile is of the Irish student population in higher education in Ireland, based on domicile, and only includes HEA funded higher education institutions, excluding Trinity College Dublin. **Source: HEA**

²⁹ <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/10/Higher-Education-Spatial-Socio-Economic-Profile-Oct-2019.pdf>

2.4 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Overall, 40% of population in 2019 aged 15-64 years old have achieved a third-level qualification, an increase of 5% since 2011. Over the last 10 years, participation levels in higher education increased between 3% to 7% across all age cohorts; the percentage of persons who have attended higher education within the 25-44 years old age cohort has surpassed 50%.
- The four NAP target groups recorded lower educational attainment levels than the national average. This is particularly the case for members of the Traveller Community, where in 2016, most had the highest educational level of primary education or below. Lone parents, persons with a disability and individuals from disadvantaged areas also had low levels of educational attainment.

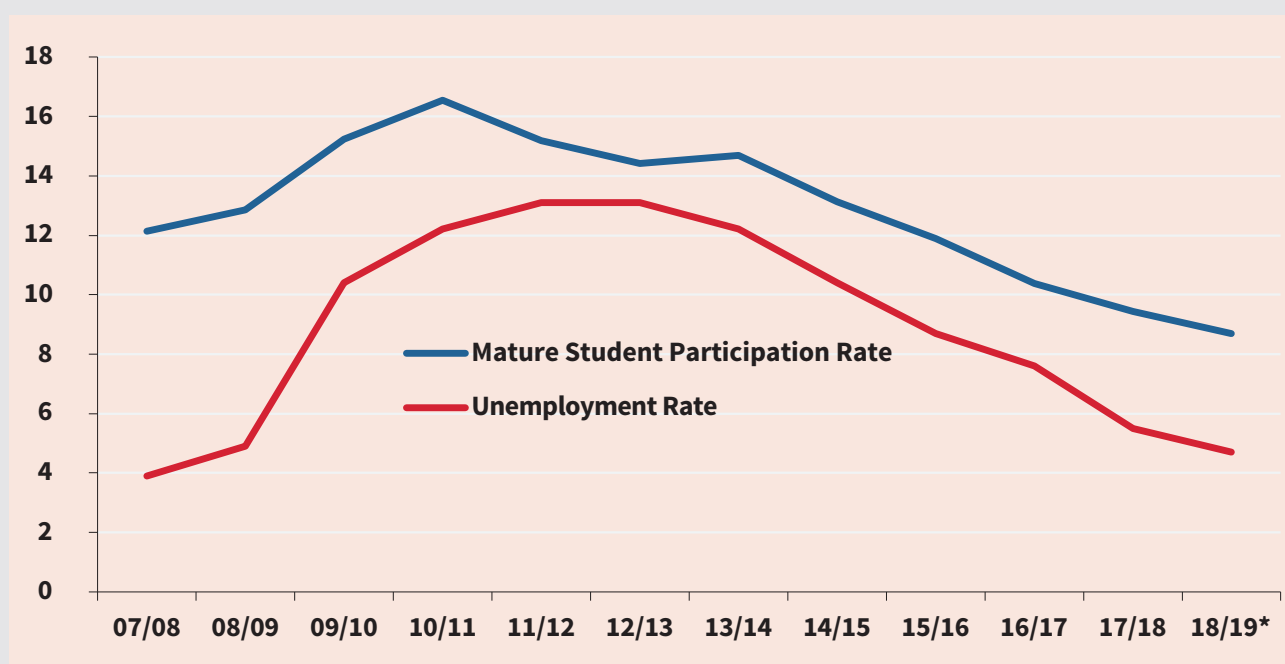
3

TRENDS IN MATURE STUDENT PARTICIPATION

3.1 OVERALL TREND IN PARTICIPATION RATES

The rate of participation of mature students in higher education increased from 2007/09 to peak in 2010/11, and subsequently declined to 9% of the total new entrants in 2018/19.^{30,31} The decline in participation from 2013 coincides with the reduction in unemployment, reflecting the impact of employment opportunities on the numbers of mature students as illustrated in Figure 3.1. The NAP Progress Review noted that the decline in mature student participation coincided “with a period of economic recovery and labour market reactivation that was not foreseen when the targets for the National Access Plan were being set and this may be an influencing factor in the declining number of mature students.”

Figure 3.1: Rate of First-Time Students in HEIs who are Mature Students, 2007/08 to 2017/18



Source: HEA* **Note:** Figure for 2018/19 is based on % change for students excluding TCD, applied to overall figures for 2017/18.

As well as short-term changes in economic conditions, longer-term changes in levels of educational attainment will impact on the number of mature students participating in higher education. First-time new entrant mature students can be thought of as being drawn from the population over 23 years of age which have never attended higher education before. Table 3.2 shows that the number of individuals aged 25 – 64 in the Irish population without a higher education qualification declined in the decade to 2019.

³⁰ There is no distinction within the CAO application or in HE Institutions that allows the identification of first-time mature student entrants. This may have resulted in a number of places designated for first-time mature students (as set out in the NAP) going to mature students who are not first-time entrants.

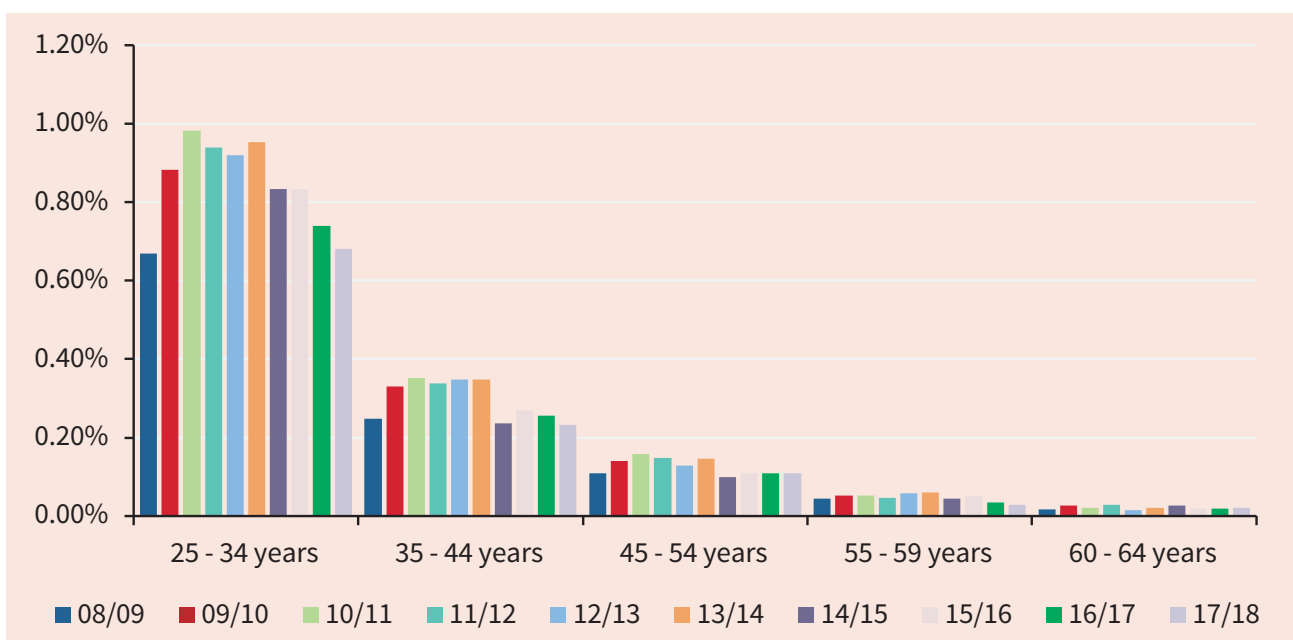
³¹ This is based on the rate of change excluding TCD from the 17/18 to 18/19 academic year, applied to the totals for 17/18.

Table 3.1: Population without a Higher Education Qualification by Age, 2009 and 2019

Age	Males			Females			Total		
	2009	2019	Change	2009	2019	Change	2009	2019	Change
20 - 24 yrs	138,800	112,110	-19%	123,012	102,620	-17%	261,812	214,730	-18%
25 - 34 yrs	216,440	137,295	-37%	167,055	132,258	-21%	383,495	269,553	-30%
35 - 44 yrs	190,288	174,524	-8%	166,650	163,016	-2%	356,938	337,540	-5%
45 - 54 yrs	190,060	187,644	-1%	180,960	179,496	-1%	371,020	367,140	-1%
55 - 59 yrs	86,651	94,537	9%	81,900	95,568	17%	168,551	190,105	13%
60 - 64 yrs	81,822	88,200	8%	80,184	85,626	7%	162,006	173,826	7%
25-64 yrs	765,261	682,200	-11%	676,749	55,964	-3%	1,442,010	1,338,164	-7%

Source: CSO

The rate of decline in the population without a higher education qualification has been higher in younger age groups. While there were 383,000 people aged 25-34 without a third-level education in Ireland in 2009, there were only 270,000 in this category by 2019. This is due to both demographic changes and the higher level of educational attainment of this cohort (55% in 2019). Against this background, it is useful to examine participation rates of mature students based on the percentage attending from the potential population pool. This is shown in Figure 3.2 below. This shows that participation rates are significantly higher for the younger age categories. Across most age groups, an increase in the rate of participation as mature students can be seen following the onset of higher unemployment after the economic crisis of 2007/08. However, participation rates have now fallen back to the same levels witnessed prior to the crash, indicating that the rate of participation appears to have been stable over this period, though with higher take-up of the opportunity to study when employment possibilities are weaker. For example, 0.68% of 25-34-year-olds were first-time mature students in 2017/18, virtually unchanged from 2008/09 (0.67%).

Figure 3.2: Participation rate as First-Time Mature Students in HEIs, 2008/09 to 2017/18

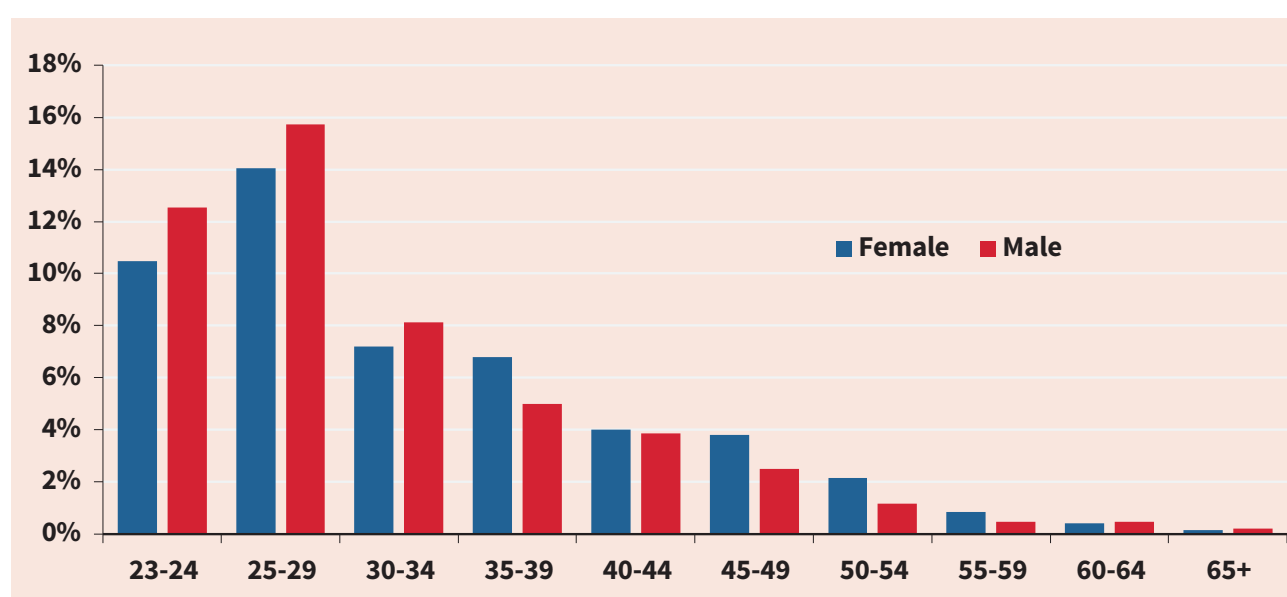
Source: Indecon analysis based on HEA and CSO data

While noting that the recent fall in participation is likely, in part, to relate to changed labour market conditions, the fact that the overall rate has only returned to pre-crisis levels is concerning, given the overall policy aim of increasing the rate of lifelong learning in Ireland. Ireland's 12.6% lifelong learning rate, defined as the participation by adults aged 25-64 in education or training, in the four weeks prior to being surveyed, is lower than that of a number of European countries. For example, more than one in three Swedes report some education and training in the previous four weeks. This is below a number of policy targets set, for example the 15% target for adult participation by 2020 as set in the EU's Education and Training 2020 Framework; 15% by 2025 in National Skills Strategy 2025³² and as referenced in the Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018-2020; 18% by 2025 in Future Jobs Ireland 2019.³³

3.2 AGE AND GENDER COMPOSITION

As noted above, participation by mature students tends to be concentrated in younger age categories. Only one in five mature students are aged 40 or older, representing less than 2% of the total student intake. In terms of gender, males outnumber females in the younger age cohorts, though from age 35 and older there are more women than men attending higher education for the first time. This may, in part, reflect the impact of women returning to the labour market after a period of child-minding. The large population of males without a HE qualification may also impact on participation rates. The rate of participation of first-time mature students in HEIs, broken down by age and gender, is shown in Figure 3.3 below.

Figure 3.3: Age and Gender of First-Time Mature Students in HEIs, 2017/18



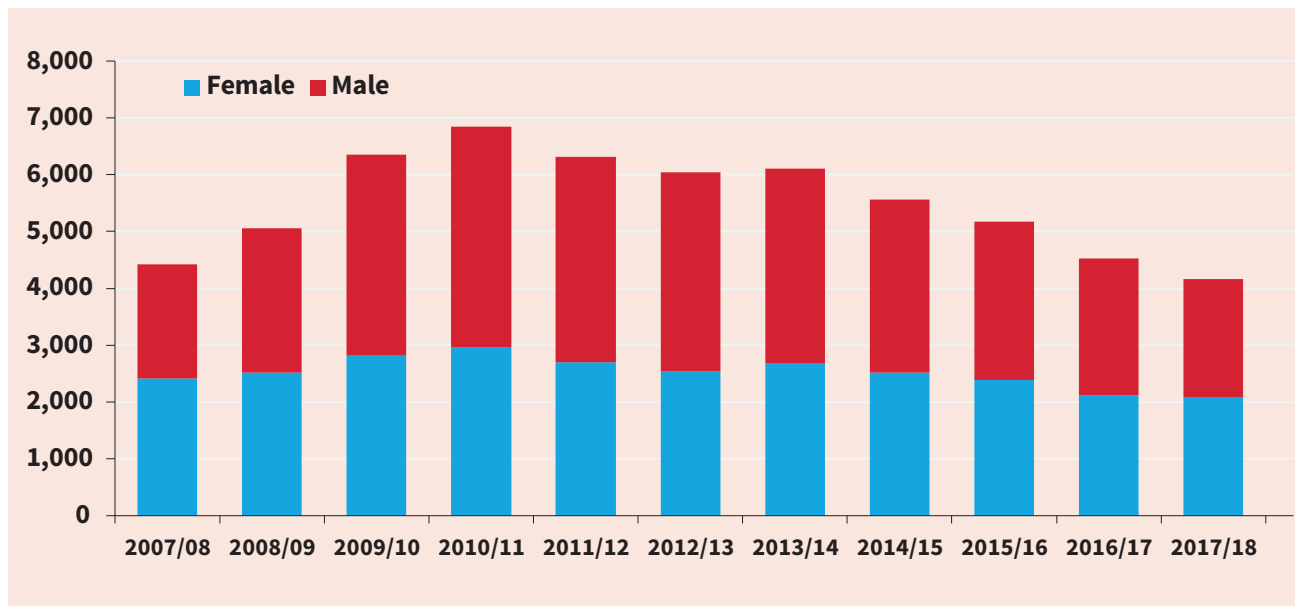
Source: HEA

³² https://www.education.ie/en/publications/policy-reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf

³³ <https://www.enterprise.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Future-Jobs-Ireland-2019.pdf>

The fall in mature student participation witnessed over the last decade was particularly pronounced among males, whose numbers have fallen by almost half (46%), compared to a 30% fall for females aged 23 and above. This is shown in Figure 3.4. However, of note is the greater volatility in the number of first-time male mature students. This may reflect the earlier rise in numbers during the crisis in the Irish economy.

Figure 3.4: Gender of First-Time Mature Students in HEIs, 2007/08 to 2017/2018



Source: HEA

3.3 PARTICIPATION RATES BY INSTITUTION

It is useful to examine which institutions mature students attend, and the rate of mature student participation between the different forms of higher education institution (university, college or institute of technology). The distribution of mature students by institution is shown in Table 3.2, as expressed as a percentage of all mature students. Over half of all mature students attend an institute of technology, with most of the remainder in one of the universities. The fall in mature student participation from 2010/11 was most pronounced in colleges (50%), though universities (32%) and institutes of technology (42%) also reported significant falls.

Table 3.2: Distribution of Mature Students by Institution, 2018/19

Universities		Colleges		Institutes of Technology	
University of Limerick	3.2%	St. Angela’s College	1.2%	IT Tralee	2.5%
Trinity College Dublin*	6.5%	NCAD	0.6%	IT Blanchardstown	2.5%
Maynooth University	6.0%	RCSI	2.1%	IT Tallaght	1.8%
NUI Galway	4.1%	Mary Immaculate College	0.5%	Letterkenny IT	3.8%
DCU	6.3%	IADT	1.2%	IT Sligo	3.1%
UCC	9.2%			Athlone IT	4.5%
UCD	6.6%			IT Carlow	4.9%
				Dundalk IT	4.2%
				Limerick IT	6.1%
				GMIT	3.4%
				Waterford IT	7.3%
				Cork IT	1.0%
				DIT	7.3%
Total	42.0%	Total	5.6%	Total	52.4%
Source: HEA. * Figure for TCD is for 2017/18					

Source: HEA. * Figure for TCD is for 2017/18

The participation rate as expressed as the number of mature students as a percentage of all new entrants by institution and institution type is displayed in Table 3.3 below. Institutes of technology and colleges show higher rates of participation of mature students than universities. In the 2018/19 academic year, 6.8% of new entrants in universities were mature students, compared with 12.3% in colleges and institutes of technology.

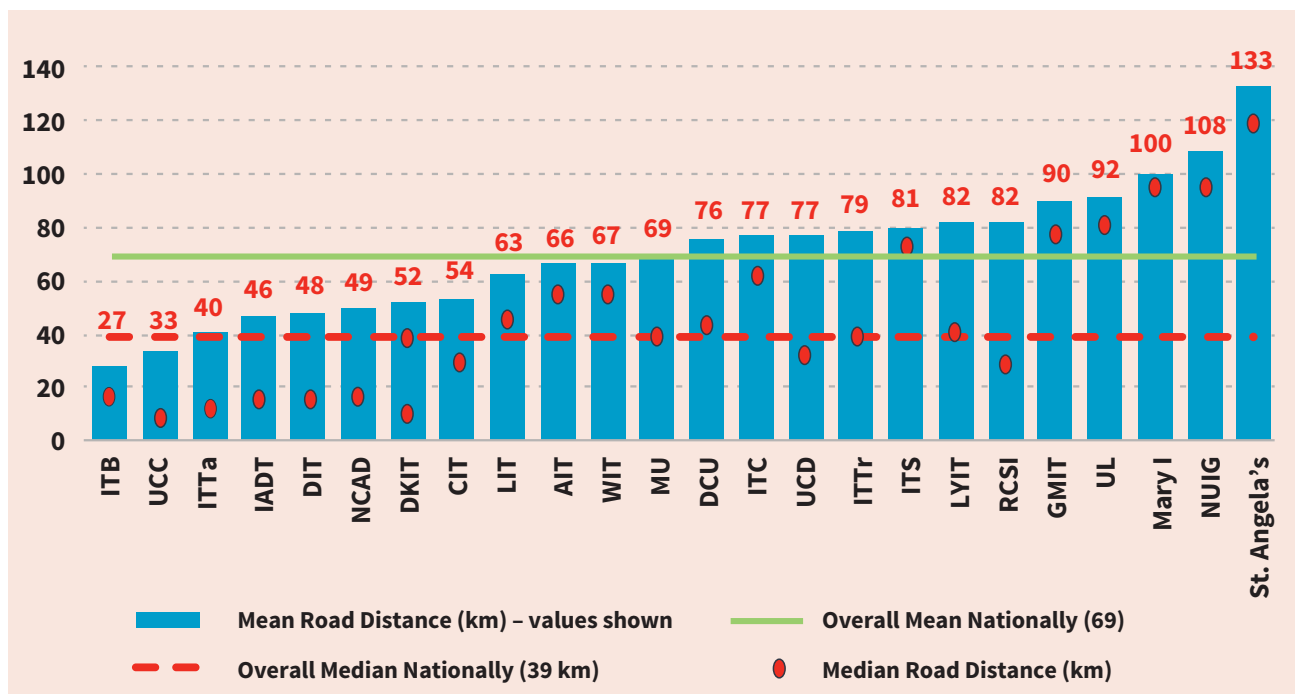
Table 3.3: Percentage of New Entrants that are Mature Students by Institution, 2018/19

Universities		Colleges		Institutes of Technology	
University of Limerick	4.9%	St. Angela's College	21.5%	IT Tralee	12.7%
Trinity College Dublin*	8.8%	NCAD	8.6%	IT Blanchardstown	13.8%
Maynooth University	7.0%	RCSI	20.0%	IT Tallaght	8.4%
NUI Galway	4.8%	Mary Immaculate College	2.1%	Letterkenny IT	15.4%
DCU	6.7%	IADT	9.2%	IT Sligo	12.9%
UCC	9.3%			Athlone IT	23.3%
UCD	5.8%			IT Carlow	18.9%
				Dundalk IT	14.6%
				Limerick IT	22.6%
				GMIT	10.2%
				Waterford IT	17.8%
				Cork IT	6.0%
				DIT	12.5%
Average	6.8%	Average	12.3%	Average	12.3%
Source: HEA. * Figure for TCD is for 2017/18					

Source: HEA. * Figure for TCD is for 2017/18

The greater number of mature students attending institutes of technology versus universities may be related to the duration and type of the programmes provided. Institutes of technology offer programmes from Certificates (Level 6) to Masters/PhD (Level 9/10). However, students can progress via a step based ‘add on’ programmes pathway via the ladder system from Level 6 to Levels 7 and 8, thereby building on their educational awards achieved. They may also enrol on a Level 8 but can leave with an exit award at Level 6/7. Universities generally start with Level 8 programmes, while institutes of technology generally deliver programmes that are more diverse. Institutes of technology also facilitate flexible learning via Springboard+ programmes with blended learning approaches (online lecture material and an in-house practical timetable to suit the learners), though Springboard+ is not limited to institutes of technology. These programmes are also available as full-time or part-time (taking individual modules per semester to suit students’ circumstances). The next figure shows that distance from home plays a significant role in explaining some of the differences in the percentage of mature students between institutes of technology and colleges, as compared to universities. Note, however, that this graph relates to all students, not just mature students and other factors, such as course availability and level, may influence a student’s choice of institution.

Figure 3.5: Average Road Distance from Home to Institution, 2017/18 Enrolments



Source: HEA. *Higher Education Spatial and Socio-Economic Profile*, October 2019.

3.4 PARTICIPATION RATES BY COUNTY

The distribution of Irish-domiciled mature students by county is shown in Table 3.4. While the distribution of mature students appears to be broadly in line with the distribution of population, the number of financially supported mature students in rural counties appears higher than their overall population weighting.

Table 3.4: Distribution of Mature Students, 2018/19

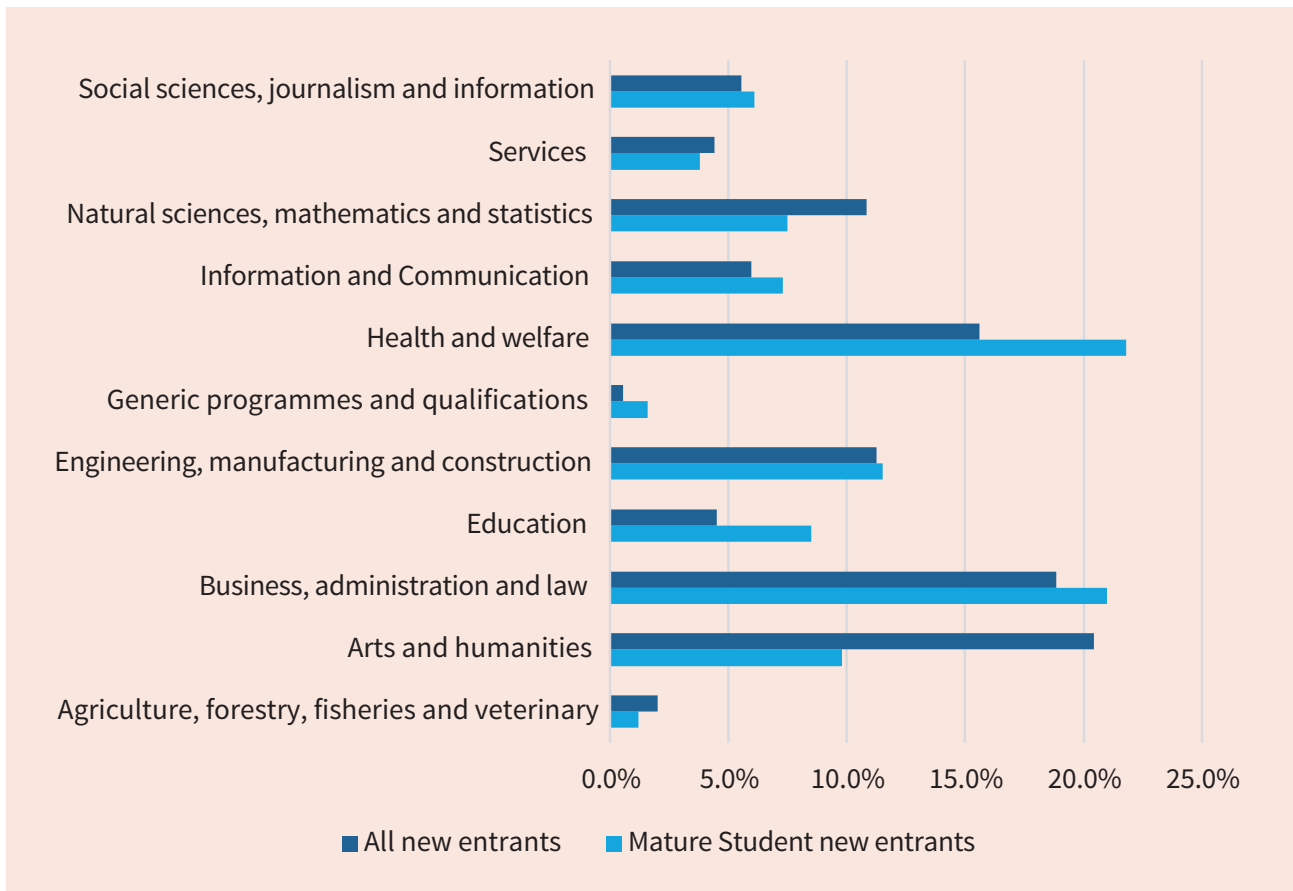
	Enrolments (Source: HEA)	Financially Assisted - SUSI (Source: SUSI)	Financially Assisted - BTEA (Source: DEASP ³⁴)	Population Size (Source: CSO, 2016)
Dublin	26.5%	21.9%	20.9%	28.3%
Cork	8.0%	10.6%	3.5%	11.4%
Galway	5.5%	6.6%	6.3%	5.4%
Kildare	5.4%	3.6%	3.3%	4.7%
Meath	3.7%	2.7%	1.6%	4.1%
Limerick	5.2%	5.5%	6.9%	4.1%
Tipperary	3.6%	3.6%	3.6%	3.4%
Donegal	4.5%	4.3%	5.9%	3.3%
Wexford	3.0%	2.9%	2.7%	3.1%
Kerry	2.7%	3.7%	4.2%	3.1%
Wicklow	2.3%	2.0%	2.5%	3.0%
Mayo	2.1%	3.6%	2.7%	2.7%
Louth	3.6%	3.6%	4.8%	2.7%
Clare	2.7%	2.7%	2.3%	2.5%
Waterford	3.4%	3.8%	5.4%	2.4%
Kilkenny	2.3%	2.5%	2.0%	2.1%
Westmeath	2.8%	2.5%	2.1%	1.9%
Laois	1.7%	1.9%	1.3%	1.8%
Offaly	2.0%	1.8%	1.2%	1.6%
Cavan	1.1%	1.0%	0.7%	1.6%
Sligo	2.3%	2.8%	2.7%	1.4%
Roscommon	1.4%	1.3%	0.7%	1.4%
Monaghan	1.1%	1.2%	0.8%	1.3%
Carlow	1.7%	1.9%	2.7%	1.2%
Longford	0.9%	1.2%	0.9%	0.9%
Leitrim	0.7%	1.0%	0.9%	0.7%
<i>Source: HEA, SUSI, Department of Social Protection and CSO</i>				

³⁴ Data relates to December 2019

3.5 PARTICIPATION RATES BY FIELD OF STUDY

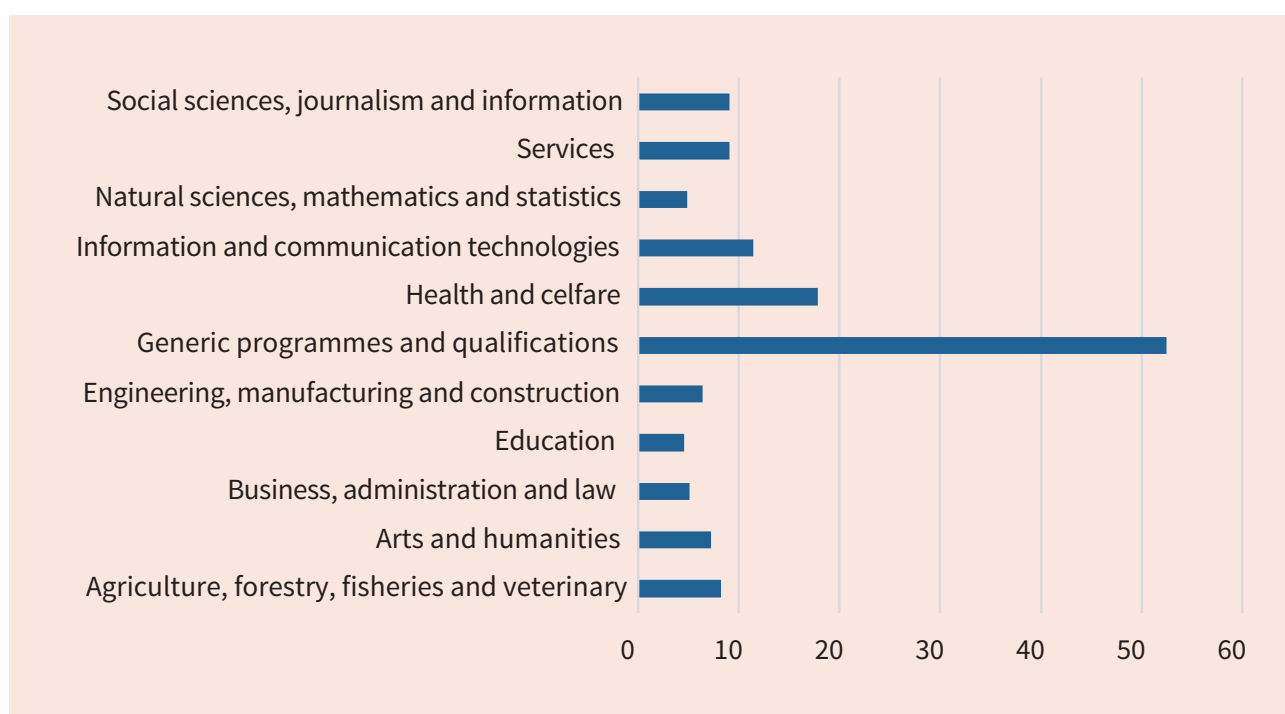
Mature students undertake a range of courses when they attend higher education. About one in five are in a Health and Welfare course or a course in Business, Administration & Law. Other important areas of study are Engineering, Manufacturing & Construction. The areas of study chosen by mature students are illustrated in Figure 3.6.

Figure 3.6: Mature Student Areas of Study, 2018/19*



Source: HEA * Figures for TCD incorporated into figures are for 2017/18

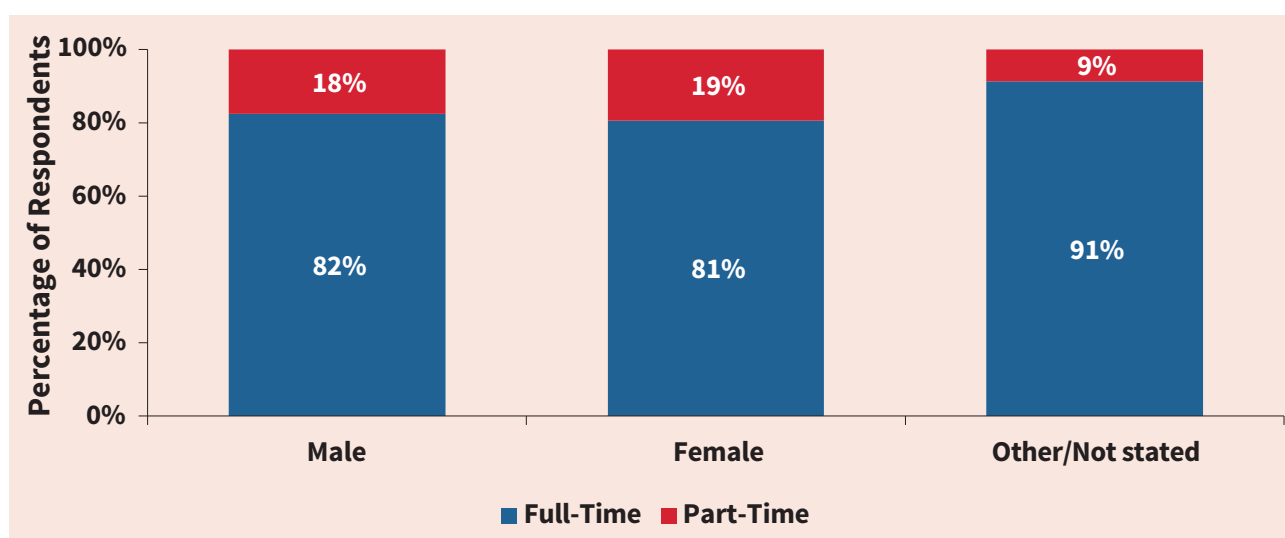
There are strong patterns between the choice of subject area and gender. Women make up a large majority in Social Sciences; Journalism & Information; Health & Welfare; and Education, while men are heavily represented in Engineering, Manufacturing & Construction, and Information & Communication Technologies (ICTs). The distribution of courses attended by mature students also varies strongly by institution. For example, the institutes of technology provide a large share of places in Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction for mature students. Mature students generally make up a small percentage of students within each field of study. This is illustrated in Figure 3.7. Half of all students undergoing courses classed as 'Generic programmes and qualifications' are mature students, though as shown above this accounts for a relatively small number of students. This category captures those courses providing fundamental skills that do not emphasise or specialise in a particular field of study. Other notable exceptions include Health and Welfare (18%) and ICT (11%).

Figure 3.7: Percentage of Mature Students within each field of study, 2018/19*

Source: HEA. * Figures relate to new entrants. Figures for TCD incorporated into figures are for 2017/18

3.6 FULL-TIME/PART-TIME PARTICIPATION RATES

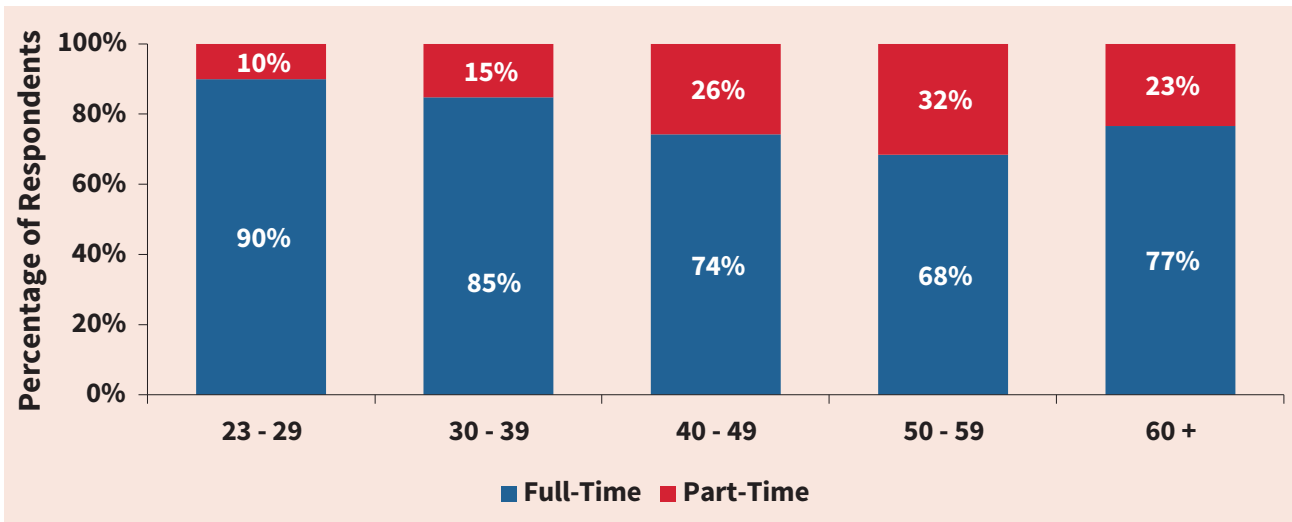
Most mature student participation currently is full-time, although they constitute a large majority of those who choose to study part-time. The proportion of mature students who study full-time and part-time is shown in Figure 3.8. HEA data shows that in 2019/20 students aged 24+ made up 12% of full-time student enrolments and 87% of part-time students in higher education. In the case of new entrants, in 2019/20 7% of full-time new entrants and 86% of part-time (Year 1) new entrants were mature students. Currently, part-time students are included in the core state funding allocation model on an FTE pro-rata basis, though the cost of provision of student services and supports (IT, registry, supports, library, etc.) may not fully reflect the cost of provision of these services to part-time students.

Figure 3.8: Full and Part-Time Current and Former Mature Students by Gender, 2020

Source: Analysis of Indecon survey of Mature Students

Older mature students are more likely to participate in HE through part-time study. Full and part-time current and former mature students are disaggregated by age in Figure 3.9. 90% of those aged 23-29 are full-time students compared to 68% of those aged 50-59.

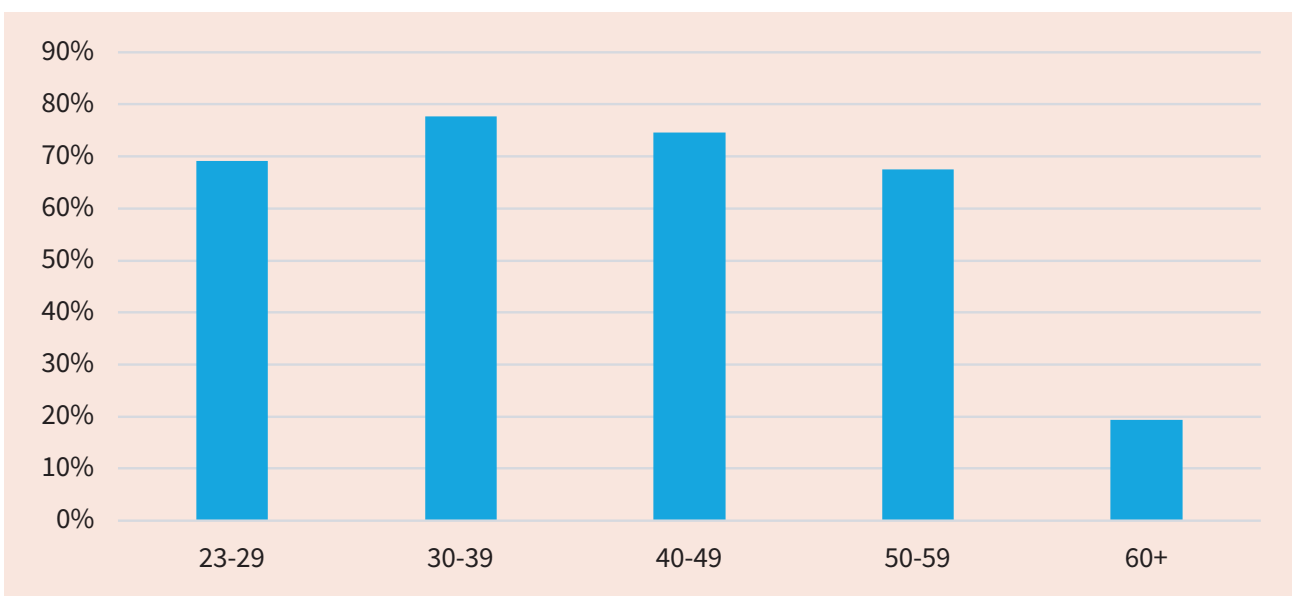
Figure 3.9: Full and Part-Time Current and Former Mature Students by Age, 2020



Source: Analysis of Indecon survey of Mature Students

The preference for part-time study may in part be driven by work responsibilities, though employment rates decline from 30-39 (see Figure 3.10) while study by part-time increases, indicating that there are other drivers for the choice of part-time education.

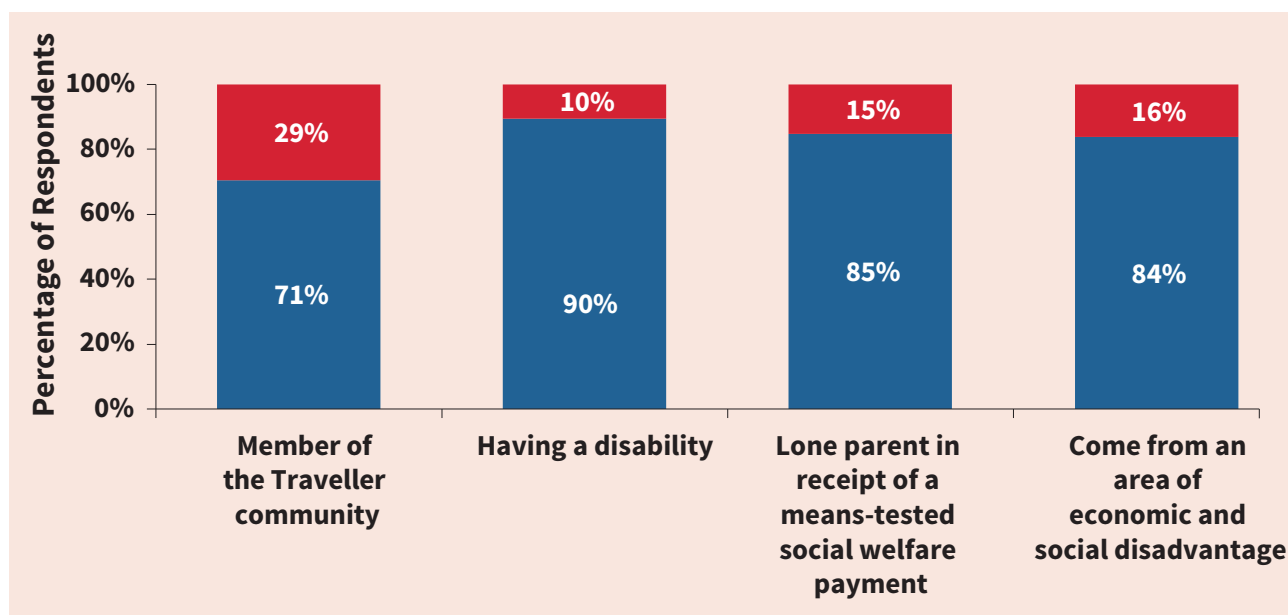
Figure 3.10: Employment Rate by Age Group, 2016



Source: CSO Census

In considering the trends in mature student participation, it is also of note that in addition to overall participation rates, there is variance in the mix between part-time and full-time courses across different NAP target groups. There is a higher concentration of part-time students among members of the Traveller Community, at 29%, compared to members of other NAP target groups. Figure 3.11 shows the participation rates for different NAP target groups in higher education, as determined from Indecon's survey of mature students.

Figure 3.11: Full and Part-Time Current and Former Mature Students by NAP Group, 2020



Source: Analysis of Indecon survey of Mature Students

The Government's July 2020 stimulus package included funding for additional part and full-time postgraduate places and modular places across higher education institutions. In addition, the Human Capital Initiative (HCI) aims to increase capacity in higher education in skills-focused programmes designed to meet priority skills needs. The HCI also seeks to promote innovative and responsive models of programme delivery, and to enable the higher education system to respond rapidly to changes in both skills requirements and technology.

3.7 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- The rate of participation of mature students in higher education rose to a peak in 2010/11, and subsequently declined as a percentage of new entrants. The initial increase occurred at a time of rising unemployment following the onset of the recession. The subsequent decline in participation coincided with a fall in unemployment, suggesting that the availability of employment opportunities may have an impact on the numbers of mature students participating in higher education. Indecon's analysis supports the assessment in the NAP Progress Review which noted that the decline in mature student participation coincided with "a period of economic recovery and labour market reactivation that was not foreseen when the targets for the National Access Plan were being set and this may be an influencing factor in the declining number of mature students."
- As well as short-term changes in economic conditions, longer-term changes in population structures may also impact on the rate at which mature students participate in higher education. First-time new entrant mature students are primarily drawn from the population of those aged 23+ whose highest educational attainment level is FET or lower. From 2009 to 2019, there has been a decline in the size of this potential pool of mature students by 7%.
- Over half of all mature students attend an institute of technology and in 2018/19 6.8% of new entrants in universities were mature students, compared with 12.3% in colleges and institutes of technology. This may, in part, reflect differences in courses on offer. Institutes of technology offer programmes from certificates (Level 6) to masters/PhD's (Level 9/10).
- Most mature student participation currently is full-time, although they constitute a large majority of those who choose to study part-time. HEA data shows that in 2019/20 students aged 24+ made up 12% of full-time student enrolments and 87% of part-time students in higher education. Older mature students are more likely to participate in HE through part-time study. 90% of those aged 23-29 are full-time students compared to 68% of those aged 50-59.

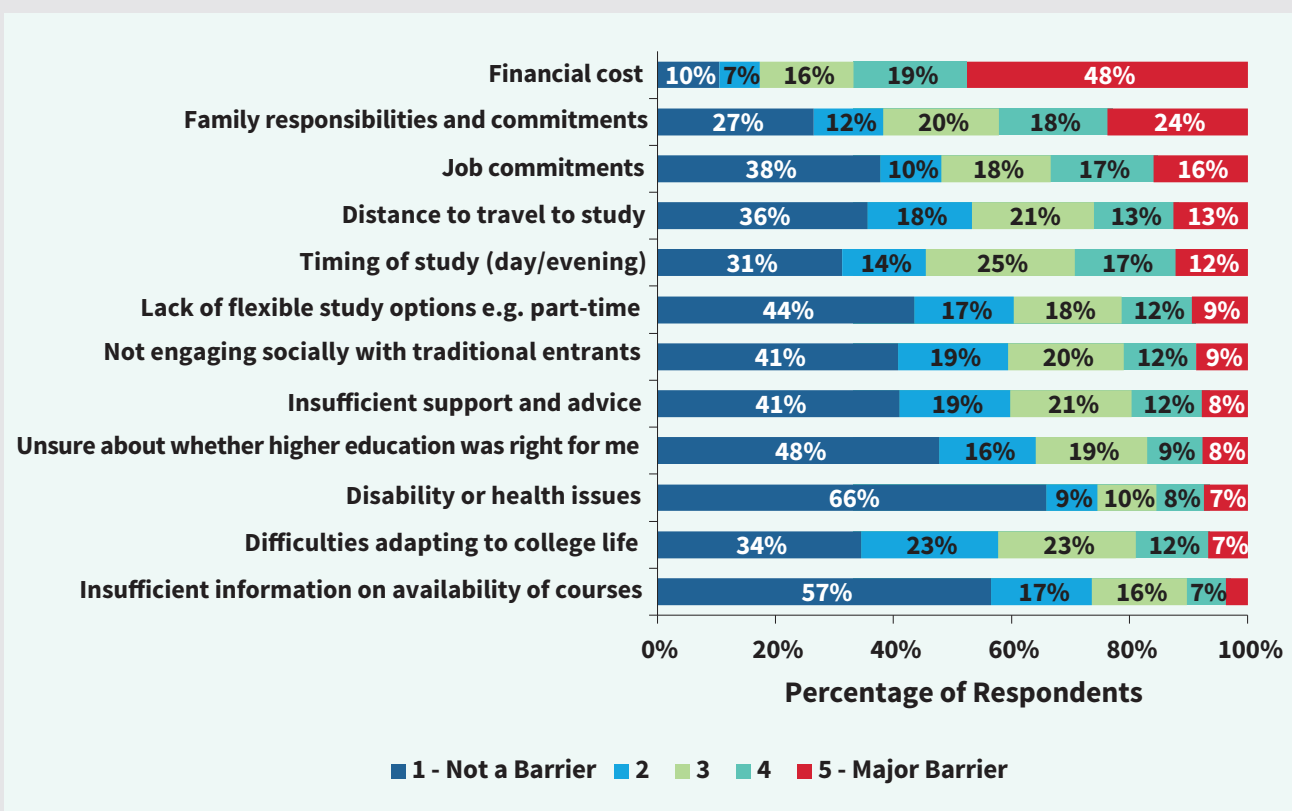
4

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

4.1 BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

As part of this study Indecon has investigated the barriers and challenges associated with participation in higher education for first-time mature students. Mature students report a wide range of barriers to participation in HE, though financial costs and family/work responsibilities were identified as the most important. Figure 4.1 shows the views of mature students on barriers to participation, with respondents being asked to rate on a Likert Scale whether factors were not barriers (1) or major barriers (5). Financial cost is seen as being the single most significant barrier, with 48% of respondents stating that it was a major barrier. Family responsibilities and job commitments were also rated as major barriers, at 42% and 33%. Research into Foundation Certificates (Fitzsimons and O'Neill (2015) and Magrath and Fitzsimons (2017)) evidence difficulties in access to these programmes for some cohorts because of course fees.

Figure 4.1: Survey of Barriers to Participation in Higher Education



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

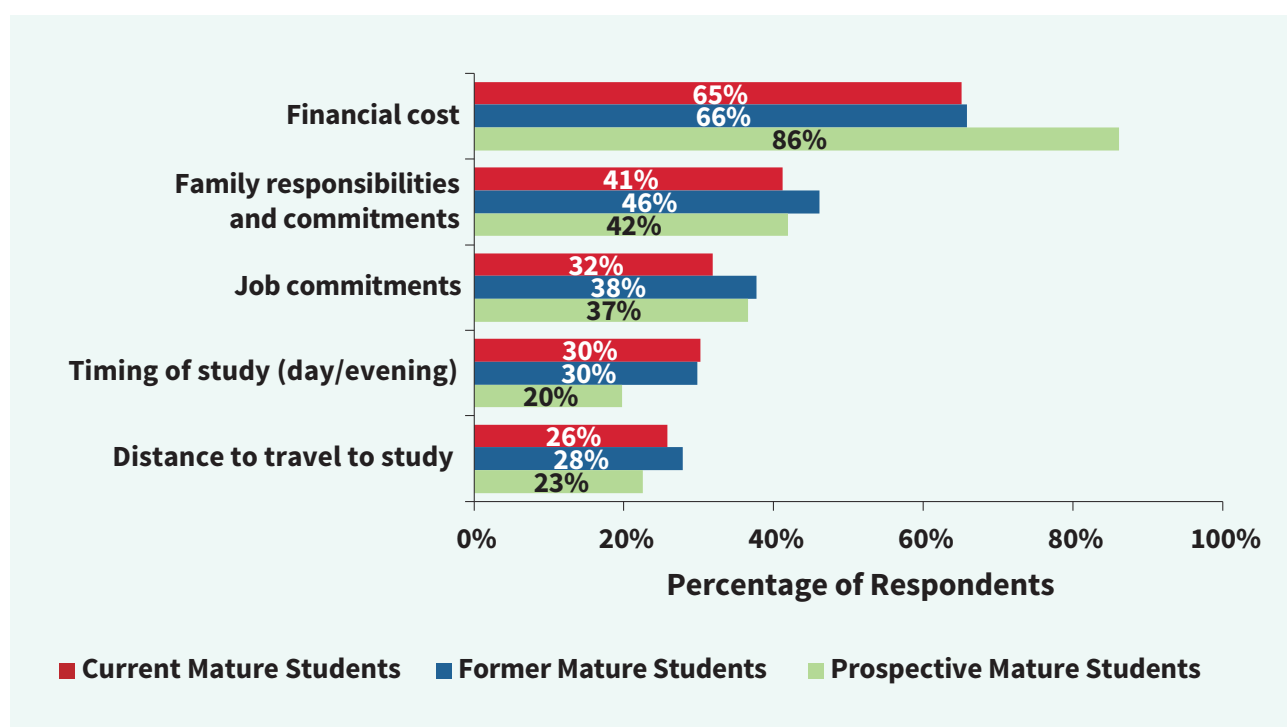
Financial costs were the main issues faced by students, regardless of age. The top five barriers faced by students, broken down into the age categories of the respondents, are shown in Table 4.1 below. However, the issue of family responsibilities and commitments were more prevalent for those in the 30-49-year-old age bracket, compared with 23-29 (24%) and 50+ (41%). The higher level for the 30-49-year-old age bracket may reflect both responsibilities of childcare and caring for elderly relatives. One in three students in this age category also reported the timing of study as being a significant barrier to participation, which may again reflect family responsibilities.

Table 4.1: Survey of Mature Students on the Top 5 Major (4-5 on Likert Scale) Barriers to Participation in Higher Education, by Age Group

Barrier	Age Group			
	23 - 29	30 - 39	40 - 49	50+
Financial cost	72%	68%	70%	54%
Family responsibilities and commitments	24%	46%	55%	41%
Job commitments	35%	32%	33%	34%
Timing of study (day/evening)	26%	31%	34%	25%
Distance to travel to study	27%	24%	28%	26%

Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

Financial cost is particularly acute for potential mature students. Figure 4.2 shows the break-down of the top five barriers faced, based on whether they are past, current or potential mature students. In considering barriers to participation in education, it is important to note that this varies by gender and by other characteristics. For example, CSO evidence shows that when asked about the main difficulty to accessing lifelong learning, four in ten females (39.9%) reported ‘Did not have time due to family responsibilities’ as the main difficulty compared to one in five males (21.6%). The main difficulty for males was ‘Training conflicted with work schedule/was organised at inconvenient time’ reported by over a fifth of males (26.1%), and this factor was the main difficulty for one in eight females (12.5%).³⁵

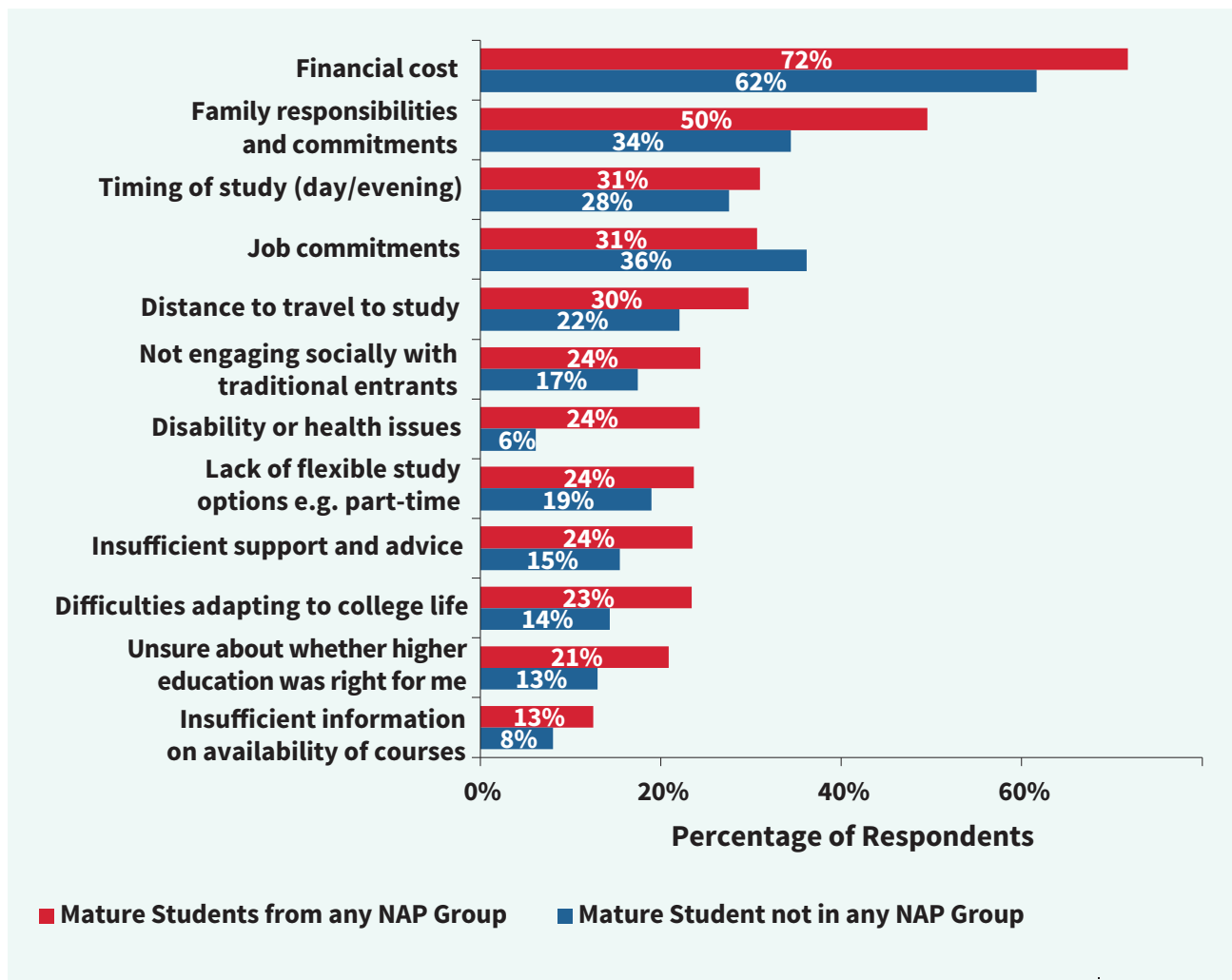
Figure 4.2: Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on the Top 5 Major (4-5 on Likert Scale) Barriers to Participation in Higher Education

Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

³⁵ CSO Adult Education Survey (2017)

Respondents who belonged to one or more NAP group generally reported much higher barriers than respondents who did not belong to any NAP group. The higher levels reported for financial costs as a barrier supports the merits of targeting available resources on these groups. Also of note is that a higher proportion of NAP respondents reported family responsibilities and commitments as a barrier. Given the extent to which mature students cite family and work pressures as barriers, the option of part-time and flexible learning may be more attractive for this cohort. One in four mature students from one of the NAP target groups responded that a lack of part-time/flexible learning options was a barrier. Greater options for such non-traditional forms of higher education may therefore be particularly important in addressing participation among this cohort.

Figure 4.3: NAP and Non-NAP Mature Students on Whether Certain Factors Were Major (4-5 on Likert Scale) Barriers to Participation in Higher Education



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

Research shows that participation in higher education by mature students poses particular risks for the cohort.³⁶ Many mature students commence their studies with a degree of uncertainty surrounding the financial commitment and eventual return on their investment,³⁷ but still hold high expectations that their efforts will result in financially rewarding jobs or careers.³⁸

³⁶ Kearns (2014), "A Risk Worth Taking? A Study of Mature Students' Experiences in Two Irish Universities."

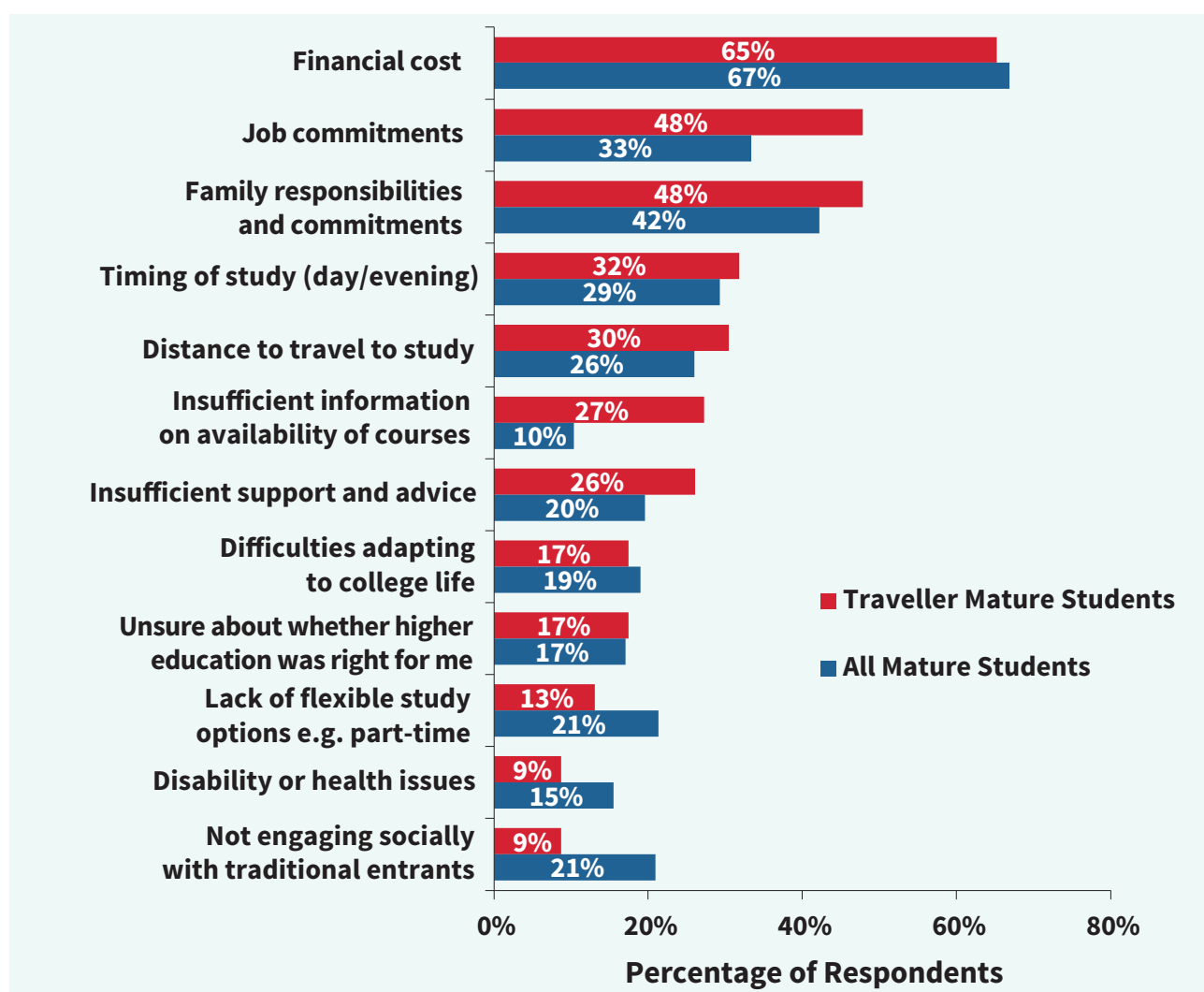
³⁷ Moss (2004), "Creating Space for learning: conceptualising women and higher education through time and space", Gender and Education.

In the institute of technology sector at Levels 6 through 8, mature students are more likely to progress to the following year of study than a new entrant who is under the age of 23. The opposite is true at Level 8 in the university and colleges sector, where traditional students are more likely to progress than mature students.³⁹ Among the total student body, students from families in higher socio-economic categories tend to display a higher progression rate than those from unskilled and manual categories.⁴¹

4.2 ISSUES FACED BY MEMBERS OF THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

The issues faced by members of the Traveller Community were similar to those reported by mature students in general. Figure 4.4 displays the views of members of the Traveller Community who were, or were considering becoming, mature students. Almost two thirds of Traveller mature students saw financial cost as a major barrier to participation in higher education, with job commitments and family responsibilities being seen as major barriers by half of respondents. However, only a small number of respondents reported that they could not mix easily with traditional entrants.

Figure 4.4: Mature Traveller Students on Whether Certain Factors Were Major (4-5 on Likert Scale) Barriers to Participation in Higher Education



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

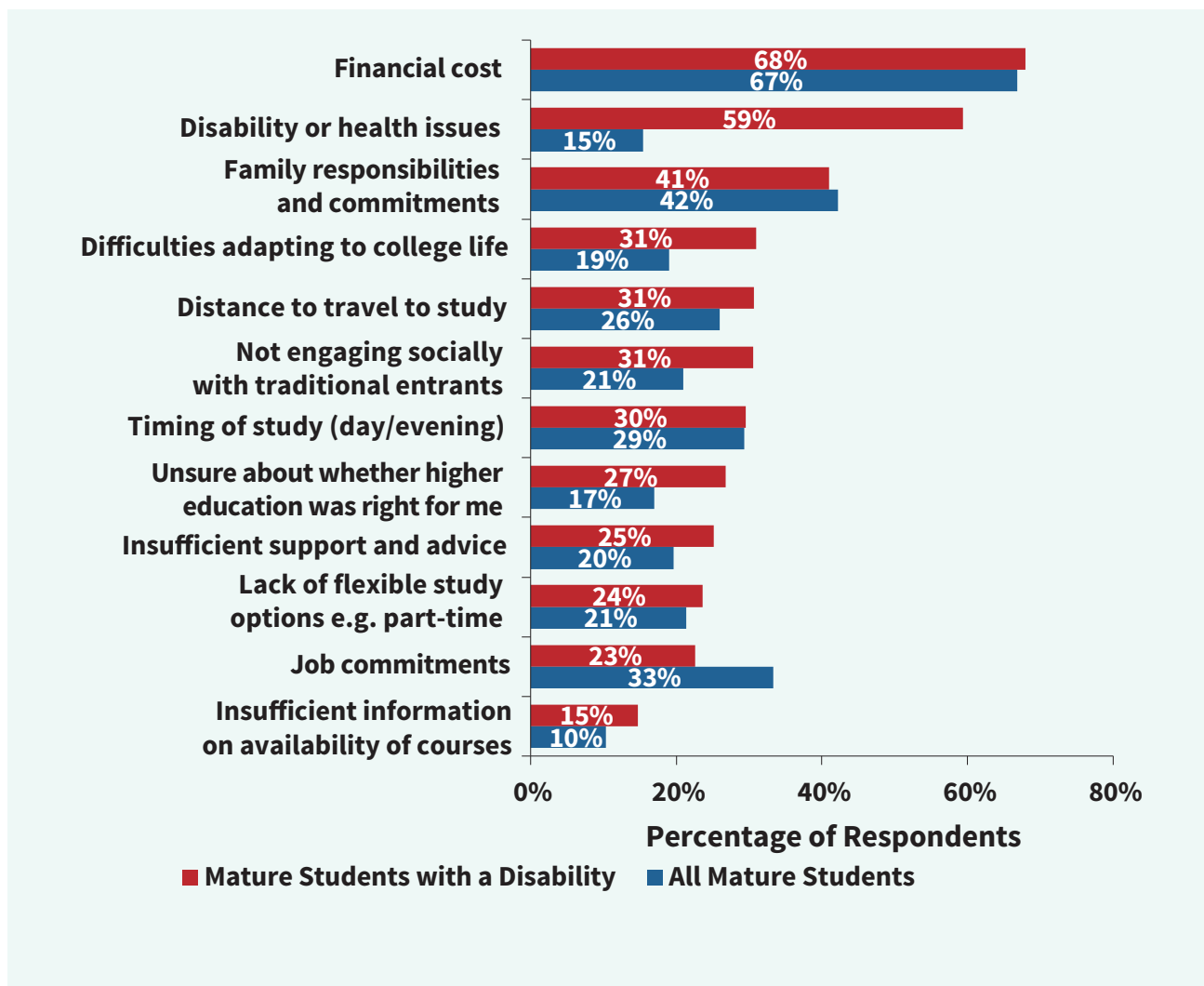
³⁸ Purcell et al (2007), 'Hard Lessons for Lifelong Learners? Age and Experience in the Graduate Labour Market,' Higher Education Quarterly, 61, 1.

³⁹ HEA (2018), "A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education 2014/15 to 2015/16."

4.3 ISSUES FACED BY PERSONS WITH A DISABILITY

Problems related to health were reported as a significant barrier by a majority of mature students with a disability (59%), though financial barriers remained the single most cited barrier. In Figure 4.5 the views of mature students with a disability on the major barriers to participation in higher education are illustrated. While 41% of respondents with a disability find family responsibilities and commitments to be a major barrier to higher education, only 23% view job commitments as being a major barrier. This may reflect the lower employment rate among those with a disability.⁴⁰

Figure 4.5: Mature Students with a Disability on Whether Certain Factors Were Major (4-5 on Likert Scale) Barriers to Participation in Higher Education



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

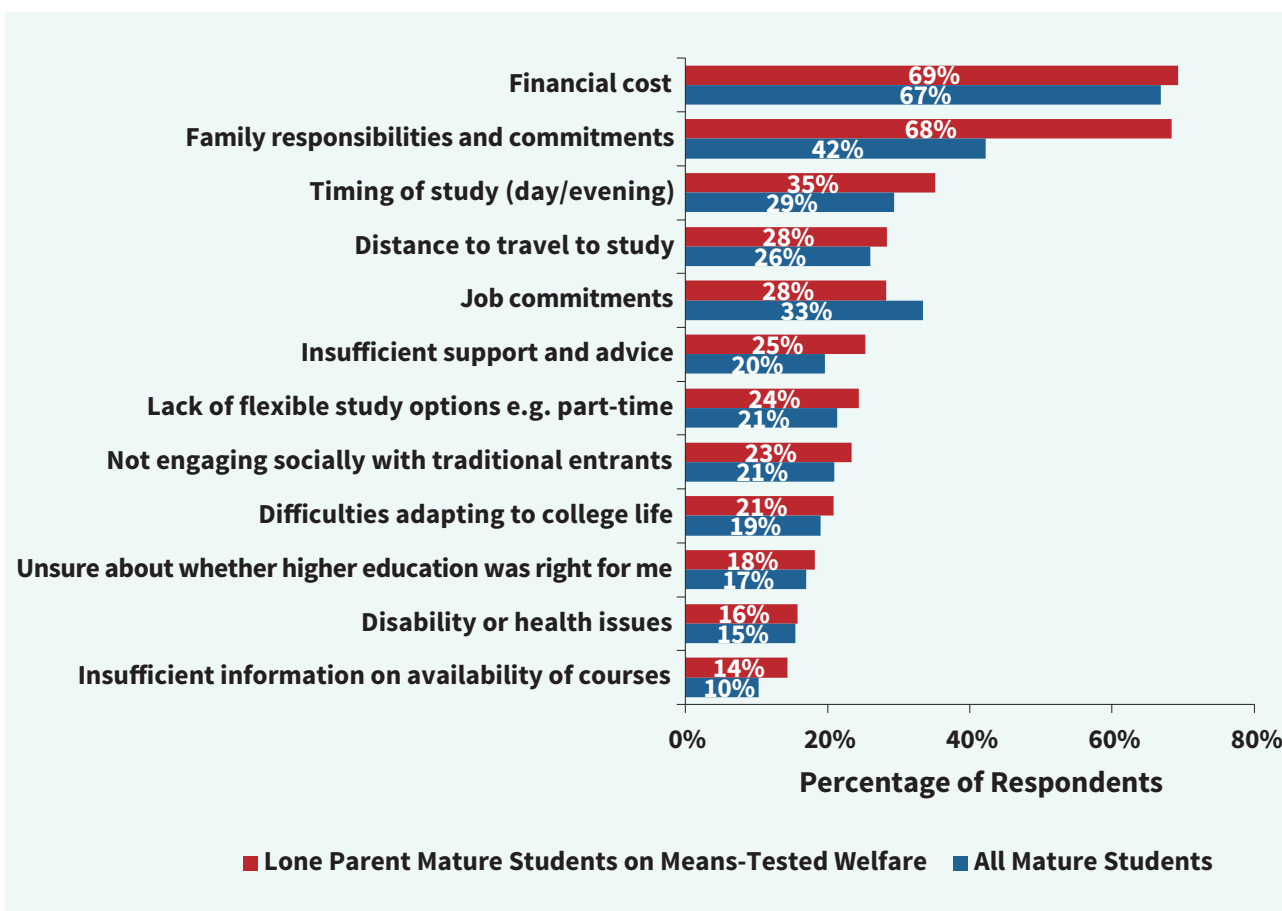
⁴⁰ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-wbn/thewellbeingofthenation2017/wk/>

4.4 ISSUES FACED BY LONE PARENTS

Many international studies have shown that the barriers to participating in education experienced by many adults are exacerbated in the case of lone parents. Typical barriers are finance, managing study and work responsibilities, access to local learning opportunities and the associated factor of availability of convenient transport. This is supported by evidence of lone parents in Ireland which finds that financial costs in particular represent a significant barrier to participation by lone parents.⁴¹ Research by Osborne, Marks and Turner (2004)⁴² and Lyonette et al (2015)⁴³ shows how mature applicants weigh the advantages and disadvantages of higher education. For lone parents, managing the demands of work, home and family was a major negative factor in their decision to become mature students. Major concerns were timetabling and the provision of childcare. Almost all applicants were motivated by the prospect of getting a better job, but the majority were ill-informed about the financial implications of entering higher education. Many were also worried about their ability to learn.

Indecon's survey of mature students in Ireland who were lone parents not surprisingly confirms the importance of family responsibilities and commitments which were rated by 68% of respondents as being a major barrier to participation in higher education. Financial cost was also seen by this group as a major barrier. Figure 4.6 provides the views of mature students that are lone parents on whether they saw certain factors as major barriers to participation in higher education.

Figure 4.6: Lone Parents Receiving Welfare on Whether Certain Factors Were Major (4-5 on Likert Scale) Barriers to Participation in Higher Education



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

⁴¹ Byrne and Murray (2017), "An Independent Review to Identify the Supports and Barriers for Lone Parents in Accessing Higher Education and to Examine Measures to Increase Participation."

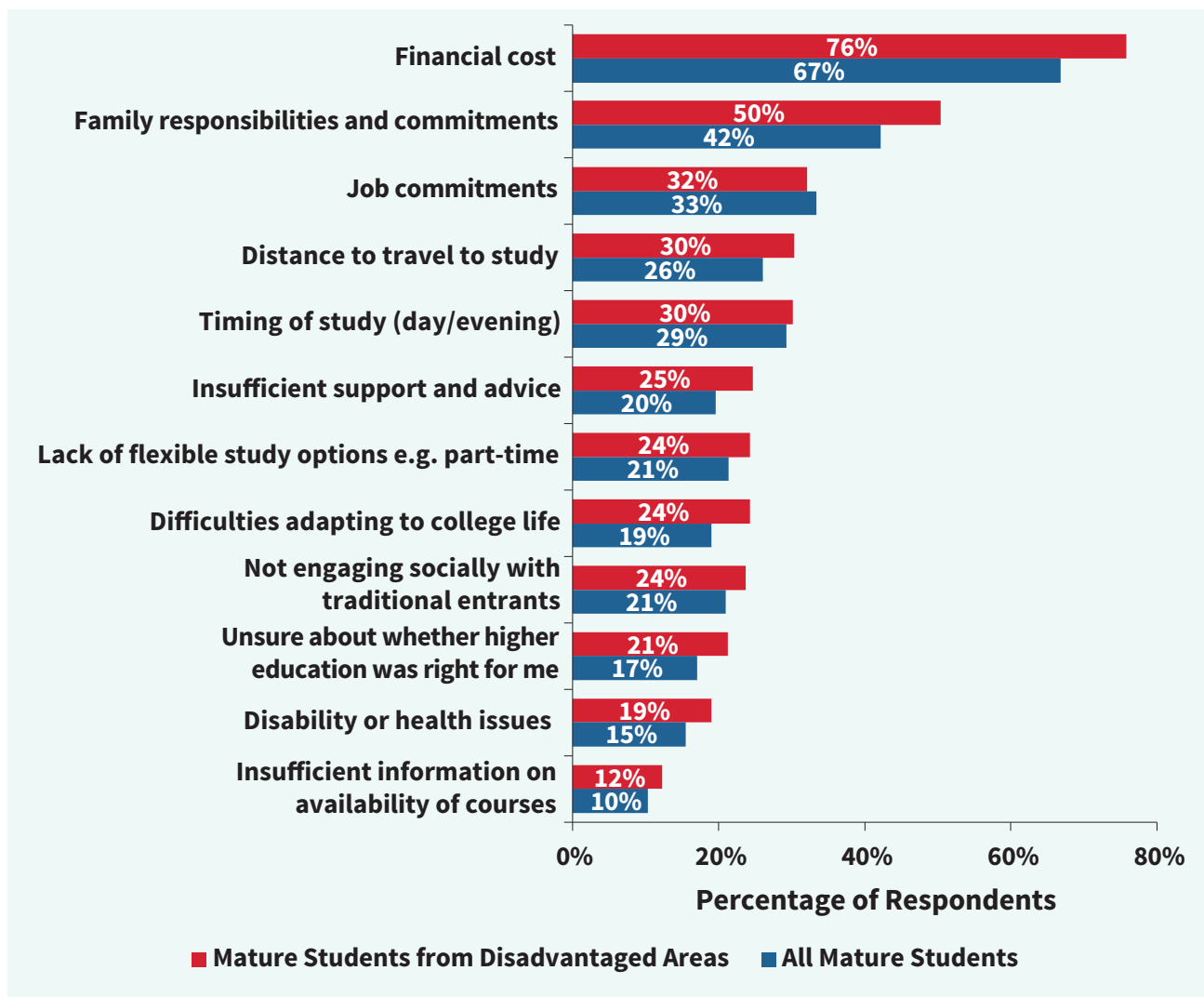
⁴² Osborne, Marks, and Turner, (2004) "Becoming a mature student: how adult applicants weigh the advantages and disadvantages of Higher Education." Higher Education, 48(3).

⁴³ Lyonette et al (2015) Tracking student mothers' Higher Education participation and early career outcomes over time: initial choices and aspirations, Higher Education experiences and career destinations.

4.5 ISSUES FACED BY PEOPLE FROM AREAS OF ECONOMIC & SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE

The survey results of mature students who were from a geographic area of economic or social disadvantage are shown in Figure 4.7. Financial cost was overwhelmingly seen as a major barrier to participation in higher education by this group, with 76% indicating so. Half of mature students from this cohort saw family responsibilities and commitments as being a major barrier to higher educational participation, while the equivalent figure for job commitments was 32%.

Figure 4.7: Mature Students from Areas of Socio-Economic Disadvantage on Whether Certain Factors Were Major (4-5 on Likert Scale) Barriers to Higher Education Participation

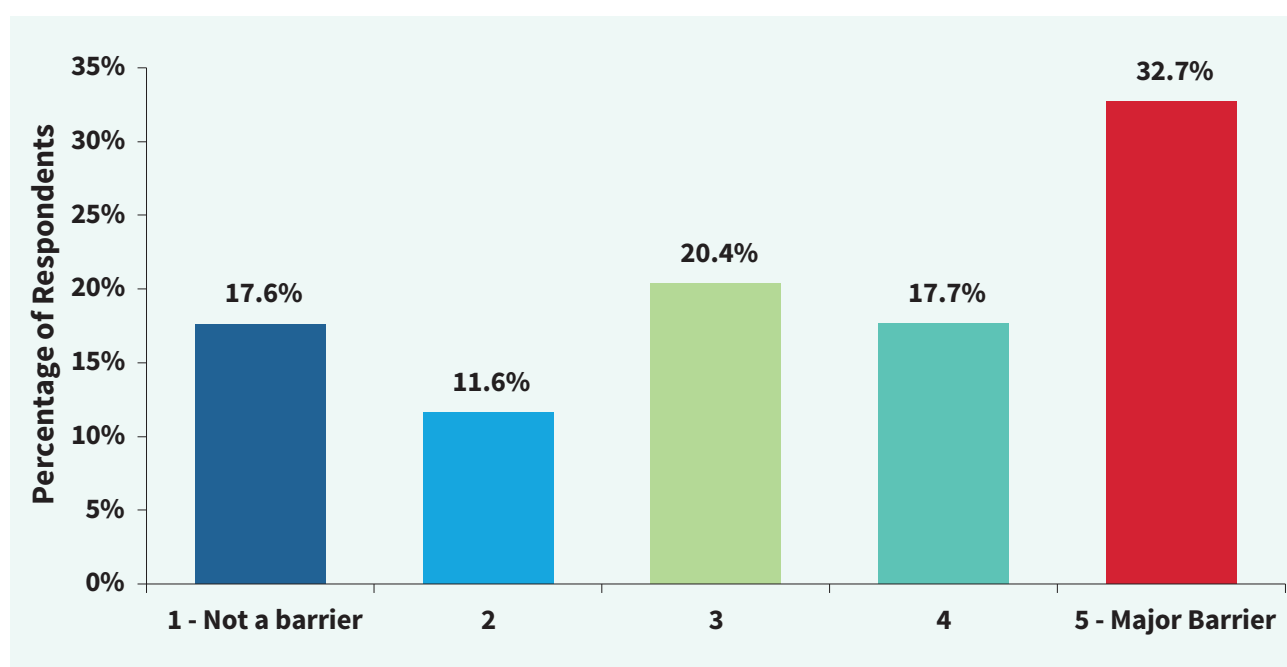


Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

4.6 IMPACT OF COVID-19

The views of mature students on whether the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions are a barrier to their participation in higher education are shown in Figure 4.8. Half of respondents see the Covid-19 restrictions as being a major barrier. It should be noted that higher education institutions put in place significant measures to ensure that courses could be delivered in the 2020-2021 academic year. Covid-19 has presented the educational sector with great challenges of engagement and delivery to all students. Supports have been established within the colleges, enabling students to progress through their education. However, travel restrictions and other concerns regarding Covid-19 will likely represent an additional barrier to participation. Indecon, however, notes that the responses of the higher educational sector to facilitate online learning may assist mature students in overcoming other barriers to participation.

Figure 4.8: Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on Whether the Covid-19 Restrictions are a Barrier to their participation in Higher Education



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

Students from each of the NAP groups surveyed felt that Covid-19 represented a major barrier on their ability to participate in higher education. This is shown in Table 4.2. Traveller mature students were the most likely to view the Covid-19 restrictions as being a barrier (48%), followed by lone parents (43%), those with a disability (39%) and those from an area of economic and social disadvantage (38%).

Table 4.2: Respondents' Views on Impact of Covid-19 Crisis on Ability to Participate in Higher Education

	Traveller	Persons with a disability	Lone parent	Come from area of disadvantage
1 - Not a barrier	22%	13%	17%	15%
2	4%	10%	9%	11%
3	13%	21%	18%	18%
4	13%	17%	14%	17%
5 - Major Barrier	48%	39%	43%	38%
<i>Source: Indecon analysis of responses to survey of Mature Students (2020)</i>				

4.7 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Mature students report a wide range of barriers to participation in higher education and financial costs and family/work responsibilities were identified as the two most important.
- Respondents who belong to one or more NAP groups generally reported much higher barriers than respondents who did not. Financial costs were seen as a barrier to participation, and family responsibilities and commitments were identified as a barrier by half of NAP respondents. Given the extent to which mature students cite family and work pressures as barriers, the option of part-time and flexible learning may be particularly relevant. One in four mature students from one of the NAP target groups responded that a lack of part-time/flexible learning options were a barrier.
- The issues faced by members of the individual NAP target groups showed some variance in the importance of different factors. Almost two thirds of Traveller mature students saw financial cost as a major barrier to participation in higher education, with job commitments and family responsibilities seen as major barriers by half of respondents. Health related problems were reported as a significant by a large majority of mature students with a disability (59%), though financial barriers remained the single most cited barrier. Family responsibilities and commitments were rated by 68% of lone parents as being a major barrier to participation in higher education, though financial cost was also seen by this group as a major barrier. Students who were from a geographic area of economic or social disadvantage reported that financial cost was a major barrier to participation in higher education.
- Covid-19 restrictions were seen as a significant barrier to participation in higher education by half of respondents. Many higher education institutions have put in place significant adaption and adjustment measures to ensure that courses could be delivered in the 2020/21 academic year. These initiatives may help in overcoming some of the other barriers to participation by mature students.

5

ASSESSMENT OF FUNDING SUPPORTS

5.1 OVERVIEW OF FUNDING SUPPORTS

There are a wide range of funding supports available in Ireland to mature students to participate in higher education. It is important to take account of the levels of these supports and the eligibility criteria. These are critical given that financial constraints are among the most significant barriers faced by mature students. Some of the main supports include:

- Student Grant Scheme (SUSI);
- Back to Education Allowance (BTEA);
- Free Fees Initiative;
- Springboard+;
- Part-time Education Option;
- National Childcare Scheme;
- Student Assistance Fund;
- PATH Strand 2 Bursaries (See Section 6.3); and
- Charitable/philanthropic bodies (e.g. Society of St. Vincent de Paul and Uversity).

Also relevant are the annual grants paid by HEA to individual institutions as part of the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH), which is discussed in Section 6.

5.2 SUSI GRANTS

The Student Grant Scheme (SUSI) is the centralised financial support scheme for students in Ireland.⁴⁴ Undergraduate student grants are divided into maintenance grants and fee grants as follows:

- Maintenance grants: Contribution towards the student's living costs.
- Fee grants: These can cover all or part of the student fee contribution; costs of essential field trips; and all or part of a student's tuition fees if not covered by the Free Fees Scheme.

Generally, students who qualify for a maintenance grant will also qualify for all elements of the fee grant. However, students may qualify for a fee grant, but not a maintenance grant, if they fulfil all the conditions for a student grant except with respect to residence in the State. Students aged over 23, who are returning to pursue a course after a full break in studies of at least five years, may qualify. A repeat period of study is allowed under exceptional circumstances, though only 100-150 students per annum typically benefit from this.

⁴⁴ Indecon understands that there is to be a review in 2021 of this important SUSI support scheme.

The SUSI grant is awarded on a means test, based on gross income, though some payments are excluded. The range of income sources which are disregarded for the purposes of assessing eligibility for student grants, has been expanded.⁴⁵ Earnings outside of term-time of up to €4,500 are allowed. The income limits for a family of fewer than four children are shown below, though are higher for every additional child going to college. Since September 2010, persons in receipt of a maintenance grant cannot also receive the Back to Education Allowance.⁴⁶ Additional funding was secured in Budget 2017 to facilitate the reinstatement of full maintenance grants from September 2017 for the most disadvantaged postgraduate students.

Table 5.1: Means Test Limits for Student Grants for families with < four children

	Maintenance	Fee Grant	
		Tuition Fees	Student Contribution
<€39,875	100%	100%	100%
Up to €40,970	75%	100%	100%
Up to €43,380	50%	100%	100%
Up to €45,790	25%	100%	100%
Up to €49,840	0%	50%	100%
Up to €54,240	0%	0%	50%
>€54,240	0%	0%	0%

Source: Citizens Information. Higher rates apply for families with 4-7 children, and >7 children.

For students who live less than 45 kilometres from the college they attend, the adjacent rate of maintenance grant is payable. The non-adjacent rate applies to everyone else. Budget 2011 changed the assessment of the qualifying distance criterion for the non-adjacent rate from 24 kilometres to 45 kilometres.⁴⁷ Prior to 2011 mature students automatically got the non-adjacent rate of maintenance grant even if they lived near the college. Mature students can move to the non-adjacent rate if they study abroad. The current rates are shown in the table below. Disadvantaged students can also qualify for a special rate of maintenance grant, which is shown below. To be classed as an independent mature student, a candidate must live separately from their parents from the year before the year of entry to the course. An independent student is assessed on their own income, and that of their spouse, civil partner or cohabitant.

Table 5.2: Maintenance grant rates for 2020-2021

	Non-adjacent rate	Adjacent Rate
Full Maintenance (100%)	€3,025	€1,215
Special rate	€5,915	€2,375

Source: Citizens Information

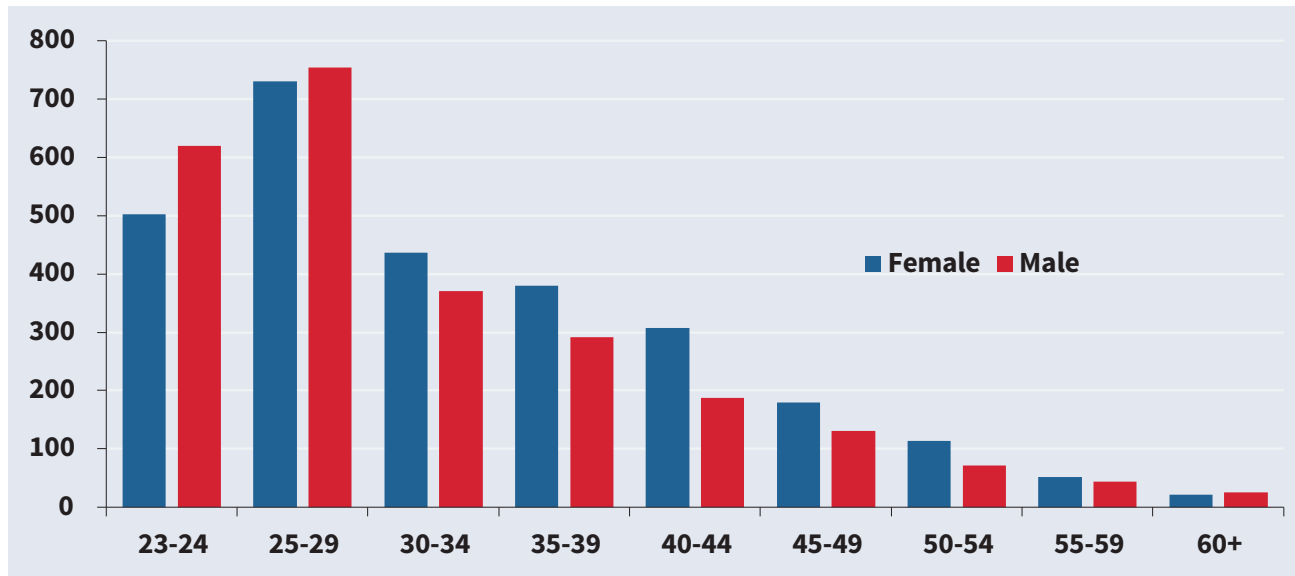
⁴⁵ The following income sources were not disregarded in 2011, but were in 2020: Aftercare Allowance; All Ireland Scholarship Scheme; Back to Work Family Dividend; Blind Pension (where paid to the applicant); Caranua services support; Carer's Support Grant (where paid to recipients of the Carer's Allowance and Domiciliary Care Allowance); Community Benefit Education Bursary for the New Children's Hospital; Cost of Education Allowance; Department of Education and Skills Third Level Bursary Schemes; Christmas Bonus payment; Domestic Water Services Refund; Exceptional Needs Payments; Household Benefits Package; Housing Assistance Payment; Independent Living Allowance for Young People in Residential Care; Jobseekers Allowance Transition (where paid to the applicant); Mobility Allowance (where paid to the applicant); Mortgage Interest Supplement; Rental Accommodation Scheme; Rent Supplement; TUSLA - NTRIS Employment Support Scheme; St. Vincent de Paul Education Bursary Scheme; St. Vincent De Paul education bursary; Uversity Bursary for Adult Learners; and Widowed or Surviving Civil Partner Grant.

⁴⁶ <http://gmitsu.ie/grants/btea/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2018-10-09a.350>

The gender and age composition of SUSI awardees is illustrated in Figure 5.1 below, and shows a similar pattern to the overall composition of mature student attendance based on the HEA data.⁴⁸ There are slightly more female (52%) than male (48%) mature student recipients of SUSI awards. Males outnumber females in younger age groups (23-30), though a high number of females is noticeable in the 40-44 age group.

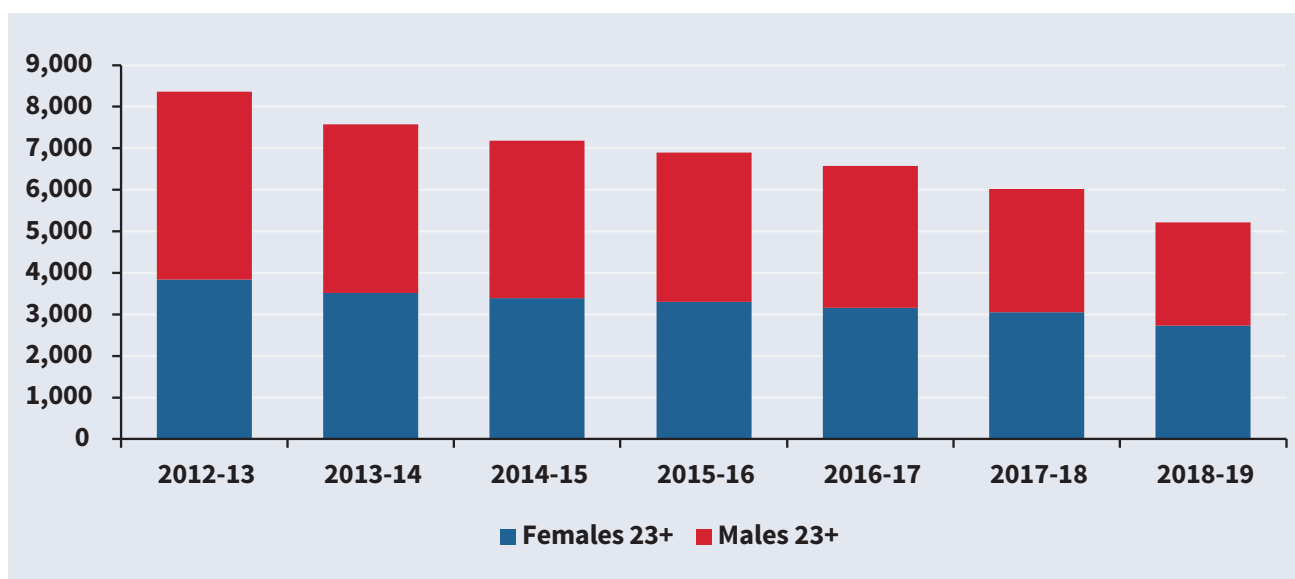
Figure 5.1: Age and Gender of SUSI Award New-Starter Grantees, 2018/19



Source: SUSI. Note: New Starter refers to 1st Year Students. Data on gender was not collected by SUSI for 2019-2020.

A breakdown of SUSI awardees by gender shows that there has been a sharper fall in the number of awards to males (-45%) since 2012/3 than females over the last seven academic years. This is shown in Figure 5.2 below. The rate of fall in males was highest in the 25-44 age groups.

Figure 5.2: Gender of SUSI Award Grantees, 2012 – 2019

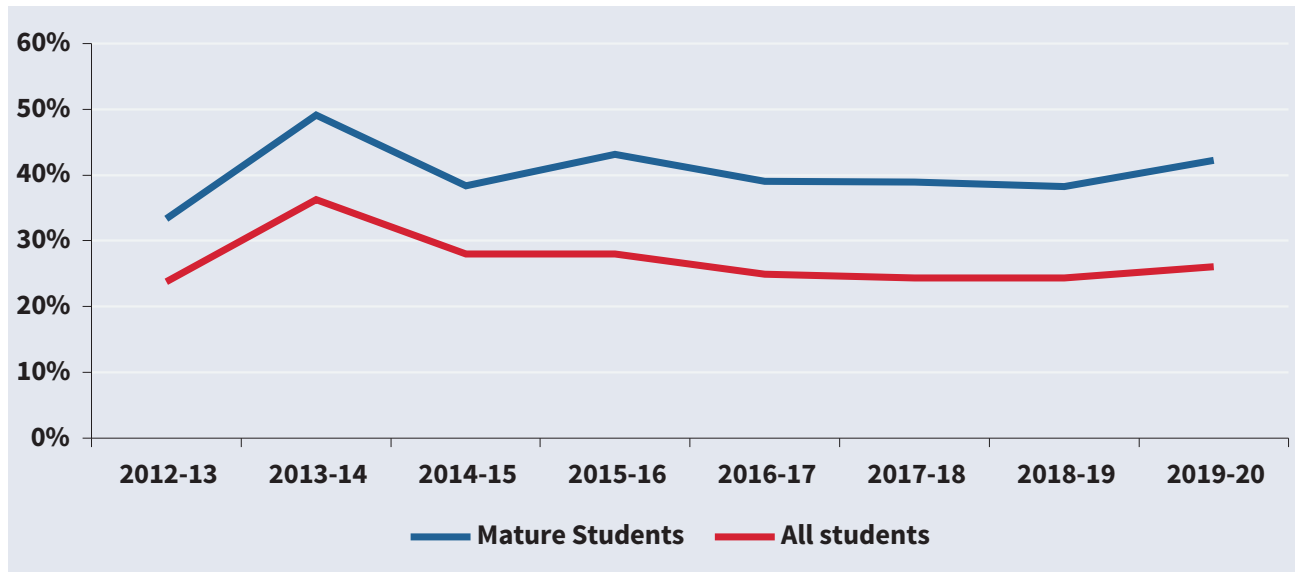


Source: SUSI. Note: Data on gender was not collected by SUSI for 2019-2020 period

⁴⁸ This data relates to new entrants as undergraduates, but they may not necessarily be first-time higher education participants, so the HEA and SUSI datasets are not directly comparable.

The number of non-approvals of grant applications are higher for mature students than for students more generally. This is illustrated in Figure 5.3. SUSI is a demand-led scheme and eligibility is based on specific criteria. The SUSI website contains an 'Eligibility Reckoner' which allows potential applicants to check their eligibility prior to submitting a formal application.

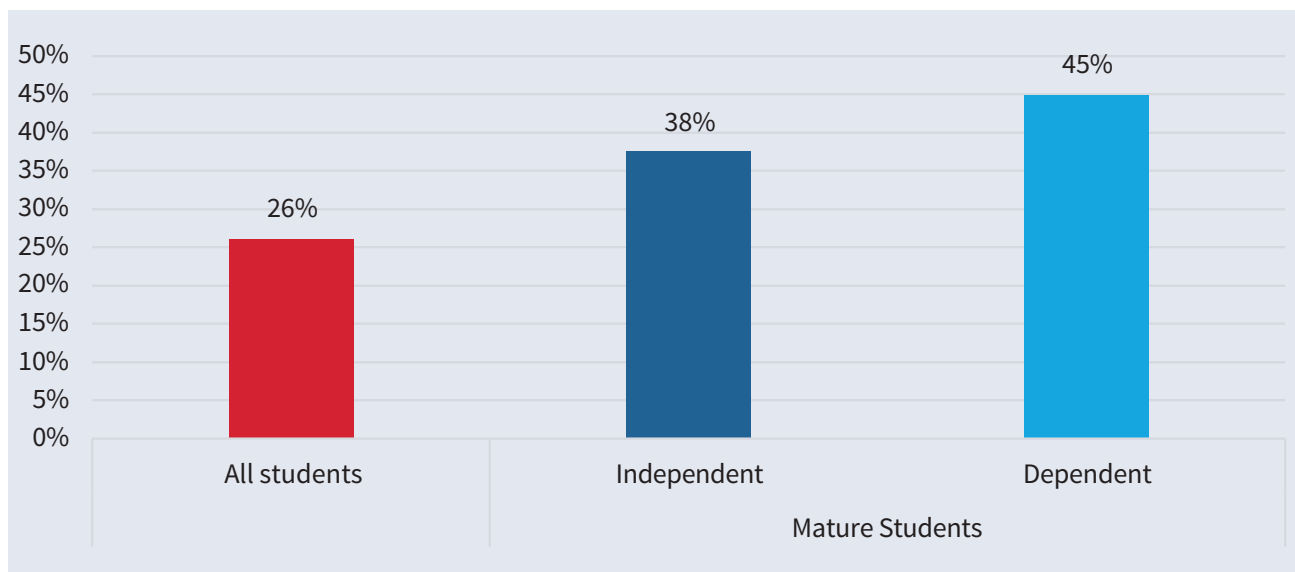
Figure 5.3: Non-Approval rate for SUSI Grants, 2012/13 to 2019/20



Source: SUSI.

The higher refusal rate for mature student applications is evident whether they are classed as independent or dependent, though it is somewhat high for the latter with almost half of all⁴⁹ dependent student applications being refused. This is shown in Figure 5.4 below.

Figure 5.4: Refusal rate for SUSI Grants by status, 2019/20



Source: SUSI.

⁴⁹ This excludes applications which are cancelled.

Other factors which may influence the acceptance rate for mature students may be related to the issue of progression and the interaction with BTEA in terms of eligibility for maintenance grants.

In relation to progression, SUSI only gives grants where people are studying for a qualification at a higher level than any they already have. Many people under the age of 23 will not have had time to get a qualification, so will therefore be unlikely to be ineligible on the issue of progression. For example, over-23 applicants may be looking to change direction and wish to do a course of the same or lower level.

The interaction with BTEA may also result in some mature students not meeting eligibility criteria. BTEA is available to students applying for further or higher education that are over 21, or 18 and out of education two years and receiving a qualifying BTEA social welfare payment. In practice, a lower percentage of people under 23 take up BTEA. Obtaining BTEA will mean the student is not eligible for a maintenance grant but may still qualify for fee grants. Those on disability grants and lone parents can hold an award as well as a SUSI award.

A review of SUSI applicants shows that over-23-year-olds have almost three times the rate of refusal for these reasons compared to the under-23-year-olds. Removing these from the data changes the refusal rates to 21% (compared to 23%) for under 23s, with 34% (compared to 42%) for over 23s for 2019-20. As such, the issues of progression and BTEA explain about one third of the difference in the refusal rate between mature students and the rest of the student body. Differences in levels of acceptance could also be influenced by awareness of eligibility criteria.

48% of mature students who responded had positive views on SUSI grants compared to 29% who rated grants as poor. There were, however, some variance in responses by NAP groups.⁵⁰

Table 5.3: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on how they would rate SUSI Grants

	Very Good	Good	Neither Good nor Poor	Poor	Very Poor
All Mature Students	21%	27%	22%	14%	15%
Traveller Mature Students	14%	27%	41%	5%	14%
Mature Students with a Disability	26%	28%	15%	14%	16%
Lone Parents	29%	35%	16%	9%	11%
Area of economic/social disadvantage	22%	28%	20%	15%	15%
<i>Source: Indecon analysis of responses to survey of Mature Students (2020)</i>					

The Government has initiated a review of the rates and eligibility criteria for SUSI grants, including for postgraduate students. The terms of reference for this study include examining the value of the maintenance grants and income thresholds, the availability of grants for part-time students, supports for postgraduates, and how Ireland compares against other jurisdictions.

5.3 BTEA

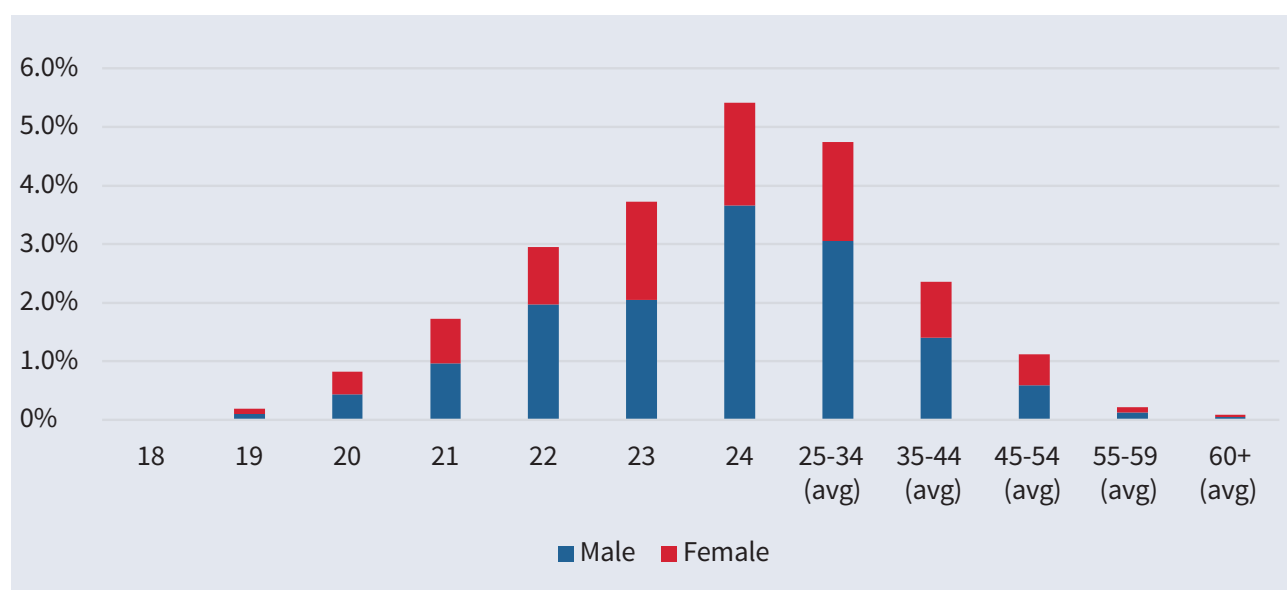
People who are unemployed, parenting alone, or have a disability and are obtaining certain payments from the Department of Social Protection, may participate in a third-level education course and are eligible for a Back to Education Allowance (BTEA). This is open to students in any approved university, institute of education or third-level college. The course must be a full-time day course and be approved for the Student Grant Scheme or be approved by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

⁵⁰ Indecon notes that on 12th November 2020 the Government announced a €300,000 fund to help members of the Traveller Community pursue third-level education.

Students in receipt of a one-parent family payment, jobseeker's transitional payment or a disability payment can stay on their current social welfare payment and apply for a student grant or can transfer to the BTEA. A decision was made in Budget 2010 to discontinue the practice of allowing students to hold the BTEA allowance and a student maintenance grant simultaneously as it represented a duplication of support payments. However, the cost of the student services charge and tuition fees payable to colleges (up to a maximum of €6,270), continues to be paid by SUSI in respect of qualifying students. Since 2015, BTEA recipients must re-establish their entitlement for the second or subsequent years of study. Since September 2017, an annual Cost of Education Allowance of €500 is payable to BTEA recipients who have a dependent child. For students over 26, the weekly BTEA is equal to the rate of the previously held social protection payment.

BTEA beneficiaries are predominantly male, with age-related participation peaking in the mid-20s. This is illustrated in the next figure. The age of BTEA beneficiaries is similar to that of first-time mature students generally, though more men appear to have received BTEA supports than compared to the mature student population generally.

Figure 5.5: Age and Gender composition of BTEA beneficiaries⁵¹, December 2019



Source: Department of Social Protection

Indecon's survey asked mature students how they would rate the BTEA scheme. 36% viewed the scheme positively while 28% rated the BTEA support as poor. Students are eligible to apply for social housing while they are studying. In assessing household income for the purposes of the household means policy, a housing authority may decide to disregard income that is temporary in nature, and scholarships or higher education grants are always excluded.⁵²

⁵¹ Third-Level Option

⁵² <https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/migratedfiles/en/Publications/DevelopmentandHousing/Housing/FileDownload%2C29413%2Cen.pdf>

Table 5.4: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on how they would rate BTEA

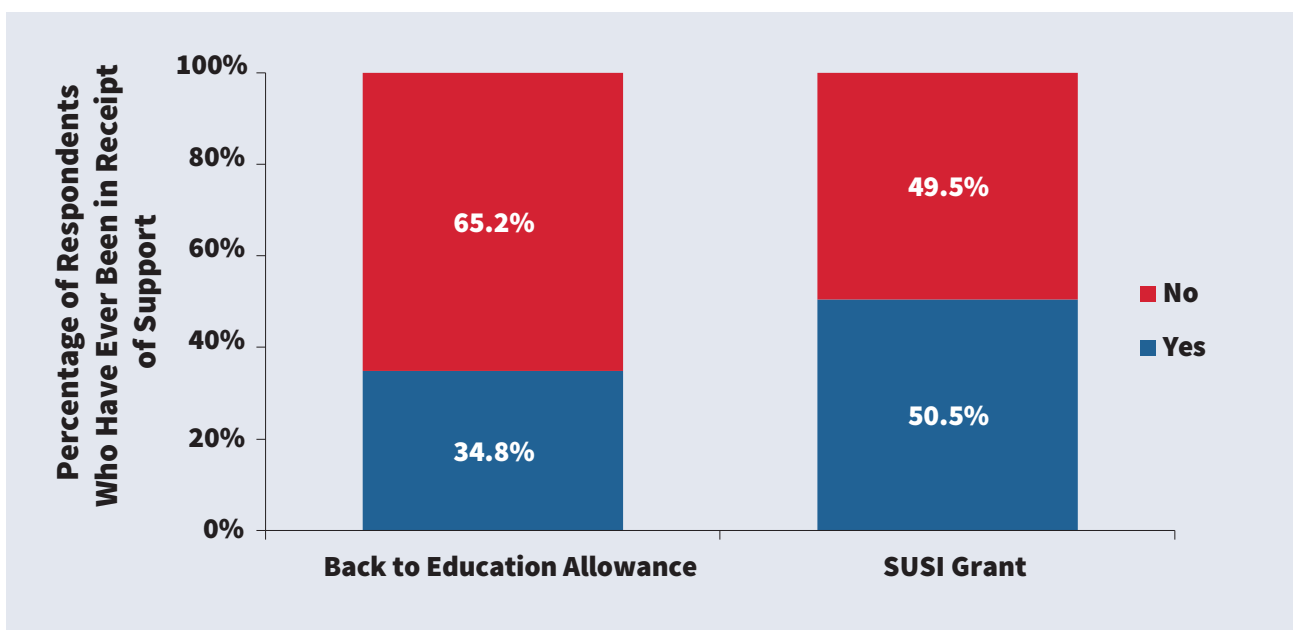
	Very Good	Good	Neither Good nor Poor	Poor	Very Poor
All Mature Students	16%	22%	35%	14%	14%
Traveller Mature Students	14%	14%	52%	10%	10%
Mature Students with a Disability	16%	18%	34%	16%	17%
Lone Parents	17%	26%	32%	14%	12%
Area of economic/social disadvantage	16%	24%	31%	16%	13%

Source: Indecon analysis of responses to survey of Mature Students (2020)

5.4 INTEGRATION OF SUSI AND BTEA SUPPORTS

In addition to considering the overall levels of funding and participation of mature students on SUSI and BTEA programmes, it is also useful to investigate the integration of these two schemes. Indecon's survey of mature students asked if students had ever received either the BTEA or a SUSI grant. Around half of respondents had received a SUSI grant, while one in three had received the Back to Education Allowance. Around 22% of all mature students received both, highlighting the importance for some participants of different funding supports.

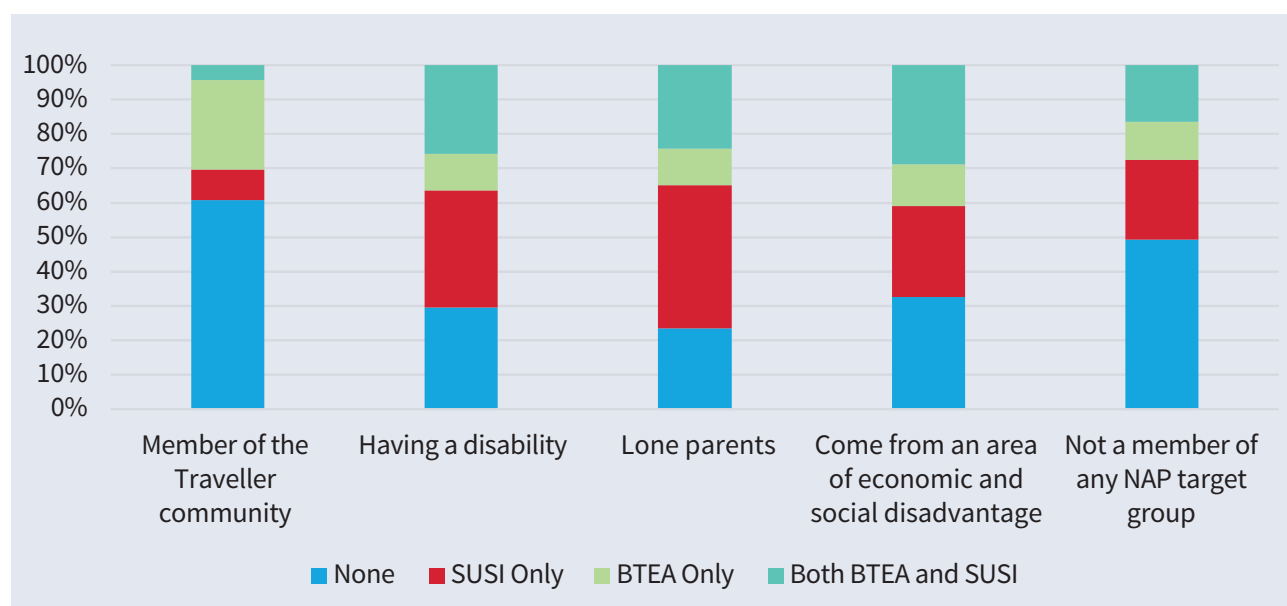
In addition, there are specific financial supports for students with disabilities and supports to help students who study abroad. There are also supports specifically aimed at students under the age of 23. As well as funding supports there are advisory and other services provided within individual higher education institutions which are important.

Figure 5.6: Proportion of Mature Students in Receipt of BTEA or SUSI Grants

Source: Indecon analysis of responses to survey of Mature Students (2020)

The next figure shows the extent to which BTEA and SUSI grants are reported to be taken up by those in the specific NAP target groups. Of note is that mature students with a disability, lone parents, and students from an area of disadvantage are more likely to benefit from these supports and half of all mature students who are not in a NAP target group benefit from one or both of these supports. Members of the Traveller Community may have received other supports, such as through the PATH fund which supports a range of students (see Section 6.3).

Figure 5.7: Proportion of Mature Students by Membership of NAP Target Groups in Receipt of BTEA, SUSI Grants or both



Source: Indecon analysis of responses to survey of Mature Students (2020)

5.5 FREE FEES INITIATIVE

In Ireland, tuition fees are paid in respect of full-time students, whether mature students or otherwise, who have been ordinarily resident in an EU/EEA/Swiss State for at least three of the preceding five years.⁵³ Students who are eligible for the Free Fees Initiative are required to pay a student contribution charge of €3,000 per year (2020/21 academic year). Tuition fees are generally only paid in respect of full-time undergraduate courses of a minimum of two years duration, and only for first-time students. A person who qualifies for a SUSI fee grant generally has the €3,000 annual student contribution paid for them.⁵⁴

5.6 SPRINGBOARD+

Springboard+ provides free higher education courses for people who are unemployed and those looking to return to the workforce. Springboard+ courses can also be availed of by those who are in employment, where a 10% contribution towards the course fee is required. There is a range of courses from certificate to master's degree levels - Levels 6 to 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Most of the courses

⁵³ <https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/course-fees/>

⁵⁴ The Fee Grant will cover the Student Contribution Charge of €3,000 where the Free Fees Schemes apply to the course and the student is eligible for free fees under those schemes, or will make a contribution towards Tuition Fees. See: <https://susi.ie/undergraduate-income-threshold-and-grant-award-rates/>.

are part-time and last for one year or less, but there is an increasing number of full-time courses.⁵⁵ Springboard+ is generally open to students, even if they already have a third-level qualification regardless of age, subject to nationality/visa requirement and residency criteria.

5.7 PART-TIME EDUCATION OPTION

The Part-Time Education Option (PTEO) allows an unemployed person to keep their Jobseeker's Allowance or Jobseeker's Benefit and attend a part-time day or evening course of education or training, as long as they continue to meet the conditions for Jobseeker's Benefit or Jobseeker's Allowance. As such, they must still be able to show that they are actively looking for and willing to take up work, and that the course is likely to improve their chances of getting a job. If offered work while on the course, learners are expected to accept the job offer.⁵⁶ An individual can take part in a part-time day course, evening course or early morning course, distance education or a part-time course under the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) or Springboard+. In some cases, part-time courses which run during the normal working day will be accepted, for example, courses under the BTEI.

5.8 NATIONAL CHILDCARE SCHEME

The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) is a scheme that provides financial support to help parents to meet the costs of childcare. The NCS will replace all existing targeted childcare support programmes and the current universal childcare subsidy by 2021. It gives financial support towards the cost of childcare to approved providers for the hours spent outside of pre-school or school. However, it does not provide support in the case of non-approved childminders/family. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme provides early childhood care and education for pre-school children and operates alongside the NCS.⁵⁷ The NCS provides two types of childcare subsidy for children over six months of age:

- A universal subsidy for children under age 3 which is not means-tested; and
- An income assessed subsidy for children up to age 15 which is means-tested.

Funding schemes for lone parents' participation in education also exist in other countries. For example, in Scotland, undergraduate students who are lone parents with at least one dependent child can apply to the Students Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) for the Lone Parents' Grant. The Lone Parents' Grant was worth £1,305 (approx. €1,500) in 2019-2020. In addition to the Lone Parents' Grant, undergraduate students can get help of up to £1,215 (approx. €1,400) for formal childcare costs such as childminders, after school clubs and providers of day care and pre-school education through the Lone Parents' Childcare Grant. Other countries have other forms of support programmes for parents (not necessarily lone parents). For instance, in the US the Federally funded 'Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program' awards a block grant to HEIs to establish a childcare facility to which eligible low-income students (i.e. those eligible to receive a Federal Pell Grant) can make applications.⁵⁸ In Denmark there are no tuition fees, and grants are available to cover subsistence with the option of additional loans. The system of support known as the 'voucher'-system (klippekorssystemet) works so that everyone that enters HE gets an allocation of vouchers to cover monthly expenses, which can be used flexibly, is not restricted to one period of continual study, and involves a measure of personal accountability by students for managing their financial situation. The Danish system also includes provision for extra funding for parents, including lone parents.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/third_level_education/applying_to_college/third_level_places_for_unemployed_people.html#:~:text=Springboard%2B%20provides%20free%20higher%20education,contribution%20towards%20the%20course%20fee.

⁵⁶ https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/social_welfare/social_welfare_payments/back_to_education/part_time_education_option.html

⁵⁷ https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/pre_school_education_and_childcare/national_childcare_scheme.html

⁵⁸ <https://www.salliemae.com/college-planning/financial-aid/understand-college-grants/pell-grant/>

⁵⁹ <https://www.su.dk/english/state-educational-grant-and-loan-scheme-su/>

5.9 FINANCIAL SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities benefit from the mainstream supports available to students. There is also a Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) to support HEIs in meeting additional costs faced by HEIs in providing for students with disabilities. This fund is managed by the HEA. In 2018/19, the fund supported higher education institutions in offering supports and services to just over 13,000 eligible students with disabilities so that they could access, participate in, and successfully complete their chosen course of study. Funding can be used to provide supports and accommodations for assistive technology, equipment and software, non-medical helpers, academic or learning support, deaf supports, and transport. It also supports students from Ireland to study on approved courses in the UK and other EU countries.⁶⁰

The views of current, former and potential mature students on the cumulative effectiveness of the financial supports for mature students with a disability are shown in the next table. 39% of students rated financial supports as poor or very poor. This may reflect the additional barrier and costs faced by mature individuals with a disability in participating in higher education. It should also be noted that as the FSD is not a form of financial support for students, respondents may not have had this in mind, or even be aware of it, when making their responses.

Table 5.5: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on Financial Supports for Mature Students with a Disability

	Very Good	Good	Neither Good nor Poor	Poor	Very Poor
Mature Students with a Disability	13%	21%	27%	21%	18%
All Mature Students	11%	19%	50%	13%	8%

Source: Indecon analysis of responses to survey of Mature Students (2020)

5.10 STUDENT ASSISTANCE FUND

The Student Assistance Fund (SAF) provides financial support to full or part-time students who are experiencing financial difficulties while attending college. Students can apply for support from SAF to help with either temporary or ongoing financial difficulties. SAF is designed to provide a source of financial support in addition to a SUSI grant.⁶¹ The use of SAF is for expenses such as: books, rent, food, medical costs, class materials, light and heat bills, essential travel, and childcare. The State allocates approximately €9.1m per year through the SAF, including €1m ring-fenced for part-time students who are lone parents or members of other NAP target groups. In response to Covid-19, the core SAF allocation was doubled from €8.1m to €16.2m for the 2020/21 academic year. In the 2018/19 academic year, just under 14,000 students were supported under the SAF.

⁶⁰ See Section 5.10

⁶¹ <https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/student-assistance-fund/>

5.11 CHARITABLE/PHILANTHROPIC ORGANISATIONS

There are a range of charitable/philanthropic bodies which also provide support for students from disadvantaged groups who wish to attend higher education. For example, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul works with thousands of students to support access to further and higher education and has established an education bursary scheme which helps low-income students with the cost of fees as well as accommodation, transport, books and materials. Uversity's scholarships are for adult learners to acquire a bachelor's degree for the first time. Scholarships enable successful candidates to pursue a degree in any discipline in selected institutions on the island of Ireland. Preference is given to candidates enrolling on full-time programmes, though other programmes are considered. The scholarships comprise financial support and programming throughout the course of the degree. The value of the scholarships, which are funded privately, depends on the successful recipients' circumstances and need.

5.12 FINANCIAL SUPPORTS FOR STUDYING ABROAD

One of the main supports for students to study abroad is the Erasmus Programme (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students), an EU student exchange programme. Erasmus+, or Erasmus Plus, is the new programme combining all the EU's current schemes for education, training, youth and sport, and was started in January 2014. Erasmus+ has a budget of €14.7 billion, which funds four million Europeans to study, train, and gain experience abroad. Formed from the merger of seven prior programmes, it provides opportunities for a wide variety of individuals and organisations. The aims of the programme include: Reducing unemployment, especially among young people; Promoting adult learning, especially for new skills and skills required by the labour market; Encouraging young people to take part in European democracy; Supporting innovation, cooperation and reform; Reducing early school leaving; Promoting cooperation and mobility with the EU's partner countries.

Indecon's survey asked mature students how they would rate supports for studying abroad, which are illustrated in Table 5.6. A relatively high proportion of students reported "neither good nor poor", probably an indication that the option of studying abroad is only considered or taken by relatively few students.

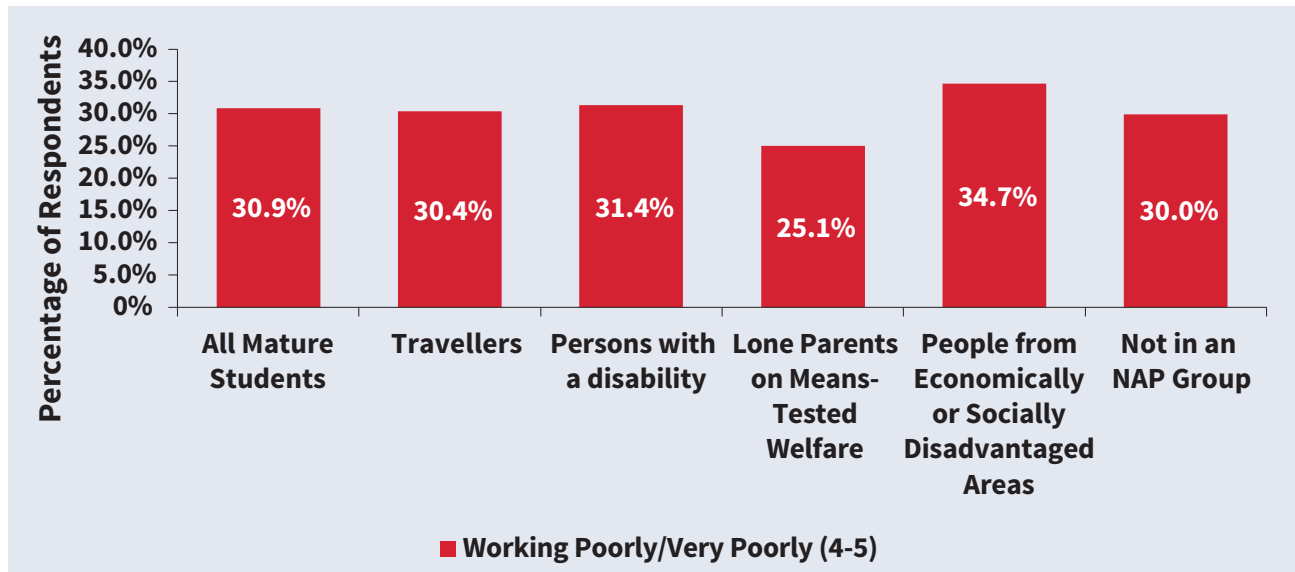
Table 5.6: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on how they would rate supports for studying abroad

	Very Good	Good	Neither Good nor Poor	Poor	Very Poor
All Mature Students	4%	11%	66%	10%	8%
Traveller Mature Students	5%	10%	60%	15%	10%
Mature Students with a Disability	3%	8%	66%	11%	13%
Lone Parents	5%	12%	68%	7%	8%
Area of economic/social disadvantage	5%	11%	62%	12%	11%
<i>Source: Indecon analysis of responses to survey of Mature Students (2020)</i>					

5.13 OVERALL VIEWS ON FUNDING SUPPORTS

The research evidence presented in an earlier chapter indicated that financial barriers were seen as an important obstacle by mature students in participating in higher education. Views of students on the overall financial supports offered is presented below. For a significant minority of respondents across the NAP target groups, financial supports were perceived as working poorly or very poorly.

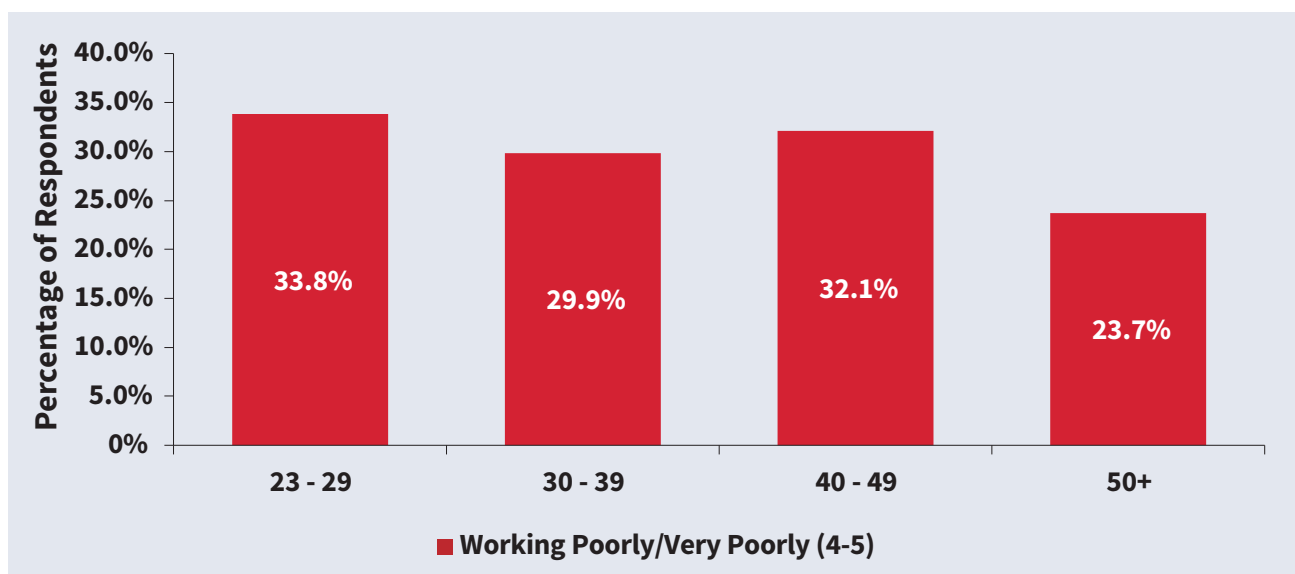
Figure 5.8: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on Whether Financial Supports for Mature Students were Working Poorly/Very Poorly, by NAP Group



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

The rate of dissatisfaction declined with age, though remained significant at all age groups. This is illustrated in Figure 5.9 below. It was also broadly equal regardless of whether respondents were past, current or prospective mature students.

Figure 5.9: Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on Whether Financial Supports for Mature Students were Working Poorly/Very Poorly, by Age Group



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

5.14 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- There are a wide range of funding supports available to mature students. Two of the most important are the SUSI grant and the Back to Education Allowance. While mature students with a disability, lone parents, and students from an area of disadvantage are more likely to benefit from these supports, half of all mature students who are not in a NAP target group benefit from one, or both, of these supports.
- The Student Grant Scheme (SUSI) is the centralised financial support scheme for students in Ireland,⁶² and was established under the Student Support Act 2011. Undergraduate student grants are potentially eligible for maintenance grants and fee grants. Students may be considered eligible for funding as a “second chance” student where they have previously attended but not completed a course, have had a 5-year break in studies at since leaving that course, and are returning to attend an approved course at the same level. Generally, students who qualify for a maintenance grant will also qualify for all elements of the fee grant. However, students may qualify for a fee grant, but not a maintenance grant. Different rates of support are paid based on the financial circumstances of students, where they live relative to their place of study, and whether they are classed as independent. There are slightly more female (52%) than male (48%) mature student recipients of SUSI awards. Males outnumber females in younger age groups (23-30), though a high number of females is noticeable in the 40-44 age group.
- The number of non-approvals of grant applications are higher for mature students than for students more generally. SUSI is a demand-led scheme and eligibility is based on specific criteria. The SUSI website contains an ‘Eligibility Reckoner’ which allows potential applicants to check their eligibility prior to submitting a formal application.
- 48% of mature students have positive views on SUSI grants compared to 29% who rated grants as poor. There was, however, some variance by NAP groups.⁶³
- People who are unemployed, parenting alone, or have a disability and who are obtaining certain payments from the Department of Social Protection, may participate in a third-level education course which is eligible for a Back to Education Allowance (BTEA). This is open to students in any approved HEI. The course must be a full-time day course and be approved for the Student Grant Scheme or be approved by QQI. BTEA beneficiaries are predominantly male, with participation peaking in the mid-20s.
- Indecon’s survey asked mature students how they would rate the BTEA scheme. The responses show that 38% rated BTEA support as good compared to 28% who rated it as poor.
- In addition to SUSI and BTEA, there are a range of other important supports available for certain mature students. For example, under the Free Fees Initiative, tuition fees are paid in respect of full-time students, whether mature students or otherwise. Students who are eligible for the Free Fees Initiative are required to pay a student contribution charge of €3,000 (2020/21 Academic Year).⁶⁴ Tuition fees are generally only paid in respect of full-time undergraduate courses of a minimum of two years duration, and only for first-time students.
- Springboard+ provides free higher education courses for the unemployed and those looking to return to the workforce. Springboard+ courses can also be availed of by those who are in employment, though a 10% contribution towards the course fee is required in these cases. Most of the courses are part-time and last for one year or less, but there is an increasing number of full-time courses.
- There is also a Part-Time Education Option (PTEO) which allows an unemployed person to keep their Jobseeker’s Allowance or Jobseeker’s Benefit and attend a part-time day or evening course of education or training, as long as they continue to meet the conditions for Jobseeker’s Benefit or Jobseeker’s Allowance.
- Also relevant is the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) which provides financial support to help parents to meet the costs of childcare and will replace all existing targeted childcare support programmes and the current universal childcare subsidy by 2021. It gives financial support towards the cost of childcare for the hours spent outside of pre-school or school. The NCS provides two types of childcare subsidy for children over six months of age: a

⁶² Indecon understands that there is to be a review in 2021 of this important SUSI support scheme.

⁶³ Indecon notes that on 12th November 2020 the Government announced a €300,000 fund to help members of the Traveller Community pursue third-level education

⁶⁴ <https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/course-fees/>

universal subsidy for children under age three which is not means-tested; and an income assessed subsidy for children up to age 15 which is means-tested.

- There are also specific measures aimed at certain NAP groups. For example, students with disabilities benefit from the mainstream supports and there is also a fund for HEIs to meet the additional costs of providing for students with disabilities, though this is not provided in the form of a direct financial support for students. Funding can be used to provide assistive technology, equipment and software, non-medical helpers, academic or learning support, deaf supports, and transport.
- The views of current, former and potential mature students on the cumulative effectiveness of the financial supports for mature students with a disability show that 39% of students rated financial supports as poor or very poor. This may reflect the additional barrier and costs faced by mature individuals with a disability in participating in higher education.
- There is also the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) which provides financial support to full or part-time students who are experiencing financial difficulties while attending college. The use of SAF is for expenses such as: books, rent, food, medical costs, class materials, light and heat bills, essential travel, and childcare. The State allocates approximately €9.1m per year through the SAF, including €1m ring-fenced for part-time students who are lone parents or members of other NAP target groups.
- PATH Strand 2 – 1916 Bursaries. The 1916 Bursary Fund provides financial support to 200 of the most economically disadvantaged students annually. The 1916 Bursaries are targeted at non-traditional entry and can support study on either a full or part-time basis. Mature students are one of the target groups for the bursary, and account for around half of all beneficiaries to date.
- There are a range of charitable/philanthropic bodies which also provide support for students from disadvantaged groups who wish to attend higher education. For example, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has established an education bursary scheme which helps low-income students with the cost of fees as well as accommodation, transport, books and materials. Uversity's scholarships are also for adult learners to acquire a bachelor's degree for the first time. The scholarships comprise financial support and programming throughout the course of the degree. The value of the scholarships, which are funded privately, depends on the successful recipients' circumstances and need.
- The research evidence presented in an earlier chapter indicated that financial barriers were seen as an important obstacle by mature students in participating in higher education. For a significant minority of respondents across the NAP target groups, financial supports were perceived as working poorly or very poorly.

6

SUPPORTING STRUCTURES & GUIDANCE SYSTEMS

6.1 ROLE AND SUPPORT STRUCTURES

In addition to the availability of funding, support structures and guidance systems have an important role to play in overcoming barriers faced by mature students in participating in higher education. This is an area where progress has already been made by higher education institutions in Ireland but ways to build on this work merits attention. We have also identified support structures which have been implemented in other countries, the most appropriate supports for mature students which focus on mature students from each of the NAP target groups. It is critical to consider how these are relevant to overcoming barriers to participation. This is considered further in our recommendations.

6.2 SUPPORTS FOR MATURE STUDENTS INTERNATIONALLY

Whilst participation rates in higher education internationally have increased; gains are not demonstrated in all sections of society. Supporting structures, guidance systems and community structures have been implemented in other countries to increase mature student participation, particularly from underrepresented groups. These are outlined below:

- **Method 1 - In-reach:** In-reach refers to actions on the part of HEIs which relate to existing supply, creating new ways for students to access programmes that are already part of provision. These include alternative entry tests for adults, customised courses, and other procedures that allow a second opportunity to demonstrate potential. They are often accompanied by a relaxation of entry requirements.
- **Method 2 - Outreach:** Outreach relates to more proactive (compared with in-reach) efforts to widen participation and create partnerships with one or more of employers, schools, and the wider community. Examples include work-based initiatives, FET/HE links and community-based access programmes. The primary objective of outreach initiatives in the context of this mature student study is to target individuals who believe that HE is 'not for them'. Under such schemes, HEIs move outside their own boundaries to actively engage with underrepresented groups and the socially excluded. Outreach therefore means taking action to counter dispositional barriers by creating greater awareness of what might be possible and thereby stimulating new demand. This would be particularly relevant for members of NAP groups.
- **Method 3 – Flexibility:** Flexibility is concerned with space and time. More concretely, this means making changes that allow students access to education in locations and modes and at times of their own rather than institutions' choosing. Flexibility also refers to the mechanisms that challenge prevailing constructions of what constitutes knowledge at HE level and the means by which knowledge can be acquired and demonstrated: most notably, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNIL). Flexible arrangements and outreach activity overlap, for example in links between FET organisations and universities, which may or may not be accompanied by collaboration for some NAP groups such as lone parents.

An example of where In-reach models have been applied is through the Australian "Fair Chance for All" policy originally published in 1990.⁶⁵ This mandated higher education institutions to recruit according to the population characteristics of their catchment area with a focus on targets for recruitment and performance of seven equity groups (DEET 1990). This type of approach led to a shift in access policy that focuses on aspirations, realising potential, and fairness.⁶⁶ Seven groups were targeted in Australia and there is a degree of overlap with the NAP target groups, in particular, low SES students (referred in Ireland as students from areas of social and economic disadvantage); and students with disability.

⁶⁵ Department of Employment Education Training & National Board of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), 1990, A fair chance for all: National and institutional planning for equity in Higher Education, A discussion paper, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

⁶⁶ Sellar, S. and Gale, T. (2016) Framing student equity in Higher Education: national and global policy contexts of a fair chance for all. Student equity in Australian Higher Education: twenty five years of a fair chance for all. Edited by Harvey, Andrew, Burnheim, Catherine and Brett, Matthew. Heidelberg, Germany: Springer.39-52.https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-0315-8_3

An example of evidence of accreditation of prior (experiential) learning and accreditation of work-place learning is France, where the system known as Validation des Acquis d'Expérience programme (VAE) is embedded in the Law for Social Modernisation (Loi de Modernisation Sociale), and which offers 'a new path to degrees and diplomas of all levels, along with initial training, sandwich programs/courses, and continuing education'.⁶⁷ However, there are inevitable challenges in implementing such approaches.⁶⁸

So-called Contextual Admissions are now commonplace now in UK universities. This is where the university considers barriers faced by particular students and will either reduce their grade requirements or give extra consideration when deciding whether to offer a student a place.⁶⁹ In the UK, institutions are obliged by the Office for Students to be fair and transparent in their approaches to access. Relevant context includes differentials in the quality of schooling that pupils get, which in turn affects their ability to study certain subjects and achieve certain grades.

Context is particularly important in admissions to very high demand subjects. Curtis et al (2014) provides the example from a Russell Group university of the range of actions taken at the University of Southampton in the field of medicine, which has the objective of widening of access based on low SES. Examples of the contextual factors taken into account are shown in Figure 6.1. Other factors not relevant to this mature student study are also taken into account, for example, those in receipt of a 16-19 bursary or young people looked after by a local authority.

Figure 6.1: Context Factors taken into Account in the University of Southampton

- First generation applicant to HE;
- Parents, guardian or self in receipt of a means-tested benefit; and
- Living in an area with a postcode which falls within the lowest 20% of the Index of multiple deprivation (IMD) authenticated by the University, or a member of a family from the Traveller Community.

Source: Curtis et al (2014)

Also, relevant to increasing participation for mature students, particularly in NAP groups, is to ensure emphasis on developing community structures that foster greater demand. Examples of wider outreach programmes include the delivery of higher education introductory studies at Sure Start Centres across London by Birkbeck College, and the comprehensive set of activities run by University College London (UCL) (see Figure 6.2 below).⁷⁰ (The UCC strategy also includes measures at primary and secondary levels and at parents but these are less relevant to mature study focus of this current review.)

⁶⁷ Sanséau, P-Y and Ansart, S (2013) Accreditation Of Prior Experiential Learning As A Catalyst For Lifelong Learning: Analysis And Proposals Based on French Experiments Journal of International Education Research 9 (4): 317-328.

⁶⁸ ibid 324

⁶⁹ See for example <https://www.medschools.ac.uk/media/2413/good-practice-in-contextual-admissions.pdf>

⁷⁰ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/widening-participation/>

Figure 6.2: UCL Strategy Aimed at Broadening Access**Potential Students**

- Prospective university students: advice and guidance about university applications, and the realities of university life and study. Helping students to see that they belong at a highly selective university like UCL.

UCL Departments

- Providing guidance and practical support to help departments meet their widening participation objectives.

Current UCL Students

- Supporting first year students in their first term at UCL through the Transition Programme.
- Drawing on the experience of current students as ambassadors, mentors and taster presenters.

Teachers

- Providing up-to-date information, advice and guidance for teachers to keep themselves informed. Developing a community of teachers engaged with UCL and the HE sector.

Policymakers

- Research and evaluation of widening participation practice and policy, to improve UCL's widening participation performance and contribute to the knowledge base of the HE sector as a whole.

Source: University College London

There are many other examples of comprehensive programmes at institution level aimed at improving access. For example, OECD (2014)⁷¹ gives the example of the Karolinska Institute in Sweden which undertakes a number of activities with much emphasis on disability, but also uses of student ambassadors, outreach arrangements with schools and individual tutoring in academic writing.

6.3 ROUTES TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR MATURE STUDENTS

In considering supporting structures and guidance supports, as well as community structures, it is important to recognise the routes of higher education for mature students. There are a number of routes for mature students to enter higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland. Most Irish HEIs report a similar combination of entry routes to higher education.⁷² The majority of courses require an application to the Central Applications Office (CAO); an interview for some or all courses chosen; additional suitability tests; and the attendance of access/foundation courses. Mature students can also directly contact higher education

⁷¹ OECD Higher Education Programme IMHE, 2014, *Fostering equity in Higher Education compendium of practical case studies: Fostering inclusion of disadvantaged students*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

⁷² <http://www.maturestudents.ie/docs/MSI-2019-admission-requirements-summary.pdf>

institutions. Many HEIs have developed offices and support centres which offer guidance and advice to support mature students.

A mature student can apply via school leaving examinations as well as via QQI FET/FETAC awards.⁷³ According to a study commissioned by HEA, 12% of mature students⁷⁴ do not have a Leaving Certificate. The fact that initiatives have been taken to enable such individuals to access higher education, is an example of what can be achieved. In such cases, work experience through prior employment or community involvement is recognised in the application process (Recognition of Prior Learning or RPL), though not all HEIs have adopted it.⁷⁵ Policies on RPL systems are developed by the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)⁷⁶ within its Access, Transfer and Progression policy. Institutes of technology are more likely than universities to recognise informal learning such as prior work experience rather than formal qualifications.⁷⁷ Similarly, part-time students are more likely than full-time students to be recognised in this way.

Alternative routes of access to HE in Ireland have also been developed. For instance, applicants who do not have assessable qualifications to enter higher education can now take pre-entry courses⁷⁷ available in some HEIs depending on the educational field and course requirements. Access/foundation courses are part of HEI access programmes which aim to increase the levels of participation of disadvantaged groups, such as mature students who were not able to attend college.

Foundation programmes provide an opportunity for students to develop skills which will enable them to successfully complete a higher-level award and expose mature students to areas of study not previously seen or experienced. There is evidence that these foundation programmes enjoy high levels of success.⁷⁸ It can also help introduce students to the college campus, its facilities, and the daily routine of the life of a student. It can also help break the barriers of age groups and develop interactions among participants. When they gain a pass award, mature students can gain access to the various programmes provided by the institutions. Mature students are also eligible for funding if the course is approved by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science under the list of Post-Leaving Certificate courses.⁷⁹ In some universities and institutions, it is compulsory for applicants to attend such access/foundation courses organised by mature students support centres.

The HEA's core grant includes access metrics relating to National Access Plan target groups in recognition of the additional costs of recruiting and retaining students from underrepresented backgrounds. This supports HEIs to have an access infrastructure in place that provides for the pre-entry and post-entry work required to support students from target groups to access and successfully complete higher education.

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) has the objective of increasing participation levels among underrepresented groups applying to higher education. PATH is broken down into three strands as follows:

- PATH Strand 1 – Initial Teacher Education: The main objective of PATH 1 is to increase the number of students from underrepresented groups entering initial teacher education.
- PATH Strand 2 – 1916 Bursaries. The 1916 Bursary Fund provides financial support to 200 of the most economically disadvantaged students annually. The 1916 Bursaries are targeted at non-traditional entry and can support study on either a full or part-time basis. Mature students are one of the target groups for the bursary.
- PATH Strand 3 – Higher Education Access Fund: PATH 3 supports HEIs to develop regional and community partnership strategies to increase access to higher education. HEIs engage with local DEIS schools, further education providers, community and voluntary groups and other stakeholders.

⁷³ <http://www.maturestudents.ie/docs/MSI-2019-admission-requirements-summary.pdf>

⁷⁴ <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/02/HEA-Eurostudent-Survey-Report-FINAL.pdf>

⁷⁵ Qualifax provides a list with HEIs who have adopted RPL policies (https://www.qualifax.ie/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=163&Itemid=190).

⁷⁶ <https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Access,-Transfer-and-Progression.aspx>

⁷⁷ https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/ireland/bachelor_en

⁷⁸ <http://edepositireland.ie/bitstream/handle/2262/79887/Murphy%202009%20Access%20Courses%20Report.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

⁷⁹ https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/third_level_education/applying_to_college/third_level_courses_for_mature_students.html

6.4 INFORMATION ON CAREERS AVAILABLE TO MATURE STUDENTS

Information on careers and other guidance systems is particularly important in the context of enhancing participation from mature students. There are a range of sources of information for mature students and many HE institutions have offices dedicated to mature students which provide specific supports and advice. In terms of the range of career guidance mechanisms, Indecon previously surveyed guidance counsellors as to their views on the significance of various mechanisms. The results, which are summarised below, suggest that as well as access to guidance counsellors as part of our review of Career Guidance for the Department of Education, access to opportunities for work experience, and online resources were perceived as being significant.

Table 6.1: Guidance Counsellors Views on Impact of Following Career Information and Guidance Mechanisms for Helping Individuals Makes Informed Career Decisions

% of Career Guidance Counsellors who believe the following are 'Very Significant' or 'Significant'	HEI	FET Institution	Other* Institutions
Access to one-to-one career guidance and information	100.0%	98.9%	96.2%
Access to career guidance work sessions in classes/workshops	92.0%	80.9%	67.3%
Access to, and use of, online sources of career information	92.0%	66.3%	75.0%
Access to online career assessment tools	76.0%	62.1%	65.4%
Access to an up-to-date career library	48.0%	43.0%	54.9%
Access to visits to or from employers	87.5%	77.9%	78.8%
Access to opportunities for relevant work experience	96.0%	88.4%	84.0%
Access to telephone personalised career conversations	64.0%	53.8%	55.8%

Source: Indecon analysis of Confidential Survey of Guidance Counsellors, undertaken as part of previous Indecon Review of Career Guidance for Department of Education and Science. *Other institutions include youth services, Local Employment Services, adult education guidance service, etc.

The perspective of higher education students on the influences on their career choice is presented in the figure below, which demonstrate the diversity of influences on career decisions.

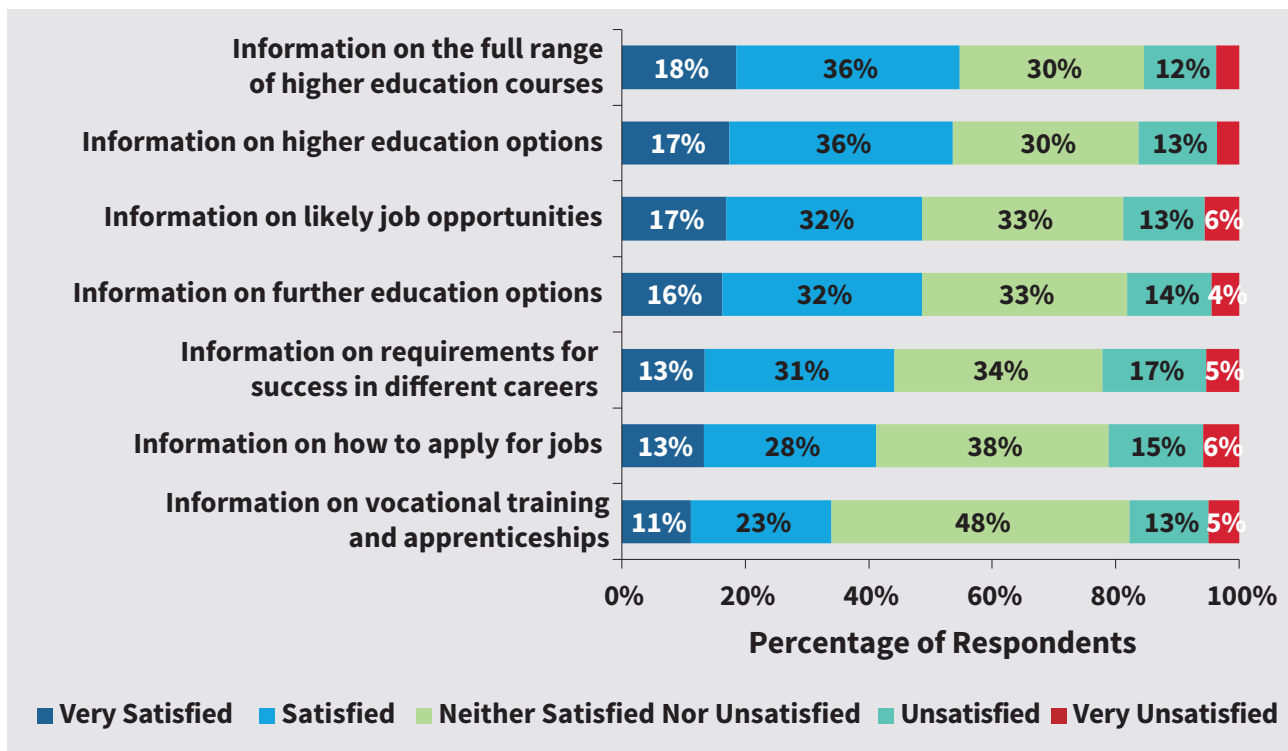
Figure 6.3: Views of Higher-level Education Students on Importance of Following Career Choice Influences



Source: Indecon analysis of Confidential Survey of Higher Education Learners

Mature students generally report satisfaction with the quality of information available on education options. This is shown in Figure 6.4. The highest satisfaction ratings were in relation to information on the higher education courses and options, where 54% and 53% of respondents respectively indicated that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the quality available. In relation to information on likely job opportunities, half of respondents indicated that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the quality of information.

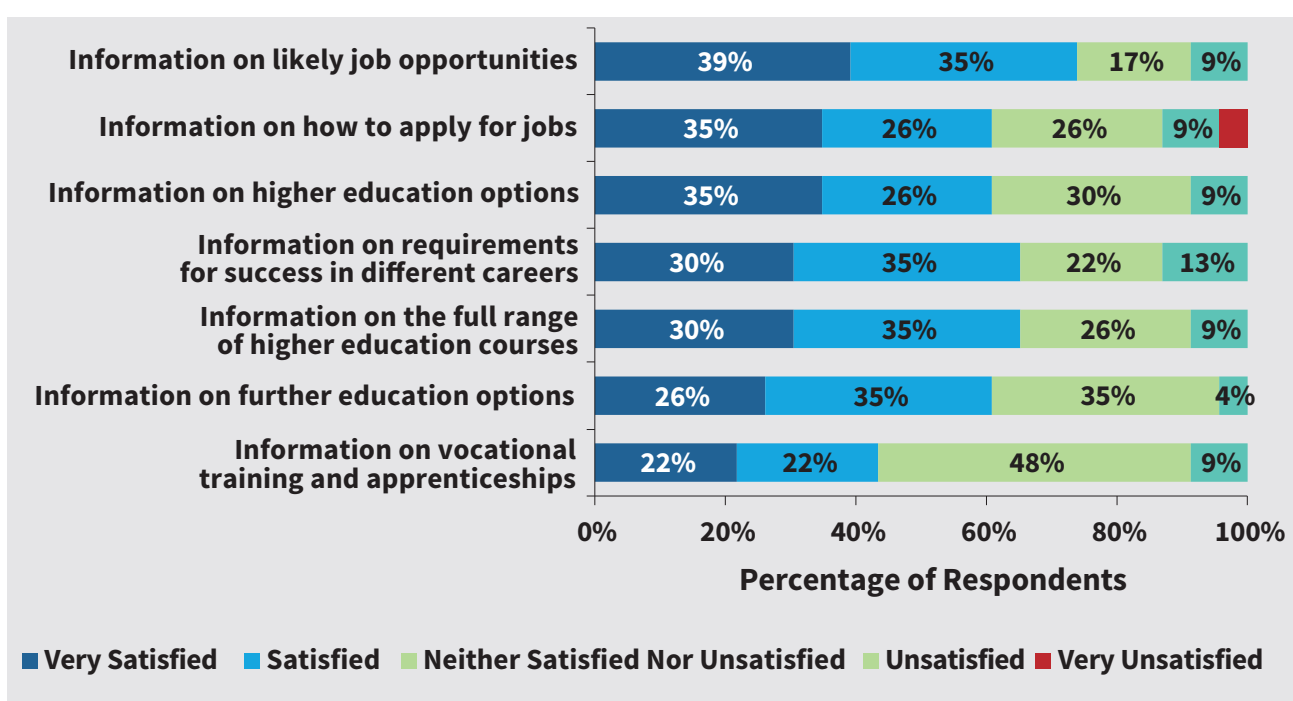
Figure 6.4: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on the Quality of Careers Information Made Available to Them



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

The next four figures provide the satisfaction ratings of members of the NAP target groups, on the same questions. While most expressed positive views, there are some students where more information could be of value. Figure 6.5 illustrates the views of Traveller mature students.

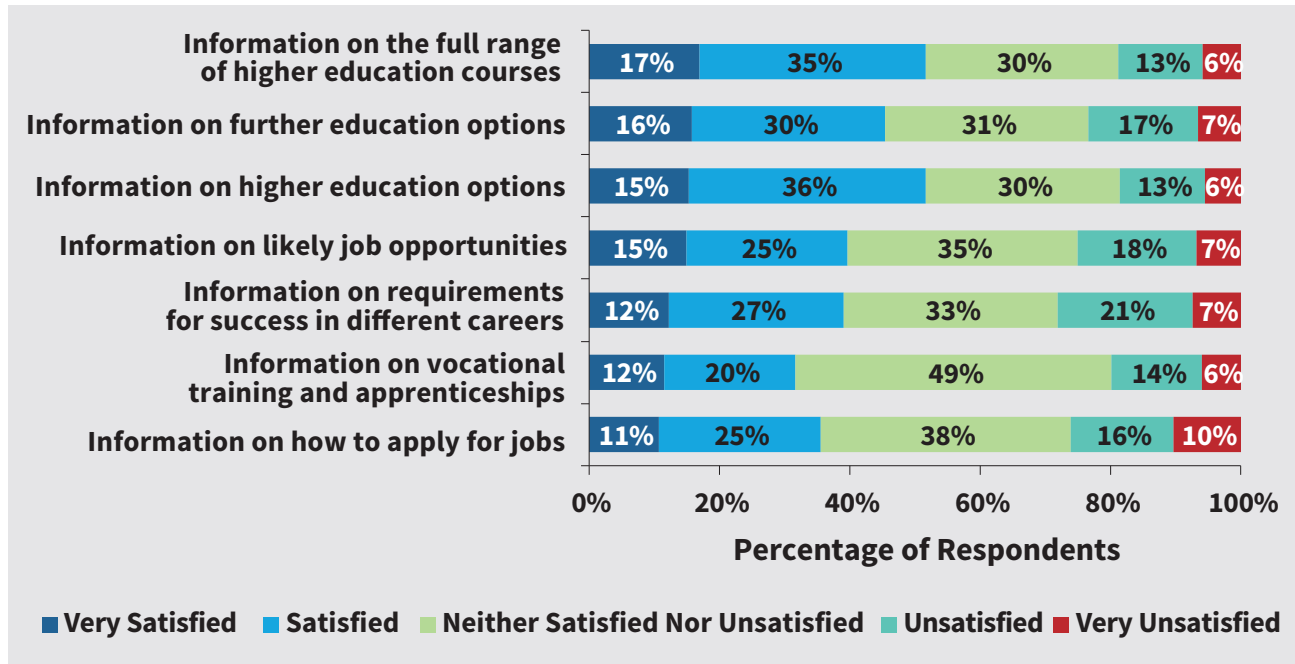
Figure 6.5: Views of Current, Former and Potential Traveller Mature Students on the Quality of Careers Information Made Available to Them



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

Figure 6.6 provides the satisfaction ratings for mature students with a disability on the quality of information made available to them.

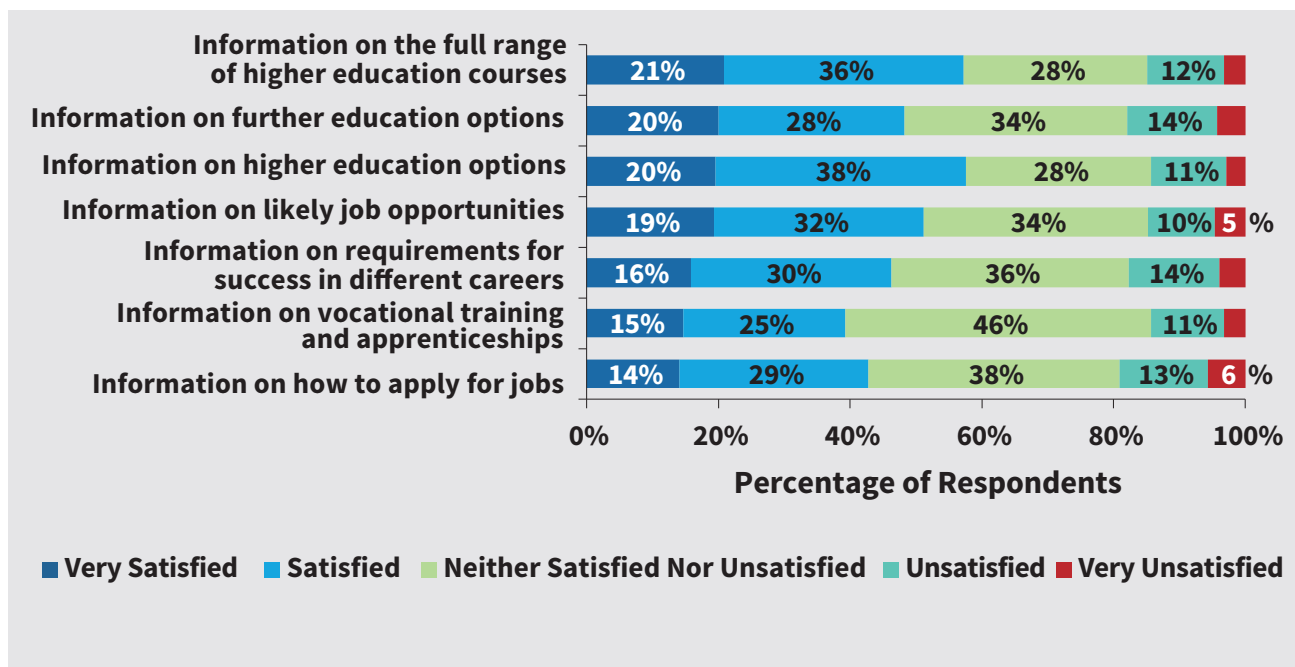
Figure 6.6: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students with a Disability on the Quality of Careers Information Made Available to Them



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

The views of lone parents on satisfaction with the quality of information is displayed in Figure 6.7.

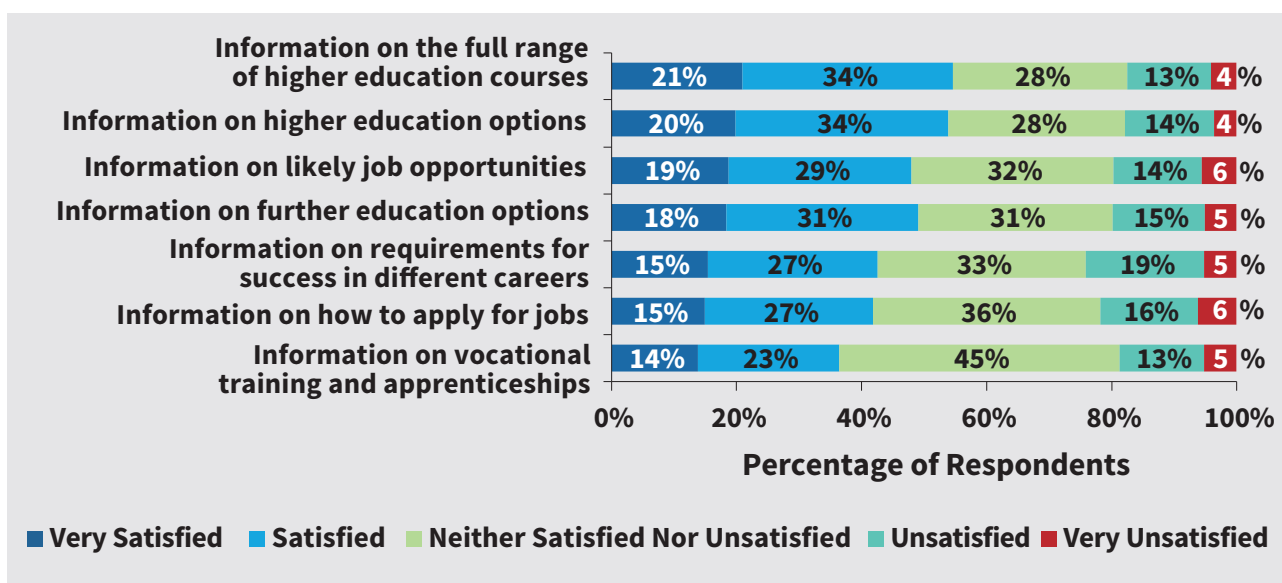
Figure 6.7: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students who are Lone Parents on the Quality of Careers Information Made Available to Them



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

Finally, Figure 6.8 shows the satisfaction for different types of information of mature students from an area of economic or social disadvantage are shown.

Figure 6.8: Views of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students from an Area of Economic or Social Disadvantage on Careers Information Made Available to Them

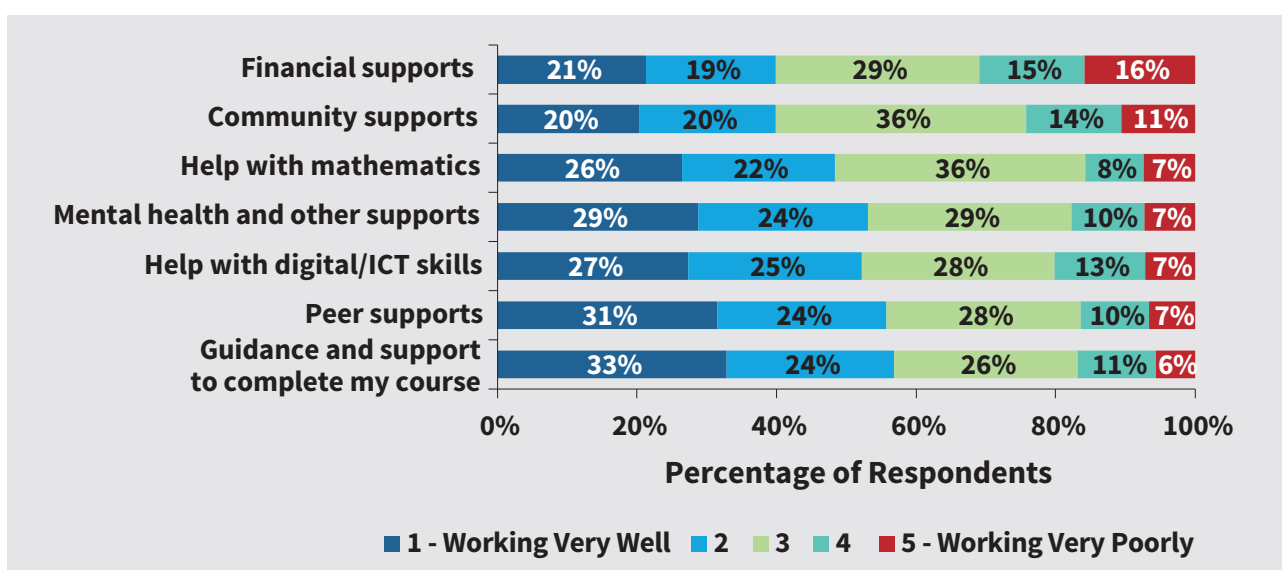


Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

6.5 THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SUPPORTS PROVIDED TO MATURE STUDENTS

In Figure 6.9, the views of current, former and potential mature students on the overall level of supports that are provided to mature students are displayed, in the form of ratings in a Likert Scale, from 1 (working very well) to 5 (working very poorly). One third of respondents stated that guidance and support to complete their course worked very well, while the equivalent figure for peer supports was 31%. 27% and 29% thought that supports for help with digital/ICT skills and mathematics worked very well, while mental health supports were regarded as working well by 29% of respondents. For a percentage of students, however, the existing supports were not perceived as positive.

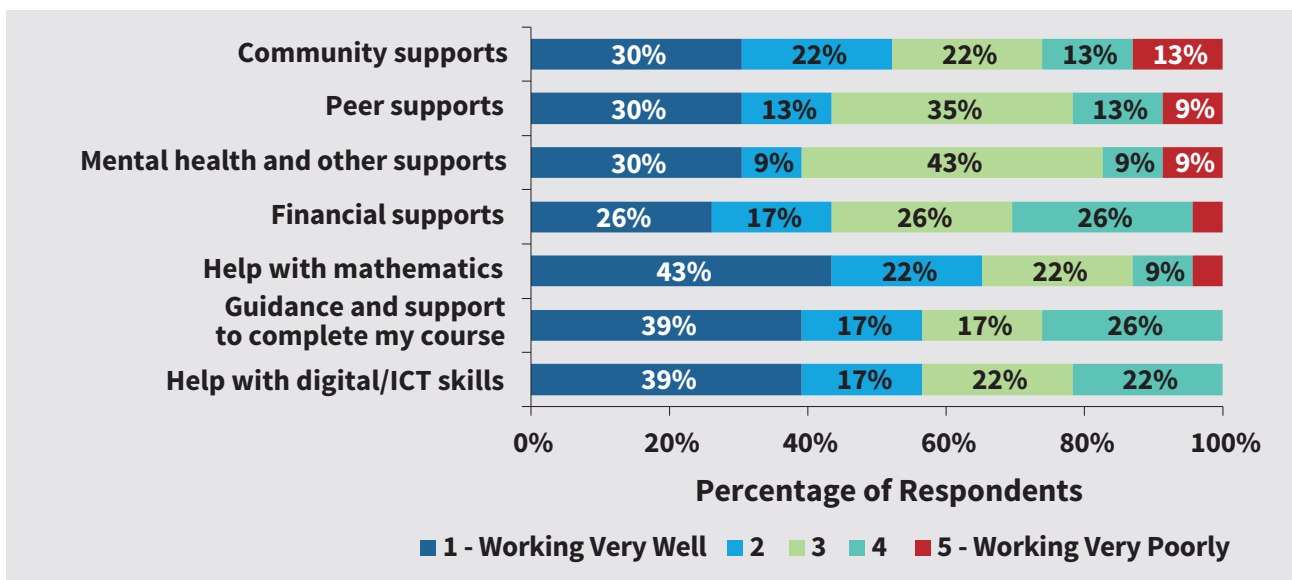
Figure 6.9: Current, Former and Potential Mature Students Rating of the Supports Provided to Mature Students



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

The following four figures present the views of current, former and potential mature students from NAP target groups, concerning the effectiveness of supports provided to mature students. In Figure 6.10 the views of members of the Traveller Community mature students concerning the effectiveness of supports provided are displayed. 43% of Traveller respondents regarded supports to help with mathematics as working very well, with 39% each regarding guidance and support to complete their course and help with digital and IT skills as working very well. However, for some students, supports were not seen as positive and in most areas this percentage was higher than for overall mature student population. This highlights the need for continued emphasis on targeted measures.

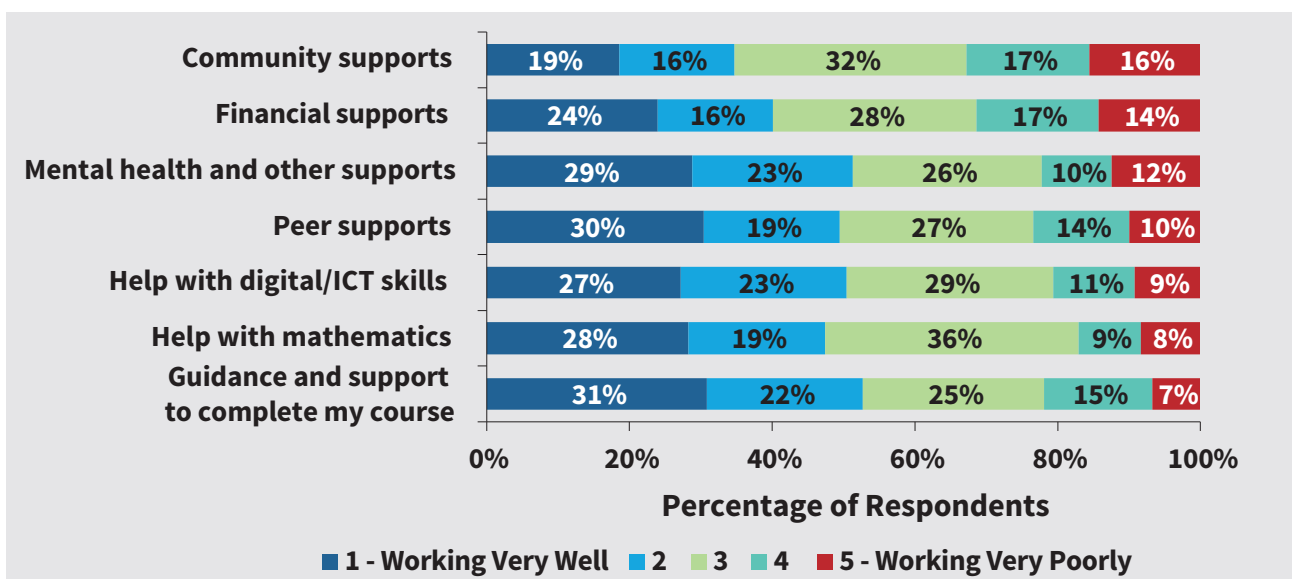
Figure 6.10: Current, Former and Potential Mature Traveller Students Rating of the Supports Provided to Mature Students



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

Figure 6.11 provides the views of mature students with a disability concerning the effectiveness of supports provided to mature students. Guidance and support to complete their course (31%), peer supports (30%) and mental health and other supports (29%) were the supports rated most highly to work well among mature students with a disability. Also of note, is that the percentage of individuals with a disability who felt the supports were not working well in areas such as community supports, mental health and other supports, and peer supports, was higher than for the overall mature student population.

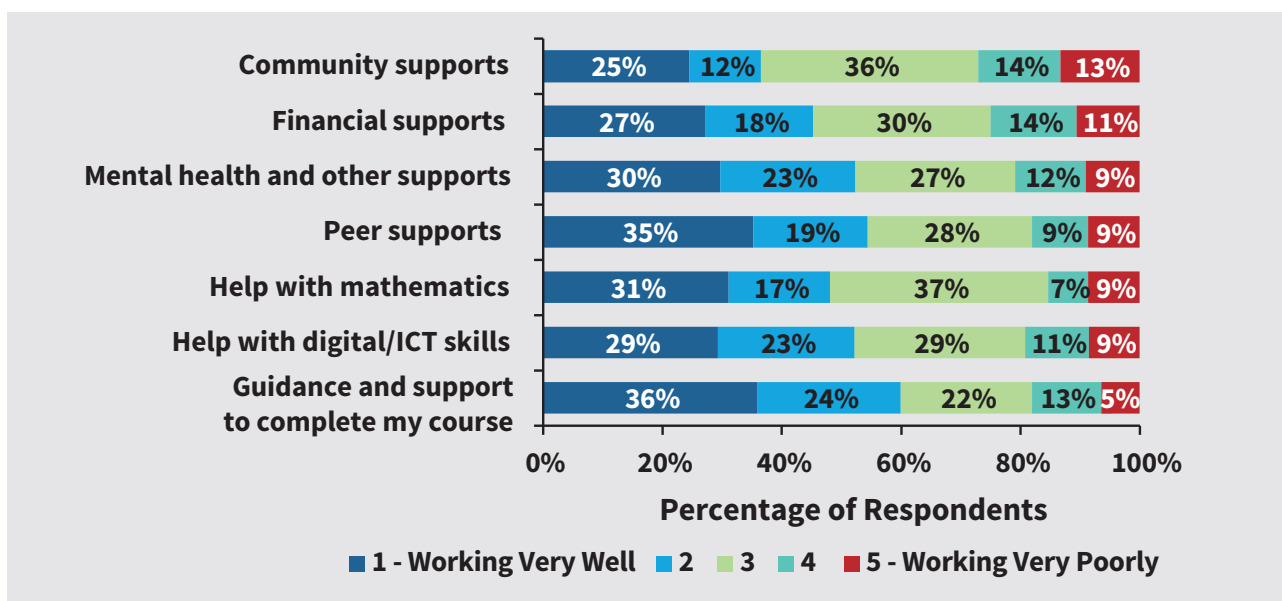
Figure 6.11: Current, Former and Potential Mature Students with a Disability Rating of the Supports Provided to Mature Students



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

In Figure 6.12 the views of current, former and potential mature students that are lone parents in receipt of welfare payments on the effectiveness of supports provided to mature students are shown. As with mature students with a disability, guidance and support to complete courses (36%), peer supports (35%) and mental health and other supports (30%) were the supports rated most highly to work well, while again community supports were rated as those least likely to work well (25%).

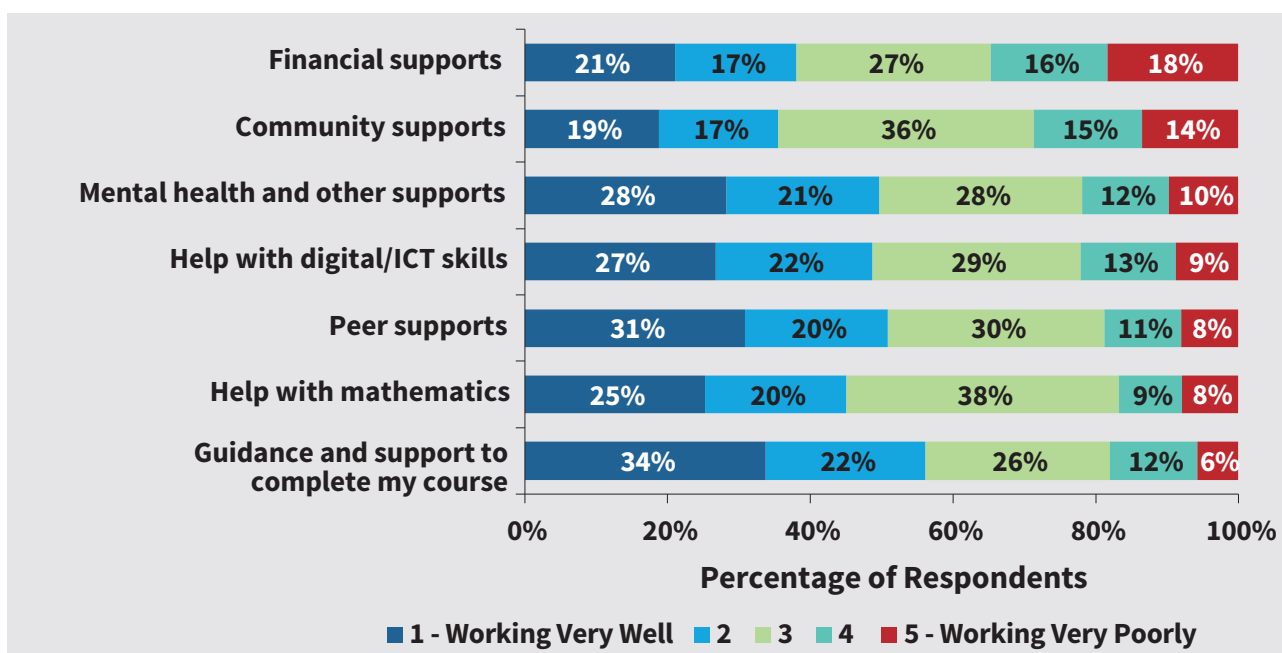
Figure 6.12: Current, Former and Potential Mature Students that are Lone Parents in Receipt of Welfare Rating of the Supports Provided to Mature Students



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

Finally, Figure 6.13 provides the views of students that come from an area of economic or social disadvantage on how well the supports provided to mature students work. As with the other NAP groups, guidance and support to complete courses, peer supports and mental health and other supports, had the highest proportion of respondents indicating that they worked very well, at 34%, 31% and 28%, respectively.

Figure 6.13: Current, Former & Potential Mature Students from An Area of Economic or Social Disadvantage Rating of Supports Provided to Mature Students



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

6.6 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Apart from funding supports and changes to delivery options there are three main methods of facilitating increased participation among mature and other students.
- Method 1 - In-reach: In-reach refers to actions on the part of HEIs which relate to existing supply, creating new ways for mature students to access programmes that are already part of provision. These include alternative entry tests for adults, customised courses, and other procedures that allow a second opportunity to demonstrate potential. They are often accompanied by a relaxation of entry requirements.
- Method 2 - Outreach: Outreach relates to more proactive efforts to widen participation and create partnerships with one or more of employers, schools and the wider community. Examples include work-based initiatives, FET/HE links and community-based access programmes. The primary objective of outreach initiatives in the context of this mature students study, is to target individuals over 23 years of age who believe that HE is 'not for them'. This could be particularly relevant for members of NAP groups.
- Method 3 – Flexibility: Flexibility means making changes that allow students access to education in locations and modes and at times of their own rather than institutions' choosing. Flexibility also refers to the mechanisms that challenge prevailing constructions of what constitutes knowledge at HE level and the means by which knowledge can be acquired and demonstrated: most notably, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNIL). For some NAP groups such as Lone Parents, Members of the Traveller Community, or Individuals with a Disability, such flexibility can be critical.
- The majority of courses require an application to the Central Applications Office (CAO); an interview for some or all courses chosen; additional suitability tests; as well as the attendance of access/foundation courses. Mature students can also directly contact higher education institutions. Many HEIs have developed offices and support centres which offer guidance and advice to support mature students.
- Mature students generally report satisfaction with the quality of information available on education options. The highest satisfaction ratings were in relation to information on the higher education courses and options, where 54% and 53% of respondents respectively indicated that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the quality available. In relation to information on likely job opportunities, half of respondents indicated that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the quality of information.
- Views of mature students on the overall level of supports that are provided to mature students are analysed. One third of respondents stated that guidance and support to complete their course worked very well, while the equivalent figure for peer supports was 31%. 27% and 29% thought that supports for help with digital/ICT skills and mathematics worked very well, while mental health supports were regarded as working well by 29% of respondents. While 21% of respondents believed that financial supports worked very well, 16% thought they worked very poorly.

7

MODELS OF EDUCATION DELIVERY

7.1 ROLE OF MODELS OF DELIVERY

The models of education delivery, teaching and learning approaches, and peer support models have the potential to impact on mature student participation and student success. This is particularly important for mature students from each of the NAP target groups. Of key importance is to ensure that the models of education delivery take account of the specific barriers to participation faced by mature students.

7.2 INTERNATIONAL MODELS OF DELIVERY

International experience in relation to models of delivery of higher education is informative in the assessment of which models might best support mature students. (Indecon also notes that innovations have also been made in this area by Irish higher education institutions). The issue of flexible timetables and blended distance/ in-person learning that fit the needs of learners is critical. Of note is that the Covid-19 pandemic has seen many higher education institutions, in Ireland and internationally, put in place facilities online and blended learning. Historically, the dual mode universities of Australia have been the pioneers in this area. Distinct from the approach of having one dedicated open university, Australia opted for a model of developing a small number of institutions, and students can switch from one mode to another or mix modes. Other routes include elongation by effectively dispensing with the distinction between full-time and part-time study. Indecon recognises that it is difficult for higher education institutions to construct a range of means of promoting access that reflects individual circumstances, and other characteristics.

Accelerated degrees are another form of flexibility and can be offered alongside, or are built upon, other flexibilities, notably: modular study, full or part-time study, and blended learning. Accelerated degrees involve a number of elements:⁸⁰

- They are structured differently to traditional degrees;
- They deliver the same number of credits as a traditional degree programme;
- They offer the same number of teaching weeks as a traditional degree, but they are scheduled so they are (or can) be completed in a shorter period. They reduce the overall duration of the course by utilising the traditional summer holiday for teaching and learning; and,
- They effectively reduce full-time study time to two years (for a three-year undergraduate course) and part-time study to four years.

For some mature students who wish to minimise their time out of the workplace, accelerated degrees could be an option. A 2017 report for the UK Department for Education⁸¹ reviewed a small number of case study institutions who offer accelerated degrees and reported some level of mature student participation in each.

Short-cycle provision (Level 5 of EQF), where institutions provide one or two-year programmes also provide greater access for the most disadvantaged and could help overcome barriers to participation, particularly for certain NAP groups (see Kirsch and Beernaert 2011). These can provide locally accessible HE, a less intimidating starting point, less challenging entry requirements and opportunities to exit with a qualification or transition to a degree programme. Examples are evidenced in the US, Canada, Australia, the UK and other countries.

⁸⁰ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/595637/Accelerated_Degrees_Literature_Review.pdf

⁸¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/595638/Accelerated_Degrees_Case_Study_Report.pdf

Facilitating academic transition can also be important and can take a variety of forms. Induction programmes often include a focus on academic skills development, digital literacies, and becoming an independent learner. One of the main foci of many programmes is academic writing as per the Karolinska Institute in Sweden. It can also take the form of ongoing support of a similar kind through a dedicated unit.

In terms of specific teaching and learning approaches, arguments for formative assessment (especially in year 1) are well established as noted by the OECD,⁸² but may have particular resonance for mature students from NAP groups who are less familiar with the approaches of HE. Recognition of the social aspects of learning, and not just of learning the discipline, but learning as manifest in the development of an academic identity and a personal identity is potentially important. Brennan, Osborne and Shah (2009) discussed this in the context of a major ESRC project, when considering diverse institutional settings and diverse students.

Another potential approach to developing access is through the leadership in HEIs. For example, the Rovira i Virgili University in Spain created a Chair for Social Inclusion in 2011, and which the OECD (2014) speaks of as being 'a leader in social responsibility, acting with a commitment to society and an aim to promote the processes of social inclusion'. OECD (2014) refers to the work of Aalborg University which has as part of its mission 'to attract students from families, that had no connection to universities'. The university reports that some 80% of new entrants fit that category. Leadership also of course happens at governmental level. For example, the autonomous Basque government implemented both the Student Support and Accessibility to Learning Programme and the University and Society Programme, though the amounts of funding dedicated were limited.

An example of a country with an over-arching national policy, and legislation is the Republic of Korea. The main organisation responsible for the design and planning of lifelong learning policies in Korea is the National Institute for Lifelong Education that was established in 2008 through the National Lifelong Learning Act, a national effort to: develop and implement national lifelong education policies, realise individualized lifelong education services and improve organisational responsibilities and efficiency. In order to achieve its mission, the Institute develops lifelong education programs, trains professionals, builds networks among lifelong education organisations, supports local institutes, operates the lifelong education system and specifically establishes a master plan for expanding national lifelong education. Korea also provides an example of lifelong learning initiatives being translated into local action, through its learning city initiatives. Indecon recognises that Ireland is well placed internationally in the field of learning city development, with both Cork and Limerick now in receipt of UNESCO Learning City Award, and both having as a foundation an annual learning festival that celebrates the achievements of learners in multiple ways. Both Cork and Limerick were amongst the first two sets of cities to be given the UNESCO Learning City Award. Cork received this in 2015^{83,84} and Limerick in 2017.⁸⁵ Dublin is currently a member of the Global Network of Learning Cities and intends to make an application to be designated as a UNESCO City of Learning as part of a PATH 3 funded project. Other higher education institutions in different parts of Ireland have also been adjusting the models of delivery to support access for mature students and other groups.

⁸² <https://www.oecd.org/site/educeri21st/40600533.pdf>

⁸³ See Ó Tuama, S (2016), Cork Learning City: Toward a Community Wide Learning Environment Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2897831> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2897831>

⁸⁴ UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) and National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE). (2015) Unlocking the Potential of Urban Communities Case Studies of Twelve Learning Cities Hamburg/Seoul: UIL/NILE. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000234536_eng

⁸⁵ UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL). (2017) Unlocking the Potential of Urban Communities Volume II. Hamburg: UIL. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000258944>

7.3 ASSESSMENT OF MODELS OF DELIVERY

In assessing the models of delivery, it is important to recognise that the experience of higher education in Ireland is mainly that of a traditional, on-campus education done in person. In Table 7.1 current and former mature students are disaggregated by whether their previous experience as a mature student involved on-campus or distance learning, disaggregated by NAP group. Overall, 93% stated that their former experience as a mature student involved on-campus learning, with the equivalent figures being in the range of 88% to 95% for the NAP target groups.

Table 7.1: Current and Former Mature Students by Whether their Previous Experience as a Mature Student involved On-Campus or Distance Learning

	Current and Former Students	Member of the Traveller Community	Having a disability	Lone parent	Area of economic and social disadvantage
On campus	93%	88%	95%	94%	93%
Distance or online learning	7%	13%	5%	6%	7%

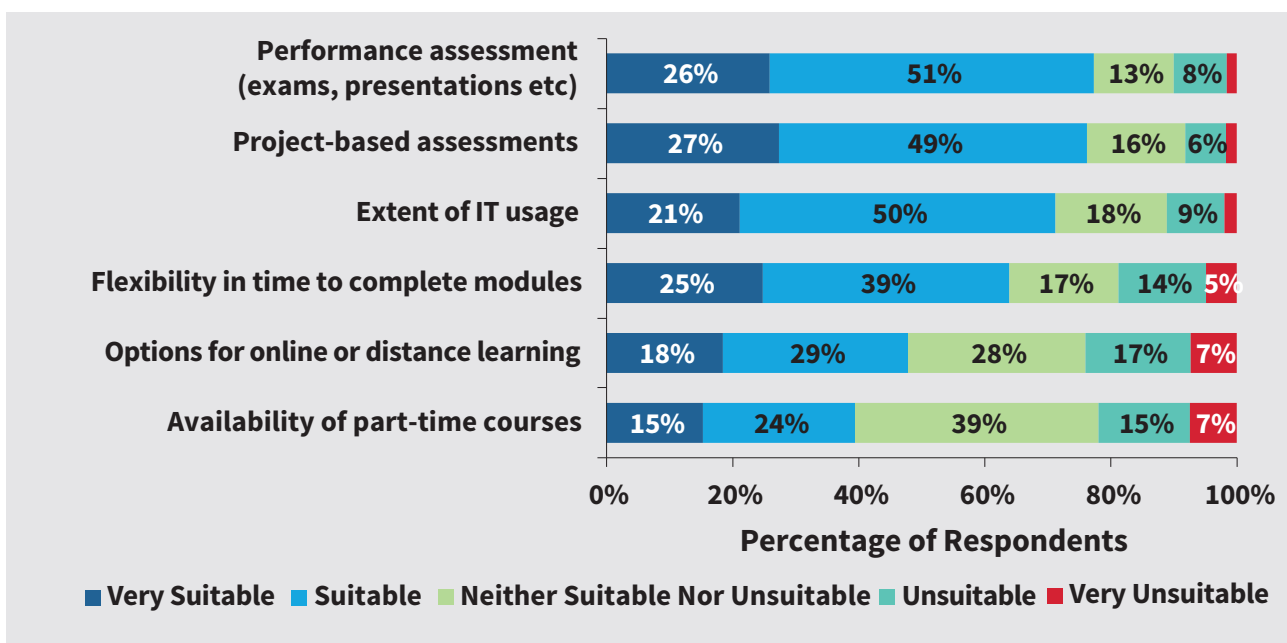
Source: Indecon analysis of responses to survey of Mature Students (2020)

When asked about models of education delivery, respondents were least positive about the provision of online learning and the availability of part-time options. In Figure 7.1, the views of current, former and potential mature students on the suitability of aspects of the delivery of higher education are shown. It should be noted that this survey was completed before initiatives were put in place by higher education institutions in response to the Covid-19 restrictions.

Options for online or distance learning were viewed as being unsuitable or very unsuitable by one in four respondents collectively, while the equivalent proportion for availability of part-time courses was 22%. As shown in Section 3.6, a large majority of mature students in Ireland do so on a full-time basis. According to a survey commissioned by HEA, 90% of part-time undergraduate courses are undertaken by mature students, whereas 15% of full-time undergraduate students are mature students.

The majority of those surveyed reported that performance assessment (in the form of exams, presentations and other methods) was suitable, with 26% stating it was very suitable and 51% stating it was suitable. Similarly, in relation to project-based assessment, views were very positive, with 27% and 49% of respondents indicating that it was either very suitable or suitable, respectively. Views were also positive in relation to the extent of IT usage, while two thirds of mature students thought that flexibility in time to complete modules was either very suitable or suitable. This is illustrated in Figure 7.1.

Figure 7.1: Views of Mature Students on the Suitability of Aspects of the Delivery of Higher Education

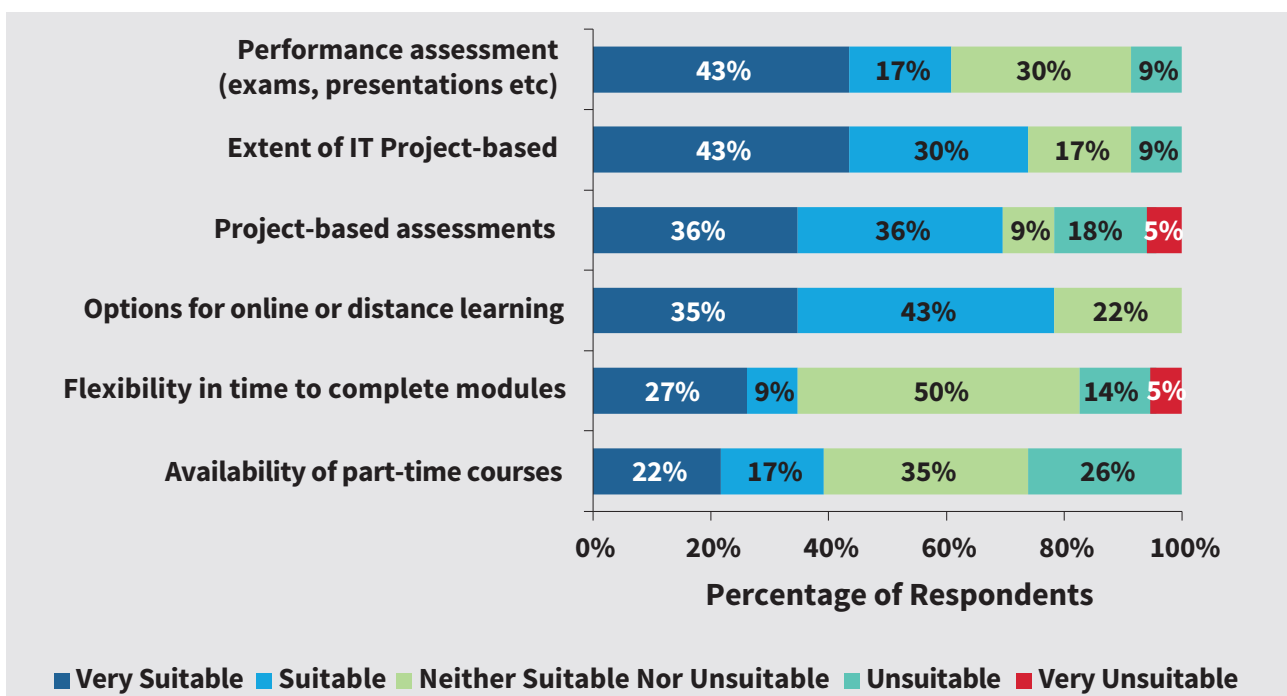


Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Mature Students

Figure 7.2 shows the views of Traveller mature students on models of education delivery, with 43% each stating that performance assessment and project-based assessments were very suitable. Respondents responded in a positive manner regarding flexibility in time to complete modules and extent of IT usage.

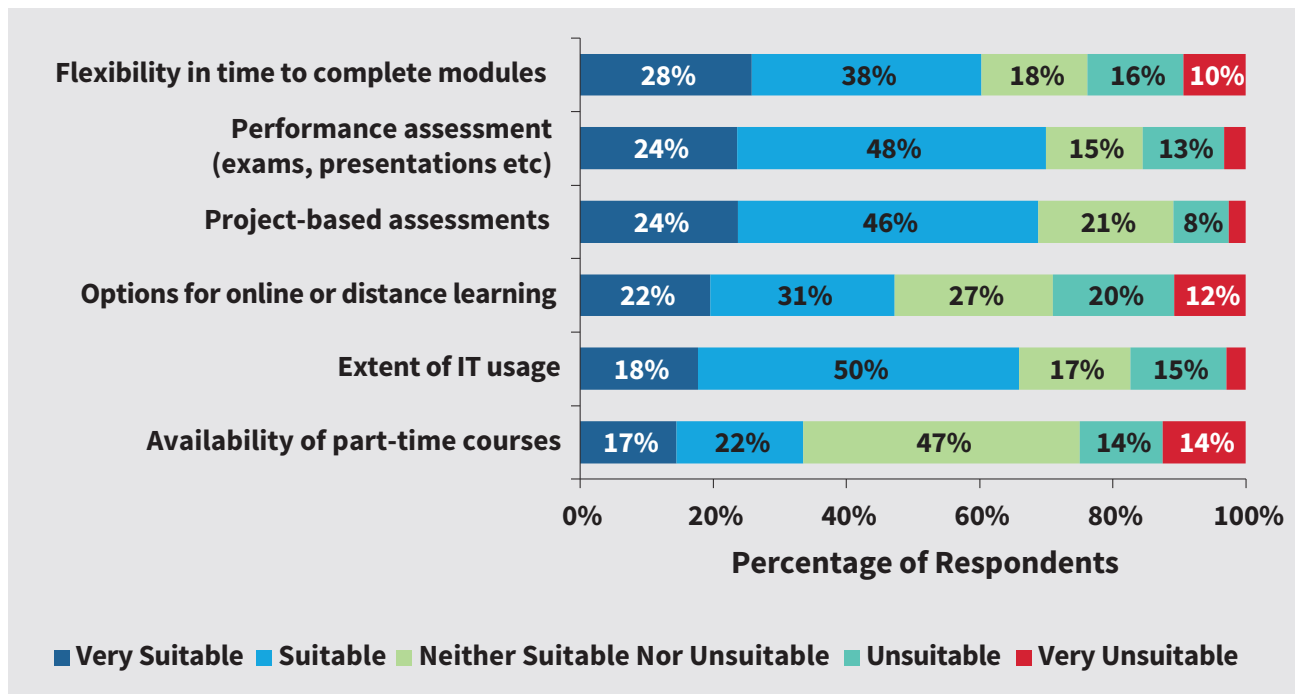
Figure 7.2: Views of Traveller Mature Students on the Suitability of Aspects of the Delivery of Higher Education for Mature Students

Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students



In Figure 7.3 the views of mature students that have a disability are shown concerning the suitability of different aspects of the delivery of mature student higher education courses. 72% of such respondents indicated that they believed performance assessment be very suitable or suitable, with the equivalent figure for project-based assessments being 70% and for the extent of IT usage being 68%.

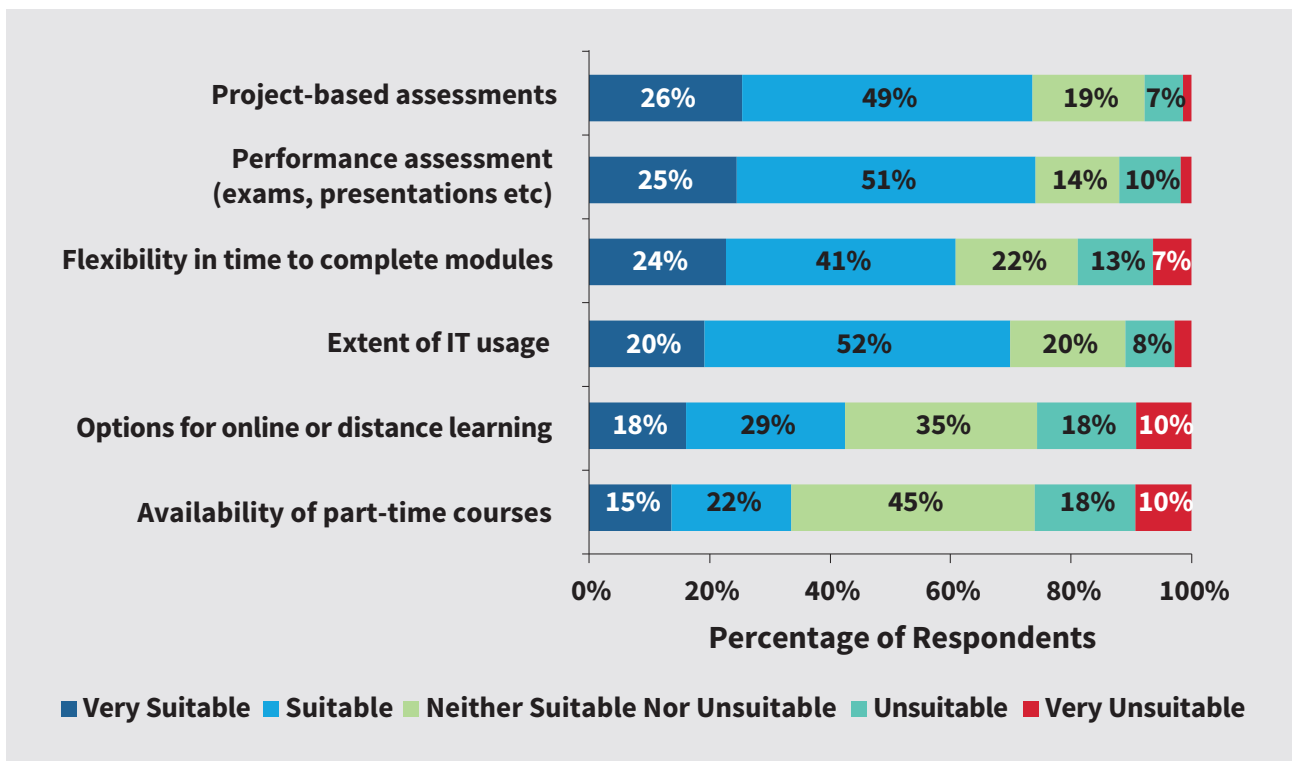
Figure 7.3: Views of Mature Students with a Disability on the Suitability of Aspects of the Delivery of Higher Education for Mature Students



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

Figure 7.4 provides the views of mature students that are lone parents concerning the suitability of aspects of the delivery of higher education, with 76% of respondents indicating that they collectively thought performance-based and project-based assessments were either very suitable or suitable, with the equivalent figure for the extent of IT usage being 72%.

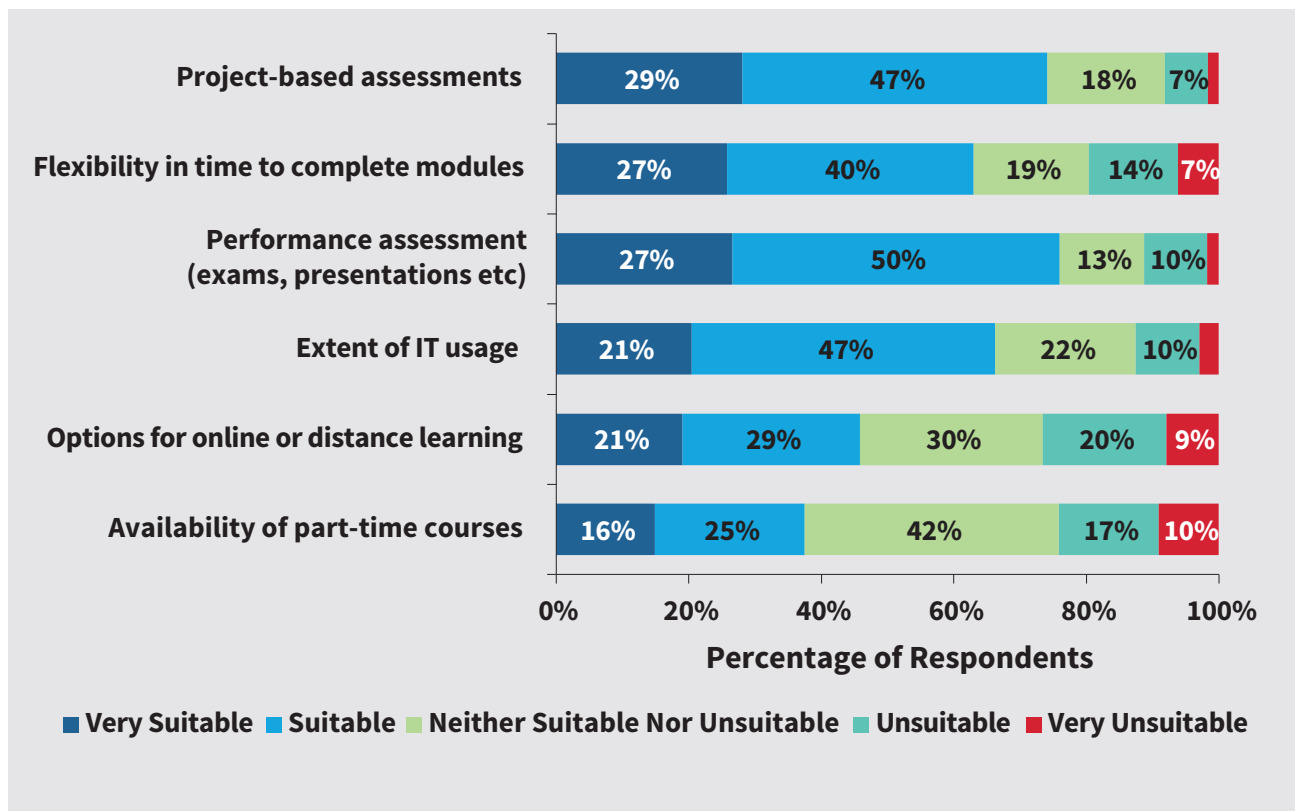
Figure 7.4: Views of Mature Students who are Lone Parents in Receipt of Social Welfare on the Suitability of Aspects of the Delivery of Higher Education for Mature Students



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

The views of current, former and potential mature students from a disadvantaged area on the suitability of aspects of the delivery of higher education are provided in Figure 7.5, with 77% of such respondents indicating that performance assessment was very suitable or suitable, and 76% stating that project-based assessments were very suitable or suitable. Meanwhile, the equivalent suitability ratings or flexibility in time to complete modules and the extent of IT usage were 67% and 68%, respectively.

Figure 7.5: Views of Mature Students from an Area of Economic or Social Disadvantage on the Suitability of Aspects of the Delivery of Higher Education for Mature Students

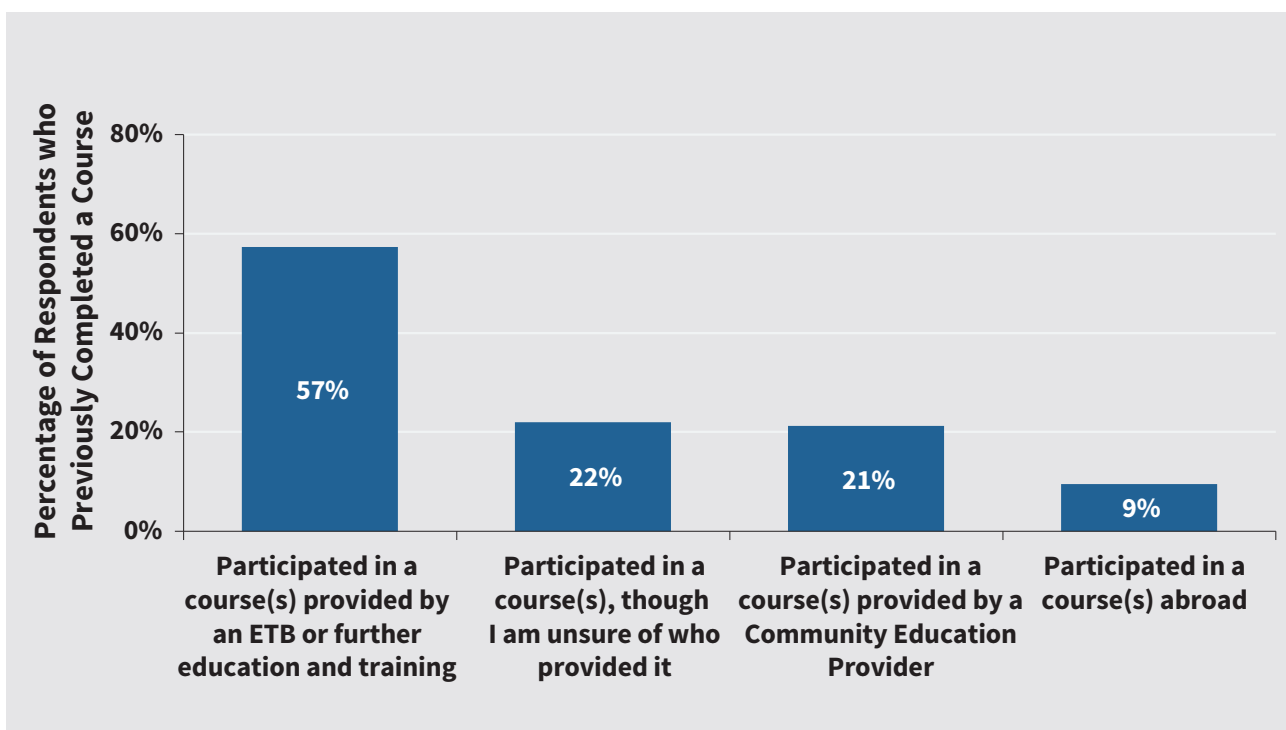


Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

7.4 ROLE OF OTHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS

In considering models of education delivery, it is also useful to examine the role of other education providers in delivering the NAP mature student targets, including the creation of pathways to higher education for mature students, e.g., the role of further education providers and the role of community education providers. In total, 72% of respondent mature students reported having participated in education and training prior to engaging in HE. In Figure 7.6, the percentages of mature students who previously completed courses in other settings prior to engaging in higher education is provided. The figure shows that over half (57%) participated in a course in an Education and Training Board (ETB) or provided by other types of Further Education and Training (FET) bodies, while 21% participated in a course provided by a community education provider.

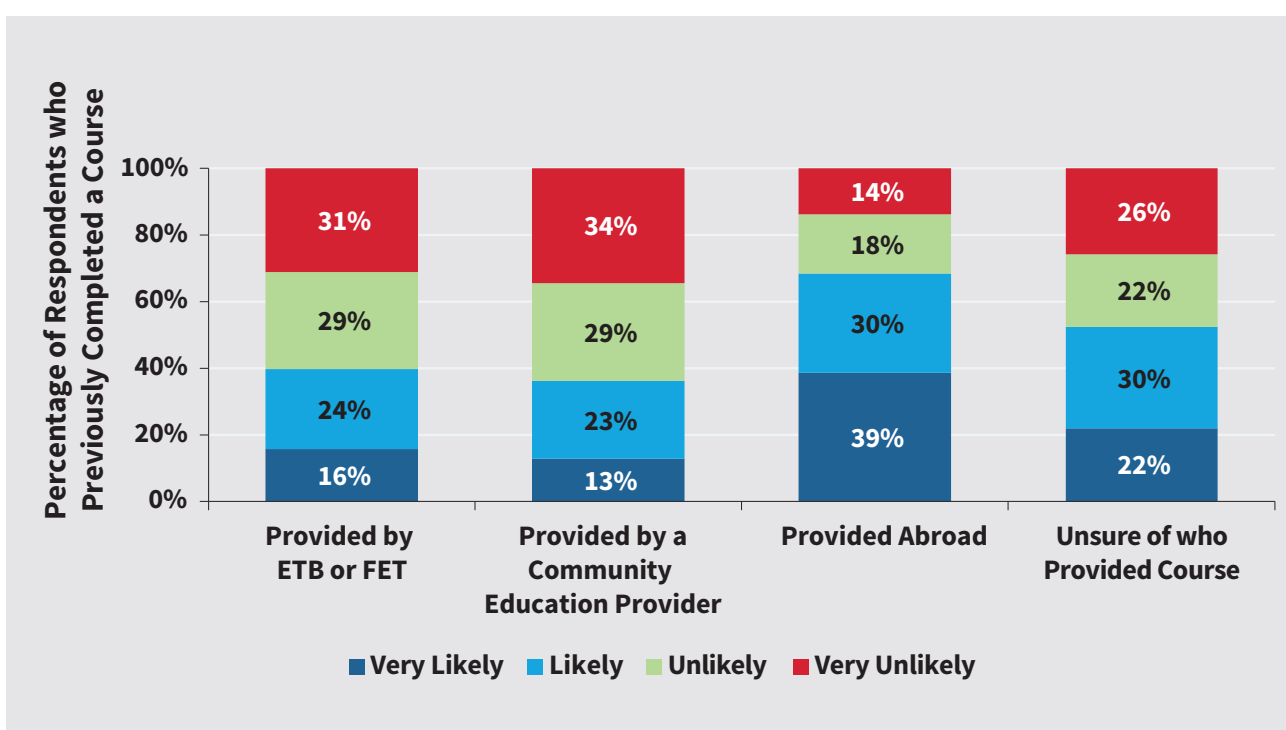
Figure 7.6: Percentage of those who Previously Completed FET or Other Courses by Provider



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

For those who did courses provided by an ETB, or provided by a community education provider, a majority of respondents indicated that they would have been unlikely or very unlikely to go onto higher education without having completed their courses, at 60% and 63% respectively. Figure 7.7 presents the views of mature students who previously completed a course or courses on the likelihood they would have gone on to higher education without doing the course, by provider.

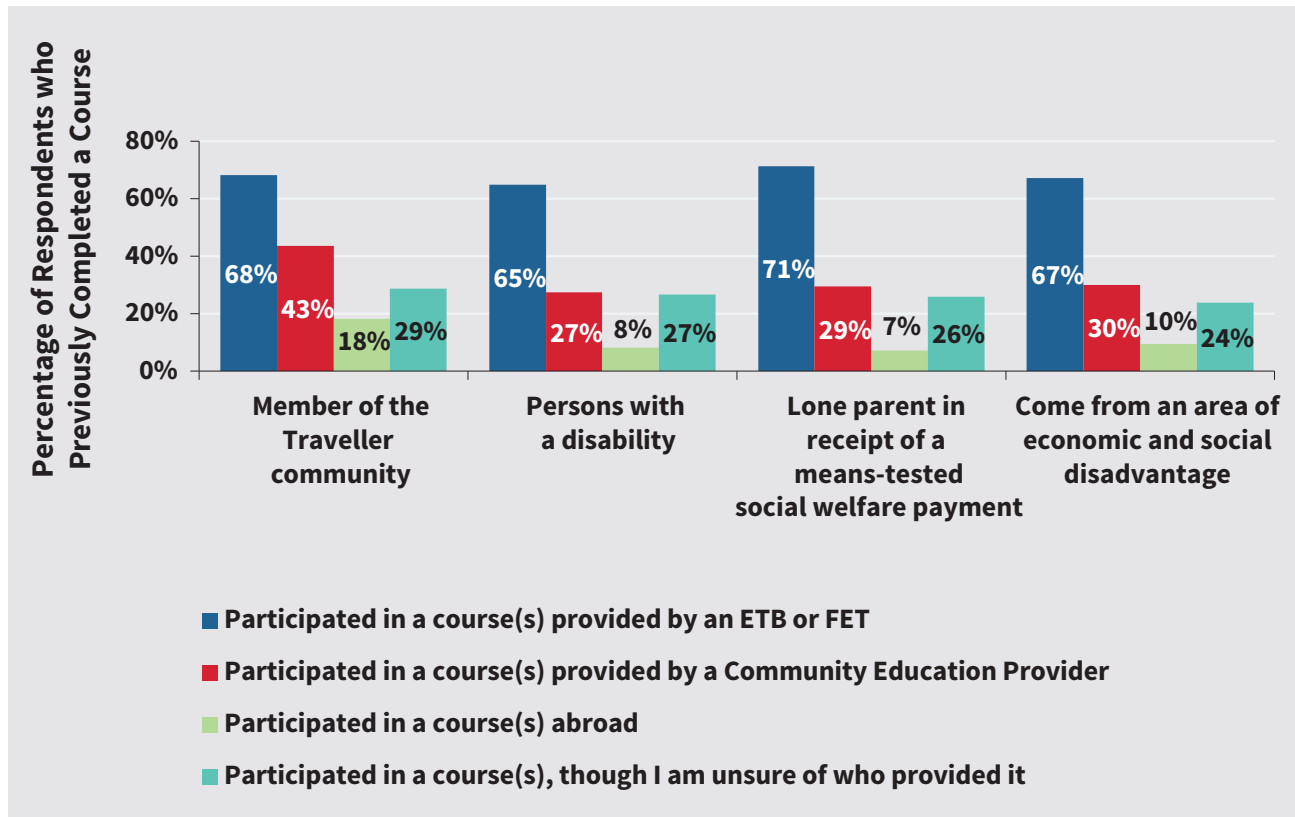
Figure 7.7: Views on Likelihood of Going on to Higher Education if Respondent had not Participated in Prior Course, by Provider



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

Community education played a more important role in the prior education experience of members of the four NAP target groups than the general mature student population, particularly for members of the Traveller Community. Figure 7.8 highlights participation rates by these groups. In this context, the finding by Barter and Hyland (2020) on funding for community engagement by HEIs is relevant.⁸⁶

Figure 7.8: Percentage of those who Previously Completed FET or Other Courses by Provider and NAP Group



Source: Analysis of Indecon Survey of Current, Former and Potential Mature Students

Members of the NAP target groups generally reported being less likely to have gone on to HE if they had not done prior training/education. In Table 7.2, the views of current, former and potential mature students on their likelihood of going on to higher education without doing a previous course are displayed, both for mature students generally and for those in each of the NAP target groups.

Table 7.2: Current, Former and Potential Mature Students on Likelihood of Going on to Higher Education Without Doing Previous Course(s), by NAP Group

	All Respondents	Member of Traveller Community	Having a disability	Lone parent	Area of disadvantage
Very Likely	20%	18%	15%	15%	16%
Likely	25%	27%	20%	20%	21%
Unlikely	25%	23%	28%	32%	26%
Very Unlikely	24%	27%	29%	30%	32%
I Haven't Gone on to HE	5%	5%	9%	4%	5%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Indecon analysis of responses to survey of Mature Students (2020)

⁸⁶ This paper highlights challenges in terms of funding for community engagement, including that until 2018 persons aged over 64 were not counted in terms of interventions because of the focus of funding on labour market activation.

7.5 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Changes to the models of education delivery can assist mature students in overcoming barriers to participation in higher education. These changes could include flexible timetables and blended distance/ in-person learning that fit the needs of learners. Accelerated degrees are another form of flexibility and can be offered alongside or are built upon other flexibilities. Accelerated degrees can be defined as delivering the same number of credits and teaching weeks as a traditional degree programme, but scheduled to be completed in a shorter period, reducing full-time study time. Accelerated degrees could facilitate some mature students who wish to minimise their time out of the workplace. Short-cycle provision, where institutions provide one or two-year programmes, provide disproportionately greater access for the most disadvantaged and could help overcome barriers to participation particularly for certain NAP groups. These can provide locally accessible HE, a less intimidating starting point, less challenging entry requirements and opportunities to exit with a qualification or transition to a degree programme.
- The experience of higher education in Ireland has, prior to Covid-19, been mainly that of a traditional on-campus education. Overall, 93% stated that their former experience as a mature student involved on-campus learning, with the equivalent figures been in the range of 88% to 95% for the NAP target groups.
- For some mature students, aspects of the current model of education delivery represent barriers to participation. These areas were seen as needing adjustment/development by 20% or more of mature students, namely availability of part-time courses, the options for online or distance learning and flexibility in time to complete modules.
- Further education and community education providers play an important role in encouraging students to participate in HE. 72% of respondent mature students reported having participated in education and training prior to engaging in HE. Over half (57%) participated in a course in an ETB or provided by other types of Further Education and Training (FET) bodies, while 21% participated in a course provided by a community education provider. For those who did courses provided by an ETB, or provided by a community education provider, a majority of respondents indicated that they would have been unlikely or very unlikely to go onto higher education without having completed their courses.

8

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This report addresses the current trends, challenges, supporting structures and policy recommendations with regards to first-time mature students, in particular those from the National Access Plan (NAP) target groups including Travellers, students with disabilities, lone parents, and students with socio-economic disadvantage. In this section we set out the conclusions of the study and a series of recommendations.

8.2 CONCLUSIONS

A summary of Indecon's conclusions from our detailed evaluation of participation by mature students in higher education in Ireland is presented in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1: Key Conclusions from Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education

1	Efforts internationally to promote access focus on disadvantaged communities
2	Educational attainment rates in Ireland are high
3	Number of mature students in HE in recent years declined as unemployment fell
4	More mature students attended institutes of technology than universities
5	A majority of mature students attend HE on a full-time basis
6	Financial cost viewed as the single greatest barrier to participation
7	There are existing supports available to encourage mature student participation in HE
8	Non-Acceptance rates of SUSI grant awards are higher for mature students than for other students
9	There are three main methods of increasing participation rates: In-reach; Outreach; and Flexibility
10	Guidance and peer supports deemed to work well
11	Participation in a FET course or through community education is an important pathway to HE
12	Issues concerning part-time, online and flexibility relevant for some mature students

Each of these conclusions is discussed in greater detail overleaf.

1 | Efforts internationally to promote access focus on disadvantaged communities

The Irish National Access Plan has overall targets for mature students, defined as first-time new entrants who are 23 years or over in January of their year of entry. Internationally, efforts to increase participation by students generally are aimed at those from more disadvantaged communities, whether they are mature students or not. This is also reflected in the focus on specific NAP groups within the Irish National Access Plan.

2 | Educational attainment rates in Ireland are high

Educational attainment rates in Ireland are very high, with 40% having achieved third-level education and only 7% have primary level or below. Within the 25 - 44-year age cohort, levels of participation in higher education have surpassed 50%. However, despite the overall levels, NAP target group members have relatively low levels of educational attainment.

3 | Number of mature students in HE in recent years declined as unemployment fell

The number of mature students in higher education declined as unemployment rate fell. The evidence also shows greater volatility among males than females. The decline in the number of mature students may in part reflect the significant increase in overall higher educational attainment.

4 | More mature students attended institutes of technology than universities

More mature students attended institutes of technology than universities and represent a larger portion of student

intake in their respective institution type. The greater number of mature students attending institutes of technology is likely to have been influenced by the duration and type of programmes provided.

5 | A majority of mature students attend HE on a full-time basis

While a majority of mature students participate in higher education on a full-time basis, older candidates and members of the Traveller Community are more likely to participate on a part-time basis. 90% of part-time undergraduate courses are undertaken by mature students, whereas 15% of full-time undergraduate students are mature students.

6 | Financial cost viewed as the single greatest barrier to participation

Financial cost is viewed as the single greatest barrier to participation by mature students. This is a particularly important barrier for the NAP target groups. Other barriers include family responsibilities, job commitments, timing of study, and distance. Those in NAP groups reported higher barriers than other respondents.

7 | There are existing supports available to encourage mature student participation in HE

There are existing supports available to mature students. These include: SUSI, BTEA, Free Fees Initiative, Springboard+, Part-time Education Option, National Childcare Scheme and the Student Assistance Fund, as well as a number of charitable/philanthropic bodies which support access (e.g., St. Vincent de Paul, Uversity). There is also funding to support higher education institutions to facilitate students with disabilities. The main support is through SUSI grants which have remained unchanged for a number of years. The Government has initiated a review of SUSI, the terms of reference for which include examining the value of the maintenance grants and income thresholds, the availability of grants for part-time students, supports for postgraduates, and how Ireland compares against other jurisdictions.

8 | Non-acceptance rates of SUSI grant awards are higher for mature students than for other students

The number of refusals of SUSI grant awards are higher for mature students than for other students. This may, in part, be because of eligibility criteria for different programmes.

9 | There are three main methods of increasing participation: In-reach; Outreach; and Flexibility

Apart from funding supports and changes to delivery options there are three main methods of facilitating increased participation among mature and other students: **In-reach** - actions by HEIs to create new ways for students to access existing programmes; **Outreach** - proactive efforts to widen participation and create partnerships with wider community; and **Flexibility** - providing education in locations, modes and at times that best suit students.

10 | Guidance and peer supports deemed to work well

Positive views were expressed for mature students on guidance and support, including career information, community supports and help with specific skills. However, for a minority percentage of mature students, some aspects of supports were perceived as working poorly.

11 | Participation in a FET course or through community education is an important pathway to HE

Further Education and Training providers play an important role in encouraging students to participate in HE. Almost three in four mature students reported having participated in education and training prior to engaging in HE. Over half participated in a FET course, while 21% participated in a community education course.

12 | Issues concerning part-time, online learning and flexibility relevant for some mature students

For some mature students, aspects of the current model of education delivery represent barriers to participation. Some areas were seen as needing adjustment/development by 20% or more of mature students, namely availability of part-time courses, the options for online or distance learning, and flexibility in time to complete modules.

8.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

A summary of Indecon's recommendations based on our detailed research evaluation of participation by mature students in higher education in Ireland is presented below. While these are presented in order of priority Indecon believes that they are all important to ensure individuals are facilitated to release their potential and to address equity concerns. The research undertaken as part of this study shows that in many cases the low levels of participation by certain groups reflects specific barriers and challenges rather than a lack of interest. If measures are taken to reduce these barriers, Indecon believes that there would be increased demand for participation in higher education.

Recommendations for the Future - Mature Student Participation in Higher Education

1	Focus access targets and supports on disadvantaged communities
2	Promote and fund part-time learning
3	Greater provision of flexible learning opportunities
4	Institution-level support for mature students should continue
5	Strong national provision of guidance and support
6	Increase provision of foundation/bridging courses
7	Consider ways to secure greater involvement by communities and employers for NAP groups
8	Seamless pathways between FET and HE should be developed
9	Improve data availability

1 | Focus access targets and supports on disadvantaged communities

Lower levels of educational attainment of students from disadvantaged communities and NAP groups have important consequences for the individual's ability to realise their potential and represent a risk of increased poverty as well as wider negative impacts on productivity and economic development. Evidence from Indecon's study shows that respondents who belonged to one or more NAP group reported much higher barriers than respondents who did not. Indecon recommends that scarce Exchequer resources should be focused on supporting the most disadvantaged and underrepresented communities to access HE. There needs to be an equitable, coherent, realistic and flexible funding model for mature students from disadvantaged communities. The economic and social risk of participation for these groups needs to be mitigated by an appropriate financial support package. There is also, importantly, a need to accommodate re-entry and second chance provisions for those from disadvantaged communities and groups with low levels of educational attainment.

2 | Promote and fund part-time learning

Full-time HE participation for all may not be consistent with the need to maximise upskilling and retraining opportunities, while full-time learning may not be feasible or appropriate for many potential mature students. Currently, only students on full-time programmes are eligible for the Free Fees Scheme, SUSI, BTEA, and this effectively disincentivises part-time/ flexible study. Focusing some of existing public resources on expanding the opportunities for part-time learning may be an efficient means of promoting participation. This could include examining access routes; increasing financial support for part-time learning (e.g., through an expansion of SUSI, the Student Assistance Fund or other means); institutional level targets and other measures.

3 | Greater provision of flexible learning opportunities

Flexible/part-time higher education needs to be made accessible to a more diverse range of students, including for the benefit of mature students. The current Covid-19 pandemic has seen impressive achievements made by the HEIs in Ireland in introducing measures to ensure that education is accessible to students, and in upskilling lecturing staff with online delivery and IT skills to meet such challenges. These investments can now be used to provide greater flexibility to those students for whom fixed calendar learning is not feasible, including many mature students. There also need to be a clear definition of what constitutes part-time learning and flexible learning.

4 | Institution-level support for mature students should continue

All mature students, whether from disadvantaged communities or not, face challenges and issues in participating in HE. Further, many mature students return to education due to the need to make a career change in order to gain secure employment. HEIs should continue to provide appropriate levels of support and guidance to all mature students, such as through dedicated Mature Student Offices where appropriate.

5 | Strong national provision of guidance and support

HEIs should continue to enhance student advisory support programmes to ensure that mature students can access appropriate support and information on an ongoing basis throughout the duration of their studies, both through undergraduate programmes and post-degree (i.e. postgraduate and employment opportunities). This should include, where appropriate, the provision of relevant supports outside of regular hours, possibly on an online basis. This would require significant investment and systemic change, so careful consideration would need to be given as to how this could be delivered.

Guidance also plays a critical role in the decisions of individuals to engage in FET as a pathway to HE and to consider HE opportunities while engaging in Further Education and Training. It is important that guidance services are accessible to all prospective mature students, including those not linked with their local Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI) through community initiatives or through a formal programme of study.

6 | Increase provision of foundation/bridging courses

International experience, and the experience of successful courses already run by many institutions in Ireland, suggests that the funding and provision of foundation/bridging courses in advance of attending a mainstream HEI course can greatly assist students. This can involve partnerships between the higher and further education/community education sectors in the running of access/foundation courses that will provide a range of options to meet the specific needs of disadvantaged communities.

7 | Consider ways to secure greater involvement by communities and employers for NAP groups

National and international practice suggests the importance of developing community structures that foster greater demand by mature students. In December 2020 it was announced that PATH 3 was being funded for a further three-year period with an additional allocation of €7.5m. An updated evaluation of the experience of PATH 3 may help guide policy for future access strategy. Ensuring mature students have access to information on careers, and to employers directly, is also important.

8 | Seamless pathways between FET and HE should be developed

Facilitation of enhanced progression from further education and training to higher education should be put in place. It is imperative that both the higher education and further education sectors work in tandem, and that a clear vision and set of principles between these two sectors is agreed to ensure that those students that want to progress are given the information and opportunity to do so. An FET-HE Transitions Reform Sub-Group was established in 2017, and in 2020 issued a report setting out potential action areas to promote transition.⁸⁷ Indecon believes that the outputs of the group should be considered carefully as a means of promoting transition from FET to HE as a priority in the context of mature student and wider educational and skill objectives. This should build on recent achievements which have taken place.

9 | Improve data availability

The HEA and SUSI collect very useful information on the participation of mature students in third-level institutions. However, data on the progression of students into HE, data on part-time students, and data on what happens to mature students post-qualification requires further development. This data will be important in understanding how best to recognise the impact that participation in HE subsequently had on learners' lives. There needs to be a review of how data on mature students is collected and reported within institutions themselves to ensure that a consistent approach is being followed across institutions.

8.4 SPECIFIC SUPPORTS FOR NAP GROUPS

The recommendations outlined above will assist in supporting mature students from each of the NAP target groups. In addition, there will be a need for targeted supports to be tailored to meet the more specific needs of members of each of the NAP target groups. Specific recommendations for consideration aimed at each of the NAP target groups are outlined below. However, future National Access strategy may identify different categories of target groups, who may in turn require targeted supports reflecting their own circumstances. More generally, a Universal Design approach by educational institutions may help improve access, participation, and success for all groups, whether identified as NAP target groups or not.

Recommendations specific to participation by members of the Irish Traveller Community who are mature students.

- > Aligned with Indecon's general recommendation to target resources on NAP groups, we support the increased targeting of financial supports to facilitate full and part-time access to higher education for members of the Irish Traveller Community who are mature students.
- > Ensure easy access to literacy and numeracy supports.
- > Support HEIs to continue and widen research and programme development aimed at members of the Traveller Community.
- > Resource relationship building with community development organisations that represent Traveller organisations.
- > Support Traveller Graduate Network that can increase visibility and provide role models within the community and HEIs.
- > Bridge the gap from early school leaving to entering HE by pre-development capacity building and personal development to ensure students are college-ready.

⁸⁷ <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/b63d2338fd/des-transitions-sub-group-working-paper-june-2020.pdf>

- > Include Irish Travellers as role models in HE mentoring programmes for students in second-level and FE.

Recommendations specific to participation by students with disabilities who are mature students.

- > Increased targeting of financial supports to facilitate full and part-time access to higher education for mature students with a disability.
- > Ensure post-entry support for students with disabilities including access to Occupational Therapists and Assistive Technologists as well as facilitating flexible requirements to take account of health issues.
- > Consistently apply the principles of Universal Design for Learning to ensure a positive impact for individuals with disabilities.
- > Ensure easy access to literacy and numeracy supports to support learners with disabilities.
- > Provide supports for learners with disabilities to pursue non-linear educational pathways.
- > Increase awareness of staff on the impact of specific conditions (e.g., dyslexia).

Recommendations specific to participation by persons from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who are mature students.

- > Increased targeting of financial supports to facilitate full-time and part-time access to higher education for individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who are mature students including former children in care, ethnic minorities as well as for individuals from other NAP groups.
- > Support representative organisations to highlight opportunities for individuals from disadvantaged groups to participate in higher education.
- > Ensure easy access to literacy and numeracy supports for individuals.
- > Provide support for mature learners from disadvantaged groups to pursue non-linear educational pathways.

Recommendations specific to participation by lone parents who are mature students.

- > Provide flexibility in timing of requirements to ensure barriers related to co-ordination with childcare are addressed or support additional college-based childcare provision.
- > Increased targeting of financial supports on lone parents to facilitate full and part-time participation in higher education.
- > Support lone parents' families to participate in HE.
- > Include lone parent students as role models in HE mentoring programmes for students in second-level and FET⁸⁸ and highlight case studies to show the financial impact of higher education and how barriers to learning were overcome.
- > Provide support for lone parent mature students to pursue non-linear educational pathways.
- > While lone parents are identified as a specific target group in the National Access Plan, it is important also to identify the broader costs of caring (for example, for elderly parents) which may also particularly impact on mature students.

⁸⁸ <https://assets.gov.ie/24760/5c424910fec84e6c9131d40081b3ff48.pdf>

8.5 LONGER-TERM IMPACT

The policy proposals recommended in this report are aimed at supporting greater participation by mature students in higher education in Ireland, particularly those from disadvantaged communities. However, it should be noted that policy interventions take place in an existing social and economic context, and that certain key factors which influence participation rates are not as amenable to direct policy control. Most notably, there are cultural and social reasons behind lower participation among certain groups, for example, the younger age of marriage and family formation of members of the Traveller Community. Further, the prevailing economic environment and labour market has a huge impact on participation rates. As such, policy measures should be targeted and aimed at increasing longer-term participation in HE by sections of the Irish population which may not otherwise get that opportunity. The potential medium and long-term impact of Covid-19 on HE participation rates also remains to be seen and should be carefully monitored.

