



Second Data Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education

Technical Report

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Acronyms used in studies on equity of access

BAME	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
BME	black and minority ethnic
CA	contextualised admissions
CALD	culturally and linguistically diverse
CALMMR	culturally and linguistically marginalised migrant or refugee
DACA	deferred action for childhood arrival
DE	developmental education (or direct entry)
DEI	diversity, equity and inclusion
EAL	English as an additional language
EDI	equality, diversity and inclusion
FE	further education
GPA	grade point average
HBCU	historically black college and universities
HE	higher education
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	higher education institution
HPS	high participation system
ID	intellectual disability
ID/DD	intellectual and developmental disabilities
LPN	low participation neighbourhood
LSES	low socio-economic background
ML	multilingual learner
NAMRS	newly arrived or migrant student
NESB	non-English speaking background
PSE	Post-secondary education
RBS	refugee background student
RPL	recognition of prior learning
RRR	rural, regional and remote
SEN	special educational needs
SfRBs	students from refugee backgrounds
SwDs	students with disabilities
SWVIDs	students with visual impairment disabilities
URG	underrepresented group
URM	underrepresented minority
VI	visual impairment
WA	widening access
WINTA	women in non-traditional areas
WP	widening participation

1

Introduction

This report builds on the work that Trutz Haase and I carried out in 2017 for the first Data Plan on equity of access to higher education (Haase et al., 2017). Like its predecessor, this plan aims to identify reliable sources of information that can be used to measure, monitor and enhance the participation of vulnerable social groups in higher education. To this end, I carried out a systematic review of the international literature on equity of access, a careful assessment of the priority groups identified in the National Access Plan (NAP) and I held several focus groups with stakeholders, representatives of HEIs and experts. On this basis, I have formulated a set of proposals for improving the evidence base available to the HEA by acquiring, linking and analysing new and existing sources of data.

In the first Data Plan, we emphasised the value of administrative databases across the education sector and showed that it was possible to exploit the national data infrastructure in order to join and analyse educational databases (such as the Pobal database covering pre-school education, POD and P-POD, SUSI, the FSD, the SOLAS PLSS database and the HEA SRS databases)¹. By bringing together these sources, we argued, it is possible to monitor educational pathways in an integrated manner and from a “whole of education” perspective. It is also possible to achieve a better understanding of the role of social welfare benefits in facilitating participation and to gain an appreciation of the relationship between educational attainments and labour market outcomes by linking with other sources of data.

After 2017, the HEA established data sharing agreements with the Central Statistics Office, the Department of Education, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, SOLAS and Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI). This project builds on this approach and seeks to chart a route towards the kind of integrated monitoring framework that we described in 2017. At the same time, I address a series of operational difficulties that have emerged since 2017 in the context of monitoring activities and discuss the issues raised by the most recent National Access Plan, with a view to sustaining the efforts of the HEA and the HEIs in Ireland to implement policies and programmes that aim to widen participation.

Since we wrote the last Data Plan, the use of joined administrative data to provide an evidence base for policy has become standard practice in many areas and it is widely accepted that these data sources provide a cost-effective and reliable way of monitoring educational participation. This is a timely development, as it is becoming increasingly difficult to gather survey data, in Ireland as in most other countries. This problem was already apparent in 2017, and in the first Data Plan we showed that proxy measures of occupational status based on surveys were often unreliable and should not be used to set thresholds for access to higher education.

During my recent consultations with stakeholders, other limitations of survey data have become apparent, including selective response, stigmatisation effects, differences in how key terms are interpreted and inefficiency in the measurement of small groups. Many of the focus group participants highlighted these issues:

“I think some of the data we’re relying on is not robust, and it’s not complete. It’s not accurate, you know, and large amounts of it are self-reported. There’s just a bit of a difficulty – I think in this particular area anyway – with the kind of data we’re looking at.”

(HEI representative)

¹ The National Data Infrastructure includes the census of population, the census Small Areas, the system of Eircodes, GeoDirectory, PPS numbers and related technologies.

For these reasons, survey data do not offer a reliable solution to many of the challenges we face in relation to target-setting, resource allocation and monitoring across an expanded range of categories. Because of these problems, many HEIs use alternative data sources, although these raise other issues:

"We are still very aligned to the pathway data, because that's the most reliable data that's coming back into the SRS and then being reported via the HEA dashboards. That is data that has been validated by an external organisation and that we can use for reporting purposes. However, it is very narrow and it doesn't capture the expanded criteria under the National Access Plan ... it is those who've chosen to apply to a particular pathway that we can align, and it's not actually reflective of the student demographic."

(HEI representative)

The dangers of these approaches are self-evident and there is now a broad consensus across the HE sector that additional efforts are needed in order to provide a stable foundation for monitoring equity of access. I argue in this report that the evolving framework for monitoring access to HE in Ireland should seek to capitalise on the investments that have been made over the past two decades in administrative databases. In other countries which have developed effective registries (most notably the Scandinavian countries), the use of secondary databases has greatly enriched the evidence base for policy-making and led to a great expansion of applied research which has shed light on key aspects of the education system which cannot be studied effectively using other kinds of data.

The monitoring framework described in this report relies on state-of-the-art methods, which can support an ambitious research agenda capable of sustaining educational programmes and strategies in coming years. One HEI representative who participated in the consultation for this project highlighted the usefulness of evaluating interventions like outreach programmes using this kind of expanded evidence base:

"So they're actually tracking students at post primary coming into second or into higher education. And you have a full picture of your cohort and your target groups and that are coming in prior to entering higher education. And they're able to then actually really assess the impact of their outreach because they have those students tagged from their outreach. So each institution can see the students that they engage with from outreach and do they follow through into higher education and what the impact of that particular outreach initiative is."

(HEI representative)

Not only is education a dynamic process, but other aspects of students' lives are also subject to change, and this is particularly evident in relation to demographic factors (having children, providing care), disabilities (which may be diagnosed during higher education), geographical mobility, changing identities and many other characteristics. By studying these transitions across the education system as a whole, it is possible to identify groups at risk of leaving school early, for example, or failing to progress to HE. One of the benefits of using administrative datasets is that it is possible to obtain updates at regular intervals and to capture these aspects of the system.

The work that the HEA has carried out in collaboration with SUSI, the CSO, the Department of Education and other actors represents a good example of the potential of this approach². A longitudinal monitoring approach would have the potential to shed further light on the impact of a range of programmes:

"So for us, we'd be interested in knowing how many adults start off in a literacy context and then end up progressing all the way into higher education. That is what we wish we were able to know. And the question is, how do you measure that?"

(NALA representative)

Integrated, sector-wide monitoring can also facilitate an enhanced agenda which goes beyond access. As a number of commentators and stakeholders observed, there is no point in widening access to higher education if this does not lead to high rates of retention, completion and successful transitions to postgraduate study and the labour market. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) note that "access without support is not opportunity", and Banerjee (2019) states that "... one of the major problems faced by the HE sector is that of attrition and decisively disadvantaged students are more likely to drop out from their courses".

For these reasons, I believe that it is appropriate to take a further step towards measuring equity of access using an integrated, dynamic monitoring framework. Other sectors of the education system are moving in this direction, and these separate strands can contribute to monitoring activities that cover the entire sector. Each part of the system has a role to play in meeting the data requirements of the others, as we collectively move towards a "whole of education" approach to monitoring. One of the HEI representatives who participated in the consultation made the following remark:

"There's a huge emphasis on counting people coming in and we want to sub-categorise them and know all that, you know what I mean: the nuances and how many are in these often very tiny subgroups. And what we're not really focusing on then is the quality of the student experience when they come in. Are they engaging? Are they achieving the same outcomes as other students? And if they're not, why not?"

(HEI representative)

² See, for example, the material provided by the CSO on the following website: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/fp/fp-eossr/educationandotheroutcomesforsusisupportrecipients2012-2022/> (accessed in April 2025).

At the heart of the proposed monitoring framework is the use of Small Area deprivation scores to measure socio-economic composition via aggregation. This approach is used in other areas of policy-making, within the education system and beyond, including the identification of DEIS schools, the distribution of funds under the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) and in health (HSE) and social services (Tusla). The reason why this is a core component of the monitoring framework is due to the crucial role that socio-economic position plays in shaping access to resources and influencing the distribution of educational opportunities. While other forms of exclusion from higher education are typically more tractable, socio-economic disadvantage remains entrenched and is particularly difficult to overcome.

However, one of the merits of an integrated monitoring framework is that it facilitates the joint analysis of different domains and dimensions of educational disadvantage. At the international level, policy-makers, managers and researchers are aware of the importance of thinking about educational inequalities from an intersectional perspective, as there are often overlaps between priority groups. The experience of women, mature students, Irish Travellers, Roma people, lone parents and people with disabilities often vary in accordance with their overall characteristics. Moreover, it is important to take socio-economic disadvantage into account when assessing access to higher education by these groups. This point is expressed clearly in the 2022 NAP and represents a welcome step forward in understanding obstacles to access and developing more sophisticated policies that tackle educational inequalities.

The logic of the proposed monitoring framework is as follows: data are linked at the individual level using PPS numbers, at the household level using Eircodes, and at the Small Area level using CSO identifiers. By linking the SRS with the POD and P-POD databases, the HEA can acquire valuable information relating to school students. By linking with data from the Fund for Students with Disabilities, it can estimate the incidence of disability and a similar approach can be adopted in relation to the benefits system, further education, the labour market, young people in the care of the state and other sub-systems where administrative data are routinely collected.

Because the collection of these data is part of the process of providing services, this is arguably the most appropriate, efficient and reliable way of obtaining accurate information on the priority groups mentioned in the NAP. This approach overcomes many of the difficulties inherent in the collection of survey data, while reducing administrative burden and concentrating attention on the collection of data at a single point within the system. During consultations, HEIs referred to the demoralising experience of repeatedly seeking to “count the sheep”, obtaining a different result each time:

“We gather the data over and over again. We keep counting the sheep, but we never figure out what we have. So we would love a data plan that would allow us look at those patterns across programmes and across institutions so that we can really challenge the different programmes to be more inclusive.”

(HEI representative)

2

Terms of reference

According to the terms of reference, this Access Data Plan was expected to involve a comprehensive, independent research study that makes recommendations on data availability, in compliance with data protection regulations, with a view to identifying robust sources for all priority groups identified in the National Access Plan. Using methods proposed by the Tenderer, the study was expected to:

- (1) Review and assess national and international approaches to data collection methods/sources for equity of access measures across all education sectors (including early-years, primary, post-primary, further education, and higher education), identifying examples of good practice that could potentially be replicated³.
- (2) Review and assess existing HEA data collection methods/sources and data quality for equity of access measures in higher education, including Deprivation Index Scores (DIS), Equal Access Survey (EAS), Student Record System (SRS) access-related variables, Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD), Student Assistance Fund (SAF) and Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS).
- (3) Consult with key stakeholders to identify data gaps and areas for improvement in data definition, collection, and measurement for equity of access measures in higher education, with a particular focus on the priority groups identified in the National Access Plan (2022–2028).
- (4) Make recommendations in relation to the following:
 - (a) Enhancements to existing data sources for measuring and monitoring equity of access, participation, and success in higher education by priority groups identified in the National Access Plan. This should include an implementation plan for addressing challenges around the use of self-declaration data, survey response rates, and reporting on small numbers (e.g., ethnicity data).
 - (b) Identification and use of additional data sources for measuring and monitoring equity of access, participation, and success for all priority groups identified in the National Access Plan. This should include an implementation plan for proposed solutions, resources and timelines for additional data sources, systems, and analysis. Consideration should also be given to the identification of national level definitions for priority groups taking account of available data sources as well as the relevant dependencies in respect of any additional data sources.

3 While carrying out the systematic literature review, it quickly became apparent that the challenges faced at each of these different levels of the education system are highly specific, which means that it is not generally possible to extrapolate from the experience of primary schools, for example, and to apply these to HE. Where this is feasible, we include references to these sectors.

3

Equity of access at the international level

Higher education systems expanded rapidly in most of the developed countries after about 1960 due to transformations in the labour market as a result of technological innovation, expansion of the services sector and demographic changes. In the UK, the share of 17–30 year-olds who enrolled in higher education rose from about 5% in 1960 to about 43% in 2007 (Chowdry et al., 2013). In Ireland, the participation rate increased from about 20% of young people in 1980s to over 50% in 2015 (Hannon & O'Sullivan, 2018). Between 1995 and 2010, the average OECD university entry rate rose from 37% to 62% (Fack & Grenet, 2015). By 1970 the world gross enrolment ratio⁴ in higher education was 10%; by 2010, it had reached 30%. North America and Europe are the regions in which this expansion reached the highest levels: in 2011, the gross enrolment ratio was almost 77% in North America and Western Europe and 71% in Central and Eastern Europe (Garaz & Torotcoi, 2017).

Scholars often describe this process in terms of a transition from an elitist HE system to a 'universal' or 'high participation' system via a process of 'massification'. Haas & Hadjar (2024) provide the following description of this process in the USA:

"Given that the labor market rewards generic rather than specific skills, higher education is the default postsecondary education option for U.S. students (Streeck 2011), and even low-achieving students are encouraged to enroll ... because the U.S. higher education system caters to students with very different needs and academic goals, higher education is also highly diversified, including an extensive postsecondary sector that provides shorter qualifications (e.g., certificates or associate degrees)."

(Haas & Hadjar, 2024, p. 279)

Initiatives to expand participation spread rapidly across the developed countries during the 1990s, although the aims of these interventions varied greatly depending on the context. As part of the Bologna Process⁵, participating countries commit to implementing policies for increasing access, retention and completion for students from vulnerable groups (Hâj & Țucă, 2022), as "the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations" (this formulation, quoted in Riddell & Wheedon 2014, was already embraced by EHEA Ministers at the Prague Conference in 2001, see Salmi, Hâj & Alexe (2015)). However, coordinating progress on the agenda of widening participation proved difficult:

"... progress reports on the Bologna Process ... note the significant challenges involved in achieving the social objectives of widening participation for under-represented groups. These reports highlight a number of problems including national differences in understanding of social inequality and the nature of under-represented groups, the general absence of specific targets for widening participation of under-represented groups, the lack of systematic monitoring and the limitations of widening access initiatives and strategies."

(Riddell & Weedon, 2014, p. 5)

⁴ This is calculated as the number of students enrolled in higher education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population whose age corresponds to higher education (typically 18–24).

⁵ The Bologna declaration of 1998 was based on intergovernmental cooperation and led by ministers of education from across the European Higher Education Area. In 1999, the declaration was signed by 29 countries and 46 countries had joined by 2010. Signatories agree to the development of a common framework of qualifications, easier student mobility and a policy of contrasting inequalities.

Sellar & Gale (2016) describe the development of policies for widening participation in the UK:

"Approaches to widening participation in English higher education did not have a substantive national dimension prior to the release of the Dearing Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in 1997. At this time, student equity was seen to be a matter largely for institutions and approaches to widening participation varied depending on institution-specific missions and contexts. However, following the Dearing Report and the election of Blair's New Labour in 1997, national targets were set for increasing participation."

(Sellar & Gale, 2016, p. 47)

In the USA, the primary objective of widening participation policies has always been to attract students from under-represented ethnic groups (particularly African Americans and Hispanic students), whilst in Canada and Australia the aim is often to recruit from rural and indigenous communities (Alexander & Cleland, 2018; Bathmaker & Bowl, 2018). In Finland, the need to widen access policies was recognised as part of the policy agenda only recently, because of the nature of the HE system itself:

"... as HE is largely funded by the state and degree programmes do not have tuition fees, there is a political consensus that there is no need for special initiatives to widen access by focusing on under-represented groups ... There are no preparatory programmes or admission procedures aimed at 'non-traditional' or first-generation students. Institutions do not systematically collect follow-up statistics on students' backgrounds or provide any targeted student counselling or support for mature students or those from working-class or immigrant backgrounds."

(Haltia et al., 2022, p. 542)

Only a small number of countries have set targets for widening participation in HE, including the UK, Sweden, Australia, Germany and Ireland (Elliott 2018). In Australia, four indicators are used to monitor the progress of six priority groups, using standardised rates of access, participation, success, and apparent retention⁶. The groups capture students who fall into the following categories: (1) low socio-economic status; (2) disabilities; (3) indigenous people; (4) women in non-traditional areas; (5) 'regional' or 'remote' students from areas outside the main urban centres; (6) non-English speaking background students. The rigorous definition of monitoring variables for each priority group is one of the strengths of the Australian framework, which permits the use of dashboards for tracking progress over time. Over the past three decades, Australian researchers have developed a range of analytical tools to monitor access, including concepts such as the "age-specific population parity rate". In the UK, priority groups include students from lower socio-economic groups, black and minority ethnic backgrounds, those with no family history of participation in HE, mature students, students with disabilities and those who have been in the care of the state (Bathmaker & Bowl, 2018).

The experience of the last few decades reveals that policy shifts and external shocks tend to stimulate interest in monitoring equity of access. To reduce the barriers to entering HE, many countries provide financial aid and fee waivers to a share of students (often around one third), with grants typically decreasing as parental income increases (Fack & Grenet, 2015). Until 1998, full-time undergraduate education in England was free of charge to students at publicly funded HEIs, but in that year the government introduced, and then progressively increased, tuition fees. Azmat & Simion (2021) use linked, longitudinal administrative databases to show that the introduction and increase in these university fees did not discourage disadvantaged students from participating in HE in England, mainly because they typically qualified for student grants.

⁶ These indicators are calculated for each equity group and expressed as a ratio (compared to all students), which means that the expected value would be 1 in the absence of any disparity. Access rates are calculated in relation to the "higher education age group of the population".

In the USA, roughly half of first-time, full-time undergraduate students rely on federal student loans, although the average student accumulates more than \$26,000 in debt by the time they graduate (A. R. Baker et al., 2017). Nevertheless, participation in this context has also increased substantially over the past two decades. Ford, Rosinger & Zhu (2021) use data drawn from the tax records of 30 million Americans to examine enrolment by income quintile during the years leading up to and immediately following the Great Recession, adopting a data-linking strategy. They observe that even in places where the recession was most intense, enrolment patterns did not change significantly to the detriment of the lower classes. These findings highlight the wide base and structural nature of the recent expansion in levels of participation, despite the persistence of inequalities in access rates.

In Scotland, where there are no university fees for Scottish-domiciled and EU students, the *Commission on Widening Access* was set up in 2015 to study why this situation was not encouraging more people from disadvantaged groups to enrol (Riddell & Weedon, 2018). Since 2012–13, HE institutions have been obliged to submit widening access agreements to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), in much the same way that English universities must convince regulators that their widening access strategy is adequate before they are allowed to charge the highest rate of tuition.

As we have seen, geographical remoteness is sometimes treated as a dimension of potential exclusion from HE (S. Kim & Bastedo, 2024). Fleming & Grace (2017) observe that roughly one third of Australians live in remote areas, although only 15% are isolated in the “inner regions”. This issue is also considered relevant in Romania, where a significant share of the national population lives in rural areas where access to HE is difficult. In the Southern States of the US, and in the Mid-West, geographical access to a HEI has been shown to be an important factor, particularly for disadvantaged students (D. Elliott et al., 2024).

Gender is treated as a priority group in some jurisdictions, in relation to field of study, for example. EUROSTAT data indicate that the enrolment rate of women in Computer Science in the EU is just 16.7%, for example, dropping to as low as 6% in the Netherlands and remaining at very low levels even in the egalitarian Scandinavian countries (Colomo-Palacios et al., 2020). During the most recent period of expansion of HE, women and ethnic minorities have greatly increased their representation in most countries, reaching a 55% share for women and 33% for ethnic minorities in 2015 in the UK. Interestingly, however, declining levels of participation in higher education by men is not currently treated as a relevant form of educational disadvantage:

“Male and female students are, as would be expected, very similar in levels of poverty, ethnic origin, first language, age in year, and school mobility. However, males are much more likely to be labelled as having SEN [special educational needs], and have markedly lower attainment results at all phases of schooling. Substantially fewer male than female students continue in education post-16, and fewer again attain any KS5 [key stage 5] qualifications ... These differences cannot be explained by students’ differential background, and if sex were almost any other characteristic it would already have been proposed and used widely for CA [contextual assessment].”

(Gorard et al., 2018, p. 322)

Gender disparities that penalise men are becoming increasingly evident in the developed countries and have started to attract attention in the USA, where the gap between men and women in HE enrolment widened from 4.5 percentage points to no less than 14.6 percentage points in the period between 2018 and 2021 (Kelchen, 2024). These findings are likely to attract the interest of researchers and administrators in coming years if this trend is confirmed in the USA and if it becomes more evident in other countries.

Socio-economic disparities have proven to be more resistant to change than gender and ethnic differences. Some progress has nevertheless been reported in Australia, where the share of students from low socio-economic backgrounds increased from 16.1% to 18.1% between 2008 and 2020; the population parity rate was 25%, and the target set in 2008 was 20% (Jackson et al., 2023). According to Koshy (2020), there was a 20% growth in domestic student enrolments from low-SES students between 2013 and 2018, although the equivalent figure was 50% for those with a disability and 42% for Indigenous students. The overall growth in domestic student enrolments was roughly 13%, suggesting that Australian equity policies were relatively effective, assisted by the shift in 2012 from a capped enrolment system to demand-driven funding, which also boosted enrolments when it was adopted in the UK.

In the USA, the share of 24 year-olds with degrees who come from families in the top income quartile increased from 40% in 1970 to 70% in 2011, while the share of graduates in the bottom quartile only increased from 6% to 10% (Blum, 2016, p. 240). In this country, HEIs have a high level of autonomy in relation to admissions, and the criteria and assessment tools they use vary greatly, as do their strategic objectives⁷. This is why policies for equity of access in the USA have often been imposed by Supreme Court judgements or state-level referenda, which have had a considerable influence on enrolment trends. There was a sharp decline in non-White student enrolment at UCLA after affirmative action was banned in California in 1996, leading to a fall of a 30% and a 27.5% in the percentage of African American and Latino students, respectively, at selective institutions (Hinrichs, 2014).

A range of motivations for widening access to higher education have been proposed, including the positive economic consequences of having a more educated workforce (the “efficiency” argument), the benefits of having diverse professional practitioners providing services to diverse populations (particularly in health, social services and education – the “workforce diversity” argument, see Patterson et al. (2018)), the opportunities for enhancing the learning process by mobilising a wider range of perspectives, cultural models and cognitive styles (the “educational diversity” argument⁸) and pressure to ensure greater equity (the “social justice” argument). Other arguments can be made for widening access in specific fields, with Bandiera et al. (2015) arguing that diversity in medical schools generates greater respect for differences and better communication within clinical teams.

A large body of academic research has encouraged universities to embrace the idea that diversity brings benefits, and HEIs are generally in favour of widening participation. In many cases, expanding enrolment and diversity is in their interest, and coincides with the policy preferences of a majority of faculty members. As they have become aware of the ways in which traditional definitions of academic meritocracy can mask social inequalities, universities have introduced changes to their admissions procedures with the goal of reducing bias and widening participation. Before discussing initiatives to improve equity of access, it is worthwhile describing how admissions procedures relate to this goal, as admissions and access are strongly intertwined.

In France, students who passed the final school examination (the *baccalauréat*) were traditionally able to enrol freely at university, and a similar approach is still adopted in Germany, Italy and many other continental European countries (Bodin & Orange, 2018). In France, if programmes were oversubscribed at a given university, a lottery was used to select participants, while admission to the most selective institutions was based on an additional examination (Bastedo, 2021; Fack & Grenet, 2015). Since 2018, however, students have been ranked on their secondary school marks, with a redlining procedure that ensures that the same percentage of low-SES students that apply are admitted to competitive degree courses. Fees are low at the public universities and there are numerous vocational education courses which provide participants with higher diplomas. The vocational and technical colleges providing these two-year courses have absorbed a large number of ‘non-traditional’ students:

7 As Karen (2017) observes, Ivy League universities typically fill their classes not only with scholars but also wrestlers, quarterbacks, point guards, bassoonists, singers, and actors. Students expect race to play a role in the admissions process, in contrast with the UK, where they generally hope that “meritocratic” admissions will completely ignore race and cultural background.

8 Mayhew et al. (2016) reviews ten years of impact studies and finds convincing evidence that diverse peer interaction leads to positive outcomes across several psychosocial and attitudinal measures.

"Students holding a technical baccalauréat, who are largely from low socio-economic backgrounds, tend to choose short courses in HE, which usually follow on from their secondary education in terms of content and are located in the same geographical area ... For many of them, entering HE is only an option in the shape of short vocational courses. If they were not accepted onto such programmes, symbolic barriers mean they would not go to university instead ... even though they have access to it without any form of selection."

(Bodin & Orange, 2018, p. 9)

The *Bourses sur Critères Sociaux* is the main national support scheme in France for low-income students entering HE. There are seven levels based on income, number of siblings and distance to university, up to a maximum of about €4,200 euros per year, which covers approximately 90 percent of the average student's living expenses when living at home (Fack & Grenet, 2015). Prospective first-year undergraduate applicants who qualify for this grant are more likely to start college, to re-enrol in the following year and to progress within their programme of study (Fack & Grenet, 2015).

In Australia, many colleges of advanced education and many institutes of technology became universities in the 1990s as a result of mergers (Chesters et al., 2018, p. 36). As in France, these institutions have been successful in attracting students from disadvantaged backgrounds; in 2010, roughly 10% of all HE students entered on the basis of a qualification provided by a vocational or technical institution, and this has become an important access route to the traditional universities.

Most post-secondary education systems in developed countries are stratified in this way, having a more selective sector (like the competitive Russell Group universities in the UK, or the Ivy League universities in the USA) and a more open one (like the community colleges in the USA, further education colleges in the UK, or vocational training institutions in continental Europe) (Raby et al., 2023). The more open sector tends to be characterised by a network of smaller colleges where local people are more likely to enrol. As indicated earlier, these colleges have proved attractive to disadvantaged groups, and have played an important role in facilitating their participation in FE and HE.

In the Irish context, McNally et al. (2022) report a higher incidence of students from socio-economically deprived backgrounds in Institutes of Technology (14%), compared to universities (8.3%). In the USA, the vast majority of Black and Latino students enrol at minimally selective community colleges and their ability to do so is more influential in overall terms, in relation to the goal of widening participation, compared with the impact of affirmative action policies in the most selective, élite universities (Blum, 2016). Gaisch & Aichinger (2018) provide the following overview of this sector of 'second-tier' HEIs:

"These institutions fill an important gap. The unique characteristics include (a) location in geographical locations to service rural and urban poor; (b) nontraditional and under-served student populations (age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background); (c) curriculum that is deemed "useful" to support local industry and economy; (d) granting of certificates and diplomas for technological and specialist programs and associate level or baccalaureate level degrees for vocational, career-oriented, and academic disciplines; (e) belief that resulting education will support vertical social mobility; and (f) reality that these institutions maintain less prestige than selective universities and whose graduates are also often labeled as less prestigious."

(Gaisch & Aichinger, 2018, p. viii)

The 1960 California Education Master Plan was widely emulated by countries and States which were interested in expanding participation in HE by groups which traditionally would not attend college (including in Australia, following the Murray report, see Seal (2022)). The California Plan was based on the principle of free access for all students who are qualified to enter HE, with the bulk of expansion taking place in a network of locally focused 2-year community colleges. Above these were the state universities, and at the top tier of the system was the multi-site University of California, the world's strongest agglomeration of science universities. The feasibility of upward transfer from lower to higher tiers of the system, and the availability of federal student grants and loans, were essential features. This ensured that the intake of the University of California at Berkeley would be as strong in academic terms as that of the most well-known private universities, even though it enrolls many low-income students (and only 28% of students come from the top income decile), as well as students from under-represented minorities – in fact, as many as the Ivy League universities combined (Marginson, 2016, p. 173).

In the UK, students from 'non-traditional backgrounds' are generally concentrated in the newer ('post-1992') universities which focus greater attention on the remit of widening access and often have more effective support and guidance services (Banerjee, 2019, p. 47). In Portugal, legislation in 2006 reduced the minimum age for entering HE as a mature student to 23 and enabled HEIs to give more space to the recognition of prior learning. This led to a rapid increase in the number of people accessing HE, although the most prestigious universities still have 23+ entry rates that are below 5% (Amorim, 2018).

In Canada, General and Vocational Colleges represent the first level of HE, and have a participation rate of approximately 60% (Kamanzi, 2019). After completing this level, just over half of students go on to a bachelor's degree programme (with a participation rate of 36.7% in 2011). In France, the percentage of students with a migration background (from North Africa or Southern Europe) who access HE via vocational pathways is higher (41% and 35% respectively) than for native French students (27%), as is the case in Germany for second-generation Turkish students (42%, compared to 14% for Germans with no migrant background). Second-generation students in Switzerland are not overrepresented in the vocational route to higher education, and in this country one third of people aged 15-24 have a migration background (Murdoch et al., 2016).

In Finland, students who do not choose the general academic stream in secondary education (which leads up to the matriculation exam) tend to enrol at Universities of Applied Science (29.5%), which are broadly comparable with second-tier universities in other countries. The equivalent figure for universities is just 2.5% (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2019). However, the Universities of Applied Science also serve as a gateway to first-tier (academic) universities via entry routes that were originally designed for mature students. Although the number of students using these routes is not enormous, the possibility of accessing HE in this way is considered important from a widening participation perspective (Haltia et al., 2022).

In the UK, the Access to Higher Education Diploma provides mature students with the opportunity to acquire the skills needed to enter HE (Farmer, 2017; James et al., 2016). In 2014–2015, 29% of HE entrants who came through this route were from ethnic minority backgrounds, 22% came from low-participation neighbourhoods and many went on to study Nursing, Biological Sciences, Social Work or Education (Farmer, 2017). Many were women in their twenties or older with childcare responsibilities (Busher & James, 2020).

In Scotland, about 17% of higher education takes place in the college sector, compared to just 6% in England. The sub-degree programmes offered by these colleges enable students to transition to a university degree programme for the last two years, in much the same way as students can move from community colleges to HE in the USA or Canada (Riddell & Weedon, 2018, pp. 272–273):

"In California, where this study takes place, community colleges are the primary point of entry for first-time freshmen. Serving over 2.1 million students across the state, nearly three-fourths of all undergraduates in California are in the community college system ... Of those millions of students, it is estimated that over 60% aspire to transfer, but less than 25% do so after six years..."

(Felix, 2018, p. 79)

In education systems like these with a highly stratified HE sector, there is a danger that young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds may be diverted to, or may choose lower-status programmes that lead to less well-paid jobs. In the UK, more than half (58%) of young higher education entrants from disadvantaged areas study at local colleges rather than universities, compared to just 23% in the most advantaged areas (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015). The success of FE and vocational training colleges in attracting 'non-traditional' students has focused attention on the importance of facilitating transitions to HE, although this route continues to attract a relatively small number of candidates (Catterall et al., 2014). The resulting differences in the social and economic composition of HEIs are sometimes referred to as "horizontal stratification", "institutional differentiation" or "institutional hierarchy".

Within the broader strand of research on equity of access, there is a sub-strand which addresses the need for all types of HEI (including the most prestigious universities) to admit a more diverse group of students. In addition, researchers and policy-makers are increasingly paying attention to the need to widen participation in the most prestigious universities and programmes (particularly Medicine and Dental Medicine, see Johnson, Spivey & Chisholm-Burns (2021)), which are less accessible to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds or ethnic minorities (Fikrat-Wevers et al., 2023; Greenway et al., 2021; Griffin & Hu, 2015). Because access to these universities and courses is highly competitive, some HEIs organise free preparatory courses aimed at prospective students from under-represented groups.

In the USA and in many other countries, there was initially a move away from using GPAs or school examinations to select students, and towards standardised aptitude tests, which were considered less susceptible to the influence of socio-economic factors (Alexander & Cleland, 2018). In Australia, admission to HE traditionally relied on the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR), a percentile rank of how applicants compare to other students within their national cohort. Now, however, more than half of university entrants enter HE via alternative routes like early access schemes (Pilcher & Torii, 2018). In countries like Ireland, Greece, Portugal and China, where national admissions tests have traditionally been used to select students for HE, socio-economic inequalities within HE tend to be larger, which has in many cases encouraged HEIs and policy-makers to seek ways of improving equity (Bastedo, 2021):

"China, which famously uses the gaokao to sort and rank its college applicants once every summer, has for many years provided an alternative admissions route to its most elite colleges that accounts for an applicant's leadership and extracurricular achievements. Since 2014, Trinity College Dublin has experimented with an alternative admissions scheme that uses contextual factors to increase the admission of low-socioeconomic status (SES) students. Many institutions in South Korea now employ admissions officers to admit students who would not otherwise qualify through the national CSAT exam. Similar innovations are in practice in Japan, South Korea, Australia, Malaysia, and France."

(Bastedo, 2021, p. 92)

In recent years, there has been a move away from reliance on measures of academic proficiency as they have experimented with other forms of assessment (holistic review, contextual admissions, interviews⁹) that aim to evaluate academic potential (Fikrat-Wevers et al., 2023). In the USA, for example, some HEIs carry out an assessment of extracurricular activities and ask students to provide essays, letters of recommendation and other forms of personal information, which are used to inform admissions decisions (Bastedo, 2021). In practice, however, it is more difficult to measure ability in prospective terms than it is to retrospectively assess attainment (Boliver et al., 2015).

The existing research suggests that participation cannot be significantly widened just by modifying the criteria used to select candidates. Gorard, Boliver & Siddiqui (2018, p. 310) note that "... many of the common tools long-used for admissions, such as additional entry tests, interviews and setting tasks for applicants, may actually lead to more bias in offers and entry than using prior attainment". Nevertheless, Fikrat-Wevers et al. (2023) report that using curriculum-sampling tests and assessing CVs within admissions procedures for Medicine in the Netherlands reduced socio-economic differences.

Efforts to improve access are often costly, which is why funders often provide economic incentives to institutions which adopt these (Alexander & Cleland, 2018). As mentioned earlier, universities may create special routes referred to as access or enabling programmes, pipeline programmes, bridge programmes, foundation years, extended programmes or graduate entry programmes (S. Baker et al., 2021; Fritz et al., 2015; Price, 2021; Sasso et al., 2019). They can last from one semester to four years and typically seek to "meet students where they are", to facilitate participation by those who lack the required qualifications for entering HE directly, perhaps with a focus on a specific field of study. These routes typically account for a small share of intake (5-10% of students at most), which reduces their impact on access rates, particularly in terms of socio-economic disparities, which are typically very large (Alexander & Cleland, 2018).

In the UK, participation by different socio-economic groups is measured using an indicator known as POLAR (participation of local areas), where areas are assigned to quintiles based on the proportion of young people who participate in higher education. POLAR areas have 2,000–5,000 households and are based on postcodes, which makes it relatively straightforward to classify applicants and entrants. The 2020 target for HE participation was 28% for POLAR 1 and 2 combined (the most deprived), which was double the figure measured in 2012. This target was not met, although participation had increased to about 21.4% by 2020¹⁰. Crawford and Greaves (2015) report a difference of around 38 percentage points in the participation rates of children in the top and bottom quintiles of the IMD and POLAR measures. However, Seal (2022) notes that it is problematic to use POLAR as a proxy for social class, as this makes the association between social class and HE participation tautological. It is therefore more appropriate to measure socio-economic position in this context using a census-based deprivation index.

In the UK, universities seek independently to identify applicants who meet the official criteria for widening participation by using the POLAR4 classification and measures like eligibility for free school meals, attendance at academically weaker schools or having parents who receive means-tested state benefits (Chan et al., 2024, p. 933). This is necessary because no less than 60% of households in POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 are in NS-SEC 1 and 2 (managers/professionals). By contrast, combining aggregate-level and individual-level measures of deprivation yields a more reliable indicator (Garrud & Owen, 2018, p. 208). Candidates who meet a specific set of criteria are given an admissions "bonus". It is evident again here that the measures used in the UK to monitor socio-economic disparities are problematic.

9 In these systems, additional information is often collected and used to identify historically low-performing schools, students in care, those who are the first in their family to attend HE or those from neighborhoods with low educational attainments. Extenuating circumstances may be considered, including poor health or family responsibilities, and non-academic measures of ability can be taken into account.

10 Data provided by the Office for Students via the following website: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-polar-and-adult-he/> (accessed in April 2025).

In the USA, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is the primary source of data on post-secondary education. This system is managed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and provides data on all institutions which receive federal funding. Tertiary institutions collect standardised data on the composition of enrolments, tuition fees, graduation rates and so on using a system of inter-related and repeated surveys, with reporting being based on the provision of aggregate data (Gándara & Li, 2020). Attempts have been made over the past 20 years to move to a student unit record system (with individual-level data), but this has met with strong opposition in Congress and across the HE system itself. Indeed, legislation promoted by libertarian Republicans prevents federal agencies from joining individual-level administrative data to develop a monitoring system for equity of access. Bipartisan efforts such as the College Transparency Act have been attempted, albeit without success, with a view to finding a way of monitoring enrolment, retention and completion across HEIs and within study programmes.

Outside the English-speaking countries, less emphasis is placed on monitoring educational inequalities using standardised measures. In continental Europe, for example, the existence of relatively inclusive higher education systems is associated with a belief that these automatically facilitate participation. The measures used in Germany to monitor the composition of HEIs tend to be quite narrow in scope, for example, focusing mainly on migrants (Brooks, 2020).

The international literature includes several examples of using matched administrative databases in educational research, opening up new possibilities for understanding inequalities. In addition to the study cited earlier, Crul and Lelie (2020) use data from the Dutch national funding scheme for students, combined with municipal registry data to obtain information on the birthplace of students and their parents, making it possible to study retention rates for students with various types of migration background. Davies, Maldonado & Zarifa (2014) use four matched administrative datasets relating to Toronto to track an entire cohort of students from the ninth grade to HE. Sánchez-Gelabert, Elias Andreu & Bouvier (2024) use registration data for a cohort of 82,923 students in their final year of compulsory education in Catalonia, Spain, to analyse the probability of enrolling at HE, considering the interaction between factors like migration background and gender.

Milian et al. (2024) use a sophisticated research design to study the influence of disability on HE participation using linked administrative datasets:

"Through this study, we draw on a custom administrative linkage to produce what is – to our knowledge – the most comprehensive longitudinal study of the PSE pathways traveled by students with disabilities. This linkage allows us to follow over 33,000 TDSB students from their Grade 9 year into (and through) Ontario PSE for a period of up to 9 years. Further, it allows us to pool disability information from administrative records generated by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), the Canada Student Loans Program (CSLP), and the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA). Using this administrative linkage – which is unprecedented in its richness and coverage in the Canadian context – we statistically model the relationship between disability and PSE pathways while controlling for a more extensive set of covariates than used in any previous Canadian study of student mobility."

Sikora, Malette & Robson (2024) use harmonised administrative data to compare Toronto and Sydney, including a detailed analysis of a range of ethnic groups. Smith & Hirschl (2021) use student-level data for Wisconsin from the Statewide Longitudinal Data System (which contains information about 153,760 students who entered ninth grade for the first time between 2006/07 and 2011/12, as well as the schools they attend and their test scores), matched with data from the National Student Clearinghouse on the postsecondary institutions where students enrol. All of these studies, and those referred to elsewhere in this report, provide accurate and policy-relevant estimates at a low cost, exploiting existing data sources.

As we have seen, policy frameworks which aim to widen participation in HE often include a similar set of priority groups. At the same time, the way in which these groups are conceptualised and measured – and the specific combination of characteristics considered – varies greatly from one country to another (Brooks, 2020). The Australian case is particularly interesting, as this was the first country to develop detailed policies for widening participation (in 1990) as well as a formal monitoring framework (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014; Pitman & Koshy, 2015):

"Defining core equity groups enabled the collection of rich longitudinal data on access, participation, success, and retention, at both institutional and national levels. Moreover, the categorical framework provided clear parameters for research into student equity, and facilitated targeted national funding to support the groups ..."

(Harvey, Burnheim, et al., 2016, p. 5)

The Australian programme *A Fair Chance for All* (1990) also influenced the development of the Irish approach to enhancing access to HE:

"A Fair Chance for All focused explicitly on access and representation, advocating the need for composition of the student population to reflect the broader population (DEET 1990, p. 8). This principle was central to the subsequent confirmation of equity indicators in 1994 when baseline data first compared the university participation rates of the six identified equity groups with their share of the total population (Martin 1994). Although success and retention data were collected, the original inclusion of equity groups was based primarily on access, and most subsequent reviewers have maintained the need for such a focus."

(Harvey, Burnheim, et al., 2016, p. 6)

Martin (2016) emphasises the innovative character of this programme at the international level:

"This was a significant change in approach which required initiatives to address participation gaps and build equity into the core activities of institutions. At this time there were no international models for such an approach and the policy initiatives were based entirely on Australian work. This was a significant achievement at the time and the Australian equity framework developed has proved to be influential in development of policies internationally ... A Fair Chance for All represented a landmark report internationally – no country had attempted to aim for a higher education profile which was representative of the population profile; to set national participation targets or objectives; to identify groups where there was some evidence of disadvantage; or to mainstream student equity as a core component of institutional planning and performance monitoring."

(Martin, 2016, pp. 25–27)

Although the Australian student equity framework was reviewed on several occasions, few changes have been made to the definition of equity groups and the variables used to measure them, although the emphasis placed on the categories 'women in non-traditional fields' and 'non-English speaking background' was reduced after initial targets were achieved.

In the next section of this report I describe the policy context in Ireland, focusing in particular on the evolution of strategic aims across a series of National Access Plans. This will prepare the ground for the subsequent discussion of approaches to monitoring, technical issues and data sources for monitoring priority groups.

4

Promoting Equity of Access in Ireland

This report forms part of an evolving strand of policy that aims to reduce educational inequalities in Ireland. Traditionally, HE has been provided in Ireland by 8 universities¹¹, 14 Institutes of Technology and a small number of other institutions, such as private colleges and Colleges of Education. Under the Technological Universities Act of 2018, five new universities were established through mergers involving 12 of the existing Institutes of Technology¹². Entry to HE is based on points (grades) achieved in the Leaving Certificate examination or via alternative pathways including the National Tertiary Office, QQI Award, mature student and access routes. The Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant is the main source of financial support.

The first national plan for equity of access to higher education was published in 2004 (*Achieving equity of access to higher education in Ireland: Action plan 2005–2007*), and was followed by the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008–2013*. A Consultation Paper was published in 2014, entitled *Towards the development of a new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education*, which prepared the way for the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019* and a new Consultation was carried out during the drafting of the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2022–2028*. The policy approach set out in these plans is summarised by Hannon & O'Sullivan in the following way:

"In Ireland, measures to address the access challenge have included changes to the legislation governing widening participation and the operation of universities under the Irish Universities Act (1997). This has been marked by some diversification of entry routes into higher education and by the introduction of the free fees system and the student grant scheme (Department of Education and Science, 2012)."

(Hannon & O'Sullivan, 2018, p. 68)

Drawing on the results of the 2001 *Report of the Action Group on Access to Higher Education*, the first National Access Plan (NAP) in 2004 established three targets: (1) 1.8% of new entrants with a disability by 2006 (the corresponding figure was 0.9% in 1998); (2) 10% mature students as a share of full-time entrants (compared to 4.5% in 1998) and 30% as a share of part-time entrants (compared to 22% in 1998); (3) 27% from the unskilled and agricultural worker socio-economic groups, as a share of new entrants (compared to 16% in 1998). Due to the lack of data on Irish Travellers and other ethnic minorities – in the general population and in higher education – no targets were set for these groups. The targets were largely achieved, although these were less ambitious than they may seem, given that the broad trends for these indicators were already clear in 2004.

The 2004 Plan emphasises the need for a coherent strategy to widen access to education, linked with the provision of extra resources, the definition of targets and the use of quantitative data to monitor progress. The main sources of data for measuring equity of access were the new Student Record System (SRS), a new survey on the socio-economic position of the families of entrants to higher education, the Fund for Students with Disabilities, and the student records data held by the Department of Education and Science.

11 These are as follows: (1) Dublin City University; (2) Maynooth University; (3) Trinity College Dublin; (4) University College Cork; (5) University College Dublin; (6) University of Limerick; (7) University of Galway; (8) the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

12 Technological Universities prioritise teaching and research that can contribute to local and regional economic development. The new Technological Universities are as follows: (1) Technological University Dublin, established in January 2019; (2) Munster Technological University (MTU), established in January 2021; (3) Technological University of the Shannon, established in October 2021; (4) Atlantic Technological University, established in April 2022; (5) South East Technological University, established in May 2022. The two remaining Institutes of Technology are the Dundalk Institute of Technology and the Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology.

13 The 2008 Plan quotes an estimate provided by AHEAD, which suggested that 3.2% of undergraduate students had a disability in 2006. In relation to ethnicity, the Plan states that "this important dimension of equality will feature centrally in the evaluations of the progress in widening participation that will be undertaken over the period of this plan" (p. 37). The introduction of the Equal Access Survey in 2007 was also expected to facilitate the setting of targets.

The 2008 Plan set the following targets: (1) an overall entry rate of 72% by 2020 (from 55% in 2004), as a share of the population aged 17–19 years of age; (2) all socio-economic groups should have entry rates of at least 54 per cent by 2020 (the ‘non-manual’ group stood at 27% and the ‘semi-skilled and unskilled manual’ group at 33% in 2004); (3) 20% mature students as a share of full-time entrants by 2013 (12.8% in 2006); (4) 27% mature students as a share of all entrants by 2013 (18% in 2006); (5) 17% flexible/part-time students by 2013 (7% in 2006); (6) 30% of all entrants using non-standard routes to access higher education by 2013 (estimated at 24 per cent in 2006); and (7) a doubling of the number of students with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities in higher education by 2013¹³.

The 2015 Plan builds on a sector-wide consultation and on the targets set in the *Higher Education System Performance Framework 2014–2016*, which was published by the Department of Education and Skills. It is based on the principle that “the population of new entrants to higher education should be broadly representative of the general population” (p. 6). Commenting on progress in relation to previous goals, the report notes that participation rates for the semi-skilled and unskilled socio-economic groups remained low, at about 26%, but it also identifies problems with the measurement of socio-economic group using survey data and highlights the need to develop supports to encourage participation by lone parents, teen parents and ethnic minorities.

The 2015 Plan sets the following targets: (1) a 30% participation rate for the non-manual socio-economic group by 2019 (from 23% in 2015), and 35% for the semi/unskilled manual worker group (from 26%)¹⁴; (2) 16% of all new entrants to higher education should be full-time mature students (from 13%), and 24% should be mature students (from 19%)¹⁵; (3) 8% of students with a disability, indicated during enrolment (from 6%); (4) 22% of all students in higher education should be part-time or flexible learners (from 19%); (5) 10% of new entrants to higher education should be admitted based on a further education qualification (from 6.6%); and (6) 80 Irish Travellers should enter higher education as undergraduates by 2019 (compared to 35 individuals in 2015)¹⁶. In addition to these targets, it was proposed to find ways of monitoring entry to higher education by students who attend DEIS schools, students in receipt of the special rate of the student grant, and by postcode area.

The target for including students with disabilities was exceeded by 2019, and no less than 12.4% of new entrants declared a disability in 2021. The overall approach to measuring socio-economic deprivation changed before the end of the Plan, while the share of mature students declined (from 13% to 7.5%) and the number of Irish Travellers entering higher education remained roughly constant at just over 30. In short, across the full set of indicators, the only result that was not disappointing relates to students with a disability.

The HEA commissioned a Data Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education in 2017 to address a number of the issues raised by the 2015 Plan. This Data Plan introduced a new methodology for monitoring the socio-economic composition of HEIs. Adopting an approach that was widely used in health research, the Data Plan proposed to estimate the socio-economic position of students by identifying the Small Area in which their family resides (using their out-of-term address¹⁷). It is assumed in this approach that some individuals will be misclassified due to variations in the composition of Small Areas, but as individual data are aggregated, these discrepancies cancel out yielding an accurate measure of the composition of HEIs, cohorts and fields of study.

14 Participation rates relating to socio-economic group relate to new undergraduates, aged 18–20 years, as a proportion of the relevant national group, aged 18–20.

15 Mature students are defined as those 23 years or over on 1 January of their year of entry to higher education.

16 The Plan notes that a percentage target would be inappropriate given the small number of Traveller students accessing higher education.

17 Students who are in the care of the State, who are part of the international protection programme, who do not have a permanent address or do not live in a private household should not be attributed a deprivation score in the usual fashion. In the process used for the identification of DEIS schools such individuals are automatically assigned to the most deprived category, and a similar approach would be warranted when assigning deprivation scores within the SRS. As additional individual-level data sources are integrated into the monitoring framework, this principle can be applied.

This approach has been adopted by Government Departments and Agencies and is used in academic research, as it makes it possible to estimate the socio-economic position of specific samples of people using only their address. This approach to monitoring socio-economic composition was proposed for the following reasons:

"Not only is it increasingly onerous to collect questionnaire data, it is also increasingly problematic due to selective non-response, differences in how the job of the head of household is described, problems with occupational coding, social mobility, demographic transformations and associated difficulties with interpreting results. Alternative approaches based on linked administrative datasets are being adopted with greater frequency in Ireland and the UK, precisely because they allow us to answer more questions, to gain greater insights and to obtain more accurate estimates. Although they pose some challenges, they are increasingly feasible in technical terms due to the development of powerful datasets containing information on service users across different sectors."

(Haase et al., 2017)

The current National Access Plan was published in 2022, following a sector-wide consultation which led to the identification of new priority groups. The Plan identifies three underrepresented groups, setting the following four targets: (1) the share of new entrants aged 18–20 years from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas should reach 54% by 2028, compared to 42% in 2020/2021; (2) new entrants who are mature students from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas should reach 20% by 2028, compared to 11% in 2020/2021; (3) new entrants who have a disability should reach 16% by 2028, compared to 12.4% in 2020/2021; and (4) new entrants who are Irish Travellers should reach 0.32% by 2028, compared to 0.07% in 2020/2021. All four indicators can be calculated using SRS data, enriched by deprivation scores, and data on disabilities and ethnicity is derived from the Equal Access Survey.

In addition, the Plan observes that students experiencing socio-economic deprivation may come from a range of backgrounds, including: (1) low-income families and those dependent on welfare; (2) people living in disadvantaged areas; (3) mature students; (4) students who are lone parents or teen parents; (5) students who are migrants or refugees or who have experience of the international protection process, or students from ethnic minorities; (6) students who have experience of the care system; (7) students who are survivors of domestic violence; (8) students who are carers; (9) students who have experienced homelessness; and (10) students who have experience of the criminal justice system. The Plan states that the possibility of identifying key performance indicators for these groups should be evaluated at the time of the mid-term progress review of the Plan in 2025, including the possibility of incorporating data on students from the Roma community into the fourth target (relating to Irish Travellers).

In terms of data availability, it is recognised in the NAP that the Pobal HP Deprivation Index provides a reliable aggregate measure of the incidence of low-income families, those dependent on social welfare and those living in disadvantaged areas. SRS data permits the identification of mature students, although the Plan acknowledges that there are no reliable sources of data that can be used to identify "second chance" mature students. It suggests that students receiving a lone parent family payment can be identified using SRS data, enhanced by information from the Equal Access Survey, the reliability of which will be assessed in this Plan. Reliable data are also needed on higher education students who are migrants (including those who are refugees or have experience of the international protection process), belong to an ethnic minority (with the exception of Travellers and Roma people, who are analysed separately), have experience of the care system, are survivors of domestic violence, are carers, have experienced homelessness or who have experience of the criminal justice system, and all of these issues also fall under the remit of this Data Plan.

Finally, the 2022 NAP indicates that the following key performance indicators should be used to monitor progress in relation to equity of access: (1) the percentage of part-time/flexible learners (24.6% of all enrolments in 2020/2021); (2) progression from further education to higher education (6.1% in 2020/2021); (3) postgraduate study by priority group (deprivation score, Travellers, students with disabilities); (4) field of study by priority group (deprivation score); (5) students with a disability supported by the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) (15,670 students in 2020/2021¹⁸); (6) students who attended DEIS schools (12% in 2020/2021); (7) students who are lone parents (0.5% of new entrants in 2020/2021); (8) progression and completion by priority group (deprivation score); and (9) graduate outcomes by priority group (deprivation score). These indicators can be calculated using available data, so we will not discuss this further, except to identify the most reliable sources of data for certain indicators.

As mentioned above, the Equal Access Survey is currently used to identify higher education students who are members of the Irish Traveller and Roma communities, but appropriate baseline data on Roma students would need to be identified in order to set targets, and this issue is also flagged for attention in the new Data Plan. Students who attended DEIS schools can be identified using SRS data, combined with information from the Department of Education. As far as disabilities are concerned, reference is made to both the Equal Access Survey and students supported under the FSD, and this issue is also flagged for attention.

The brief summary of indicators and targets provided above shows that monitoring equity of access to higher education has become increasingly complicated, as new forms of inequality, new priority groups, new targets and new performance indicators have been introduced. By integrating the specific (and often rather technical) questions formulated in the NAP within the context of a powerful monitoring framework, it will be possible to achieve greater clarity in terms of how to achieve the objectives indicated by policy-makers.

Another important policy initiative in Ireland involves the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR), a form of contextualised admission. In order to be considered eligible, students must possess three out of four attributes that reflect low socio-economic status. University courses reserve a certain number of places for HEAR applicants, who compete among themselves on academic grounds based on their marks in the secondary school Leaving Certificate examination; about 7.5% of HE applicants were HEAR-eligible in 2017 (O'Sullivan et al., 2019). This aspect of the Irish system contrasts with the more decentralised system of contextualised admission that is found in the UK. The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) is another alternative admissions scheme that is coordinated nationally, and offers reduced points places to school leavers who have experienced educational challenges during second-level education as a result of having a disability¹⁹.

18 A slightly different figure is quoted in the NAP; this was updated by the HEA using institutional data returns received at a subsequent date.

19 Eligible disabilities are: (1) Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); (2) Autistic Spectrum Disorder (including Asperger's Syndrome); (3) Blind/Vision Impaired; (4) Deaf/Hard of Hearing; (5) Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD) – Dyspraxia Dyscalculia/ Significant Numeracy Difficulties; (6) Dyslexia/Significant Literacy Difficulties; (7) Mental Health Condition; (8) Neurological Condition (including Brain Injury and Epilepsy); (9) Physical Disability; (10) Significant Ongoing Illness; (11) Speech and Language Communication Disorder.

5

Analytical approach

In this Data Plan, I focus on the question of access, rather than success within HE. These two elements are reciprocally dependent, of course, and are equally important from a policy perspective. In order to identify appropriate ways of measuring and monitoring equity of access, it is necessary to make an analytical distinction which momentarily sets aside questions relating to the inclusion of HE students and their subsequent experiences. The international academic literature is rich in this regard, and a review of the numerous studies that focus on inclusivity and integration of HE students from non-traditional backgrounds would be very useful as a guide when developing support structures and policies. Once we have achieved consensus in relation to access, it is a strength of the proposed monitoring framework that it can be extended to incorporate measures that reflect retention, completion, progression to postgraduate study and transition to the labour market²⁰.

In our 2017 Access Data Plan, we distinguished between two different approaches to the measurement of equity of access. The first focuses on the characteristics of students entering higher education, and compares them with the Irish population. This is in line with the policy aim of ensuring that the group entering, participating in and completing higher education “reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population”.

The second type of analysis studies the relationship between HE students and the population from which they are drawn. In this type of analysis, educational outcomes are treated as the result of a nested sequence of selections. This approach shows how the differentials observed at any point in the system may be dependent on those occurring at earlier stages of education. It provides a useful representation of how disadvantage tends to “cascade” through the educational system and is structured incrementally, with discontinuities and interruptions. At key points along educational pathways, it is possible to estimate the probability of completing transitions, comparing across the priority groups defined in the NAP.

This second approach helps to clarify a number of conceptual issues that are fundamental to the measurement of educational inequalities. In this section, I will discuss three of these: (1) the definition of appropriate reference groups; (2) identifying how inequalities crystallise across the education system; (3) understanding the relationship between priority groups.

Starting with the first issue, it is important to identify the most appropriate reference population for each indicator. If we make direct comparisons between the HE population as a whole and the national population, we will reach the paradoxical conclusion that elderly people and young children are under-represented. This simple observation highlights the need to circumscribe the reference population and suggests that this assumption is implicit in national policy. The 2022 NAP specifies ways of circumscribing the reference population at several points, for example by referring to people aged 18–20 when setting a target for enrolment levels. In previous Plans, other intervals were used, and in the international literature 18–24 is a common definition of the demographic cohort that is relevant when considering equity of access, with mature students often being defined as those who are 25 years of age or more²¹. The share of the national population aged 18–24 (or a similar range) that falls within a specific category can be referred to as the “age-specific population parity rate”, while the share of students who completed the Leaving Certificate and are aged 18–24 (or similar range) can be referred to as the “school-leaving parity rate”.

If an age-based reference is used, then the same definition should arguably be applied to both groups when making comparisons between HE students and a reference population. This practice avoids a problem that can occur when studying participation rates among ethnic minorities, for example. As Mestan (2016) observes in relation to Australia, the arrival of many qualified migrants can lead to an inflated estimate of the expected participation rate for these groups, which does not translate into enrolments because many of the individuals concerned already arrive with a degree.

20 I use the term retention to refer to the passage of students from one year of a study programme to the next, completion to refer to the achievement of formal educational qualifications, progression to refer to the passage from undergraduate to postgraduate study and transition to refer to labour market entry. Along with access, these are all fundamental aspects of the HE system that deserve attention from a monitoring perspective.

21 In Ireland, people aged 23 and over at the moment of enrolment are treated as mature students.

This age-specific approach is logical when analysing participation rates as we are accustomed to thinking about these on a cohort-by-cohort basis. To return momentarily to the theoretical model based on educational transitions, this places mature students in a separate category, and highlights the way in which postponed entry to higher education can influence the educational profile of a specific cohort. It compensates, at least in part, for the exclusion experienced by a specific person and age group, rather than increasing the participation rate for younger cohorts. For this reason, it makes sense to distinguish between cohorts when analysing educational data, as these are frequently exposed to different factors and influences. If labour market conditions or policies encourage a large number of mature students to enter HE all at once, this should not be confused with an increase in the HE participation rate for young people.

This point is less evident when considering priority groups like people with disabilities, lone parents or Irish Travellers. Nevertheless, when analysing participation rates for groups such as these, it is still important to adopt a cohort-based approach. The reason for this is obvious if we consider the distribution of disabilities by age: chronic conditions, physical difficulties and sensory disabilities tend to be highest among the elderly, who are unlikely to be the target of policies to encourage people to enrol in higher education. This is why it makes sense to restrict calculations to a specific age cohort, not least because Irish society has changed rapidly in recent years due to population growth and immigration, and the characteristics of younger cohorts are different from those of the population as a whole. Similarly, the number of lone parents is different among people aged 18–24 than among older age cohorts, so a similar approach is also required when analysing priority groups like this. I will return to this issue later in the Data Plan when discussing the priority groups in greater detail. When setting targets, this approach implies that separate objectives should be specified for mature students and younger HE entrants, and that these two groups should be kept separate.

Another aspect that is related to reference groups has to do with international students, who should arguably not be included in participation rates at all. In all English-speaking countries, a significant share of HE students are international students, often drawn from the middle and upper classes of other countries (including developing countries). They are able to pay fees, travel and living expenses in order to obtain a prestigious qualification in another country and account for roughly 14% of undergraduate students, 38% of postgraduate students and 43% of doctoral students in the UK (these figures are for 2014/2015, see Détourbe & Goastellec (2018)). In Ireland, the HEA reports that there were 35,140 international students in Ireland in 2022/23 (13.7% of the total)²². If these students were to be included in the access data (for example as members of an ethnic minority), this would potentially generate bias, not least because they do not have a permanent family address in Ireland, so they cannot be assigned a deprivation score.

This issue is closely related to the second one, which has to do with the way in which inequalities form at different levels of the education system. If all or nearly all members of a social group were to fail to complete secondary school, this group would inevitably have a low overall participation rate in higher education. It would be a mistake, however, to provide incentives directly to HEIs in an effort to improve this situation; what is required is obviously a targeted intervention to boost achievements earlier on in school. The advantage of an integrated monitoring framework that uses data from administrative databases is that it enables us to make these distinctions and to define targets that are appropriate. This is also why the best approach is to use the number of students who completed the previous level of education as a reference when calculating participation rates.

This consideration adds considerable value to the Department of Education's P-POD database, which contains information on secondary school students. This is the ideal source of information on younger cohorts that could potentially enter HE. These cohorts represent the most appropriate reference group when monitoring equity of access to HE for this group. As mentioned previously, mature students should be considered separately, linked with their respective cohorts.

22 See <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/> (accessed in April 2025).

Where this situation is not technically feasible, due to data issues, it will often be possible to use existing sources to obtain estimates, or to work towards collecting additional information. And even if this is not possible, thinking about prior educational selections can at least provide an idea of the direction and magnitude of the bias that is likely to be present in a given source of data.

The third issue has to do with the interactions and overlaps that can occur between priority groups, which make it important to understand how they relate to each other. At one extreme, if there is a high correlation between two groups, then one of these may be redundant and add no additional information to the monitoring system. At the other extreme, if there is no correlation between two groups, then they represent distinct forms of educational disadvantage.

In practice, we expect to find a moderate to high level of association between groups which relate to the same domains. Each new group may provide some additional information as well as contributing to the measurement of the underlying dimension that is common to the whole set. For example, the groups which are identified in the NAP as contributing to socio-economic disadvantage (as either causes or effects) are likely to be correlated. Although each has its own specificities, these groups will tend to rise or fall together in a concerted way and policies that are effective in relation to one are likely to be beneficial also to the others. These patterns of associations need to be evaluated in empirical terms once individual-level data have been obtained.

There may also be situations where one measure of exclusion is inversely associated with another. One example of this phenomenon relates to specific learning difficulties, the identification of which tends to be correlated with affluence. Because of their higher aspirations and greater access to resources, young people from middle- and upper-class families are more likely to seek out and to receive certification for these kinds of disabilities when they encounter difficulties at school. Because these social groups have a higher rate of participation in higher education, students with these disabilities also tend to be well-represented in higher education and there is generally a negative association between the share of disabled students and the share of students from low socio-economic groups. This phenomenon is described later in this report, and relevant data, references and interview extracts are also provided.

From a policy perspective, this makes it important to maintain a distinction between initiatives that aim to encourage participation by students who belong to these two groups to avoid the “crowding out” of students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background. It also means that disability among students from deprived areas and poor families is less likely to be diagnosed and certified, which can also create a risk that disadvantaged students with a disability are themselves crowded out within support services and HEIs. A better understanding of the complexity of these processes can guide policy-makers and administrators towards more effective initiatives which avoid risks of cancelling out and crowding out by adopting an intersectional approach.

I would also like to draw attention to the distinction between monitoring, setting targets and resource allocation. The specific uses that we have in mind when collecting data can have an influence on how we approach each task. Data are sometimes used for monitoring participation in higher education across different social groups without altering the distribution of funding or other incentives. In countries like the USA where the higher education sector is heavily marketised and HEIs compete for students and research funding, this is often the case, and state agencies avoid intervening directly in the system. Due to the absence of material incentives in this kind of system, and the reduced risk of institutional opportunism, data collection is often delegated to HEIs, which are simply asked to provide aggregate count data.

Where data are used in resource allocation models, however, additional considerations arise. Data collection mechanisms must be repeated at regular intervals, must be sustainable over time and must ensure an adequate level of reliability and validity. If it is necessary to weight by field of study, cohort or multiple priority groups, then individual-level data will generally be required. This is related to the issue of intersectionality, as several stakeholders observed during the consultation phase:

"And they're often asking for data which is just not available. And I think it's one of the frustrations. As people who work in the access service, we're often asked how many people from the lone parent background have you worked with? How many parents from Traveller backgrounds, how many migrants, refugees? But yet we're not capturing that data and there is also a huge intersectionality with those groups. So a person may often be ticking several boxes. So they may be a migrant, they may be a lone parent, they may be a mature student and they may have a disability. So what, so what do we need to count and how do we count?"

(HEI representative)

If data are to be used for setting targets, then reliable, valid and timely data for an appropriate reference population must be available. In this case, a more sophisticated monitoring framework is required, and this is arguably the case in Ireland.

Another important way in which data on equity of access are used is at the local level, by the HEIs themselves. It is helpful to consider how they are currently accessing and using data on access, and what their requirements might be in order to intervene more effectively. At present, most HEIs use aggregate data to guide their strategic plans and to target resources:

"What I do is I wait for the Access Dashboard to be updated on the HEA website and then I look at the key performance data as well as the Deprivation Index Score data. So what that access data gives me is the response rate to the Equal Access Survey, the percentage from a disability and ethnic minority perspective. And the dashboard also gives me the entry route data ... Let's say the pathway data would be part of the strategic plan and we would assess the sort of percentages where we want to be, and then we would be looking at benchmark data as well across other institutions, how we compare."

(HEI representative)

These sources and techniques are widely used by HEIs, typically in aggregate form: survey data from the EAS, administrative data from the SRS (including entry route) and Pobal HP Deprivation Scores. There is a degree of dissatisfaction across the sector due to difficulties with accessing timely and reliable data on pertinent characteristics of new HE entrants. The publication of an expanded set of priority groups as part of the new NAP created even greater confusion, as HEIs were not in a position to operationalise the new categories on their own:

"So the 1916 bursary comes in underneath PATH 2, and it was devolved down to the lead cluster to, at the beginning, assess and distribute this funding, OK? So it's quite a significant amount of funding. And then when the NAP was launched, we had to adjust our assessment process to take on the expanded socio-economic disadvantage. So that leads us into a bit of a precarious situation where there are things like 'how do you evidence experience of the criminal justice system, how do you evidence experience of homelessness, how do you evidence survivor of domestic violence?' So we couldn't."

(HEI representative)

6

Technical considerations

Before discussing the priority groups indicated in the NAP, it is important to make some general remarks about the criteria that social scientists use when evaluating indicators, measures, and priority groups. As will be clear from the discussion in the previous section, these measures need to be carefully assessed in relation to a range of criteria before being used. In this section, I will provide an overview of the four most important technical issues that must be considered when seeking to enhance or expand the evidence base for equity of access policies, namely: (1) transforming concepts into empirical measures; (2) identifying reliable and valid sources of data; (3) avoiding problems of an ethical or legal nature; and (4) involving stakeholders, experts and advocacy groups in decisions.

Starting with the question of operationalisation, it is important to consider how we go about collecting information on priority groups. A range of different approaches are possible, including collecting survey data, drawing on existing databases and collecting new data within the process of service provision. Although surveys have been used in Ireland for many years to monitor equity of access to higher education, this approach is problematic in a number of ways. When dealing with small groups, for example – such as those which account for less than 1% of the national population – it is inefficient and ineffective to use survey techniques. Because of the low incidence of these priority groups, errors of measurement (where students mistakenly tick a box, for example, or misunderstand a question) have the potential to drown out the valid cases (leading to a decline in reliability) and it is necessary to collect a large amount of data from students who do not belong to the priority group (leading to inefficiency).

In these cases, it makes more sense to adopt a targeted approach to data collection that uses existing databases. It is valuable to consider different ways of operationalising measures, as we demonstrated in the first Data Plan in relation to the socio-economic composition of higher education. When evaluating alternative forms of measurement, the key issue that must be considered is the validity of the measurement instrument. In statistics, validity refers to the ability of an instrument to measure the quality that it is intended to measure. Through the aggregation of individual deprivation scores, for example, individual errors of attribution on the Pobal HP Index tend to cancel out, yielding a valid measurement of socio-economic composition at the aggregate level.

Secondly, all data that are used to measure and monitor equity of access must be reliable. In statistical terms, reliable measures are consistent, which means that they produce the same result when they encounter identical cases, regardless of when and where those measurements are carried out. As errors of measurement increase, reliability decreases, so the aim is to reduce the scope for errors when data are collected. An important source of error when collecting data on sensitive topics derives from stigmatisation and fear. If respondents feel that they might be penalised if identified as belonging to a specific category, then it becomes more difficult to obtain a reliable measurement. Rather than correctly describing their characteristics, they may decide to provide an alternative response which reduces the risk of penalisation.

Another source of error that can reduce reliability is selective response. This is currently a problem with the Equal Access Survey, as it is implemented at local level. Response rates range from roughly 25% to 99% of new entrants, and the stakeholders consulted during the preparation of this Data Plan are of the opinion that some groups have a lower probability of completing the survey than others, due to factors such as time constraints, difficulties in relation to the use of digital technologies, learning difficulties, chronic health conditions or social vulnerabilities. This suggests that the very groups which are at the centre of policies to improve access may have a lower rate of response, reducing reliability. Stakeholders also pointed out that enrolment is often not the best time to collect data, as new students are often at their most vulnerable:

"New students, new entrants, you know – accommodation, probably the first time being away from home, want to be independent for the first time, bad experiences of second-level supports, don't want to identify as having a disability – and that changes in the second and the third year a lot of the time, so I think it would be a huge advantage to collect data every year."

(AHEAD representative)

"When are individuals asked about this stuff? So often at the start of something, when they're feeling the most vulnerable they'll ever feel, when accessing a new course or a new institution. It's the same issue in the workplace, if you're asked to fill in a disability form on day one, are you going to disclose, even if you do have that professional bit of paper?"

(representative of an advocacy organisation in the field of additional educational needs)

It is evident from this discussion that definitions, categories and procedures for collecting data should be uniform and identical across all HEIs. Where it is possible to identify secondary data or to use existing data, all calculations should be carried out centrally to ensure that the same procedures are used. One of the reasons why the use of secondary administrative data sources is so powerful is because of the way in which it increases the level of standardisation while reducing administrative burden. Where it is necessary to collect new data, this should be achieved in exactly the same way and using the same tools at each HEI. The raw individual-level data should then be transmitted to the HEA, in order to ensure that calculations (including the management of missing data) are carried out in a uniform way. Use of individual-level data also makes it possible to carry out coherence checks using other data, which can help to identify errors and to analyse overlaps between categories. Finally, this also makes it possible to explore intersectionality, as mentioned earlier.

The issue of stigmatisation is also related to the third consideration, which refers to ethical or legal obstacles. Under prevailing legislation, any organisation which collects data from human subjects must respect a series of conditions. In particular, the collection of personal data is tightly disciplined by EU and national law under GDPR. Personal data include information that relates to an identified or identifiable person such as a student who provides their name, address, PPS number, registration number or a photograph. A range of considerations are imposed by GDPR, including the principle of no harm, the idea of proportionality, data security and informed consent. Where it is possible to collect a specific type of data, the subjects must give their consent and receive information about how their data will be used and stored, an issue that many HEIs are currently tackling:

"... in the context of our new system, what tags should we be assigning to students? And also how long should a tag be left on a student record? And that includes some of the disability tags. So I suppose there's ethical considerations as well."

(HEI representative)

Simplifying somewhat, it is not permitted to collect data that could potentially retraumatise or create distress among respondents, if this is not strictly required in order for the data collector to fulfill their statutory duty. If personal data cannot be kept secure, or if the subject does not provide informed consent, the same situation applies and data cannot be collected. There are specific situations where sensitive personal data can be legitimately gathered (for example within the provision of health and social services), typically in the presence of a high level of support and with taxing data security protocols. There are strict limits on the kinds of information that can be collected from higher education participants in the context of policies to improve equity of access, and we will return to this issue later when evaluating the categories indicated in the NAP. In general terms, the HEA is entitled to collect personal data to the extent that this is necessary in order for it to fulfill its statutory duties under the Higher Education Authority Act 2022 and other relevant legislation, as long as it respects the aforementioned principles.

Finally, it is important to consult with stakeholders, advocacy groups and experts when developing new measures or when seeking to identify new priority groups. The lived experience of people who have a disability, and the insights of those who provide support to students with a disability and who advocate for their rights is particularly valuable when developing a new measurement tool or methodology in relation to this group. As I noted above, the advocacy groups with which we spoke during this project emphasised that there are limits to the ability of the EAS to provide reliable data on disability, ethnicity, and family composition for various reasons, and representatives of HEIs provided several examples of how this survey can generate misleading estimates. This is why it is important to consult with a wide range of actors when developing a Data Plan for equity of access. Given the technical nature and specific focus of this report, my main priority was to consult with data experts and data practitioners, although the voices of students were very much present during the consultation phase, particularly through the participation of Access Managers, as the following extract shows:

"Those who do want to disclose their information have, you know, voiced that they don't want to have to disclose it continuously. And sometimes within the student population if students feel they're disclosing the information through the Equal Access Survey or they tick disability on the CAO form or they tick something, they sometimes naively feel that that information is going to be shared and they are going to be ticked somewhere on a student record system and receive the reasonable accommodations or the support automatically."

(HEI representative)

7

Priority groups

In this section I will discuss each of the priority groups mentioned in the NAP (and in the terms of reference for this Data Plan) and evaluate the main issues that must be addressed when seeking to incorporate these within the HEA's monitoring framework for equity of access. For each group, I will start by summarising the relevant findings and insights present within the international literature, before summarising the points raised by stakeholders (representatives of HEIs, advocacy groups, experts) during the consultation. I will then list the main conceptual and technical issues that need to be addressed, including definitions, measurement scales and categorisation. Having clarified these points, I will discuss the sources of data that could potentially be used to measure the priority group²³.

I will start with the three key groups specified in the 2022 NAP: (A) students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged; (B) students who are Irish Travellers or members of the Roma community; (C) students with disabilities. I will then move on to the other groups mentioned in the NAP, discussing each group in a separate section.

23 I will not consider whether qualitative data (such as focus groups, interviews, or observation) could potentially enrich the analysis of equity of access, although such data were used during the consultations for this Data Plan. This issue was raised by a few participants, and it became evident during the literature review that there is a substantial amount of research on inclusion with HE that uses qualitative methods, which would potentially be useful to HEIs.

A. Socio-economic disadvantage

International context

Efforts to widen access to higher education by improving participation by social groups which have not traditionally enrolled have been implemented in a very large number of countries, as mentioned previously. Academic research on this topic has expanded greatly over the past twenty years. In the UK, universities have received praise for having widened access to prestigious degree courses among ethnic minorities and among women, but they have also been criticised for their failure to make more rapid progress in relation to socio-economic disadvantage (Mathers et al. 2016), particularly in competitive programmes and universities:

"Every UK medical school has a widening participation program, and most have facilitated routes of entry for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While these efforts have succeeded in some areas, such as gender balance and ethnic minority recruitment, they have not been successful in other areas. Using POLAR quintiles as a measure of disadvantage ... it is clear that little has changed in the distribution of both applicants and entrants to medicine over a twelve year period, 2007–18 ..."

(Chan et al., 2024, p. 931)

This is rather ironic, given that debates about disadvantage and widening access to HE largely hinge around social class in the UK, rather than race or other characteristics (Chan et al., 2024, p. 933; Pilkington, 2018). Data for Canada also indicate a substantial failure to address socio-economic disadvantage over recent decades (Davies et al., 2014). This is also true in Central and Eastern European countries, where the main emphasis also tends to be on socio-economic status rather than ethnicity (Csereklye, 2014), but progress has been limited in relation to participation in HE by the lower social classes. Low school-level attainments explains a large part of the difference in HE participation rates between these groups, and these gaps appear at early stages of the education system (Duckworth et al., 2016).

As mentioned earlier, a measure of educational disadvantage (POLAR) was developed in the UK by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) by ranking postcode areas into quintiles by HE participation rates among young people, and this is often treated as a proxy measure of socio-economic disadvantage:

"Three performance indicators have been published annually, since 1999, by the England HE Funding Council: percentage of students educated in state schools/colleges; percentage of students coming from the lowest four socioeconomic groups (SEC 4–7, defined by parental occupation); percentage from low HE participation neighbourhoods (POLAR measure)."

(Garrud & Owen, 2018)

In the UK, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) developed a combined measure of disadvantage (referred to as the Multiple Equality Measure, or MEM) that has five categories, based on a combination of factors including the POLAR measure, attending a private or public school, sex and ethnicity (Bathmaker & Bowl, 2018). Official data for recent years suggest that the disparities between POLAR quintiles and MEM groups have remained essentially unchanged, with only a slight “ceiling effect” as the most affluent groups reached the highest level of participation that is basically possible (Bathmaker & Bowl, 2018). Despite the expansion of HE participation, access rates by different socio-economic group are not converging, and an interaction effect with gender is also apparent:

“Data demonstrated that not a single university in the country has more than 13% of white working-class boys among their undergraduate student population. This is not solely a Russell Group²⁴ issue and will need attention across the entire sector.”

(Boeren, 2024, pp. 18–19)

In Scotland, a small area deprivation index (SIMD20) is used to monitor access to HE by identifying postcodes that are in the 20% most deprived data zones. Scottish Funding Council (SFC) funding depends partly on the recruitment and retention of students from priority groups, particularly those from areas that are deprived in socio-economic terms. Over time, as mentioned earlier, a two-tier system has emerged which is increasingly polarised between elite universities (where disadvantaged groups have a low level of participation) and more vocationally oriented colleges which have wider participation. Reay (2017) relates this polarisation to the very agenda of widening participation:

“The troubling paradox of widening access and democratisation of higher education is that, despite its democratic intentions, widening access has brought an intensification of class and racial inequalities between different levels of higher education. Growing diversity within the field of HE, rather than producing a more inclusive higher education, has resulted in a segregated and increasingly polarised system.”

(Reay, 2017, p. 121)

In Australia, socio-economic status is currently measured using the area of residence of the family of the HE student (Statistical Area 1), using geographical units that have a population of 200-800 and are thus similar to Irish Small Areas. These areas are ranked at national level using the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) and Index of Education and Occupation (IEO) which are calculated using census data. This approach was developed as a response to long-running criticism of the previous methodology which relied on postcodes. In subsequent debates, the decision to focus monitoring activities on the lowest quartile of disadvantaged students also received criticism:

“By measuring SES categories in quartiles, the Framework created a very broad cohort of disadvantage. We argue that adopting such a large group led to an underestimation of the extent of class inequality, and to policies that were not always closely targeted to those most in need.”

(Harvey, Andrewartha, et al., 2016, p. 70)

24 The “Russell Group” comprises 24 leading UK universities which tend to receive the highest rankings in terms of research output.

This is a good observation, as research on a range of different outcomes has shown that social gradients tend to be non-linear due to the concentration of obstacles and barriers among the most disadvantaged. At national level, therefore, I recommend using the Pobal HP Deprivation Index categories as shown in Table 1 below. By separately measuring access rates for students from extremely or very disadvantaged neighbourhoods and less disadvantaged areas, it would be possible to gain a greater understanding of equity issues in relation to HE.

A frequency distribution could be calculated for the age-specific national population, preferably confined to those who sat the Leaving Certificate, and crossed by other priority groups to form a series of cross-tabulations. These data could be presented for each annual cohort as part of an online dashboard to facilitate monitoring across the whole sector, for each HEI and for each course of study. Rates could also be presented for access, retention, completion, progression and transition for students from extremely, very and less disadvantaged areas.

Table 1: Number and % of Small Areas by Pobal HP Deprivation Index Categories

Category	N	%
Extremely or very affluent	185	0.98
Affluent	2,560	13.53
Marginally above average	7,543	39.87
Marginally below average	5,822	30.77
Disadvantaged	2,059	10.88
Extremely or very disadvantaged	750	3.97
Total	18,919	100.00

Using another spatial approach, with different terminology, the USA College Board proposed the adoption of an “adversity score” in 2019, based on variables measured at the census tract level (poverty, unemployment, crime levels etc.), which could be used to contextualise the results obtained by students in standardised achievement tests (González Canché, 2019). This is equivalent to the deprivation indices that are widely used in the other Anglo-Saxon countries, but have been used much less frequently in the USA, mainly due to the availability of reliable disaggregate data on family income.

A wide range of measures and policies have been used to encourage students from lower socio-economic groups to enrol at HE. For example, to expand access to the selective *Grandes Écoles*, the French government uses affirmative action to improve participation by students from deprived neighbourhoods (referred to as *Zones d'Éducation Prioritaire*). Schools in these areas receive extra funding and students who live within them are given preferential treatment during admissions (Bastedo, 2021, p. 100). Another elite university in France, *Sciences Po*, developed an alternative admissions track at the beginning of the new Millennium and approximately 10% of each cohort enters via this programme. Applicants from deprived areas are asked to write two essays, which are graded anonymously by a jury, and those with the highest scores are invited to an interview on campus. By 2016, 27% of *Sciences Po* students were from disadvantaged backgrounds, compared to just 6% in 2000 (Bastedo, 2021), and students admitted via this track have rates of retention and success which are comparable to those of the rest of the student body.

In Romania, as a result of a policy introduced in 2020, greater financial resources (in the region of 5% of total funding) are awarded to universities based on their performance, as measured by indicators of success in admitting students who have experienced socio-economic disadvantage. This initiative is deemed to have been a success, as the number of individuals from a disadvantaged background attending university increased from about 85,000 to about 150,000 over a four-year period, despite the fact that there is no direct pathway into higher education for students without a school-leaving (baccalaureate) qualification (Dervis et al., 2022). Before this policy, only 3.8% of young people aged 25–29 from the poorest quintile of families graduated from HE, compared to 52.4% of those in the most affluent quintile (Hâj & Țucă, 2022). This situation is mainly due to differential rates of obtaining the baccalaureate certificate, which in turn are influenced by the way in which upper secondary schools are streamed in Romania.

In conclusion, it is worthwhile to keep in mind the warning repeated by Harvey, Andrewartha & Burnheim (2016) which emphasises the way in which the poorer school performance of disadvantaged students reduces their opportunity to access higher education, rather than their aspirations. Until the resources needed to remedy this situation are invested within the school system, it is likely that only modest increases in enrolment rates will be achieved among socio-economically deprived students:

"What is missing from the National Access Plan are corresponding targets for schools to increase the educational outcomes for the most underrepresented students."

(Padden & Tonge, 2018)

Stakeholder perspectives on the Irish context

Some issues were raised during focus groups regarding the Pobal HP Deprivation Index, relating primarily to how it can be used by HEIs. These are reported below, together with my comments on how to address these difficulties:

"... to give you an example that comes up with the HEAR scheme all the time, we would have unaccompanied minors who are in direct provision, but they don't qualify for, they don't meet the DIS indicator because their direct provision centre is in an affluent area, you know, but no one would think that they're living in an affluent community."

(HEI representative)

Following the methodology described in our 2017 Data Plan, the out-of-term (family) addresses of students entering HE directly are geocoded and assigned to a Small Area. Deprivation scores are assigned based on these Small Areas, and then aggregated to obtain a mean score or distribution across deprivation categories. This yields a reliable measure of socio-economic composition which coincides with best practice at international level. It has been used in Ireland since 2021 in the formula for the Annual Core Recurrent Grant (alongside additional access metrics) and influences the distribution of the Student Assistance Fund (along with the number of full-time equivalent students).

However, index scores should not be assigned to international students, young people in the care of the state, students without a permanent address and students who are in the international protection programme. In all these cases (and there may be others), the home address of the student is either missing or does not reflect residential choices within the housing market. Where it is possible to identify members of these groups, they should not be assigned a deprivation score based on the address provided.

Other stakeholders drew attention to the significant delays that they face when seeking to access the deprivation scores for their students, and above all in obtaining the individual-level data:

"I suppose on a positive side, I will say that over the last, the lifetime of the last plan, the DIS data is very, very useful. And it is fantastic that we now have dashboards at a national level, key facts and figures, access metrics available on the HEA website that we now have comparisons, that we hope is based on the same data definitions across the sector. So there has been some progress under some of the categories. I often joke with my colleagues here in Systems that we have to wait for the data to go to the HEA so that we can then see it on the dashboard because officially the data isn't attached to the student record in the institution."

(HEI representative)²⁵

"I do know myself that when I did reach out to the HEA statistics department they were able to give me the DIS breakdown of the students coming into the different patterns which was quite useful and there was a lot more depth to it and I think that information should be readily available and given to each institution and that's deeper data than currently we're getting at the moment."

(HEI representative)

Conceptual issues

In Ireland, socio-economic disadvantage in access to HE is currently measured by the Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas. The most recent version of this index relies on data from the 2022 Census of Population. Deprivation scores represent a reliable measure of socio-economic composition when they are aggregated because individual-level measurement errors cancel out (e.g. relating to affluent individuals who happen to live in a deprived area or vice versa). It is self-evident that at the individual level, the deprivation score assigned to a given student will not always be aligned with his or her characteristics such as receipt of a student grant. HEIs need to be aware of this feature of the monitoring system, and they should be reassured that when scores are aggregated, the resulting estimates are reliable. The Pobal HP Deprivation Index should normally only be used at the aggregate level or within statistical models.

There are two ways of using the deprivation index at this aggregate level: as a mean score or as a share of people in a specific category. When using the mean, it is important to be aware that fields of study or HEIs which are relatively polarised between disadvantaged and affluent students will tend to have a score that is close to the general mean because these extremes will tend to cancel each other out. When using categories, I suggest using the Pobal Maps thresholds: (1) Extremely Disadvantaged (-30 and below); (2) Very Disadvantaged (-29.9999 to -20); (3) Disadvantaged (-19.9999 to -10); (4) Marginally Below Average (-9.9999 to 0); (5) Marginally Above Average (0.0001 to 10); (6) Affluent (10.0001 to 20); (7) Very Affluent (20.0001 to 30); (8) Extremely Affluent (30.0001 and over).

²⁵ It may be worth pointing out that the Pobal HP Deprivation Scores for all students attending a HEI can be requested from the HEA so that the HEI can integrate this information into their databases.

When calculating targets for disadvantage scores or categories, it is appropriate to use the distribution of students who remained at secondary school until the Leaving Certificate, across these categories. This is possible using information from the Department of Education P-POD database. The retention rate at secondary level is considerably lower for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and if this is not taken into account, there is a risk of setting an unreasonable target for the HE system.

Data sources

The Pobal HP Deprivation Index is calculated for all Small Areas in Ireland using data from the census of population²⁶. The variables considered are as follows: (1) Age Dependency Rate; (2) % Change in Population; (3) % Lone Parents; (4) % Low Education; (5) % High Education; (6) % Professionals; (7) % Low Skilled; (8) % Men Unemployed; (9) % Women Unemployed; (10) Number of Persons per Room. The Index is based on a multi-dimensional conceptualisation of disadvantage²⁷.

With 70,000–80,000 SUSI grant awards each year, this variable provides useful information on socio-economic position (see Table 2). The special rate is currently only awarded when household income is below €27,400 (where the applicant has less than 4 dependent children), and grant level is correlated with deprivation²⁸. Whereas 23% of recipients of the special rate of SUSI grant come from disadvantaged Small Areas, this applies to 13% of those who were only awarded a lower rate of student contribution and to 15% of the general population of HE students.

Table 2: SUSI grant level by Pobal HP Deprivation score, 2023/2024

	Affluent	Marginally Above Average	Marginally Below Average	Dis-advantaged	Total
Band 1 Rate	9%	40%	34%	16%	100%
Band 2 Rate	11%	41%	33%	15%	100%
Band 3 Rate	9%	41%	36%	14%	100%
Band 4 Rate	9%	43%	34%	13%	100%
Contribution/Fee Only Rates	9%	44%	34%	13%	100%
Special Rate Band	8%	34%	36%	23%	100%
Total	9%	42%	34%	15%	100%

Source: HEA, Student Record System, 2025

Note: Students are merged within each category without considering distance.

²⁶ The index is derived from a set of multidimensional GLS factor scores calculated using a constrained, confirmatory, multiple-group factor analysis model in EQS.

²⁷ For more information, see: <https://www.pobal.ie/pobal-hp-deprivation-index/>

²⁸ See <https://www.susi.ie/eligibility-criteria/income/full-time-undergraduate-income-thresholds-and-grant-award-rates/> (consulted in July 2025).

Recommendations

The Pobal HP Deprivation Index should continue to be used at the aggregate level, as a mean score or distribution across categories, wherever it is necessary to monitor or measure socio-economic composition within a HEI, a programme of study, a cohort, or a priority group. I recommend using the Pobal Maps thresholds and ensuring that all calculations relating to socio-economic disadvantage are carried out centrally in order to avoid confusion or difficulties at local level. The following extract illustrates some of the risks that need to be avoided:

"So if we're looking at socioeconomic disadvantage, somebody might be using DIS data, somebody might be using HEAR data, somebody might be using number of students getting the Student Assistance Fund. They might have a Local Access Admissions pathway. And so who are your socioeconomically disadvantaged students? Some of or all of the above? And we're calculating them all into one figure and off we go."

(HEI representative)

On a technical level, a minimum threshold of roughly 100 students should be implemented across the sector when reporting deprivation data to ensure that aggregate scores provide a reliable estimate of the composition of a course or cohort. This is part of the rationale of the index, as noted above, and may mean that smaller courses or cohorts in specific HEIs need to be merged. I recommend finding a way to accelerate the process of geocoding address data, assigning deprivation scores and distributing data to HEIs. It should be possible to complete this process and to carry out all necessary checks within about 6 months from receipt of enrolment data from HEIs.

As mentioned previously, it would be good practice to break other priority groups down by deprivation and to target the most deprived students within them. In the absence of this kind of intersectional approach, there is a risk that the inclusion of affluent members of other groups (such as mature students, lone parents or those with a disability, for example) could counteract the goal of enhancing social inclusion. Affluent students are generally more able to secure supports and to obtain access using their own resources and networks, while disadvantaged students are likely to be at greater risk of exclusion if they also belong to another risk category.

B. Irish Travellers and Roma people

International context

Irish Travellers are an ethnic minority indigenous to Ireland, comprising less than 1% of the population (Brennan et al., 2024). Institutional data sources suggest that retention rates for Traveller children in post-primary schools are low and that less than 1% enter HE in Ireland. In recent years, targeted initiatives to provide HE qualifications to Travellers via part-time courses that are geographically accessible and socially inclusive have recorded some success in stimulating participation (Brennan et al., 2024).

Some authors have noted that although Irish Travellers have been recognised as a distinct ethnic group since 2017, some remain reluctant to declare their ethnic identity as a result of past discrimination (Brennan et al., 2024). Quoting from the educational literature, D'Arcy & Galloway (2018) report that up to 70% of Travellers in UK schools provide contrasting descriptions of their ethnicity at different points in time, with 50% changing their identification between primary and secondary school. They reach the following conclusions:

"Centuries of discrimination have meant that Travellers are rightly cautious in declaring their ethnicity for fear of the consequences. Capturing accurate data for effective ethnic monitoring of all educational outcomes is an important starting point to enable academics and teachers to understand the profile of Travellers in Higher Education."

(D'Arcy & Galloway, 2018)

Turning now to Roma people, Csereklye provides the following description of their situation in Hungary and other European countries:

"The social status and education of the Roma was always very distinct from that of other ethnic groups in Hungary, and this is true for most of Europe. While the language and culture of most ethnic groups were valued and promoted from the 1960s on, at least within the ethnic groups themselves, the Roma were looked at as people with a serious cultural deficit, having limited competencies in mainstream Hungarian language and culture. These limitations were attributed partly to both their economic and social status. Even today, educational initiatives for Roma children are often assimilationist in nature, and focus primarily on closing this perceived cultural gap."

(Csereklye, 2014, p. 108)

The Roma population constitutes the largest ethnic minority in Europe and is one of the most marginalised and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups in the EU (Garaz & Torotcoi, 2017). Their social situation and educational participation rates are quite different from those of other sub-populations of European countries which have a migration background. Roma students are concentrated in the countries of Eastern and Southeastern Europe, many of which participated in the international programme *Decade for Roma Inclusion* (2005–15). In Romania, Roma people made up 2.25% of the population aged 18–24 in 2015, but represented only 0.23% of students enrolled in HE (Dervis et al., 2022). In Serbia, the 2011 population census indicated that only 0.7% of its Roma population had university degrees, while in Albania, a national-level survey in 2011 found only that 1% of Roma had a higher education degree (Garaz & Torotcoi, 2017).

To date, the largest initiative aimed at facilitating the access to higher education for Roma in Eastern and Southeastern Europe was the Scholarship Programme of the Roma Education Fund, which covered the twelve 'Decade' countries as well as four others. This programme covers tuition fees and scholarships for Roma people enrolled in HE, reaching 1,500 scholarships per year (Garaz & Torotcoj, 2017).

Stakeholder perspectives on the Irish context

During the consultation phase of this project, representatives of Irish HEIs mentioned that they are regularly asked for data on students who are Irish Travellers, or Roma, which they aren't able to provide:

"... they're probably more challenged by the fact that some of the reports and returns they're asked to do are much more granular, linked to specific funding and are often asking questions about the student body that isn't data we hold on the record system. So for example, the returns around membership of the Traveller community."

(HEI representative)

Pavee Point has made a number of recommendations in relation to data on educational participation. Citing human rights principles, Pavee Point supports the collection and use of disaggregate data on ethnicity for all students to monitor the situation of minorities within the education system and to contrast the effects of racism and exclusion in society:

"A basic prerequisite for effective targeted action is that it is evidence-based – hence the necessity for disaggregation of data. The grounds of gender, socio-economic status and age are already factored into disaggregated data collection and analysis. Ethnicity must also be factored in, if false correlations and causal attributions are to be avoided, intersectionality is to be registered, and strategies are to be targeted sensitively and effectively. Pavee Point has urged the use of disaggregated data on Traveller and Roma learners' education careers at every level of the system, starting with Early Childhood Education and Care. To monitor engagement, data is required, not just for enrolment, but for attendance, retention, completion, and outcomes, to provide an evidence base for innovations to harness strengths and address challenges."

(Kenny, 2024)

The following account also shows that there is broad support for using data on ethnicity in an integrated way across the education system:

“Author: *there would be, for example, an argument that for higher education, the HEIs and the HEA should acquire this data directly from the secondary schools, which would have recorded it perhaps already from primary level in the school databases? Would that raise any difficult issues, in your view, in terms of the way these issues are conceptualised and measured in the school context?*

Participant: *It would certainly promote more accountability if we know that a young person in primary school is a member of the Traveller community, where did they drop out, you know, and we can then make it clear, and we can then see clearly actually that between the ages of X and X, something is happening.”*

The Department of Education records data on the ethnicity for school students in the POD and P-POD databases. The way that ethnicity and cultural background are defined is aligned with the relevant census categories, which facilitates comparisons. When a student finishes primary school, their personal data are not carried over automatically from POD to P-POD, but are re-entered manually at their new school. The coverage of the ethnicity field is currently in the region of 85% for POD, and around 50% for P-POD. The Department recently sent a circular to secondary schools reminding them that this question is mandatory, and the coverage of this characteristic is expected to improve in the next wave of data collection as many secondary schools were not aware of the need to gather data on this characteristic.

Advocacy groups representing ethnic minorities encourage students and families to indicate their ethnic identity when asked:

“So diminishing the bureaucracy and explaining it and creating conditions where people can understand why it’s worthwhile or useful for them and where it also goes beyond just access ... It then helps you to track participation, you know, and can get to outcomes as well, and the deprivation index scores, the HEI funding can be linked to those, as well as the HEAR scheme eligibility.”

(representative of Pavée Point)

The obstacles to collecting data on ethnicity should not be minimised, of course, and the following extract summarises these effectively:

“And we do know a lot of Travellers within third level education that we had reached out to, who had refused to ... do an interview because they didn’t want to be identified and therefore potentially be treated differently in third level education. We have a handful that we would know for sure that graduated from XX, for example, and they would be within that XX field and would not identify themselves as members of the Traveller community at all, out of fear of being treated differently within their workplace, you know, so there is that whole sense of losing Travellers to the educational system as well, and it’s very much a thing that’s happening.”

(representative of the Traveller community)

The most appropriate solution for monitoring progress in relation to the NAP would be to impute missing data in P-POD using information from POD, with a view to achieving a higher rate of coverage. The resulting data could then be merged at the individual level with the SRS using PPS numbers. Use of data from these databases would greatly improve the accuracy of monitoring in relation to the identification of Irish Travellers and Roma within HE, as well as other ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds.

Statisticians at the Department of Education believe that the coverage of these specific groups within POD and P-POD is superior to the coverage of the census, which underlines the value of this source. There is no risk of double counting and schools have an interest in correctly recording individual data on members of disadvantaged groups. One of the benefits of this approach is that it would facilitate more effective forms of targeting, avoiding some of the risks inherent in the current system:

"Just last week we identified another student who's a member of the Traveller community who's entitled to some funding which she wasn't aware of and had gone ... to try and get access to some Funds. Her dad is a member of the Travelling community, her mother isn't and she didn't identify herself. But actually, in terms of the definition, she was entitled to some funding and she didn't realise until somebody just happened to have a conversation with her in a hallway."

(HEI representative)

Conceptual issues

Ethnicity is typically measured using self-reported data. The following question was used in the 2022 census of population:

Question 11. What is your ethnic group/background?

Choose ONE section from A to D, then mark the appropriate box.

A White

- 1 *Irish*
- 2 *Irish Traveller*
- 3 *Roma*
- 4 *Any other White background*

B Black or Black Irish

- 5 *African*
- 6 *Any other Black background*

C Asian or Asian Irish

- 7 *Chinese*
- 8 *Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi*
- 9 *Any other Asian background*

D Other, including mixed group/background

- 10 *Arabic*
- 11 *Mixed, write in description*
- 12 *Other, write in description*

The same categories are used in the POD and P-POD databases, as mentioned previously.

Data sources

Three main issues are encountered when seeking to measure the participation rate of Irish Travellers in higher education. Firstly, the numbers are low, which means that survey data tend to be unreliable (and measurement error has a tendency to crowd out the valid responses, due for example to respondents misinterpreting the terms “Traveller” or “Roma”). One example of this phenomenon is described in the following extract:

“It said we had XX Roma students, which I knew wasn’t the case. And I asked the member of staff who was working on the Equal Access Survey and reporting to the HEA to look into that for me, and it was Italian students from Rome ticking the Roma box, you know! So if you’re, if you’re not really checking into that data, then it can be reported wrongly.”

(HEI representative)

Secondly, due to their experience of discrimination within the school system and in the wider society, Irish Travellers and Roma people may be (justifiably) reluctant to identify themselves within higher education (particularly at the time of enrolment), as they may fear that they will be penalised. When enrolling, they may simply choose not to answer the Equal Access Survey.

Thirdly, both ethnic groups have low rates of secondary school completion, which means that it would be misleading to compare their higher education participation rate directly with their age-specific population parity rate. According to the Department of Education (2024), the retention rate for Roma people in the 2017 cohort of secondary school students was just 58.9%, while that for Irish Travellers was 26.5%. The incidence of these two ethnicities within the same cohort was 0.2% for Roma people (151 individuals) and 1.2% for Irish Travellers (766 individuals). However, more than one third of students are missing data, which means that the incidence of these two groups could in theory be different (Department of Education, 2024).

The most reliable source of data on Travellers and Roma is arguably the POD/P-POD system, which is a centralised, online database containing standardised information on all primary and post-primary school students in Ireland (Department of Education, 2024). These two databases are administered by the Department of Education and contain PPS numbers, as well as a range of fields where data can be recorded each year on the school environment (including type of school and DEIS status), demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity) and other relevant information, such as whether the student sat the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate (this information is provided to the Department by the State Examinations Commission). This information is uploaded by schools in October of each year using a secure web portal. Schools in the ETB sector also submit data. Due to the availability of PPS numbers, the POD/P-POD data can be matched with SRS records to provide an estimate of the access rate for Travellers and Roma in HE, which can then be compared with the school-leaving parity rates for these groups.

P-POD data are geocoded and have a Pobal HP Deprivation score. Although data from POD are not automatically transferred to P-POD when a student starts secondary school, it would be possible to make optimal use of both datasets when seeking to measure ethnicity. A minority of families refuse to identify their ethnicity, as is the case in all similar databases or surveys at national and international level. This would not prevent monitoring activities using these data, as this also has the support of the most relevant advocacy groups, who actively encourage the members of these groups to state their ethnic identities for monitoring purposes.

Recommendations

I recommend using ethnicity data from the Department of Education for HE students who went to school in the Republic of Ireland. Ethnicity data, including Traveller and Roma, from POD and P-POD, can be matched to the information in the SRS using PPS numbers, together with any other required fields (such as the DEIS school identifier).

C. Disability

International context

According to the World Health Organization, disability includes impairments, limitations on activities and restrictions on participation due to the interaction between health conditions, on the one hand, and environmental factors, on the other. Access to HE for people with a disability can lead to improved employment opportunities, financial independence, and a higher quality of life (Butcher & Lane, 2024, p. 2). In most developed countries, the number of students with disabilities in HE has increased over the last two decades (Aquino, 2016). Most scholars believe that this was due to a reduction in the degree of stigma associated with mental illness, rather than an increase in the latter. Gorard, Boliver & Siddiqui (2018) note that students flagged as disabled have a higher rate of participation in HE in the UK than in either the school system or the wider society; they are also increasingly successful within undergraduate degree programmes (p. 318). Hewett, Douglas & McLinden (2023) provide the following account of how legislative change contributed to this improvement:

"... the most significant development in the United Kingdom (UK) in recent years has been the introduction of the Equality Act 2010. In relation to education and disability, this Act of Parliament requires providers to make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled students so that they are not put at disadvantage when compared to their nondisabled peers. These reasonable adjustments apply to admissions, curriculum delivery and examinations (Hewett, et al, 2015). In other Western national contexts similar legislation has been enacted ... Morina (2017) acknowledges these worldwide shifts in policy, reporting that these have led to an increased focus on inclusion within HE, which in turn this has led to higher participation rates for students with disabilities."

(Hewett, Douglas & McLinden, 2023)

Brett (2016) notes that technological progress has also played a role in this process, as a result of innovations such as cochlear implants, low-cost tools for the automatic conversion of digital text into accessible formats as well as text-to-speech and text-to-braille devices. Brett concludes that "[t]oday, many of these materials are available online, and can be processed by higher quality natural speech software embedded within operating systems of near ubiquitous smart phones" (Brett, 2016, p. 99).

Because disabilities are varied, and have a differential impact on HE participation, we should not treat all students with a disability in the same way. Although students with intellectual disabilities remain a small minority within HE (no more than 6,000 across the whole of the USA, for example) and only a small minority of HEIs facilitate their participation (Grigal et al., 2021), the number of undergraduates with a mental health condition has increased rapidly. For example, in the UK this group comprised just 8,415 individuals in 2008, but increased to reach 49,265 in 2016 (Glazzard et al., 2020). This raises issues regarding socio-economic selectivity in the identification of certain forms of disability:

"Students in disadvantaged or more social segregated school settings are more likely to be diagnosed as having a behavioural disorder, for example, whereas those in more advantaged settings may be treated as being merely 'naughty' (Gorard and See 2013). However, this historical trend has changed with the rise of dyslexia and similar unseen disabilities. A disability statement based on dyslexia yields an increased chance in the competitive education system for the child (such as extra time in examinations), and it is clearly the middle classes in the UK who have taken most advantage of this (Tomlinson 2012)."

(Gorard et al., 2018, pp. 318–319)

"Reliance on mothers' advocacy may therefore perpetuate gaps in the resources and support provided to students with learning disabilities from disadvantaged backgrounds, magnifying the impact of disability ... The rising expectation that mothers will acquire private services for their child could not only reproduce but deepen existing inequities because even the well-off mothers interviewed in this study discussed how the financial costs incurred by private support were difficult to manage."

(Nevill et al., 2023, p. 254)

This suggests that learning disabilities among individuals from the lower social classes are more likely to escape measurement and less likely to receive attention and support. This issue was also mentioned by stakeholders during focus groups:

"The number one thing that came back from all DARE practitioners was the intersection of affluence and qualification for disability and some way to disentangle that in the data."

(HEI representative)

"... to be aware of the DARE programme and to get all the documentation that's involved which means engagement with your second-level institution just for the SIF form, the Educational Impact Assessment form and your documentation ... that needs a significant level of social capital, and economic capital, that a lot of students don't have, and it precludes them from being captured in this."

(AHEAD representative)

"So if you look at, I got the DARE data and I got the DIS score for our general population and OK, so the affluence level of those coming into the DARE route is actually higher than our norm in our general population – they're more affluent. So therefore that particular pathway is made up of more affluent individuals. Whereas if you look at those coming into through HEAR, obviously their disadvantage score is lower than the norm. So that is already there and we have the evidence for it. And also if you look at the SUSI data that was released recently and those on the special rate compared to the general student population, so the DARE rate of students on the SUSI grant, the percentage is much smaller in comparison to the general population of students."

(HEI representative)

This pattern is also confirmed in the article by Padden & Tonge (2018) on the operation of the DARE scheme at UCD:

"... the reasons behind the very high numbers of students from fee-paying schools receiving DARE offers to UCD must be examined further as it would appear that the children from more financially resourced backgrounds are significantly more likely to benefit from the DARE scheme."

(Padden & Tonge, 2018, p. 10)

As Milian et al. (2024) point out, information on HE students with disabilities have only recently become available in many countries:

"Until very recently ... researchers' ability to study the PSE pathways traveled by students with disabilities in the Canadian context was hampered by the absence of suitable data sources ... In Ontario, Canada – a jurisdiction routinely critiqued for its underdeveloped educational data infrastructure (Robson, 2021) contemporary data sets that holistically capture student flows through PSE, such as Statistics Canada's Post-secondary Student Information System (PSIS), do not contain information on students' disability status. Similarly, in the United States, the National Student Clearinghouse (2022) only started collecting disability status – on an optional basis – from domestic institutions in 2022."

(Milian et al., 2024, p. 218)

They conclude, using a sophisticated research design, that after adjusting for high-school academic performance and other relevant variables, there are no significant disability-based differences in access to third-level education among students with disabilities, who have the same probability of transferring to university, albeit from a lower base.

Stakeholder perspectives on the Irish context

During the consultation phase for this project, a large amount of qualitative data relating to students with disabilities was collected. This is because this group has increased rapidly in size in recent years, creating a degree of uncertainty about what is being measured and about the true size of the group:

"We're sometimes asked by politicians or journalists how many people in Ireland are dyslexic or dyscalculic. We have a difficulty answering that question because of a variety of issues. One is massive underidentification of these difficulties, particularly in some subgroups, including people coming from FE, including people from certain demographic groups. But we also have massive underdiagnosis in people who attend school in a regular way because of the lack of capacity within the system."

(representative of an advocacy organisation in the field of additional educational needs)

Stakeholders provided the following comments in relation to the measurement of disability:

"I think the key indicator here has to be impact on education: what is the impact? How much of an impact is my disability having? Because the Disability Act, the Equality Status Acts, they all have different definitions of disability, every single one of them. So I think a good way of measuring it in this context would be 'how significantly is this disability impacting upon my ability to engage with my studies?'"

(AHEAD representative)

"I suppose the census definition is probably more directly in line with the legislative definition of disability, which is important because then it places it in the frame of rights holders and what their rights are and the obligations the institution has. And the new census data introduces to some extent that idea of an impact, which I think is also a useful frame because, as we see, the levels of diagnosis are exploding, the levels of self-identification are exploding."

(AHEAD representative)

The distinction between disability in general, and disability that has an impact on education explains why a much larger share of students indicate in the EAS that they have a long-standing condition or impairment, compared with the number of people who subsequently register with support services in HEIs:

"I think it really is essential that we get as accurate data as possible. And that disparity between the HEA stats and the statistics that we, that we collect ... I'm not saying either are right or either are wrong, but there are totally different underlying datasets."

(AHEAD representative)

"So like in the Equal Access data for our HEI, for example, XX% of students who fill out that state that they have a disability. But that doesn't correlate to the registration with the service. So YY% of our students – if they're the same people – go on to register. So the data which the HEA are using is not accurate."

(HEI representative)

As for other characteristics, and as I mentioned earlier, the fact that the EAS is carried out only once, at the moment of undergraduate enrolment, means that it cannot capture impairments that are diagnosed at a subsequent point in time:

"I suppose the disadvantage is that it is only taken once in a student's career, at that new entrant, undergraduate stage. And then all of the disability data that the HEA reports on is taken from that. They take unique identifiers from that process and then map it out over time. So that can be quite problematic for a couple of reasons, because particularly in the areas of say, progression on to postgraduate study and things like that, you could be talking like, you know, you could be talking 10 years later in a learner's journey, and obviously [there are] increasing numbers of people getting diagnosed later in life and they're not being picked up as we currently stand."

(AHEAD representative)

One HEI representative emphasised the difficulties that institutions have experienced in recent years simply keeping up with the increasing number of students registering with support services and requesting reasonable accommodations:

"So if you can successfully state you have a disability, you will accrue a benefit on the basis of reasonable accommodations and admissions. So it is much more complicated at our end, and we're managing huge numbers of students who've successfully made that case."

(HEI representative)

At the same time, other stakeholders pointed out that putting together the required documentation to obtain support can be arduous, at least for some students:

"There's a lot of students, socio-economically disadvantaged and disabled students who can't get assessments because they don't have money or they are on a waiting list. So we have a duty to support them ... This year so far, there's a thousand disabled students have registered with our office and 40% of those wouldn't meet the funding criteria, so they're not captured."

(HEI representative)

The rapid increase that is observed in the number of people with disabilities enrolled in HE is due to the growing awareness and acceptance of limiting conditions. This process is uneven, being most marked among the more affluent social groups, which is evident in all data sources. This pattern is even evident when we look at variations in disabilities (of any type and degree) among young people aged 20-24 years across Local Authority Areas. This goes from a low of 14.0% in Monaghan and 15.4% in Longford to a high of 26% in Galway City Council, 22.8% in Cork City Council and 22.4% in Dún Laoghaire/Rathdown County Council (19.4% in Ireland as a whole²⁹).

Conceptual issues

As indicated previously, it would be preferable if we could calculate a participation rate for students with disabilities enrolled in HE, and compare this with the school-leaving parity rate (the share of young people with a disability who completed the Leaving Certificate). The only reliable source of data on this topic is currently the census of population, which contains the following two questions:

15. Do you have any of the following long-lasting conditions or difficulties?

- (a) Blindness or a vision impairment;
- (b) Deafness or a hearing impairment;
- (c) A difficulty with basic physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting or carrying;
- (d) An intellectual disability;
- (e) A difficulty with learning, remembering or concentrating;
- (f) A psychological or emotional condition or a mental health issue;
- (g) A difficulty with pain, breathing or any other chronic illness or condition.

Response categories: (1) Yes, to a great extent; (2) Yes, to some extent; (3) No.

16. As a result of a long-lasting condition, do you have difficulty doing any of the following?

- (a) Dressing, bathing or getting around inside the home;
- (b) Going outside the home to shop or visit a doctor's surgery;
- (c) Working at a job or business or attending school or college;
- (d) Participating in other activities, for example leisure or using transport.

Response categories: (1) Yes, a lot; (2) Yes, a little; (3) No.

29 See the 2022 census data, available from the CSO Open Data Platform at <https://data.cso.ie/> (accessed 10 March 2025).

Using these data, it is possible to obtain an estimate of the share of people in the relevant age group who have a disability, by extent and type. Table 3 shows that 19.2% of young people aged 18-24 years have some form of disability or long-standing condition, compared with 21.6% of the population as a whole. Among young people, there is a higher rate of learning difficulties and mental health problems, and a lower rate of physical difficulties. However, many of these conditions have no significant influence on their ability to study or to participate in HE. For this reason, it is necessary to focus on the group of people who have a disability that in some way “affects their ability to work or attend school or college”.

Table 3: Percentage of the Irish population, and those aged 18-24 years, by extent and type of disability (Census of population, 2022)

Description	All people	18–24 years
Persons with a disability <i>to any extent</i>	21.55	19.20
Blindness or vision impairment <i>to some extent</i>	5.16	5.15
Deafness or hearing impairment <i>to some extent</i>	3.66	0.74
An intellectual disability <i>to some extent</i>	1.20	1.96
A difficulty with learning, remembering or concentrating <i>to some extent</i>	3.63	4.75
A difficulty with basic physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting or carrying <i>to some extent</i>	4.48	1.20
A difficulty with pain, breathing or any other chronic illness or condition <i>to some extent</i>	5.74	3.05
A psychological or emotional condition or a mental health issue <i>to some extent</i>	3.62	5.59
Persons with a disability <i>to some extent</i>	13.64	13.29
Blindness or vision impairment <i>to a greater extent</i>	0.60	0.45
Deafness or hearing impairment <i>to a greater extent</i>	0.87	0.23
An intellectual disability <i>to a greater extent</i>	0.93	1.31
A difficulty with learning, remembering or concentrating <i>to a greater extent</i>	1.40	1.69
A difficulty with basic physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting or	2.30	0.52
A difficulty with pain, breathing or any other chronic illness or condition <i>to a greater extent</i>	2.81	1.30
A psychological or emotional condition or a mental health issue <i>to a greater extent</i>	1.62	2.54
Persons with a disability <i>to a greater extent</i>	7.91	5.91
Working at a job or business or attending school or college <i>to a greater extent</i>	3.44	1.99
Working at a job or business or attending school or college <i>to some extent</i>	2.46	3.00
Working at a job or business or attending school or college <i>to any extent</i>	5.90	4.99

Source: CSO, census of population, 2022 (accessed via the Open Data Platform, <https://data.cso.ie/> which was accessed in March 2025)

A total of 5% of young people aged 18-24 years fall into this category. Of course, it is likely that disabilities also have an impact on retention rates and academic achievements during secondary school, so the age-relevant population parity rate is likely to be a little higher than the school-leaving parity rate would be, if we were able to calculate it.

Data sources

In the UK, data for each HEI are published each year by the Higher Education Statistics Agency based on the number of students receiving the Disabled Students Allowance. In Australia, students with a disability represent 7.7% of domestic undergraduate students, and the number of students in this category increased by 123% between 2008 and 2017 (Butcher & Lane, 2024). These data are gathered at the moment of enrolment using a signed declaration³⁰. In the USA, students with learning disabilities must first provide documentation of their disability in order to receive accommodations and support services (Hadley & Eric Archer, 2017). Disability generally only becomes a target for policies and support services following enrolment, rather than in the context of admissions.

In order to obtain an equivalent measure for enrolled students within HEIs, it would be possible to repeat the two questions used in the Irish census as part of a survey of HE students. However, this method of data collection would be subject to the same problems of uneven and selective response currently observed in relation to the Equal Access Survey. In addition – as a number of stakeholders pointed out during the consultation – students with a disability may be reluctant to communicate information on their condition to HEIs at the beginning of their course, or they may not yet have developed, or be aware that they have a condition.

An alternative strategy would be to use administrative data from the Fund for Students with Disabilities, following the UK approach. This fund was established by the Department of Education and Skills in 1994 in order to enable higher education institutions to offer supports and services to eligible students with disabilities so that they can participate and successfully complete their chosen course of study.³¹ If this approach is adopted, it will be necessary to assume that students with a documented disability experience some degree of difficulty within HE, but based on this rather mild assumption, it would be possible to compare the situation in each HEI with baseline data from the census.

A total of 12.4% of new entrants in 2020/2021 declared in the Equal Access Survey that they had a disability and 15,670 students were receiving support from the FSD, out of a total of 246,630 students in HE (which represents 6.1%).

This suggests that people with a disability are over-represented in higher education at the current moment, compared with the incidence of relevant long-standing conditions in the population. This finding is in line with the situation in other developed countries, such as the UK. Of course, it is possible that the number of students registered with the FSD underestimates the true size of this priority group, and that the 2022 census data are out of date due to rapid change. The very strong and recent increase in awareness of disability and willingness to self-identify as having a disability poses considerable challenges from a measurement point of view.

If data from the FSD are to be used within the equity of access monitoring framework, then it would be appropriate to ask HEIs to return individual-level data. These data should be reported using standardised procedures, and following formal definitions, and should include information on type of disability as well as PPS number, in order to ensure uniform coverage:

"Most of our funding metrics now are not using EAS data, they're using the Fund for Students with Disabilities. And when you talk about who's returning on the Fund for Students with Disabilities, it varies across each of the HEIs around how they return [data on] students."

(HEI representative)

30 Students are asked to answer the following questions at the moment of enrolment: (1) Do you have a disability, impairment or long term medical condition which may affect your studies? (2) If yes, please indicate the area of impairment: Hearing; Learning; Mobility; Vision; Medical; Other; (3) Would you like to receive advice on support services, equipment and facilities which may assist you?

31 See <https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/fund-for-students-with-disabilities/> (accessed 20 March 2025).

Further research is required in order to achieve a better understanding of why there has been such a rapid increase in the number of students seeking support for disabilities within HE, particularly among those from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. In the meantime, I recommend disaggregating disability by deprivation when setting targets, as this would provide greater recognition to HEIs which facilitate HE access within the weakest groups, as well as encouraging them to focus their efforts on students who are both disabled and disadvantaged, which is emerging as an important target for access policies.

Recommendations

I recommend reviewing the targets for students with a disability in light of the census data on long-standing conditions or impairments which influence people's ability to participate in higher education.

I recommend setting up a system whereby HEIs would return individual-level data on students receiving support under the FSD. These data should be reported using standardised procedures, should be based on formal definitions, and should include information on type of disability as well as PPS number. I also recommend disaggregating disability by deprivation when setting targets, with a view to improving HE access within the weakest groups.

D. New priority groups

The 2022–2028 NAP lists a number of life situations that may contribute to the risk of socio-economic disadvantage, namely:

- D.1 coming from a low-income family;
- D.2 being from a disadvantaged area;
- D.3 being a mature student;
- D.4 having experienced the care system;
- D.5 having experienced the criminal justice system;
- D.6 having experienced homelessness;
- D.7 being a lone or teen parent;
- D.8 being a carer;
- D.9 being a migrant, a refugee or belonging to an ethnic minority;
- D.10 being a survivor of domestic violence.

The NAP indicates that the first two groups are appropriately measured by the Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas and I encountered no evidence during the literature review and focus groups to suggest otherwise. The other groups are listed in the terms of reference for this Data Plan, and the NAP suggests that they should be given consideration within the context of the 2025 Mid-term review. As part of this assessment, we need to determine whether they should be included in the HEA's equity of access monitoring framework. In the following sections, I will summarise the international literature, describe the observations made by stakeholders and review any relevant conceptual and technical issues before formulating my recommendations in relation to each of these groups.

D.3 Mature students

International context

Most entrants to post-secondary education (84% across EU21 countries) are under 25 years of age (OECD, 2015). In recent years, as I noted earlier, the share of mature students entering HE has been declining in the developed countries, including the UK and Ireland (G. Elliott, 2018). In the USA, a drop of nearly 50% was recorded in the years after the Great Recession (2010-) in the number of mature students (25 years of age or older) enrolling for undergraduate courses (Kelchen, 2024).

In Australia, students are considered mature if they are 21 years of age (Andrewartha et al., 2023), although other countries use different thresholds (such as 23, 24 or 25 years of age). Mature students often have childcare commitments, which creates obstacles to participation due to the timing of lectures, a lack of affordable childcare facilities near universities and policies that prohibit or discourage students from bringing their children with them to their place of study (Brooks, 2020; Welsh, 2024):

"Not only are student parents absent from statistics and research literature, their invisibility is also a physical phenomenon as they and their children are rarely evident on HE campuses. Where nurseries exist, they are often tucked away and known only to those who use them. Pregnancies are hidden behind desks, and rooms for breastfeeding or baby-changing facilities are often non-existent."

(Welsh, 2024, p. 583)

Stakeholder perspectives on the Irish context

During the consultation, the following comments were made in relation to students entering HE via the Further Education system, who are more likely to be mature students:

"And we know that a lot of disadvantaged students are supported by the FET system. There's a progression rate of around 30% from there into the higher education system – I think it's only something like 65% that go straight in from the Leaving Cert. So, we really believe that there's value in the form of education that's offered in that particular sector."

(Rebecca Jackson, Policy and Advocacy Officer, AONTAS)

Conceptual issues

Mature students are defined in Ireland as individuals who enrol in higher education at the age of 23 years or over. They do not by definition constitute a disadvantaged group, and are conceptually different from the other priority groups described in this section. There is, of course, an indirect link with educational disadvantage due to the greater incidence of vulnerable groups of all types within this category. However, this link is not constitutive of the category itself, which is heterogeneous.

It is interesting to consider how mature students relate to the broader issue of equity of access. Delayed entry/return to higher education is linked to the conditions that students experienced earlier in their lives, to the obstacles they encountered and the structural factors which influenced their educational choices. It is important to identify these inequalities, and thus to assign mature students to a priority group so that we can gain a better understanding of their impact on participation rates and their role in widening participation. Although these more indirect pathways into HE do not compensate for existing inequalities, they are nevertheless important.

The adoption of upper and lower age thresholds when calculating participation rates for priority groups implies that mature students must be treated separately, as I mentioned earlier. When doing so, it is necessary to assign them to both an age cohort and a priority group (where relevant), so that the contribution of mature students to achieving greater equity of access can be assessed without running the risk of confounding; otherwise, a surge in enrolment among mature students could be mistaken for an increase in the overall participation rate among young people.

HE participation rates are often calculated for individuals aged 18-24 years, which takes into account the possibility of short interruptions and delays during and after secondary school, as a result of migration, as well as the possibility that a student may change course or participate in a foundation course. When studying mature students, it makes sense to use 5-year age cohorts such as 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40 and over. These categories could easily be adapted to take account of existing conventions in Ireland.

Data sources

Mature students can be identified using registration data, for example using the date of birth field in the SRS. "Second-chance" mature students who were enrolled in HE in the past but failed to complete their qualification cannot currently be identified using administrative data, although this may become possible in the future as reliable information on previous cohorts of HE entrants accumulates.

Recommendations

I recommend assigning mature students to an age cohort as well as one of the three main priority groups (socio-economic disadvantage, Irish Traveller or member of the Roma community, student with a disability). Data on mature students should be reported separately, as long as the minimum threshold of 100 students can be respected. If deemed appropriate, targets could be set for mature students from disadvantaged backgrounds, those who are Travellers or members of the Roma people or have requested support under the FSD.

D.4 Having experience of the care system

International context

Data from the UK (2020/2021) suggest that care-experienced students are three times less likely to enrol at HE than other people (Child & Marvell, 2024). Gorard, Boliver & Siddiqui (2018) discuss how this characteristic is measured in the UK:

"This indicator has a relatively simple, binary and official definition, and where known, this indicator is sent to universities with application data. However, at present the information is only self-declared by the candidate, and is otherwise unverified, and a lot of relevant data is missing or unclear. Such information is likely to yield both positive and negative misclassifications. It would be better if this data could be made available from official records to a responsible central authority."

(Gorard, Boliver & Siddiqui, 2018, p. 317)

Writing about young people in residential centres in Spain, Fernández Simo et al. (2024) provide the following overview of their ability to access HE, highlighting the difficulties inherent in the transition to HE:

"The vulnerable situation of students in protection during the school trajectory makes it difficult for them to pursue higher education. Various studies indicate that adolescents living in residential protection centers have fewer options to carry out post-compulsory training trajectories than their peers (Day et al., 2013; García-Molosa et al., 2021). The group's situation of academic exclusion is especially notable in their access to university (Jackson & Cameron, 2012), with exceptional cases in which they manage to pursue a university education (Miguelena et al., 2018), although they present worse academic evolution when they manage to access the university (Day et al., 2013)."

(Fernández Simo et al., 2024, p. 222)

In the Australian context, out-of-home care for young people refers to those in relative/kinship care, foster care, residential care or group homes. These individuals face a range of educational challenges from an early age, that may include placement instability and disrupted schooling. They are generally treated as a subset of socio-economically disadvantaged students, who are targeted under the existing framework for equity of access to HE. Admission bonus points and pathway programmes have proved useful in encouraging participation in HE, but the incentives and supports available are considered inadequate (Harvey, Burnheim, et al., 2016).

Stakeholder perspectives on the Irish context

A HEI representative made the following comment:

"So for example, in relation to people in care, now you can indicate that you're in care through the HEAR scheme and you can provide appropriate identification. But when they come into our institutions, we have no way of noting, collating or gathering that data. So I have no idea unless the student comes and tells us, and I keep the information in my little grey book of uncertain information that's never going to be discussed outside of the institution. So I don't know how many students we have in care. And nationally, we don't know how many we have in care, and we can't compare it to where we should be or what the national position is."

(HEI representative)

A Tusla representative explains that the number of care-leavers who access tertiary education is relatively high in Ireland, possibly in the region of 70% (considering both FE and HE), primarily due to the level of financial support that is available, as well as after-care services:

"The Tusla after-care services are there to provide different services, one being a support system to young people who need guidance and support, and also a financial structure to allow them the means to progress in their education. To be eligible for after-care, a young person must be in care for a year between their 13th and 18th birthday. In addition, if they are in care for 12 months between their 17th and 18th birthday until they age out of the care system, then they are also eligible for financial support in the form of an Aftercare allowance. That means that they are provided with an allowance to meet their board, keep and educational costs.

The Aftercare allowance is €300 a week ... if a student is in a course that's approved under SUSI, they're also eligible and entitled to SUSI support. They are generally eligible for SUSI at the special rate, which is the highest rate of SUSI support. Therefore combined, the after-care allowance and the SUSI maintenance grant should enable the young person to fully meet their financial needs to complete their education."

(Tusla representative)

Just under half of young care-leavers continue to live with their foster carers after they reach 18 years of age, and after they have transitioned from school to third-level education. In this case, the after-care allowance is paid directly to the foster family, and the resulting stability of care tends to contribute to better educational and developmental outcomes. There are also young people with care experience who are not entitled to after-care services because they returned home to their families before their 16th birthday, but there are no reliable data on this group, particularly in the context of HE:

"But certainly, the cohort who may need the most significant supports are the young people that were in residential care or move on from placements without any links or ongoing connections with their previous carers when they aged out of care. They don't necessarily have a structure of support in their lives and they are often fully reliant on the support of the state."

(Tusla representative)

At least some of these students enter HE through the HEAR and DARE schemes:

"When young people are applying to college, Aftercare services encourage them to complete the application process for the HEAR scheme or DARE, if relevant. The HEAR scheme allows young people access additional and particular supports in college by virtue of being care-experienced."

(Tusla representative)

At the present moment, there are just over 200 young people in receipt of Tusla after-care attending HE. Roughly three times this number are attending FE, which suggests that there is some scope for increasing the HE participation rate (data provided directly by Tusla).

Conceptual issues

As we noted above, priority should arguably be given to identifying individuals who were in the care of the state during the period prior to their enrolment at HE. Although some other students may have experienced the care system when they were younger, their situation is typically different from that of young people who were continuously in the care of the state during their childhood.

Because of the small numbers involved, it is arguably neither efficient nor effective to use sector-wide survey data to identify students with experience of the care system. Moreover, this is not necessary if the priority group is restricted to young people who were in the care of the state during the period prior to enrolment, as these individuals are assisted by Tusla and the number of people entering HE can be quantified using administrative data. Of course, a young person in the care of the state could end up enrolling in HE as a mature student, but this is rather rare because of the conditions that apply to financial support; the current system of subsidies creates an incentive for young people who are in care to enrol in tertiary education immediately after completing secondary school and to complete their course within the expected time.

Data sources

The most reliable and accurate source of data on people who were in the care of the state during the period immediately prior to enrolment is Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, which has responsibility for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. A representative of Tusla described the current situation in terms of data, and the possibility of identifying people with experience of the care system:

"We are currently working on capturing relevant data in every aftercare area and we are able to say how many young people open to Tusla Aftercare services are attending each university and institute. These figures are updated and made available on an annual basis. However, this data is not a complete representation of all care experienced students – only those open to Tusla Aftercare services. Further figures may be available through the HEAR scheme if applicants declare themselves as care experienced on their applications. If those figures were available and the data cross-referenced, the majority may well be those that are linked with our Aftercare services. Currently the HEAR scheme requires a letter from Tusla verifying the applicant's care history; they may not be connected to Tusla or aftercare services, but they will be relinking or reconnecting with Tusla Services in that regard."

(Tusla representative)

The IUA aims to access Tusla data in order to verify the information provided by students when applying to HE through the HEAR and DARE schemes:

"Something we're hoping to get off the ground now in the next two years is to align with Tusla's databases to try and ensure that we can verify applicants who are in the care of the state or care experienced. At the moment, an applicant applies to the HEAR scheme and they tick a box to say they're in the care of the state and they get a letter from Tusla ... We wish we would be able to take the application burden off the student and off the TUSLA practitioners and instead just have it be data-based."

(Daniel McFarlane, Head of Access, Irish Universities Association)

Recommendations

I recommend monitoring the share of people in care who make the transition to higher education. Participation rates should be calculated in relation to the number of people in care who complete secondary school and then obtain a qualification which enables them to attend HE using the normal enrolment procedures (CAO/HEAR). Given the small number of people in this category, I do not recommend setting targets. I recommend requesting aggregate data from Tusla, broken down by type of disability (where relevant) and ethnic group (primarily Travellers/Roma). Although it would technically be possible to obtain individual-level data, this does not appear to be warranted given the small number of students involved.

D.5 Having experience of the criminal justice system

International context

Johnson, Alvarado & Rosinger (2021) describe the lengthy struggles that took place in the USA to “ban the box”, that is to prevent employers and HEIs from asking about criminal history in the context of recruitment. This policy has been implemented in many states and cities, and was endorsed by the Department of Education under the Obama administration. These authors provide the following description of the campaign:

“The campaign grew out of concerns regarding the growing number (roughly 80%) of postsecondary institutions that consider criminal history in making admissions decisions (Evans et al., 2019), and aims to ensure that college admissions processes do not deter potentially qualified students from applying and enrolling because of their criminal record.”

(R. M. Johnson et al., 2021)

Stakeholder perspectives on the Irish context

Stakeholders had no observations in relation to this topic.

Conceptual issues

This category could not be measured reliably using a survey questionnaire due to the effects of stigmatisation and fear. Societal norms tend to penalise individuals who have experience of the criminal justice system, and this phenomenon would discourage students in this category from providing information to their HEI. Moreover, the Data Protection Commission would likely refuse permission to collect such sensitive data under the terms of GDPR.

Data sources

I do not believe that access to such sensitive data would be possible for the HEA under the current legislation.

Recommendations

I do not recommend pursuing the procurement or collection of data on this issue. The international experience provides no precedents in relation to using data on experience of the criminal justice system to widen participation.

D.6 Having experienced homelessness

International context

In the USA, between 1.6 and 2.8 million young people run away from home or are forced to leave their home each year (Crutchfield et al., 2016). Students who wish to apply for financial aid to enter HE in the USA have to provide financial information relating to their parents/guardians, which is often difficult, and it can also be complicated for young people who are outside the formal shelter system to demonstrate that they are actually homeless.

Stakeholder perspectives on the Irish context

Stakeholders made no specific observations in relation to this issue.

Conceptual issues

This category could not be measured reliably using a survey questionnaire due to the effects of stigmatisation. Societal norms and stereotypes associate homelessness with negative characteristics, and this would arguably discourage students in this category from providing information on their personal experiences. Moreover, the Data Protection Commission would likely refuse permission to collect such sensitive data under the terms of GDPR.

Data sources

I have not been able to identify any reliable sources of data on people who have experienced homelessness that could be used to monitor this group. Although data on people accessing emergency accommodation are recorded by various organisations, there are other forms of homelessness which are not recorded in the existing registries.

Recommendations

I do not recommend pursuing the procurement or collection of data on this issue. The international experience provides no precedents in relation to using data on homelessness to widen participation.

D.7 Being a lone or teen parent

International context

Byrne & Murray (2017) provide an overview of supports and barriers relating to lone parents and HE. They note that lone-parent families account for just over one fifth of all families with children under 15, pointing out that it is not currently possible to provide a statistical portrait of HE enrolment trends for this group. They recommend enhancing data sharing agreements between the HEA and Government Departments in order to develop a more effective evidence base for analysing the HE participation of lone parents.

Stakeholder perspectives on the Irish context

This topic was mentioned during the consultation by an advocacy group:

"I think in the last data I saw for 2020-2021, 2% of new entrants identified as a parent, and of those 23% were lone parents. So we had about 200 lone parents in the entire system, you know. The institutions themselves don't know that, so it should be part of a system ... There has to be a way of being able to give them the information, and to feel safe and confident in terms of relaying that information."

(One Family representative)

Conceptual issues

Young people who grow up in families headed by a lone parent (usually the mother) are particularly exposed to educational disadvantage. The mechanisms involved cut across several spheres and have been the subject of numerous studies. In the past, the attention of policy-makers in Ireland was focused on improving outcomes for children and young people from lone parent families. In the 2022 NAP, however, the emphasis is shifted to the parents, who are identified as a possible priority group for initiatives to improve equity of access.

There is a strong correlation between area-level socio-economic disadvantage and the incidence of lone parent families, which is why the Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas treats this variable as an indicator of disadvantage. There is evidence that young people who grow up in lone parent families are exposed to even greater risks than those who grow up in two-parent families that experience long-term unemployment or low wages. From this perspective, initiatives that seek to enhance the skills of all members of these families have a solid rationale, and it makes sense to focus on both the parent (by age group) and their children (when they reach the appropriate age for attending HE).

While high rates of lone parent families are observed in deprived urban areas where there are large amounts of social housing and widespread unemployment, it is also evident that the incidence of one parent families is increasing throughout society as a result of changes such as increases in the percentage of children born outside marriage and higher rates of separation/divorce. It is therefore important to be aware that not all lone parent families are disadvantaged in educational or socio-economic terms.

It is challenging to identify disadvantaged lone parents due to the heterogeneity of this category and due to the possibility of changes taking place over time in their status and financial situation. For example, the composition of the family unit may change from year to year, and significant variations are possible in the socio-economic position of the head of household. Within the age cohort 18-24, the incidence of lone parents attending HE is low, and the use of a single wave of survey data to measure their incidence within the entire population of HE students would not be efficient or effective. As a representative of One Family pointed out, lone parents are less likely to answer the EAS, and students are not captured at all if they become lone parents during their time in HE.

Data sources

Using the available census data, it is not possible to determine the number of lone parents who completed secondary education, broken down by age. This makes it impossible to establish an age-specific population parity rate for this group. It would, at least in theory, be possible to identify lone parents using benefits data from the Department of Social Protection. The integration of benefits data within the CSO Educational Longitudinal Database provides an opportunity to obtain estimates, and it may be helpful to analyse the 2022 census data to determine the distribution of lone parents and their children, by age group and educational attainments. The issue of teen parents could also be studied in this context. This would help to overcome the difficulty that welfare recipients are only entitled to the One Parent Family payment until their youngest child is 7 years of age.

Recommendations

The existing evidence supports the need to target lone parents and their families within the context of policies and initiatives to widen participation in HE. It is not currently possible to identify young people who grew up in lone parent families and are at risk of educational disadvantage within this sector. However, this may become possible in the future as the availability of high-quality administrative data covering extended periods of time improves. Similarly, it is not possible using published data to estimate the number of lone parents who have completed secondary education and could potentially enrol at HE. Additional research is required and additional progress must be made before the HEA can develop the capacity to monitor the participation of lone parents within HE.

D.8 Being a carer

International context

Taylor et al. (2023) describe support services for Australian HE students who are carers, noting that these were developed only recently:

"The most prominent feature of carer support was the availability of academic plans, also often given to students with a disability. Upon registration, this features an impact statement and 'reasonable adjustments' such as automatic assessment extensions, the ability to re-sit exams that conflict with their schedule."

(Taylor et al., 2023)

Stakeholder perspectives on the Irish context

This issue was mentioned by a few stakeholders during the consultation for this project, as the following extract illustrates:

"So you may have a disability, you may also have other challenges, and you may have multiple disabilities, or you may have a social disadvantage as well as a disability, or you may have caring responsibilities or whatever. So it's understanding the nuance of the people coming in and their situations in order to provide the best supports you can."

(HEI representative)

Conceptual issues

The conceptual issues involved in the identification of people with a significant care burden are rather complex. These challenges include the heterogeneity of the category, the difficulties involved in identifying carers using existing sources of data and the likelihood of changes over time in the nature and extent of care responsibilities.

Data sources

The 2022 census of population included a question on the provision of care, with unpaid carers being classified by gender, age, number of hours of care provided, type of household, area of residence, marital status and labour market position. The question was phrased as follows:

23. Do you provide regular unpaid personal help or support to a family member, neighbour or friend with a long-term illness, health issue, an issue related to old age or disability?

1 Yes 2 No

If 'Yes', for how many hours per week?

Among young people aged 15-24 years³², 4,195 were providing 15 hours or more of unpaid help per week, of whom 2,559 were providing 29 hours or more. Out of this overall figure, 1,526 were at work, 179 were unemployed and 2,079 were studying³³.

This suggests that even a relatively large care burden (in terms of hours of unpaid help) does not prevent young people from participating in education and employment. In terms of equity of access, the scope for increasing participation in HE would be confined to a share of the 1,705 people aged 15-24 who are at work or unemployed, although some of these may have already completed a third-level qualification or be too young to enrol at HE. There are ongoing research projects on this topic which will provide further estimates and insights in the near future.

Recommendations

The available data do not support the hypothesis that a large care burden is currently preventing a significant number of young people in Ireland from accessing HE. It is possible that this burden is interfering with the ability of some students to complete their studies within the allotted timeframe. Given the relatively small number of people involved, targeted forms of support would be an appropriate response, including providing information about part-time and flexible forms of study.

32 It is not possible to focus specifically on people aged 18-24 years of age.

33 2022 census of population consulted via the CSO Open Data Platform at <https://data.cso.ie/> (consulted 2 April 2025).

D.9 Being a migrant, a refugee or belonging to an ethnic minority

International context

It is only in recent years that HEIs and governments have started to collect data systematically on ethnic groups, and in many jurisdictions there is still no information on students with a migrant background, those with refugee status or who come from a specific ethnic minority. In the USA, it was only from the 2010–2011 academic year onwards that HEIs were obliged to provide systematic and complete data on ethnicity using the following categories: American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian American; Black or African American; Hispanic; Native Hawaiian; Other Pacific Islander; White; Two or More Races. From the late 1960s, affirmative action was used as a way of counteracting racial discrimination, accounting for the way in which colonialism had limited the opportunities of African Americans (J. R. Ford et al., 2023). However, a series of Supreme Court judgements have eroded the legal basis of these measures, provoking a shift towards “diversity” as the main aim of admissions:

“... diversity by itself, totally severed from any corrective justice considerations, cannot explain why race should be privileged among other forms of diversity – ethnicity, religion, economic background, political ideology, urban versus rural background, international versus native, sexual orientation, gender expression, and so on – and thus cannot ground specifically race-based affirmative action ... A different and less-noted problem with a pure diversity rationale for racial diversity is that it fails to take account of important ethnic differentiation within the ‘black’ group.”

(Blum, 2016, p. 235)

The arrival of relatively affluent black immigrants in the USA in recent decades illustrates this risk, as these individuals often do not fit the profile of long-standing disadvantage associated with the African American population in the USA, being more frequently drawn from the affluent middle and upper classes of developing countries (Cokley et al., 2016). An analysis of census data for the USA shows that the number of black immigrants more than quadrupled between 1980 and 2013, reaching 8.7% of the black population (Cokley et al., 2016, p. 45). Foreign-born Black people in the USA are now significantly over-represented at the most selective institutions, where they make up more than 40% of the Black population (Cokley et al., 2016, p. 45). African immigrants have the highest probability of achieving a college degree among all ethnic groups, because on average they come from relatively affluent socio-economic backgrounds (Cokley et al., 2016).

The main objection that has been raised to the use of ethnic minorities as a priority group for access to HE is thus of an empirical nature, as Gorard, Boliver & Siddiqui (2018, pp. 314–315) observe:

"It is not clear that being a recent immigrant is necessarily an indication of educational or social disadvantage. A student from an English-speaking professional family moving to the UK from the US, for example, would not be considered disadvantaged but would be a recent immigrant ... A recent refugee or asylum seeker is, ceteris paribus, more likely to be disadvantaged than a recent immigrant more generally, but this is still not necessarily so ... Our review found no large-scale or authoritative evidence relevant to this indicator ... Some studies suggest that ethnicity has only a minor link to educational outcomes once other factors such as SES are accounted for (Gorard and See 2013), and others suggest that some apparently disadvantaged groups actually do better in some respects after controlling for social class and other factors"

(Van Dorn et al. 2006).

Boliver (2018) makes a similar point, noting that young people from ethnic minority backgrounds in the UK have enrolment rates for 18-19 year olds that range from 37.4% (Black Caribbean) to 75.7% (Chinese) backgrounds, compared to just 32.6% for those who define themselves as White British (2010/2011 data). Sikora, Malette & Robson (2024) attribute high rates of HE participation among East Asian migrants in Canada to the emphasis placed by their families on academic achievement as a primary means of achieving social mobility.

The number of students from ethnic minorities receiving a place at Russell Group universities increased by more than 40% between 2010 and 2015, outpacing the rate of growth for White entrants (Boliver, 2018; cf. Hemsley-Brown, 2015). Across the university sector as a whole, in 2015, the net gap in offer rates was modest in the UK, with Cambridge, the LSE and other universities having a net gap of 0, suggesting negligible discrimination within the admissions process. With reference to the Australian context, Mestan (2016) makes a similar point, noting that students from non-English speaking backgrounds were already over-represented in HE by 1995, and their situation further improved in subsequent years.

Researchers have shown that HE participation by ethnic minorities in developed countries is characterised by a "paradox of persistence":

"Black students have higher educational aspirations than do comparable white students. Black students also more often decide to persist in pursuing higher education, both at the point of college entry and in response to college experiences, despite having fewer academic and social resources than white students, on average."

(Ciocca Eller & DiPrete, 2018, p. 1195)

This is sometimes referred to as the “aspiration-achievement paradox” (Klein & Neugebauer, 2023), as most immigrant groups have higher aspirations than native students, after conditioning on academic achievements and socioeconomic background. This leads them to make more ambitious choices within the educational system, which compensates, at least in part, for their lower grades and achievement levels (which in some cases lead to dropping out). These authors conclude that “[a]vailable studies across Europe show that despite completing upper secondary education with, on average, lower academic achievements, immigrants are more likely to enter tertiary education due to their high aspirations ...” (Klein & Neugebauer, 2023). In Germany, for example, all immigrant groups (excluding those from North and Western Europe) enter HE with a slightly lower GPA than native students, and this gap is not explained by their socio-economic position. The differences in standardised test scores are typically quite small, less than 0.2 standard deviations, which is associated with a higher risk of non-completion (in the region of 8 percentage points).

Crul & Lelie (2020) analyse the situation of students with a migration background in Western European countries, reaching similar conclusions. They note that most of the 4 million Turkish migrants to Western Europe during the 1960s and 1970s were low-educated and were recruited to low-skilled factory jobs. They came from rural areas, and many of the women who joined their husbands after a few years had little or no schooling. However, their children have been increasingly participating in HE.

In the Randstad Area of the Netherlands, one third of degree students at Universities of Applied Science are either migrants or have parents who came to the Netherlands as migrants. In the Netherlands, it is possible to use vocational education as a stepping stone to higher education after just one year, which encourages many young people with a migrant background to enrol.

Like Ireland, many other countries have indigenous ethnic minorities which have a history of discrimination and oppression. In 2014, indigenous Australians made up 1.1% of HE students (which was about one third of the population parity rate, see Liddle 2016, p. 54), in numerical terms 13,781 individuals³⁴. Notably, their participation rate increased by a factor of nearly seven over the life of the equity programme (from 1990), due to interventions within the school system, due to the development of alternative pathways into HE and a combination of financial and social supports:

“Indigenous students were, and still are, less likely to complete secondary schooling and therefore alternative education programs which enabled participants to increase their skills prior to undertaking a full tertiary education were desirable.”

(Liddle, 2016, p. 53)

One strand of the large international literature on the HE participation of ethnic minorities and young people with a migration background deals with ways of measuring diversity. Elliott, Hawley & Rork (2024) use the Herfindahl–Hirschman concentration index to describe the diversity of undergraduates in comparison with the population of similarly aged individuals within the catchment area of each HEI. This approach is useful in contexts where HE is provided by a network of relatively small community colleges and the level of diversity is high. McLaughlin, McLaughlin & McLaughlin (2015) also provide a useful discussion of composite metrics in relation to the measurement of student diversity within HEIs.

34 The first Aboriginal Australian to graduate from an Australian university – Margaret Weir – left college in 1959 with a Diploma in Physical Education.

The 1951 Refugee Convention defines refugees as individuals who have a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”, who are entitled to protection under international law (Détourbe & Goastellec, 2018). Lambrechts (2020) describes refugees in the UK as a “super-disadvantaged” group, due to the way in which distinct forms of disadvantage combine to penalise their HE participation. From the perspective of HE, young refugees can often only access HE as international fee-paying students. Interruptions within their educational pathways, learning gaps, language difficulties, problems obtaining official documents and the cost of enrolling frequently prevent them from transitioning successfully to HE. Very few European countries (including France, Italy, UK and Germany) have a formal strategy for including refugees within HE, and HEIs are often left to deal with the difficulties that arise on their own (Berg et al., 2022). In the UK, the Office for Students added refugees as a widening participation target group in 2016, which means that universities can focus some of their outreach activities and earmark part of their budgets to support this group (Lambrechts, 2020).

In 2015-2017, there was a sharp increase in demand for HE on the part of refugees in Europe, due to the influx of migrants from Syria. Approximately one-third of refugees in Germany were estimated to have the necessary entrance qualifications and many Syrian migrants were interested in enrolling (Berg, 2021). Before any federal policies or funding were put in place, international offices at German universities noticed an increase in refugees seeking information and student organisations started providing informal support. In a short period of time, thanks to a wide public consensus and the availability of dedicated funding, these structures were formalised to create new refugee-oriented services.

The situation of refugees has a number of parallels with that of undocumented migrants, as far as participation in HE is concerned. In the USA, just under 100,000 undocumented students graduate from high school each year (Chavarria, 2024; Groce & Johnson, 2021; Peña, 2021). In the absence of targeted policies, these students are treated as international students and are deterred from enrolling at HE due to high tuition fees and inability to access loans or grants (although in some states, these obstacles have been removed or reduced). Due to their large numbers, and relatively high educational aspirations, this group plays an important role in debates about widening participation in the USA:

“Undocumented and/or immigrant youth often maintain persistent aspirations for high achievement rooted in collective commitments – be it family obligations or protective notions of ethno-racial identity that can help propel higher educational attainment ... For immigrant youth, there are added dimensions to familial obligation – what Smith refers to as the immigrant bargain, where the children of immigrants succeed in school to make good on the parental sacrifice of migration, stigmatized or undocumented migration, and often low-wage and low status work in the US ...”

(Flores, 2023)

Stakeholder perspectives on the Irish context

Stakeholders had no specific recommendations on this topic.

Conceptual issues

The individuals who fall within this category include (1) refugees; (2) other migrants; and (3) members of ethnic minorities (excluding Irish Travellers and Roma people, who are given separate consideration in the second main priority group). The asylum process took an average of about 18 months in 2024 (first decision), with a possible appeal taking 8-9 months³⁵. After this period, people with refugee status, subsidiary protection or humanitarian leave to remain are entitled to free third-level education if they have been living in Ireland for 3 years or more (in the last 5), and they may also be entitled to a maintenance grant. Most people in the second category have a migration background, having arrived in Ireland as young children, with their parents, or were born in Ireland to parents who had migrated from another country.

Being a migrant or having parents who arrived in Ireland as refugees or migrants does not necessarily lead people to experience educational disadvantage. As I showed above, the available data at international level show that after controlling for socio-economic position, migrants and their children tend to have relatively high educational aspirations and high attainments, at least once initial language difficulties have been overcome. Indigenous minorities which experienced systematic oppression and discrimination are in a different situation and tend to have much poorer educational experiences and attainments.

People in the international protection system are, of course, in a different situation from indigenous minorities and economic migrants due to the way in which their legal status impacts on their ability to access HE. However, this phase is relatively short and most of those who obtain refugee status (or a related form of protection or leave to stay) acquire the ability to participate in higher education within a few years of arrival in Ireland.

Data sources

This is one of the largest of the new groups mentioned in the 2022 NAP, and we must therefore be careful to consider all implications of including it within the monitoring framework. The census of population includes questions about citizenship and ethnic group, which do not permit the identification of refugees or asylum seekers. The IPO collects and records data on asylum-seekers, but does not gather data on HE participation. A total of 18,651 people applied for asylum in Ireland in 2024, compared to 13,264 people in 2023 and a similar figure was recorded in 2022³⁶. All applications are handled by the International Protection Office, which issued a total of 8,442 decisions in the same year, of which roughly 38% were positive³⁷.

Programmes which facilitate access to HE for asylum seekers who are awaiting a decision on their application have a clear rationale, despite the considerable difficulties that must be tackled, although it would be difficult to estimate participation rates. SUSI runs an International Protection Support Scheme for people who are in direct provision and have not received leave to stay, but the numbers in this group are small (about 100 applicants, and only a small number receive a grant³⁸). So although this would not facilitate target-setting and would not provide an estimate of the number of people who are in this group, basic monitoring could be carried out by quantifying the number of applicants and grant-holders in the International Protection Support Scheme.

36 See <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/social-affairs/2025/01/27/ireland-saw-record-number-of-asylum-applicants-in-2024/> (Irish Times, Monday January 27, 2025).

37 See the AIDA country report for Ireland in 2023, available from: https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/AIDA-IE_2023-Update.pdf (accessed 6 March 2025).

38 Information provided by Philip Connolly, Director of Services, SUSI.

39 Data downloaded from the CSO Open Data Platform at <https://data.cso.ie/>

For other individuals with a migration background, there are two sources of data that can be used for monitoring: the census of population and the P-POD database. The basic approach that I recommend is similar to that outlined earlier in relation to Travellers and Roma people. According to the 2022 Irish census of population, there are 17,298 Black people aged 15-24 years, 4,697 Chinese, 9,303 Indians/Pakistanis/Bangladeshis, 7,308 other Asians, 3,621 Arabs, and 10,004 people of mixed ethnicity in Ireland³⁹. With a total population of 630,901 people in this age group, the overall incidence of ethnic minorities is 8.3% (without considering Irish Travellers or Roma).

In much the same way as Irish Travellers and Roma people, it would be possible to identify members of these groups using the POD and P-POD databases, and these data could be integrated within the SRS using PPS numbers. This source is administered directly by the Department of Education and by using the same procedures for monitoring Travellers, Roma and other ethnic minorities, considerable economies of scale can be achieved. This would not include migrants who arrived after completing secondary school in a different country, so both numerator and denominator would be a little below the true figures.

Recommendations

I recommend monitoring access rates for ethnic minorities using data from the POD and P-POD databases, adopting the same procedures described previously for Irish Travellers and Roma people. This would yield reliable information on enrolment rates and transitions from secondary school to HE. I do not recommend setting targets, although monitoring is arguably warranted, with a view to assessing whether any specific ethnic/migration groups have low rates of participation. This will provide a better understanding of how participation rates are likely to evolve in the future, in the context of an increasingly multicultural Irish society. For the reasons set out in the previous section, I do not recommend attempting to quantify the number of asylum-seekers in HE in Ireland, although aggregate data on those accessing grants could be acquired from SUSI and reported at national level.

D.10 Being a survivor of domestic violence

International context

I was not able to identify any precedents in the international literature relating to monitoring or measuring access to HE by survivors of domestic violence.

Stakeholder perspectives on the Irish context

Participants suggested that if prospective students were to become aware that they could be asked about this aspect of their lives during enrolment, this could discourage them from applying to HE:

"So even being able to identify particular students is a real challenge. I think there's also ethical considerations about asking students to disclose things like, you know, survivors of domestic abuse or having been in the care system. It actually, I think, retraumatises some of the students when we have those conversations. So trying to build a full picture of that cohort is really, really challenging."

(HEI representative)

Conceptual issues

This category could not be measured reliably using a survey questionnaire due to the effects of stigmatisation and fear. Societal norms, legal consequences and psychological harm have the effect of discouraging people who have experienced domestic violence from declaring this in public. This would discourage any students in this situation from providing accurate information on their experiences to a HEI or in the context of a survey. Moreover, the Data Protection Commission would be likely to refuse permission for the collection of such sensitive data under the terms of GDPR as there would be a risk of retraumatising survivors simply by asking them to respond to a questionnaire.

Data sources

I have not been able to identify any reliable sources of data on people who have experienced domestic violence.

Recommendations

I do not recommend pursuing the procurement or collection of data on this issue. The international experience provides no precedents in relation to using data on people who have survived domestic violence in the context of policies to widen participation.

8

Proposals for
improving the
evidence base
available to the HEA

One of the objectives of this Data Plan is to create greater clarity in relation to the collection, reporting and analysis of statistical data within the context of the HEA monitoring framework, and to expand its coverage. Many HEI representatives who participated in the consultation for this project emphasised the way in which ambiguities within existing definitions and mechanisms for data collection have given rise to differences at the local level:

"My experience of those institutions, despite the fact that we have a national data plan or framework, is that every institution had a lack of clarity around data definitions. Every institution was gathering data differently using different definitions, and there was no way for us to collate that data even into a coherent regional picture, not least a national picture."

(HEI representative)

"We now have priority groups and targets without any baseline data, without clarity of data definitions in some of the areas. And I suppose it becomes so, so broad on so many different levels that it's unworkable at the moment. And what I consider ... I think we're all collecting numbers that are apples, oranges and bananas, and we're putting them into a fruit bowl, and at a national level, we're trying to collate it, and none of the data can be matched up because every institution is using different definitions."

(HEI representative)

As I indicated in previous sections of this report, a priority for the coming years is to centralise and thus standardise the analysis of access rates using matched administrative data. Additional training may be needed in order to equip HEIs with the knowledge and skills needed to interpret and use statistical data relating to priority groups, and it will also be necessary to provide HEIs with an expanded array of up-to-date aggregate data. Where HEIs are charged with administering access programmes, they are likely to require access to individual-level data as well as appropriate forms of training and support.

The following data sources are currently used by the HEA to monitor equity of access:

- (1) Pobal HP Small Area Deprivation Index;
- (2) Equal Access Survey;
- (3) Student Record System;
- (4) Fund for Students with Disabilities;
- (5) Student Assistance Fund;
- (6) Graduate Outcomes Survey.

Before discussing new sources of data, I will briefly describe the information that is available from these six sources and how data collection and analysis procedures might be improved.

(1) Pobal HP Small Area Deprivation Index

The Pobal HP Deprivation index is Ireland's primary social gradient tool, used by numerous government departments and state agencies to target resources towards the communities and social groups that are most in need. The index is updated every five years following publication of new data from the census of population. The Index relies on Small Areas, which are spatial units containing an average of around 100 households. It was developed by Trutz Haase and Jonathan Pratschke and has been funded by Pobal since 2006, with a methodology that permits comparisons to be made across four waves of census data (2006, 2011, 2016 and 2022).

The index uses a series of data points from the census to determine levels of disadvantage within Small Areas under three domains: demographic profile, social class composition and labour market situation. The indicators and dimensions are used consistently across each iteration of the index to ensure comparability. The statistical model underlying the Pobal HP Deprivation Index continues to demonstrate good fit to the observed data. This source is likely to remain central to the equity of access monitoring framework in the foreseeable future. The main difficulties mentioned by HEIs relate to access (obtaining deprivation scores for their students in a timely fashion) and the need to aggregate these scores in order to obtain reliable estimates of socio-economic composition.

(2) Equal Access Survey

Since 2007, the HEA has collected data on the characteristics of incoming students by holding an Equal Access Survey (EAS). This is an annual, voluntary set of questions asked of all first-year undergraduate students enrolling at institutions funded by the HEA. An external audit of this survey was published in 2010. Table 4 below shows the response rates for the EAS at each HEI in 2023/2024.

Table 4: Response rate to the EAS by HEI

HEI Name	Response rate
Dublin City University	25.1%
Maynooth University	36.6%
Royal College of Surgeons	37.7%
TUS Limerick	52.1%
Dundalk IT	69.2%
University of Limerick	70.5%
TU Dublin Tallaght	73.0%
SETU Carlow	73.4%
TU Dublin Blanchardstown	74.7%
ATU Galway-Mayo	75.7%
ATU Sligo	75.7%
MTU Cork	77.1%
MTU Kerry	79.4%
St. Angela's College, Sligo	80.2%
Dun Laoghaire Institute	80.4%
TUS Athlone	83.3%
ATU Donegal	83.4%
University College Cork	84.7%
University College Dublin	85.2%
TU Dublin City	86.5%
SETU Waterford	87.1%
University of Galway	95.0%
Trinity College Dublin	95.3%
Mary Immaculate College, Limerick	99.4%
National College of Art and Design	100.0%

Source: HEA, 2025

As the table shows, the response rates to the EAS are generally high, with only three universities having response rates below 50%. Designed as a census, the EAS has not managed to achieve universal coverage. At the same time, it is not a representative survey either, given that the probability of response is unknown.

During the consultation phase, HEI representatives mentioned that although they are responsible for gathering EAS data, they aren't encouraged to integrate these data within their local student record systems. HEIs are, however, being encouraged to work on improving rates of retention, completion and progression, which is difficult to accomplish without data:

"... but the EAS isn't integrated with their, with their system and I am not aware that there's any flags done separate to that. That's kind of like a stand-alone survey that's set out there. But, you know, in terms of progression, we're trying to, we're looking at our kind of, our plan going forward to start to do more monitoring of progression and completion and retention of different cohorts and so having the kind of demographic data to identify the cohort who might be at risk, you know, on entering university, as well as those who might be at risk as they go through university, you know, if they're not really engaging or attending – that's the kind of data that is useful."

(HEI representative)

Apart from the problems generated by selective response and uneven response rates, there are other difficulties with the EAS from the perspective of monitoring, particularly in relation to the measurement of small groups and the collection of data on attributes which are stigmatised within the wider society.

Survey data will undoubtedly continue to be important in guiding the development of an inclusive HE system, but I would recommend that HEA moves towards a different system, perhaps including representative surveys which focus not only on access but also on retention, inclusion, completion and progression. These surveys could feed into an expanded agenda which complements the monitoring framework.

If the EAS is maintained in its current form, then I recommend integrating it within the registration process in each HEI, rather than directing the prospective student to a different system, as this approach appears to yield a higher response rate:

"So the previous system, they'd go through a number of screens to register. One of those screens was a link to the Equal Access survey, but we couldn't embed it in the record system, so it took them off into a different screen. So most people would have just gone back, they wouldn't have filled it in, they would have gone back to the actual registration process. It's now embedded as part of the registration process, so they don't have to leave the screen they're in ... We also, I guess probably just slightly softened the language. So while we still make very clear that this is not a requirement, we highlight the importance of having a really good sense of it, both in respect of the return, but also in terms of how we deliver our supports and services to students and make sure we're meeting their needs."

(HEI representative)

However data needs are met across the HE sector in the future, it will be important to ensure that HEIs have access to data on priority groups so that they can develop and provide services and supports in an effective and efficient manner, as well as introducing appropriate policies. If the HEA moves away from using the EAS as its primary source of information on ethnicity, disability and other characteristics, and towards the use of secondary data, then it will need to consider how it can provide HEIs with aggregate data on these topics:

"I think to be able to identify students as they come in and then to know who we should be targeting our resources towards, we have to have it, and we can't do our jobs without it really."

(HEI representative)

(3) Student Record System

The current SRS was introduced in 2004 and is based on data returns which are submitted to the HEA in March and November of each year. The returns comprise individual-level records which are submitted in .xml format through a secure online portal and include students who are in the process of completing a programme and those who successfully completed a programme during the preceding academic year. The HEA is currently reviewing the fields within the SRS to take into account recent developments within the sector.

As well as the name, address, Eircode, PPS and student ID for each learner, the SRS also contains information on gender, nationality, course of enrolment, prior educational attainments and entry basis. From the latter field it is possible to obtain information that is relevant to access pathways. The student's permanent home address prior to entry is used to assign a Pobal HP Deprivation Score via geocoding to Small Area. The demographic and academic data collected by HEIs for all students and transmitted to the HEA at individual level are likely to remain central to the analysis of access in coming years.

Because of its comprehensive coverage, I recommend using the SRS as the foundation for the development of an expanded monitoring framework. As new sources of individual-level data become available, they should be integrated with the SRS and joined with student record data using PPS numbers. This will facilitate the execution of queries, the programming of dashboards and the introduction of other automated monitoring techniques such as interactive tables, graphs and maps.

(4) Fund for Students with Disabilities

The purpose of the FSD is to assist higher education institutions in ensuring that students with disabilities have the assistance and equipment that they need in order to access, participate in and successfully complete higher education. It supports students from Ireland who study on approved courses in other EU countries (and in the UK). Eligible students can receive assistance from post-leaving certificate to doctoral level during any year of study. Full-time undergraduate courses must be not less than two years in duration. Part-time undergraduate courses (Republic of Ireland only) must be not less than one year in duration. Postgraduate courses (Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland only) must be not less than one year in duration.

In order to be eligible for support under the FSD, a student must have a verifiable disability in one of the following categories: (1) Autistic Spectrum Disorder; (2) Attention Deficit Disorder; (3) Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; (4) Blind/vision impaired; (5) Deaf/hard of hearing; (6) Developmental co-ordination disorder (dyspraxia/dysgraphia); (7) Mental health condition (for example bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, clinical depression, severe anxiety, severe phobias, OCD, severe eating disorders and psychosis); (8)

Neurological condition; (9) Significant ongoing illness; (10) Physical disability/mobility; (11) Specific learning difficulties (dyslexia or dyscalculia); (12) Speech and Language Communication Disorder. They must meet certain nationality and residency criteria and have a verified need for specific supports to enable participation on their chosen course.

Students register with the disability or access office of their HEI, where personal data and relevant documents are collected and a needs assessment is carried out. Students are informed that the personal data they provide may be processed by the HEI and provided to the HEA for the purposes of coordinating, monitoring and evaluating the operation of the programme or equity of access to HE. HEIs provide the HEA with a Resource Allocation Return, which indicates the total number of eligible students supported under the fund in the academic year concerned, relevant information about their needs and details of specific supports provided.

In order to make full use of these data and to explore associations and interactions with other attributes of HE participants, I recommend that the HEA acquire these data at the individual level, including category of disability, maintaining the required level of data security. This will require a phased approach, including validation of all new procedures, which would be expected to require between 2 and 4 years to introduce.

(5) Student Assistance Fund

The Student Assistance Fund (SAF) was established in 1994 and provides financial support to full or part-time students who are experiencing financial difficulties while attending college. This fund can be used to meet expenses such as books, rent, food, medical costs, study materials, bills, essential travel and childcare and is supplementary to the SUSI grant. Part-time students who are lone parents or members of other access priority groups are encouraged to apply as ringfenced funding (€1 million per year) is provided to support these groups. Funding is administered at a local level by higher education institutions. Institutions are obliged to report aggregate data to the HEA on all recipients of the Fund, including the category of spending under which funds are awarded. In 2015, the HEA commissioned an independent review of the Student Assistance Fund. Data relating to this fund can be used to provide additional information on the requirements of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly when set against the backdrop of SUSI grant availability.

(6) Graduate Outcomes Survey

The Graduate Outcomes Survey is conducted each year involving all graduates of HEIs approximately nine months after they have completed a programme of study. For graduates who are in employment, information is collected on contracts, salaries, economic sectors and occupations, amongst other topics. The data are gathered using a survey that is defined by the HEA, but administered by HEIs and submitted as individual data (including PPS numbers). Data from this survey can thus be matched with the SRS and used to study graduate outcomes. This source is not directly relevant in terms of the equity of access monitoring system, but provides valuable information on outcomes that can complement this analysis.

Recommendations

I recommend that the following two data sources be requested by the HEA and integrated within the SRS, with a view to improving and extending the equity of access monitoring framework:

- (1) (individual-level) POD and P-POD data on retention within secondary school, DEIS status and ethnic/migration group;
- (2) (individual-level) FSD data on students with disabilities, including information on type(s) of disability;

There is already an agreement between the HEA and the Department of Education which permits the exchange of data at the individual level for monitoring purposes, which would potentially cover the POD/P-POD data if these were to be integrated directly by the Department. Existing agreements and consent forms may also enable the HEA to acquire individual-level data from HEIs on students receiving support under the FSD, including type(s) of disability and PPS number. It is important to verify that these students are identified and registered using the same criteria in all HEIs.

It would arguably be sufficient to acquire aggregate data from Tusla on young people with experience of the care system, particularly given the small numbers involved. When requesting these data, it would be appropriate to ask Tusla to also indicate the number of HE students with experience of the care system who have a relevant disability, are a member of the Traveller or Roma communities, or both. Similarly, aggregate-level data should be requested from SUSI on the number of applicants to the International Protection Support Scheme and the overall number of beneficiaries.

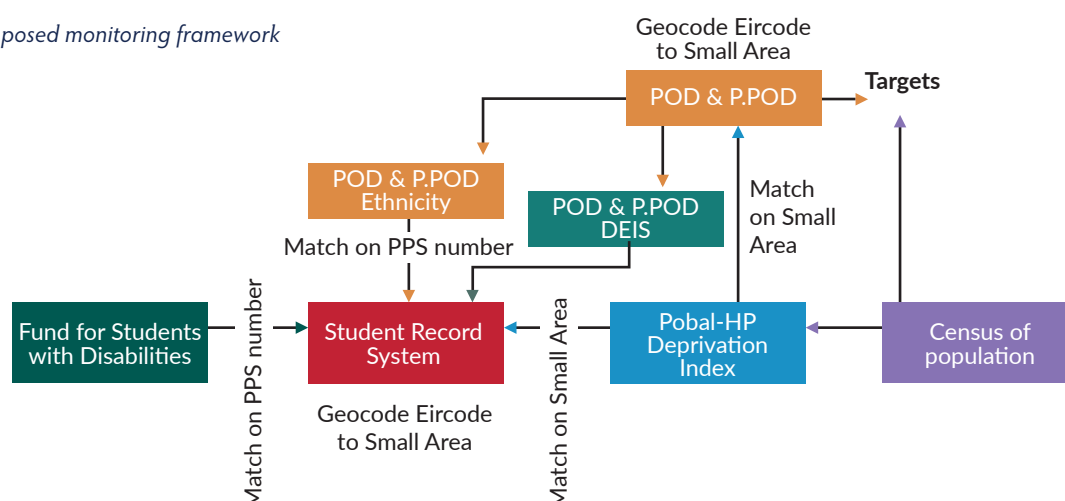
The other recommendations made in previous sections of this Data Plan are summarised below:

- 1) Provide HEIs and stakeholders with an information pack on the Pobal HP Deprivation Index and how deprivation scores can be used in the context of access policies, admissions, programme implementation and monitoring.
- 2) Speed up the process of geocoding address data, assigning deprivation scores and making data available to HEIs.
- 3) Use the Pobal Maps thresholds, in conjunction with weights if necessary, rather than equating all forms of deprivation.
- 4) Calculate the access indicators centrally, using the monitoring framework, rather than requesting aggregate data from HEIs.
- 5) Disaggregate disability by deprivation category when setting targets. This will encourage HEIs (and the HEAR and DARE schemes) to promote access by the most vulnerable groups.
- 6) Assign mature students to an age cohort and priority group (where relevant) to facilitate monitoring.
- 7) Monitor access rates for the other ethnic groups covered by the POD/P-POD databases, separately from Travellers and Roma people.

Figure 1 shows the structure of the proposed monitoring system. The core of the framework comprises the geocoded SRS records, which are matched with Pobal HP Deprivation Index scores, on the one hand, and with POD/P-POD data on ethnicity and DEIS status, on the other. Individual-level data from the FSD would be used to monitor the number of students with disabilities participating in HE.

In this way, targets can be set as required in relation to socio-economic disadvantage, Travellers/Roma people and students with disabilities, both separately and in combination, and broken down by characteristics such as gender, age and access route. If indicators of retention, progression and transition are added to the system in the future, these could also be calculated for each priority group and analysed by gender, age and access route.

Figure 1 Proposed monitoring framework



Ethical and legal issues

A number of HEIs noted that they are currently grappling with ethical and legal issues in relation to the collection of data, the definition of key variables and the expression of informed consent:

"I think then there's probably merit in using this Access Data Plan as an opportunity to look at the big challenges, the ethical challenges that all of our institutions are facing and spending an awful lot of resources and time on individually at the moment, really because I don't think there's been any sector leadership or work in terms of looking at these ethical issues around what we're doing, what we're capturing, how long we're keeping the data for, for what purposes it's intended."

(HEI representative)

In this context, it would be helpful if the HEA could provide guidance regarding data definitions, collection, storage, sharing and consent in the context of the monitoring framework and the access indicators.

Table 5 below shows the proposed data sources, all stakeholders involved, the expected timeframe for acquiring and validating the new data, as well as associated resource implications.

Table 5: Proposed new data sources, showing timeframe, stakeholders and resource implications

Data source	Timeframe	Stakeholders	Resource implications
POD/P-POD	24 months	Department of Education, HEA	Internal (departmental) resources to prepare integrated POD/P-POD dataset to HEA specifications; internal (HEA) resources to match this dataset to SRS using PPS numbers; internal (HEA) resources to evaluate coverage and coherence
Tusla	6 months	Tusla	Internal Tusla resources to prepare aggregate data on young people in after-care by age, gender, disabilities and membership of Traveller/Roma communities
FSD	48 months	HEIs, HEA	HEA to specify criteria for data collection, standardised procedures and procedures for secure transmission of individual-level data; HEIs to transmit data, including type of disability and PPS number; internal HEA resources to evaluate coverage and coherence of data, making comparisons as appropriate with existing data
SUSI	6 months	SUSI	Internal SUSI resources to prepare aggregate data on applicants to the International Protection Support Scheme and beneficiaries, by age and gender

Appendix

A

Systematic review of
the international
literature on policies
for equity of access

The literature review addressed the following research questions, with reference to the international literature:

- Q.1 How is equity of access to higher education conceptualised by researchers?*
- Q.2 What forms of exclusion from higher education have been identified in empirical research?*
- Q.3 What policies and good practices have been proposed to improve equity of access to higher education?*

To address these questions, I conducted a systematic review of the available literature that complies with the eligibility criteria, which are described below. I identified relevant documents by using a bibliographical database search strategy that incorporated four concepts. The search was carried out using a range of social science, educational and interdisciplinary databases.

Eligibility criteria

The eligibility criteria employed during the literature review are summarised in Table A1 below. The questions do not fit into a standard PICO structure, so I have used a different format. The criteria are explained in the following paragraphs.

Table A1: Eligibility criteria for studies

Population	Setting	Focal issues	Study designs	Type of documents	Other Limits
Students	Higher education	Socio-economic, ethnic and demographic characteristics	All research designs excluding: - Case reports - Non-systematic reviews - Commentaries, editorials and news stories	Journal articles, published monographs and book chapters, research reports	Studies in English Studies from Europe, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand Studies published between 2004 and 2024

Population

The review is confined to research focusing on students.

Setting

We include research relating to higher education institutions.

Focal issues

Eligibility was restricted to studies examining the exclusion of specific social groups from education, including conceptual issues (Q1), empirical findings (Q2) and policies (Q3). We will not search explicitly for concepts and theories (Q1) or for incentives, interventions, policies and good practices (Q3), but these will be identified during the data extraction phase.

Study designs

All study designs were considered potentially eligible, with the exception of:

- Case reports restricted to a single person
- Non-systematic reviews (systematic reviews will be treated as a special category when synthesising the results)
- Commentaries, editorials and news stories

Year of publication

Studies published in the period between 2014 and 2024 were eligible for inclusion.

Eligible countries and languages

Only documents published in English were considered eligible for inclusion in the evidence review, which was confined to studies that refer to Europe, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. This ensures that they relate to countries that are broadly comparable with Ireland.

Databases

I used two large bibliographical databases with extensive coverage of the relevant literature:

1. Elsevier Scopus
2. Clarivate Web of Science

Search strategy

In order to define a search strategy that is capable of identifying relevant documents while avoiding the risk of returning a large number of irrelevant ones, I adopted a four concept approach. The first concept establishes the focus on students as the subjects of the review, the second concept fixes the context (educational institutions) and the third seeks to identify studies which explore ways of including or integrating disadvantaged groups (concept 3A) or which address forms of exclusion or penalisation (concept 3B).

Key concepts

Concept 1 (subjects): Students

AND

Concept 2 (type of institution): School OR College OR University

AND

Concept 3a (inclusion): Inclusion OR Equality OR Equity OR Support OR Assistance OR Integration

OR

Concept 3b (exclusion): Exclusion OR Inequality OR Inequity OR Penalisation OR Disadvantage OR Obstacle OR Difficulty OR Discrimination

The first database, Scopus, yielded 5,452 records, while Web of Science yielded 4,691. After deduplication using Rayyan software, I obtained 7,893 unique records (4,484 duplicates were identified using Artificial Intelligence, with 165 requiring manual detection, due to the use of capital letters or multiple languages in journal titles).

The syntax used to conduct these searches is shown below:

Scopus syntax (searched 7 December 2024)

(TITLE (student AND (school* OR college* OR university OR education*) AND ((inclusion OR equality OR equity OR diversity OR access) OR (exclusion OR inequality OR inequity))) OR (KEY (student* AND (school* OR college* OR university OR education*) AND ((inclusion OR equality OR equity OR diversity OR access) OR (exclusion OR inequality OR inequity)))) AND (PUBYEAR > 2013 AND PUBYEAR < 2025) AND SUBJAREA (arts OR busi OR deci OR econ OR psyc OR soci) AND DOCTYPE (ar OR bk OR ch)*

WoS syntax (searched 7 December 2024)

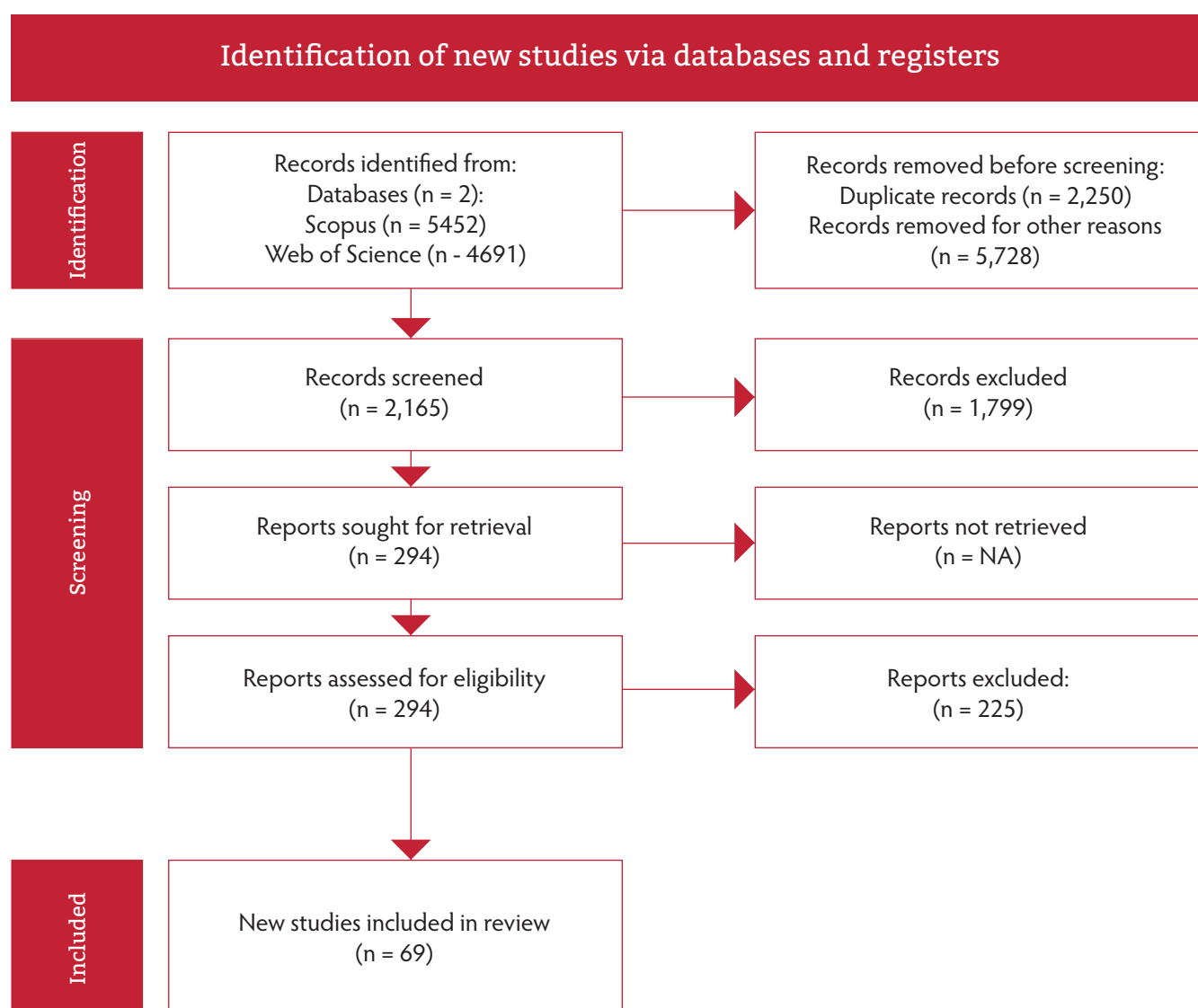
(TI=(student AND (school* OR college* OR university OR education*) AND ((inclusion OR equality OR equity OR diversity OR access) OR (exclusion OR inequality OR inequity))) OR (AK=(student* AND (school* OR college* OR university OR education*) AND ((inclusion OR equality OR equity OR diversity OR access) OR (exclusion OR inequality OR inequity)))) OR (KP=(student* AND (school* OR college* OR university OR education*) AND ((inclusion OR equality OR equity OR diversity OR access) OR (exclusion OR inequality OR inequity)))) AND PY=(2014-2025) AND SU=(Business & Economics OR Education & Educational Research OR Ethnic Studies OR Family Studies OR Psychology OR Social Issues OR Social Sciences Other Topics OR Sociology) AND DT=(Article OR Book OR Book Chapter OR Early Access OR Proceedings Paper)*

The records were initially screened in Rayyan based on their title and keywords in order to remove clearly irrelevant publications. One reviewer screened the results rapidly to identify clearly ineligible studies and to remove them from further consideration. The rejected records were archived in a separate folder so that they can be checked at any stage if necessary. The main aim during this stage was to identify studies relating to countries that were not on the inclusion list and studies that were completely unrelated to diversity and access to education. After this stage, there were 2,165 unique records left.

During the second round of screening, the included documents were screened in parallel by two researchers using Rayyan software. The researchers completed a short training session during which the exclusion and inclusion criteria were discussed in detail and only began screening the main database once they had achieved an agreement rate of at least 95%. A small number of differences in judgement were settled through discussion and closer inspection of the documents in question. This enabled us to reduce the number of potentially relevant publications to 292. Rejected studies were again conserved for future reference in a sub-folder.

A third round of screening was carried out at the full text level by the author. All 294 publications were evaluated and 69 were ultimately retained. At the end of the record selection process we produced a study selection flow diagram (see Figure A1, which contains the PRISMA flow diagram for the literature review).

Figure A1: PRISMA flow diagram



The documents selected are listed below. The extracted data were analysed in relation to the priority groups identified in the 2022 NAP, paying particular attention to the question of how specific forms of exclusion are conceptualised and measured in different countries and how these have been addressed through policies and initiatives.

Relevant publications identified using systematic literature review

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Alexander, K., & Cleland, J. (2018). Social Inclusion or Social Engineering? The Politics and Reality of Widening Access to Medicine in the UK. In M. Shah & J. McKay (Eds.), *Achieving Equity and Quality in Higher Education: Global Perspectives in an Era of Widening Participation* (pp. 143–172). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78316-1_7

Amorim, J. (2018). Mature students' access to higher education: A critical analysis of the impact of the 23+ policy in Portugal. *European Journal of Education*, 53(3), 393–413. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12283>

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Appendix

B

**Stakeholder
consultation**

I started this phase of the research by reviewing the results of the 2021 consultation on the new NAP. As part of this process, I reviewed 87 submissions by groups and 17 submissions by individuals. A set of advocacy groups were invited to participate in a new round of consultation, some of whom are members of the NAP Steering Group (all of whom were also invited to participate).

Advocacy groups

The advocacy groups which participated in the consultation for the new Data Plan include the following:

- *AHEAD*
- *AONTAS*
- *An advocacy organisation for additional educational needs*
- *EPIC*
- *An advocacy organisation for the Traveller community*
- *Mature Students Ireland*
- *NALA*
- *National Council for Special Education*
- *One Family*
- *Pavee Point*
- *QQI*

Representatives of these organisations were divided into groups based on availability and focus groups were held online using Zoom. Following a brief introduction, participants were invited to introduce themselves and to describe their organisations. After giving participants a chance to express any specific issues of particular concern, a free discussion was held, with a view to exploring issues relating to access. The focus groups were audio recorded with the permission of participants, and participants authorised the use of the extracts quoted in this report.

Institutional actors

I also consulted with representatives of the following organisations, some of which are members of the NAP Steering Group:

- *Central Statistics Office*
- *Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth*
- *Higher Education Authority*
- *Irish Universities Association*
- *SUSI*
- *TUSLA*
- *QQI*

Higher education institutions

The following institutions participated in the consultation:

- *Atlantic Technological University (ATU)*
- *Dublin City University (DCU)*
- *Maynooth University (MU)*
- *Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI)*
- *South East Technological University (SETU)*
- *Trinity College Dublin (TCD)*
- *University College Cork (UCC)*
- *University of Galway (UoG)*
- *University of Limerick (UL)*
- *Mary Immaculate College (MIC)*
- *University College Dublin (UCD)*

Institutional actors and HEIs were invited to participate in focus groups held using Zoom, which were audio recorded and transcribed. By analysing the transcripts, I was able to reconstruct the rationale for including specific priority groups within the monitoring framework and to explore a range of data-related issues. These insights are incorporated within the report under relevant sections, without naming the individuals or HEIs which made each specific point.

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