

HEA

Higher Education Authority
An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas

National Plan
for Equity of Access
to Higher Education

2008-2013



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Plean Náisiúnta
do Chothromas Rochtana
ar an Ardoideachas

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Foreword by Mr. Batt O’Keeffe, TD, Minister for Education and Science



I want to congratulate the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on producing this, the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008-2013. I know that the National Access Office of the HEA has worked closely with my Department in developing the plan and that a wide range of interests represented on its Advisory Group and the members of the authority itself have contributed an invaluable level of expertise.

This publication follows on from a previous action plan which covered the period 2005-2007 and which saw considerable success in meeting and exceeding specific targets for underrepresented groups set down by the 2001 Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education. These included increasing participation in higher education for students with disabilities, for students facing social and economic barriers and for mature students.

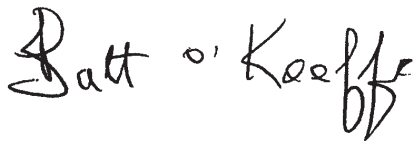
We have achieved an unprecedented expansion in educational opportunities over the last four decades and Ireland has now reached entry rates to higher education in excess of 55 per cent. Assessments of future skills needs suggest that, in order to sustain our national wellbeing into the twenty-first century, we must aim to achieve entry rates to higher education of 72 per cent by 2020. The actions outlined in this plan have the potential to contribute significantly to our pursuit of this very ambitious national skills target.

The analysis in the plan shows that the expansion of educational opportunities has not benefited all sections of Irish society equally. In common with most other countries with developed education systems, we continue to strive to tackle the complex set of social, economic and educational issues that interact to prevent those at greatest disadvantage from benefiting fully from education. The range of supports provided to schools serving disadvantaged areas under the DEIS initiative, for example, will assist in achieving higher attainment and retention at school level and facilitate greater numbers from traditionally under-represented groups to engage with and benefit from higher education into the future.

Equally, the lifelong learning agenda presents many challenges for higher education and for the education system as a whole. The analysis in this plan suggests that there is very significant potential demand for further and higher education among the adult population and particularly from those who went directly in to employment when they left school. Meeting the needs of those who wish to return to education will require integrated, joined-up approaches to the multi-dimensional needs of individuals and communities.

Together with the already increasing modularisation of courses and the provision of more flexible learning opportunities, the National Access Plan will seek to encourage the broadening of entry routes to higher education institutions to greater reflect the fundamental changes being brought about through implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications. Practical assistance will also be provided to institutions in developing and implementing access plans and in mainstreaming access in their activities and strategies.

This plan sets out the vision for higher education access policy over the next six years, concluding with a set of challenging targets, which are consistent with our National Development Plan and our Skills Strategy. I am committed to delivering ongoing improvements in the area of equity of access to higher education as resources permit and to ensuring that the substantial investments already being made at institutional, programme and individual levels deliver the greatest possible return for those who need it most.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Batt O'Keeffe". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Batt O'Keeffe, TD,
Minister for Education and Science

Preface by Michael Kelly, Chair of the HEA



Higher education is vital to Ireland's continued social and economic progress and this six-year plan presents an ambitious and challenging framework to achieve greater equity of access to higher education. The plan was developed by the National Access Office of the Higher Education Authority in partnership with the Department of Education and Science and with the guidance of an advisory group representative of a broad range of education and social partners. It benefits from close

consultation between the National Access Office and access practitioners and from active involvement and input across the executive and board of the Higher Education Authority.

The key objective of this plan is to mainstream our approaches to improving access to higher education. The mainstreaming of access will be supported by the Higher Education Authority through funding model reform to reflect the central importance of access. Within higher-education institutions, the emphasis will be on the development of institution-wide strategies to address the complex challenges at the centre of inequality in education. The autonomy of institutions to act as they consider best will support flexibility and innovation in response to existing and emerging challenges. Transparency will be achieved through multi-annual access plans which institutions will develop and implement as part of their overall strategic planning process. Together with systematic improvements in the evidence-base for higher-education policy, these developments will support best practice and are likely to enhance collaborative approaches across the sector.

We are approaching the point of full participation among the traditional groups represented in higher education. Attaining the national targets for participation of 72 percent by 2020 will require significant increases in participation by under-represented groups. While there have been very welcome improvements in participation, we continue to face substantial challenges. The key challenge now will be to develop integrated approaches to underperformance in education. Educational disadvantage is complex and multi-faceted and we need to design our responses accordingly. No agency or institution acting alone can achieve equity of access to higher education. A priority over the term of this plan will be to enhance co-operation across government departments, relevant agencies and all levels of education in order to achieve a more accessible and flexible education system.

The plan is published at a significant time for Irish higher education as we prepare for work on the development of a broader national strategy for higher education. This National Access Plan will serve as both a template for immediate action in access policy and also as a significant input into the forthcoming consultation on the

development of the broader strategic framework for Irish higher education. This will allow for refinement of the broader policy and funding framework to maximise the quality and equality of our higher-education system.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Kelly." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michael Kelly
Chair of the Higher Education Authority

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

This plan is intended as a significant contribution to the national objective of achieving greater equality of access to and participation in higher education. It follows directly from the 2005-2007 *Action Plan on Equity of Access to Higher Education* and from the 2001 *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education*. The plan benefits from the wisdom and broad-ranging expertise of the Advisory Group to the National Access Office. It has been developed in partnership with the Department of Education and Science and in close consultation with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and access practitioners in higher-education institutions. The content represents the strategic consensus on Irish higher-education access policy at this time. The plan provides an evaluation of progress, identifies challenges, outlines policy objectives and sets challenging, but realistic, targets which are consistent with the timeframe and objectives of the current National Development Plan.

We have now reached a point in our national educational development where the achievement of further growth in higher education will require continuing progress in relation to widening access. This means that the achievement of our national objectives in relation to upskilling the population will require further success in extending higher-education opportunities to groups that have traditionally been under-represented in higher education. This fact, that our economic sustainability is increasingly dependent on the learning achievements and skills of all citizens, is a very concrete illustration of the interdependence of our national social and economic objectives.

Our upskilling objectives are widely shared across all developed countries and all countries struggle with the challenges of inequality in education. Despite the enormous potential of education for counteracting inequality and poverty, education systems tend towards a reproduction of existing inequalities in the wider society. The inequalities that exist in education systems are most apparent in higher education. Countries which successfully address these challenges will have a competitive advantage into the future in terms of economic competitiveness, social inclusion and civic engagement. Ireland aims to be among them.

The evaluation of progress shows that the combined measures and investment of resources at all levels of the education system to address social exclusion and educational disadvantage is paying dividends. The national participation targets set in 2001, and endorsed in the 2005 Access Plan, have now been achieved and exceeded for students with a disability, for students facing social and economic barriers and for mature students in full-time higher education. But much more needs to be done.

The Irish education system has a number of strengths that have a positive impact on educational outcomes in general and on equality in particular. These include a comprehensive and broad second-level curriculum, a centralised and transparent admissions system to higher education and an architecture for access, transfer and progression through the National Framework of Qualifications.

The general funding environment presents challenges because overall levels of investment in Irish higher education are modest by international standards. This impacts on the extent to which student supports currently address the financial barriers to participation. In relation to the institutional funding available to promote

access, many institutions find that the demand for access-related services is growing faster than their resources permit. Other key challenges include ensuring that equality is at the heart of the mission of higher-education institutions and that the quality of our evidence-base is sufficient to inform the future development of higher-education access policy.

This National Access Plan aims to build on the considerable strengths of the Irish higher-education system and to make progress in addressing the weaknesses and challenges identified.

Challenges

The following are the key challenges identified in the consultations leading to the development of this plan:

- Access needs to be mainstreamed in the activities and strategies of institutions
- We must address the higher educational needs of those already in the workforce
- Addressing educational disadvantage and social exclusion will require joined-up strategies across education levels and across government departments
- Achieving equity of access requires additional resources both for students and institutions
- The persistently poor participation by low to middle income working families needs special attention
- We need to have special regard to the needs of recent immigrants
- The widening gap in participation between males and females requires focussed attention
- We must continue to improve our data gathering systems

Policy Objectives

The following are the stated objectives of the plan:

- The priority accorded to promoting equality in higher education will be reflected in the strategic planning and development of the Higher Education Authority and of higher-education institutions.
- The lifelong learning agenda will be progressed through the development of a broader range of entry routes, a significant expansion of part-time/flexible courses and measures to address the student support implications of lifelong learning.
- The priority accorded to promoting equality in higher education will be reflected in the allocation of public funds to higher-education institutions.
- Students will be assisted to access supports and those supports will better address the financial barriers to access and successful participation in higher education.

- The higher-education participation rates of people with disabilities will be increased through greater opportunities and supports.

Targets

The following targets are set:

- The evidence base and relevant data collection systems will be enhanced.
- Institutions will develop and implement access plans and processes for evaluation.
- A national participation rate of 72 per cent of the relevant age cohort will be achieved by 2020 (55 per cent in 2004).
- All socio-economic groups will have entry rates of at least 54 per cent by 2020 ('Non-manual' group at 27 per cent and 'Semi-skilled and unskilled manual' group at 33 per cent in 2004).
- Mature students will comprise at least 20 per cent of total full-time entrants by 2013 (13 per cent in 2006).
- Mature students will comprise 27 per cent of all (full-time and part-time) entrants by 2013 (18 per cent in 2006).
- Flexible/part-time provision will increase to 17 per cent by 2013 (7 per cent in 2006).
- Non-standard entry routes to higher education will be developed so that they account for 30 per cent of all entrants by 2013 (estimated at 24 per cent in 2006).
- Ireland will reach EU average levels for lifelong learning by 2010 and will move towards the top quartile of EU countries by 2013.
- The number of students with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities in higher education will be doubled by 2013.

Rationale



Rationale, Policy & Context

IN THIS PLAN, THE CONCEPT OF “ACCESS” IS UNDERSTOOD TO ENCOMPASS NOT ONLY ENTRY TO HIGHER EDUCATION, BUT ALSO RETENTION AND SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION.¹ THE PURSUIT OF GREATER EQUALITY EXTENDS TO ALL LEVELS OF HIGHER EDUCATION.

The evolving rationale for access

“Higher education should play a strong role in fostering social cohesion, reducing inequalities and raising the level of knowledge, skills and competences in society. Policy should therefore aim to maximise the potential of individuals in terms of their personal development and their contribution to a sustainable and democratic knowledge-based society. We share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations. We reaffirm the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background. We therefore continue our efforts to provide adequate student services, create more flexible learning pathways into and within higher education, and to widen participation at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity.”²

This recent statement from EU education ministers emphasises strong consensus on the importance of the social dimension of higher education. The pursuit of equality in higher education is central to our aspirations to create an inclusive and democratic society. Education has a key role in promoting equality of opportunity and participation in the civic, cultural and social life of a nation. Its role relates to the promotion of collective as well as personal advancement.

“People are at the heart of the knowledge society. Success in the future will be strongly dependent on growing the skills of our population.”³

The emphasis in the post-war national regeneration programmes on universal education, as opposed to the practice of earlier times of education as a preserve of an elite, has heralded an era of unprecedented technological innovation. The term ‘knowledge society’ emphasises the fact that countries can no longer rely on elites to drive innovation and economic development. Increasingly, economic sustainability will depend on the learning achievements and skills of all citizens. This has added greater urgency to our pursuit of educational opportunities for all.

At present, 50-55 per cent of 17-18 year olds enter higher education.⁴ The National

¹ This is consistent with the definition used by the European Access Network (EAN). Web-link <http://www.ean-edu.org/>

² EU Ministers of Higher Education - London Communiqué 18 May 2007, *Towards the European Higher Education Area - Responding to Challenges in a Globalised World*. <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/londonbologna/uploads/documents/LondonCommuniqufinalwithLondonlogo.pdf>

³ Foreword by An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, to the *Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation, 2006-2013* (2006), p.2

⁴ O’Connell, P., McCoy, S. & Clancy, D. (2006) *Who Went to College in 2004? A National Survey of New Entrants to Higher Education*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority

Skills Strategy has set a target of 72 per cent by 2020⁵. Continuing success in widening participation will obviously be crucial to our achievement of this key national target. The fact that widening access to higher education is now critical to our economic competitiveness is a very concrete illustration of the complementarity and interdependence of our national social and economic objectives. This interdependence was one of the central insights of the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) document, *The Developmental Welfare State* which underpins *Towards 2016*.⁶ The interdependence of social and economic policy objectives at the national level is mirrored in the interdependence of the twin educational objectives of equity and excellence in learning outcomes. In fact, the international statistics show that the most equitable education systems tend to achieve the best educational outcomes. Quality and equality are interdependent and symbiotic educational objectives.

It is important to appreciate that what we are currently attempting in terms of the development and expansion of higher-educational opportunities is unprecedented in the Irish context. It is not yet fully understood how to design and deliver education systems which successfully engage the full population to the best of their individual and collective potential over the course of their lives. It is widely recognised internationally that the achievement of further growth in higher education will require continuing successes in relation to widening access. Countries which successfully address these challenges will have an advantage into the future in terms of economic competitiveness, social inclusion and civic engagement.

The policy context

This National Access Plan aims to build on the achievements of recent years in increased participation and greater equality in higher education. The plan was drawn up by the National Access Office of the Higher Education Authority in consultation with the Department of Education and Science and with the assistance of an advisory group representative of a broad range of education and social partners.⁷

This plan covers the period 2008 to 2013 and, in this respect, it is aligned with the time-frame for the National Development Plan. It is also aligned with the National Development Plan in terms of strategic objectives and, in particular, with the high level objective of the Student Support/Third Level Access Sub-Programme which asserts that “*by 2013, students with a disability, mature students and those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including members of the Travelling Community and refugees, should have adequate opportunities to progress to higher education. Higher education institutions will pro-actively welcome and cater for a fully*

⁵ The entry rate refers to the total number of new entrants to full-time undergraduate higher education divided by the numbers in the population at the typical age of entry (17-19 years). Mature students entering higher education for the first time contribute to our performance on this indicator. This target of 72 per cent entry built upon projections published in Higher Education Authority (2004), *Review and Prioritisation of Capital Projects in the Higher Education Sector*, Appendix 4, p.68.

⁶ National Economic and Social Council, 2005. *The Developmental Welfare State*, Report no. 113.

⁷ Organisations represented on the Advisory group include, Access Made Accessible (AMA), AONTAS, Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD), Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology, Disability Advisory Workers Network (DAWN), Dublin Institute of Technology, Educational Disadvantage Committee, Irish Business Employers Confederation (IBEC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), Irish Travellers Movement, Irish Universities Association (IUA), Irish Vocational Education Association, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI), National Council for Special Education (NCSE), National Parents Council, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQA), Network of Mature Students Officers (NIMSO), Pobal, The Equality Authority, Union of Students of Ireland (USI).

diverse student population.”⁸

This plan is guided by the commitments outlined in the current partnership agreement, *Towards 2016*, namely, “investing in further support measures in the areas of further and higher education to enhance participation by those from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular: socio-economically disadvantaged school leavers, members of the Traveller community and ethnic minorities, mature students, lone parents and students with a disability. These measures will include; needs assessment, technology support, community based strategies, childcare supports and access routes”.⁹

The objectives of this plan are set within the overall mission of the Department of Education and Science, to “enable individuals to develop their full potential and to participate fully as members of society” and to provide for high quality education which will “contribute to Ireland’s social, cultural and economic development”. It contributes directly to the achievement of the Department’s objective to “promote access to higher education for under represented groups and provide flexible learning opportunities”.¹⁰

This Access Plan supports the commitment of the Higher Education Authority *Strategic Plan 2008-2010* which aims to ensure that the higher-education sector in Ireland is internationally recognised for its “contribution to social inclusion by providing the opportunity for all to participate to their full potential”.¹¹ Although this Access Plan extends to 2013 in terms of its overall objectives, a full mid-term review will be undertaken at the end of the period of the current Higher Education Authority Strategic Plan in 2010.

As well as providing a template for action on equity of access to higher education, this plan will serve as a key input into the forthcoming National Strategy for Higher Education.

Understanding educational disadvantage

“The source of educational disadvantage is rooted in differential economic, social and cultural capital of families”.¹²

Over recent decades, there has been a growing appreciation of the multi-dimensional causes and consequences of educational disadvantage as experienced by individuals, families and communities. Educational disadvantage is widely regarded as resulting from a discontinuity between the school and non-school experience of learners. This refers to the extent to which the cultural experiences of different groups in society are reflected (and validated) in the environment and curriculum of schools and educational institutions. It also relates to the extent to which different learning styles and learning needs are accommodated in the education system. Of course, this discontinuity does not occur in a vacuum but reflects the underlying societal causes of educational disadvantage.

“If we want to understand why children fail at school, we must look not simply at the education system narrowly defined. We have also to look at issues such as the persistence of poverty; the financial, psychological and community costs of

⁸ Government of Ireland (2007) *National Development Plan 2007-2013: Transforming Ireland - A Better Quality of Life for All*, p250

⁹ Government of Ireland (2006) , *Towards 2016 Ten - Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015*, p 56

¹⁰ Department of Education and Science (2008 - forthcoming), *Statement of Strategy 2008-2010*.

¹¹ Higher Education Authority, (2008), *HEA Strategic Plan 2008-2010*, p.12

¹² Clancy, P., Wall, J., (2000), *Social Background of Higher Education Entrants*, Higher Education Authority pg 52

*prolonged unemployment; the continued existence of areas in which the quality of amenities, and in some cases housing conditions themselves are poor; the differentials in the standards of healthcare available to different sections of the community; the persistence of inadequate diet and nutrition and unhealthy lifestyles among many families; and most broadly, the gross variations in the quality of life – physical and intellectual – of children from different social origins”.*¹³

Education systems function in the context of wider inequalities in society and the inequalities that we observe at the point of entry to higher education are the result of “a cumulative process of disadvantage which first manifest themselves much earlier in the educational cycle”.¹⁴

Substantial disparities in wealth and household income are an obvious source of inequalities in education. Education is the most precious commodity of the ‘knowledge society’, in which knowledge is power. Additional financial resources can translate into higher-educational achievement through differential access to pre-school education, additional private tuition, computers, books, other learning materials and a place to study. In turn, higher educational achievement confers additional financial resources in the form of higher earnings in the labour market and access to professions, such as Medicine and Law.¹⁵ Social and cultural factors can exacerbate inequalities in the extent to which individuals derive benefit from our education system. These refer to the levels of expectation and attitudes to education in different households and, ultimately, to how confidently young children engage with the education system.

One very practical factor that contributes to a child’s progress in school relates to the ability of parents to help with schoolwork. “Perhaps the most critical environmental factor impeding educational attainment and progression is the relatively low levels of educational attainment of the parents and adult relatives of many young disadvantaged people in junior and senior cycle education”.¹⁶ This shows the importance of the lifecycle framework which underpins the National Development Plan and *Towards 2016*. Accomplishing our lifelong learning goals will contribute significantly to the educational achievements of future generations.

There is also a very strong community dimension to educational disadvantage and in all countries, educational outcomes are poorest where we find concentrations of social disadvantage in particular schools and in particular housing estates.

*While educational disadvantage is often perceived as individual failure, it is typically mediated through the local community in which one lives. In this sense, poverty and disadvantage are as much about the experiences of communities as about the experiences of individuals. This implies that the elimination of educational disadvantage requires an approach which combines both individual and community development.*¹⁷

¹³ Breen, R., (1990), “Social Class, Schools and Society” published in J. Mulholland and D. Keogh (eds.) *Education in Ireland: For What and for Whom?*, Cork : Hibernian University Press, 1990, pp. 40-48

¹⁴ Clancy, P., cited in Action Group on Access to Third Level Education, 2001, Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education. Dublin pg 34

¹⁵ Patrick Clancy’s studies on access to higher education consistently noted that: “the social selectivity of higher education as a whole is complemented by further selectivity by sector and field of study...Not surprisingly those segments of the higher education system that exhibit most social selectivity are those which have the highest earning potential for graduates”. Clancy, P. (2007) ‘Education’ In: O’ Sullivan, S. (eds). *Contemporary Ireland: A Sociological Map*. Dublin: UCD Press, p.115.

¹⁶ Action Group on Access to Third Level Education, 2001, pg 31

¹⁷ Conference of Religious in Ireland (CORI) Education Commission (2001), *Learning for Life – White paper on Adult Education, An Analysis*, Dublin, CORI, p.17

Reflections on the Irish education system

Ireland compares relatively well in overall terms with other countries in the degree of equity in our educational outcomes.¹⁸ The growing body of international literature points to the importance of the structure and organisation of school systems in contributing to educational outcomes.¹⁹ Children from low income backgrounds who live in safe estates and learn in schools with a healthy social mix do remarkably well in school and have benefited greatly from the expansion of educational opportunities.²⁰ Harsh lessons have been learned in the suburbs of American and French cities about the consequences of ghettoisation. Ireland has been shown to have less social stratification between schools in general than is typical of many other developed countries.²¹ It will be important to preserve and enhance this strength of the Irish school system into the future. Insights from the research literature and developments in enrolment patterns highlight the importance of ensuring that the structure of the education system does not exacerbate inequalities in education.²²

The Irish system has a number of other characteristics that are increasingly recognised internationally for their positive impact on educational outcomes in general and equality in particular. These include a comprehensive and broad second-level curriculum and a progression system that avoids early differentiation between vocational and academic streams. Irish teenagers display some of the highest reading literacy levels in the OECD²³ (although our performance is closer to international averages in mathematical and scientific literacy). There is widespread appreciation of the importance of education and learning among the population and there is a continuing high regard for teaching as a profession in Ireland.

The Irish higher-education system has certain advantages over many competitor countries because of a number of key infrastructural elements, which we have in place or in the process of development. For example, through the Central Applications Office (CAO), Ireland operates a very objective and transparent system for the allocation of higher-education places. This gives Ireland a distinct advantage over many other countries that operate cumbersome and de-centralised admissions systems to higher-education institutions and others still that do not operate admissions systems at all. The central applications system in Ireland, which is governed by the higher-education institutions, has ensured the public and political confidence that has been so vital to the remarkable expansion of higher-education opportunities over recent decades.

The Department of Education and Science established the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) in 2000 following the enactment of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999. Thanks to the work of the NQAI, we are ahead of other EU and OECD countries in terms of the establishment of an architecture for access and progression through the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

¹⁸ For example, the PISA studies of literacy attainment among 15 year olds indicate that the overall variance in the results for Ireland is lower than in a majority of other OECD countries.

¹⁹ See Explaining Student Performance Evidence from the international PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS surveys. Danish Technological Institute (2005)

²⁰ "The social class mix (average social class) within a school has a significant impact upon pupil performance...Pupils in predominantly middle class schools tend to have higher exam scores than those in predominantly working class schools, even when their own social background is taken into account" Smyth, E. (1999), Do Schools Differ, ESRI, p.49 [emphasis added]

²¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, *Knowledge and Skills for Life: First Results from PISA 2000*. Paris: OECD

²² The importance of ensuring that the education system itself does not exacerbate inequalities was also made in a recent article on education and poverty. See Tormey, R. (2007), Education and Poverty in *Welfare Policy and Poverty*, Combat Poverty Agency/IPA, pp. 169 to 199.

²³ The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

Reform is being advanced through the adoption of modularisation, the introduction of a credit-transfer system and the development and adoption of agreed learning outcomes. These reforms aim to enhance access, transfer and progression throughout the education system within the National Framework of Qualifications. The coherent architecture for learning that is being put in place will facilitate greater transfer and progression opportunities for learners and the adoption of modularisation and credits will support greater innovation and flexibility in the design and delivery of higher education.

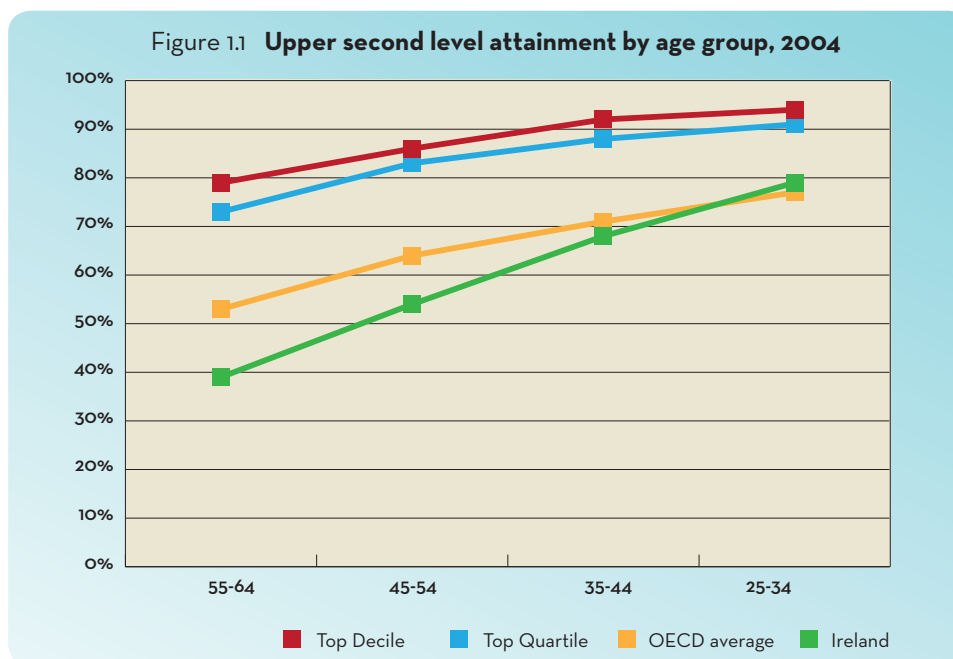
The recent introduction of the Institutes of Technology Act (2006) by the Department of Education and Science allows for a more unified policy and management framework for the higher-education sector. This will provide a solid basis for the coherent design and implementation of higher-education policy. The development, evaluation and refinement of education policy will also be greatly assisted by recent and planned improvements in administrative data collection. The fact that data collection has moved towards individualised student-record systems, which include Personal Public Service Numbers, will allow for greater understanding of progression between the various levels of the National Framework of Qualifications. It will also underpin the ongoing reform of the public funding framework for higher education in support of national priorities such as access and research.

The Programme for Government stresses that it sees education as central to achieving our goals of protecting and growing Ireland's prosperity and ensuring greater social inclusion.²⁴ All in all, the sophistication of the evolving educational infrastructure means that Ireland is well placed to break new ground, both nationally and internationally, in the pursuit of greater quality and equality in higher education. The key over the term of this National Access Plan will be to build on these strengths and to address key weaknesses.

The international context

The educational profile of countries is an increasingly significant factor in determining national economic competitiveness and, as a result, all developed countries are actively striving to improve the skills profile of their working age populations. Figure 1.1, which presents upper second-level attainment data in the international context, highlights this upward trend in educational attainment internationally over recent decades. The Irish cohort of 25-34 year olds have recently moved slightly ahead of international averages. The upper second-level attainment of Irish adults aged 35-45 is slightly below the OECD average, and the attainment of the older age cohorts is low by international standards. This is largely a consequence of our comparatively late investment in the expansion of second-level education. Across all age cohorts, Ireland lags behind the highest performing countries, although the gap has narrowed considerably over recent decades.

²⁴ Programme for Government (June 2007) p41



As the vast majority of new entrants to higher education currently come directly from second-level schools, the importance of upper secondary completion cannot be overstated in planning for the expansion of Irish higher education. Despite the very rapid expansion of second-level education from 1967 to the 1980s, between 1992 and 2004 second-level completion rates plateaued at 82 per cent.²⁵ Notwithstanding a significant increase in the take-up of apprenticeship training over this period, these second-level completion rates are out of step with the aspirations outlined in the National Development Plan and it is acknowledged in the National Skills Strategy that “improved Leaving Certificate completion rates are an essential prerequisite if Ireland is to enhance its educational profile over the medium and longer term”.²⁶ The most recent data available from the Department of Education and Science indicate that the school completion rate has begun to improve again and it is estimated that approximately 84 per cent of pupils now complete second-level education.²⁷ The current downturn in the economy will provide an opportunity for a renewed communications exercise on the value of the Leaving Certificate.

The overall patterns of attainment are broadly similar in relation to higher education, although our performance internationally is relatively stronger at this level of educational attainment. From a situation where we compared poorly among the older age cohorts, Ireland’s 25-34 year olds have recently entered the top quartile of OECD countries in terms of overall higher-educational attainment (see Figure 1.2). This comparison is based on total attainment which includes the full range of higher-education qualifications. When we examine the current Irish graduation rates by level of qualification, we find that Ireland’s position is significantly boosted by the fact that we have one of the highest outputs of graduates at NFAQ levels 6 and 7 (Higher Certificates and Ordinary Degrees).

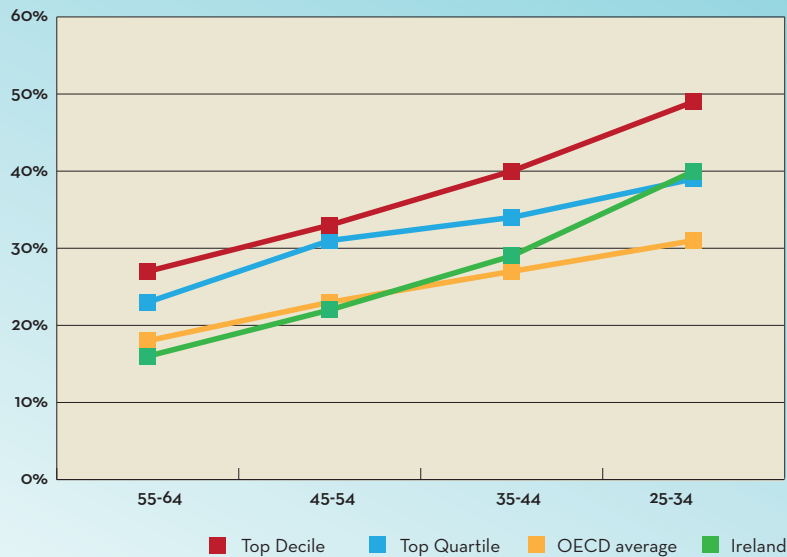
²⁵ The Irish figures used here refer to the completion of upper second-level education (NFAQ Levels 4&5) and they derive from ESRI School Leavers’ Surveys and the Department of Education’s own analysis of retention using the Post-primary Pupil Database. When we take account of young people who drop out of second-level education but who progress to NFAQ levels 4 & 5 through further education, the figures for completion of upper second-level or its equivalent (in this broader sense) are approximately 86 per cent at present for Irish 20-24 year olds (Data source: Eurostat Structural Indicator).

²⁶ Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, (2007) *Tomorrow’s Skills – Towards a National Skills Strategy*, p.95.

²⁷ Adjusted National Leaving Certificate Retention Rate, 1996-1999 cohorts, in Department of Education and Science, (2008) *Retention Rates of Pupils in second level schools* available at http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/pp_retention_1999_report.pdf

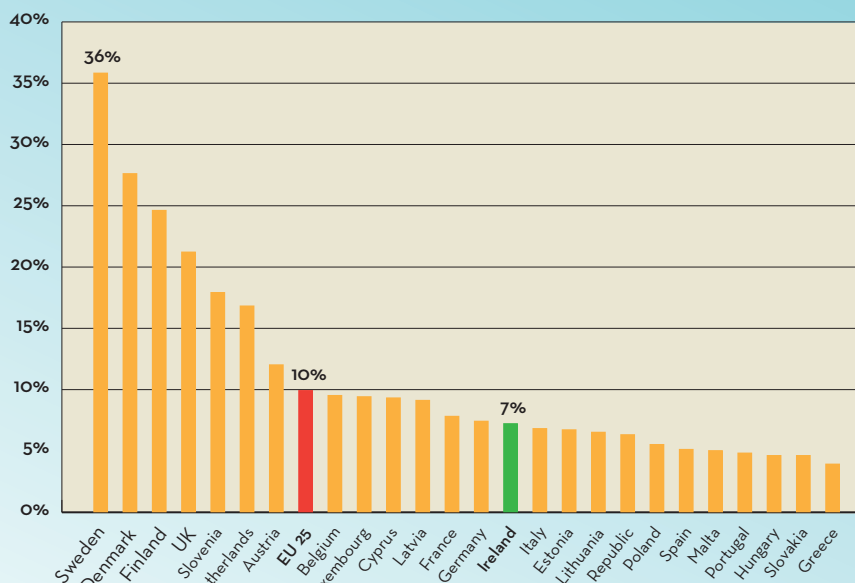
However, we are outside of the OECD top quartile in terms of graduations at NFQ levels 8 and 9 (Degrees and Masters) and we remain below average at NFQ level 10 (PhD).²⁸

Figure 1.2 **Attainment of higher education by age group, 2004**



Ireland has had only limited success in achieving participation in lifelong learning among the adult population (Fig 1.3). In 2004, the participation rate for Irish adults (aged 25-64 years) in education and training was estimated at 7 per cent. This compared with an EU(25) average of 10 per cent and participation rates of between 25 per cent and 36 per cent among our Scandinavian neighbours. As noted in the skills strategy, “Ireland’s relatively low participation rate in continuous learning is a cause for concern”.²⁹

Figure 1.3 **Participation in lifelong learning in the European Union, 2004**

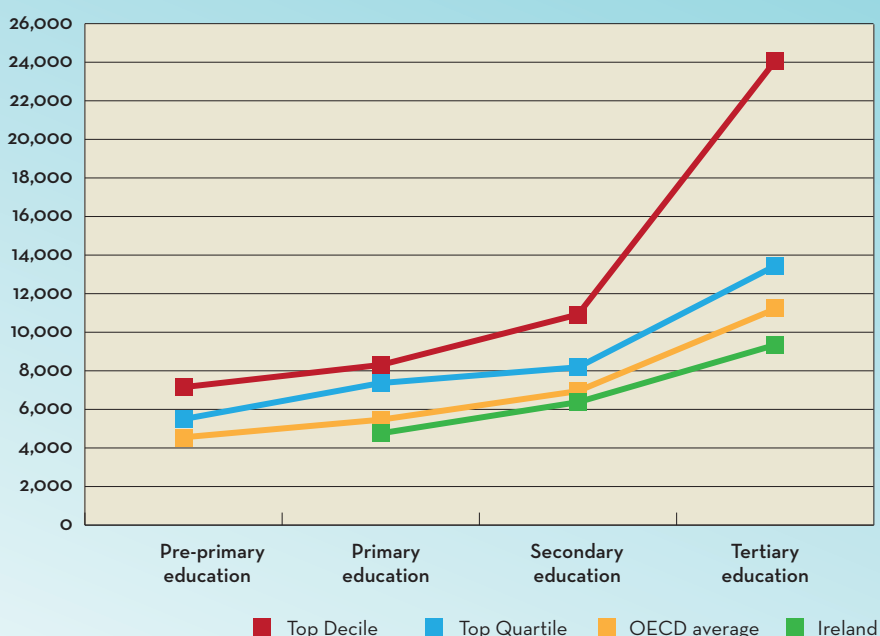


28 In terms of ranking Ireland’s output of graduates at the various levels of higher education, in 2005, we ranked 2nd (of 20 OECD countries) at NFQ levels 6 & 7, 11th (of 24) at NFQ levels 8 & 9 and 15th (of 27) at PhD level 10. See OECD (2007) Education at a Glance, Indicator A3.1, p. 67.

29 Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, *Tomorrow’s Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy*, (March, 2007) p.6

The Irish education system displays high levels of efficiency when we reflect on outcomes per unit of investment. This efficiency is evident in higher education where we have achieved an undergraduate entry rate of 55 per cent for 1.2 per cent of GDP (1 per cent of GDP in public expenditure and 0.2 per cent from private sources). While effectiveness in education is as much a consequence of coherent policy design, high-quality teaching and good administration, it is unrealistic to expect that we can develop and maintain world-class standards of teaching and learning with below average levels of investment. Figure 1.4 demonstrates that we are below international averages in terms of investment per student at all levels. In 2004, Ireland spent 4.6 per cent of our GDP on education compared to an OECD average of 5.5 per cent and an EU average of 5.4 per cent.³⁰

Figure 1.4 ³¹ Annual expenditure per student by level of education 2003
(in equivalent US\$ converted using PPPs)



³⁰ These data are sourced from OECD (2007), *Education at a Glance 2007*, Table B2.1, p. 205. The figures reported are total investment. The equivalent figures for public investment only are as follows: Ireland 4.1%, OECD 5.2% and EU 5.2%. Readers should note that comparing Irish expenditure as a percentage of GDP with other countries can be problematic because of the high proportion (20% approx.) of profits recorded in Ireland's GDP that are expatriated (primarily to the US). Therefore, it is often appropriate to use GNP or GNI to standardise expenditure income for Ireland. However, in the case of education, we must also bear in mind our demographic situation which features a comparatively very high proportion of young people. This would typically result in greater levels of investment in education and is likely to counterbalance the distorting impact of GDP in this instance.

³¹ The fact that the top decile mark for per student expenditure at tertiary level is so high is a consequence of the data reported by the US and Switzerland, which are considerably higher than equivalent data reported by other countries. 57 per cent of the US investment in higher education is from private sources. The public-private breakdown of expenditure for Switzerland is unknown (ie not published by the OECD).

Building on progress



Building on progress

Introduction

The most recent statement of national policy on equality in higher education was provided by the *Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education, Action Plan 2005-2007* which presented a roadmap of practical and attainable goals and actions under the following headings:

- Communicating the rationale as to why equity of access to higher education continues to be a policy priority
- Developing a national framework of access policies and initiatives
- Expanding routes of access, transfer and progression
- Supporting a broader range of teaching and learning practices
- Developing student and institutional funding programmes
- Establishing a more robust data collection and evaluation framework.

Progress has been made on each of the six areas. The national targets for participation have been achieved and exceeded for students with a disability, for students facing social and economic barriers and for mature students in full-time higher education.³² Key achievements of the National Access Office over the period of the plan include the administration of the Third Level Access measures of the National Development Plan, the publication of a funding review and an evaluation of access programmes. A new website www.studentfinance.ie was set up to provide comprehensive and accessible information on the range of state supports and data improvements have been initiated through the equal access data collection initiative.

Participation in higher education

*The very substantial and steady increase in the number of places at third level over the last 20 years is one of the most remarkable developments in modern Irish education . . . This expansion of third-level places was one of the critical cornerstones of our overall national economic strategy throughout the difficult 1980s and early 1990s. The availability and supply of substantial numbers of highly qualified graduates with third-level qualifications contributed significantly to Ireland's much improved economic circumstances.*³³

Comparing the educational profile of today's graduates with that of their grandparents shows remarkable improvement. Among the older generation, a half of the population finished their education at primary level and two-thirds were finished by the Junior Certificate. Only one in three got as far as the Leaving Certificate and roughly one in ten

³² These targets were set in 2001 by the Action Group on Access and endorsed within the 2005-2007 Access Plan. Action Group on Access to Third Level Education, (2001) *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education* Dublin: Stationery Office. HEA (National Access Office) (2004) *Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education. Action Plan 2005-2007* Dublin: HEA.

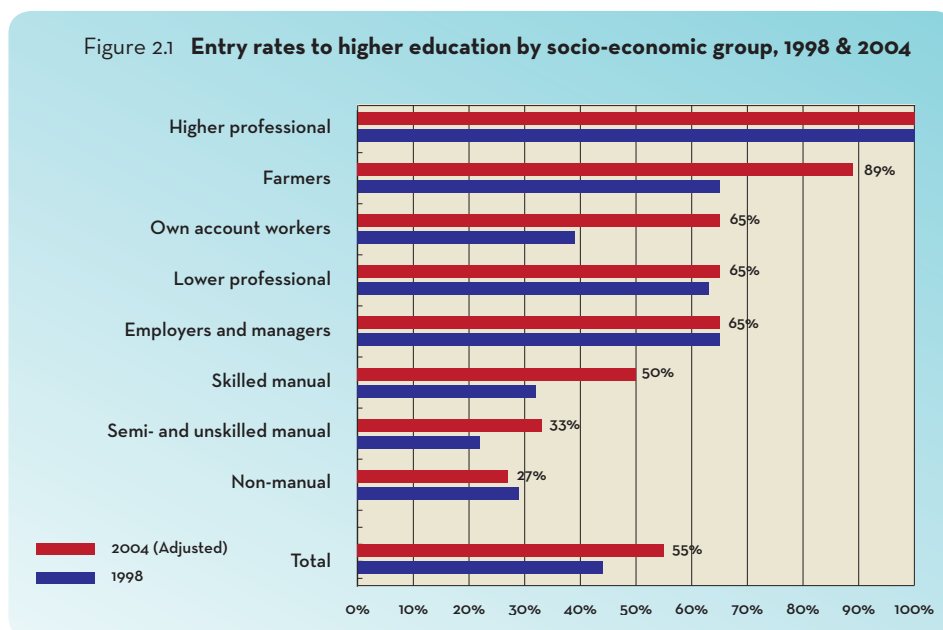
³³ Department of Education and Science, *Supporting Equity in Higher Education: A Report to the Minister for Education and Science*, 2003, p. 10.

progressed to higher education.³⁴ The rapid expansion in second-level education which occurred following the introduction of free second-level education in 1967 (a quadrupling in the number of Leaving Certificate candidates in 25 years) was followed by substantial expansion of higher education. Full-time enrolments have grown from under 41,000 in 1980 to almost 140,000 today. The entry rate ³⁵ to higher education has grown from 20 per cent (of 17-18 year olds) in 1980 to a current rate of approximately 55 per cent.³⁶

Learners from a lower socio-economic background

There are nevertheless substantial differences in the extent to which children from different socio-economic backgrounds participate in higher education. Figure 2.1 shows how entry rates to higher education vary by socio-economic background. The higher professional group reached what is effectively full participation in 1998 and have maintained that situation. Farming households, also record very high levels of participation, now approaching 90 per cent. About two-thirds of 17-18 year olds from households headed by lower professionals, employers, managers and the self-employed now enter higher education. Between 1998 and 2004, the largest increases in participation were achieved by (children of) farmers and other self-employed people (own-account workers). The participation levels of students from the traditional working classes (manual socio-economic backgrounds) also increased significantly, particularly among those from the skilled manual background. The semi-and unskilled manual group, who have been a priority target group in Irish higher-education policy, increased their participation by 10 percentage points between 1998 and 2004. An estimated one-third of children from these backgrounds now enter higher education. Two-thirds don't.

Figure 2.1 **Entry rates to higher education by socio-economic group, 1998 & 2004**

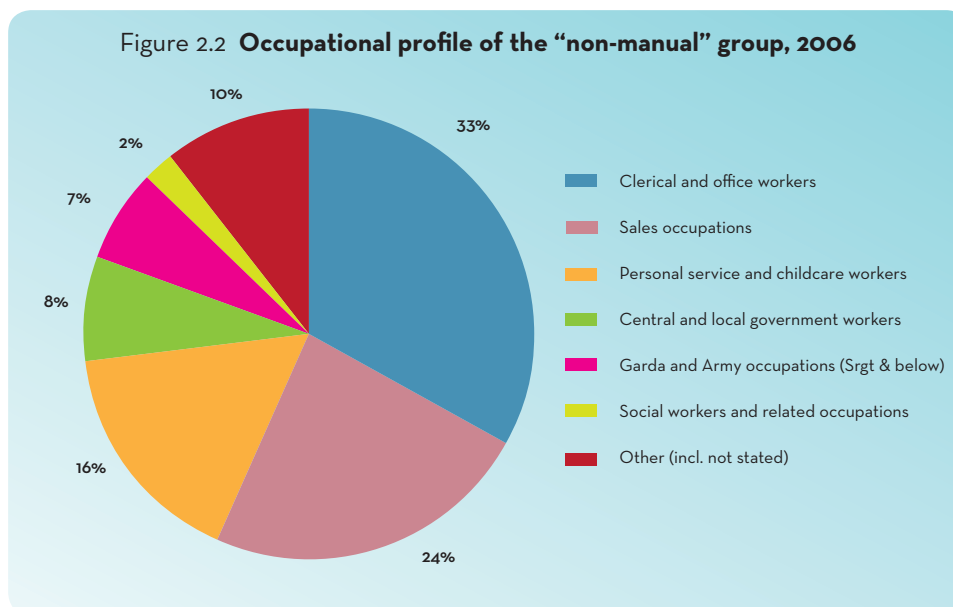


34 See O'Connor, M (2007), *Sé Sí - Gender in Irish Education*, Department of Education and Science

35 The entry rate to higher education is calculated as the total number of new entrants to higher education (including mature students), divided by the total numbers in the population at typical age of entry (17-19 year olds/3).

36 Data sources: Clancy, P., *College Entry in Focus*, Dublin: Higher Education Authority, 2001, table 25 (p. 68), as published in the *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third-Level Education*, 2001, p. 33. AND O'Connell, P., Clancy, D. and McCoy, S., *Who Went to College in 2004? A National Survey of New Entrants to Higher Education*, Dublin: Higher Education Authority, 2006, Table 3.8, p. 49.

The lowest levels of participation are now found within a socio-economic group called the “non-manual” group. As the title suggests, this group is defined more on the basis of what it is not rather than what it is. It is effectively the ‘Other’ category in the socio-economic spectrum, but it now accounts for one-fifth of all Irish households. It is a very diverse group. Figure 2.2 provides an overview of the main occupational categories that make up the non-manual group. Households headed by clerical and office workers account for one-third of this group and a further 8 per cent refer to similar workers in central and local government offices. Households headed by workers in sales occupations account for 26 per cent of the group and a further 16 per cent relates to personal services and childcare workers. Together, the above occupational groups account for four-fifths (81 per cent) of non-manual households. Remaining occupational groups include lower ranking Gardaí and soldiers (sergeant and below), social workers and related occupations.



In addition to the differences in participation between socio-economic groups, participation in higher education also varies strongly between different communities. This has been illustrated in the analysis of participation in higher education across the various postal districts of Dublin, where participation rates vary dramatically between richer and poorer parts of the city.³⁷ Educational outcomes are poorest in communities where there are concentrations of disadvantage. Therefore, while we have dealt quite well with the provision of educational opportunities to households that experience poverty in isolation, success has been more limited in improving educational outcomes for people from areas where we find concentrations of poverty and disadvantage. In a Report on Equity in Higher Education published in 2003, the Department of Education and Science noted that:

*“The worrying tendency for educational disadvantage to cluster in specific schools/ areas and to be reproduced across generations raises serious equity issues and highlights the need for effective educational interventions”.*³⁸

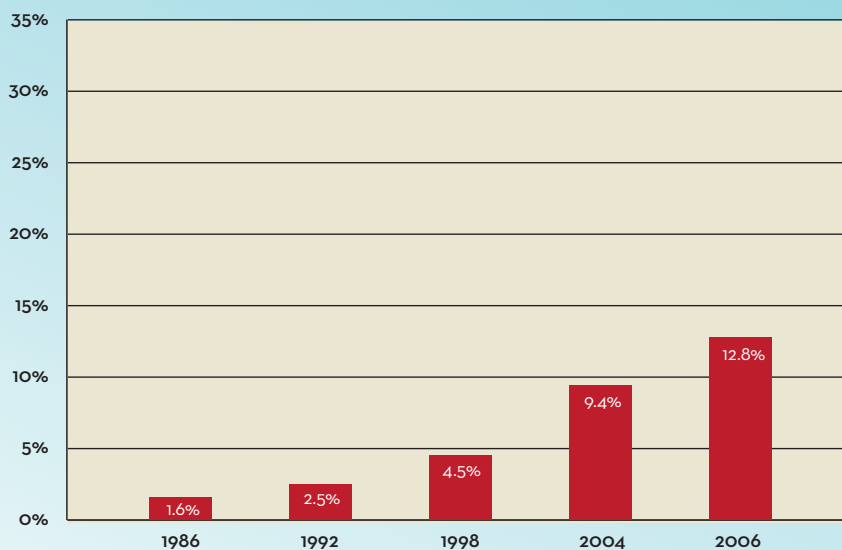
³⁷ See Clancy, P., *College Entry in Focus*, Dublin: Higher Education Authority, 2001, table 46 (pp. 120-126) AND O’Connell, P., Clancy, D. and McCoy, S., *Who Went to College in 2004? A National Survey of New Entrants to Higher Education*, Dublin: Higher Education Authority, 2006, Table 5.8, pp. 102-107.

³⁸ Department of Education and Science, *Supporting Equity in Higher Education: A Report to the Minister for Education and Science*, 2003, p. 7.

Adult learners in higher education

Ireland has made clear progress in increasing the numbers of mature students entering full-time higher education (figure 2.3) from 1.6 per cent of students in 1986 to 12.8 per cent by 2006.³⁹ However, because of later expansion of second-level and higher education, the educational profile of our adult population remains poor by international standards (Figure 2.4) and poses a particular challenge to policy makers.

Figure 2.3 **Mature students (aged 23 and over) as a percentage of new entrants to full-time higher education, 1986 to 2006**

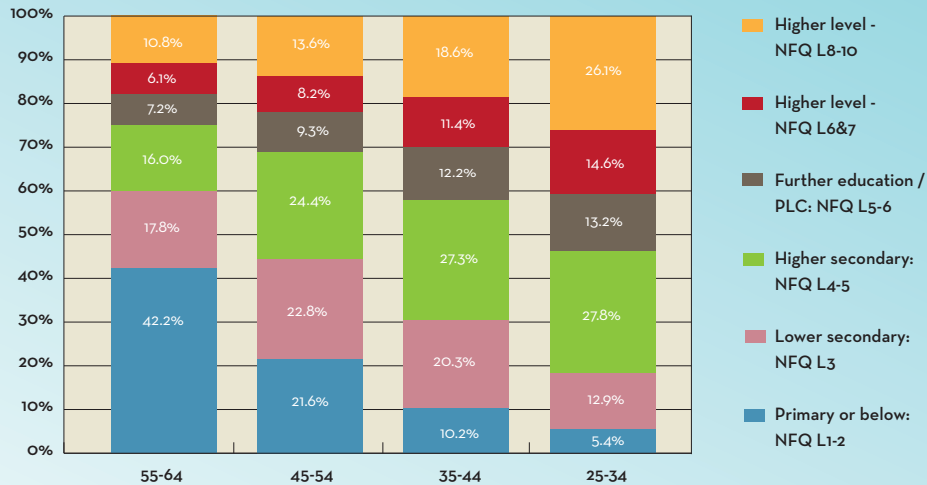


The comparatively weak educational profile, particularly among middle to older Irish adults, can be seen in Figure 2.4. Low educational attainment in the existing labour force, particularly in the older age cohort, is an issue of serious concern. The skills strategy forecasts that a significant proportion of Ireland's workforce in 2020 will remain low-skilled having less than upper-second level as their highest level of educational attainment.⁴⁰ Policy initiatives to ensure improved participation in higher education by adult learners are necessary to meet Ireland's skills needs.

³⁹ These figures refer to first-time (new) entrants to full-time undergraduate courses (NFQ levels 6 to 8).

⁴⁰ Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, *Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skill Strategy* (5th Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs), March 2007, p.7

Figure 2.4 **Highest level of education attainment among Irish adults 25-64 (CSO, QNHS 2005)**

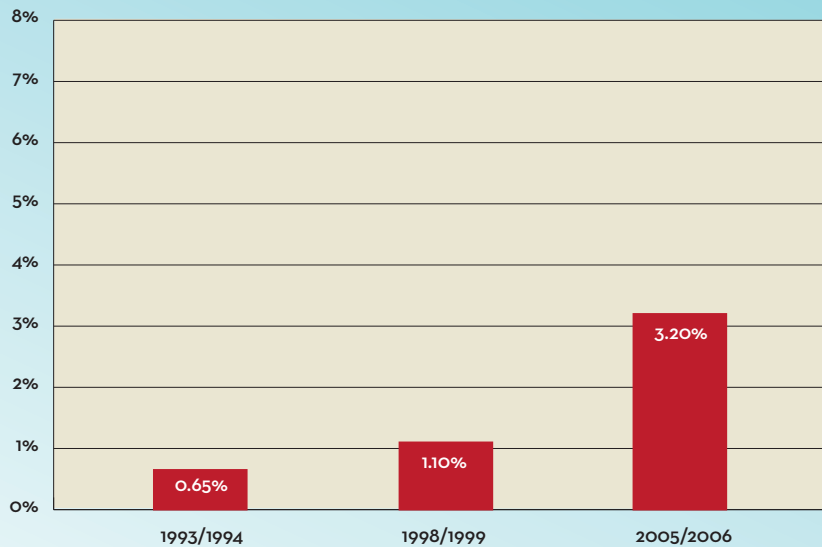


Learners with disabilities

People with disabilities have, to date, been significantly under-represented in Irish higher-education for reasons to do with historic lack of supports for people with disabilities throughout the education system and low educational expectations. Figure 2.5 shows that there has been a significant increase in the participation rates of such students in recent years, due in part to a higher level of diagnosis as well as the increased provision of vital learning supports, assistive technology and other necessary accommodations.

One such valuable support has been the Fund for Students with Disabilities which provides funding to institutions for students who require additional supports and services. The numbers of students benefiting from the Fund has increased steadily over time. An allocation of almost €13.5 million was made under the Fund in 2007/2008, benefiting a total of 3,099 students. While progress has been made in increasing the number of students with disabilities in higher education, people with physical and sensory disabilities continue to have very low participation rates.

Figure 2.5 ⁴¹ **AHEAD estimates of undergraduate students with disabilities as a percentage of all undergraduate students**



Members of the Traveller community

In the absence of adequate data, the 2005-2007 Action Plan did not set targets for access to higher education for members of the Traveller community or ethnic minority groups. Members of the Traveller community participating in higher education remain a tiny minority. Most Traveller children do not complete second-level education, therefore, work with primary and second level forms an important part of access activities in the higher-education institutions. The enhancement of access to education services for Travellers is a multifaceted issue. Any response must take into account poor literacy levels among members of the community, also the living circumstances of the students, and the wider marginalisation experienced by Travellers in education.

Previous targets

In 2001, the Action Group on Access set national targets for entry rates by under-represented groups in higher education. These were endorsed in the National Access Plan 2005-2007. Figure 2.6 provides an assessment of progress since 1998 relative to the targets set for entry to full-time higher education. The data show that the combined investment of resources and measures at all levels of the education system to address social exclusion and educational disadvantage are paying dividends. All of the targets set in respect of full-time students have been attained.

⁴¹ These estimates are sourced from a working draft of an AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability) survey on students with disabilities in Irish higher education. The 3.2 per cent estimate is based on 3,608 students with a disability identified by AHEAD in the 2005/06 academic year. In that same year, 2,032 students qualified for supports under the Fund for Students with Disabilities. Therefore, estimates of the participation rate based on students supported under this fund would be lower than those provided by AHEAD.

Figure 2.6 **Review of full-time participation in light of the 2006 targets set in 2001**⁴²

Target group	Baseline (1998)	Target for 2006	Outcome (year)
Semi-and unskilled manual ⁴³	23%	27%	33% (2004)
Mature students (23+)	4.5%	10%	12.6% (2006)
Students with disabilities	0.9%	1.8%	3.2% (2005)

However, the range of targets set by the Action Group relating to 'full-time and part-time students combined' were not met. While very considerable progress has been achieved in the expansion of higher-education opportunities, it remains the case that the majority of those who benefit from higher education are from the middle and upper socio-economic groups. Those who fail to derive appropriate benefit from our education system are generally from the lower socio-economic groups and from lower-middle income working families (the 'non-manual' group).

⁴² The 2006 targets were set by the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education in 2001 and endorsed in the *National Access Plan 2005-2007 - Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education*. Action Plan 2005-2007, HEA (2004).

Although the original target included agricultural workers, the number of agricultural workers in the population has declined steadily and the monitoring of progress by socio-economic group has tended to focus on the semi-skilled and unskilled manual worker categories.

⁴³ Although the original target included agricultural workers, the number of agricultural workers in the population has declined steadily and the monitoring of progress by socio-economic group has tended to focus on the semi-skilled and unskilled manual worker categories.

5

Current Challenges

3

Current challenges

NOTWITHSTANDING THE SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS JUST PRESENTED, SUBSTANTIAL CHALLENGES REMAIN IF IRELAND IS TO SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVE EQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION. A SELECTION OF KEY CHALLENGES ARE OUTLINED BELOW.

Access needs to be mainstreamed in the activities and strategies of institutions

An evaluation of access programmes published in 2006 found that access is still not a central part of the development strategy in many higher-education institutions. Access programmes remain peripheral and access personnel are often not involved in strategic planning or decision making at institutional level. There were also concerns raised about the extent to which the different strands of access are linked together in many colleges, and about the coordination between access services and the broader range of student support services. In light of these findings, embedding access into the mainstream policies of institutions is a key priority for the period of this national plan. The 2006 evaluation of access programmes outlined a framework for effective institutional access programmes.⁴⁴

Some institutions have developed supplementary admissions routes. For example, seven institutions participate in the HEAR scheme (Higher Education Access Route) which is a mechanism for allocating reserved places at reduced CAO points levels as well as a range of post-entry supports to young adults from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The number of school-leavers entering higher education via this route has increased from around 300 entrants in 2001 to over 800 offers being made in 2007. The supports offered by the scheme could potentially benefit a larger number of higher-education entrants from under-represented groups. While the scheme has been successful in terms of targeting and in terms of outcomes, the operation of the scheme has placed a very considerable bureaucratic burden on participating access offices, who currently administer means assessment of applicants.

Building on the initial success of this scheme will require the development of more systematic and formalised approaches which will ensure that access staff at institutional level are free to focus on the improvement of services and the student experience. In 2005, the HEAR group and the Irish Universities Association commenced work on the development of a more consistent mechanism for allocating reserved places to a wider pool of applicants nationally from target groups. This project has secured funding through the Strategic Innovation Fund. The primary aim is to explore further how a national systems-based admissions model, with fair and robust indicators, can be developed with a view to this being implemented through the CAO.

Higher education access (or foundation) courses have also formed part of the strategy of some Irish universities and institutes of technology to increase the participation

⁴⁴ Higher Education Authority, (2006) Towards the Best Education for All: An Evaluation of Access Programmes in Higher Education in Ireland, HEA: Dublin

of under-represented student groups. The courses generally last one year and aim to prepare students for higher education. On successful completion of the course, learners generally have the option to progress to a degree programme within the same institution. However, the broader progression opportunities are unclear because, at present, most of these courses do not lead to a qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications. Students on full-time access/foundation courses are currently ineligible for the student financial supports available in further and higher education. It is important that the issues around the provision of full-time access courses be resolved to the optimal benefit of diverse groups of learners. This should be done in a way that builds on the good practice that has emerged within and between the higher and further-education sectors.

We must address the higher educational needs of those already in the workforce

Detailed analysis of future skills needs in Ireland indicate that the demand for graduates will exceed the supply of traditional (post-school) entrants to our higher-education institutions. Reflecting on the fact that 60 per cent of our labour force in 2020 are already in the labour force, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs stated: *“It is self evident that if one wants to influence the skills profile of the labour force in 2020, one needs to concentrate on the largest supply – that is, on those in the current labour force”*.

⁴⁵ Therefore, improvements to the educational profile of the adult population will be crucial to our national economic competitiveness.

Tapping into the potential demand for higher education among adults who did not benefit from opportunities to participate in the past will present challenges for the higher-education sector and opportunities to build on the strengths of the Irish education system within a lifelong learning framework. Our performance to date in reaching out to adults has been undermined by the limited availability of part-time and flexible learning opportunities at NFQ levels 6 to 8 (undergraduate level). In the 2006-07 academic year, less than 7 per cent of entrants to undergraduate programmes were part-time students.

The effectiveness of part-time courses in reaching out to mature students is evidenced by the fact that 86 per cent of those part-time undergraduate entrants were aged 23 and over and 60 per cent were aged over 30. The current low level of part-time study opportunities limits the accessibility of higher education for working adults and adults with caring responsibilities. It also limits the study-options available to traditional school leavers, who may prefer to, or need to, combine work and part-time study.⁴⁶

One of the most challenging aspects of lifelong learning as a strategy for addressing low skill levels is that those with low levels of initial education tend to be least likely to participate in education and training as adults.

“Irish adults with third-level qualifications are almost four times more likely to participate in continuing education and training than their peers with less than upper

⁴⁵ Government of Ireland (2007) *National Development Plan 2007-2013: Transforming Ireland – A Better Quality of Life for All*, p. 82. Very similar conclusions were reached in the recent Leitch study on the UK. See Leitch Review of Skills, *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy: World-Class Skills* (December, 2006) p.1

⁴⁶ Part-time options for traditional school leavers may be more attractive to young males and also to those from the ‘non-manual’ background, who are currently the most under-represented socio-economic group in Irish higher education.

*second-level education”*⁴⁷

Participation rates in continuing education are strongly linked with initial levels of education in every OECD country and promoting lifelong learning among those who need it most is a challenge for all developed countries. However, the difficulty of the challenge does not take from its importance and the considerable achievement of many countries in the promotion of lifelong learning suggests that there is significant room for improvement in Ireland.

Addressing educational disadvantage and social exclusion will require joined-up strategies across education levels and across government departments

Increasingly, in recent years efforts to combat disadvantage are based on the view that if the causes are societal then it will be necessary for educational institutions, families and the wider community to work in partnership to remove the underlying discontinuity.⁴⁸ The growing importance and increasing recognition of the need for partnerships between home, school and community can be seen in a number of policy initiatives and changing practices over recent years. These include the enhanced involvement of parents in school life and the changing relationship between schools, higher-education institutions and the wider community more generally with much greater emphasis on principles of partnership, empowerment, participation and capacity building.

National policy is strongly supportive of a greater emphasis on joined-up community-based approaches to educational disadvantage in particular and to social exclusion more broadly. In 2000, the White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life, took on board the concept of social inclusion and presented an integrated community-based approach to lifelong learning. The Action Group on Access, which reported in 2001, emphasised the value of the community sector and the potential of regional consortia to develop successful access programmes. DEIS (the action plan for educational inclusion) highlights the potential of a multi-agency approach, stating that:

*“the support of other Government departments and of many agencies and organisations in the public, private and community and voluntary sectors at all levels (national, regional/county and local) constitutes a key contribution to addressing educational disadvantage in all its aspects”.*⁴⁹

The need for joined-up approaches to social inclusion is a central theme of the *National Anti-Poverty Strategy*, the *National Development Plan* and *Towards 2016*. It also featured prominently in the previous national development plan and in the previous social partnership agreement. The repeated endorsements of community-based joined-up approaches arise out of a sense of undeveloped potential in this approach as a whole-of-government strategy to address educational disadvantage and social exclusion.

Evaluations of collaborative initiatives in the Irish context⁵⁰ concur substantially with the

⁴⁷ O'Connor, M. (2007), *Sé Sí - Gender in Irish Education*, Department of Education and Science, p.171.

⁴⁸ CMRS - Conference of Major Religious Superiors, 1992, *Education and Poverty*

⁴⁹ Department of Education and Science (2005) *DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: an Action Plan for Educational Inclusion*, p.21.

⁵⁰ See, for example, ESLI - Early School Leaving Initiative Interim Report (2000); Rourke (1999); Cullen (2000a); Cullen (2000b).

international literature in terms of the potential benefits of joined-up service provision and the barriers to the further development of such services. On the whole, the merits of joined-up approaches are strongly endorsed in the available case-study analysis. The development of collaborative strategies made it possible for participating organisations “to compile a more accurate picture of the needs and circumstances of individual young people; and to devise responses which are both appropriate and effective”.⁵¹

Many of the barriers identified related to the short-term pilot nature of the initiatives and to the lack of appropriate structures at various levels. The 2006 evaluation of access programmes also identified continuity of resources as a key factor in building effective partnerships. Other barriers to the development of integrated approaches identified in the international literature include a lack of understanding of integration and of a shared vision at all levels, unclear mandates and role definitions, and the difficulty in changing long-established patterns of institutional operations.⁵² The key message from the literature is that the deployment of integrated local service-delivery strategies must be accompanied by greater collaboration at the national and departmental levels if it is to succeed in improving services and supports.⁵³

It is fair to say that we are approaching theoretical consensus that integrated strategies have the greatest potential to address the multi-dimensional causes and consequences of educational disadvantage and social exclusion. At this point in time, many of the key principles of integration have been accepted among public policy makers. However, there is considerable scope for enhanced co-ordination between the various levels of education and for stronger inter-departmental co-ordination in our pursuit of greater equality in higher education. Bearing in mind the wide range of benefits to individuals, families, communities and educational institutions which arise from the effective creation of integrated services, it is imperative that a concerted effort is made to address issues which hinder the achievement of integrated community-based strategies to promote greater equity of access to higher education.

Achieving equity of access requires additional resources both for students and institutions

Addressing the financial barriers that continue to exist will be a key challenge over the course of this Access Plan. There are challenges both in terms of the funding provided directly to students and the funding provided to institutions.

In the case of the maintenance grants, there are two basic issues: the amount of the grant and eligibility for a grant. The available estimates indicate that the current average maintenance costs of full-time higher education are in the region of €7,000 per

51 Rourke, S (1999). A learning experience. Case Studies on Local Integrated Strategies to Tackle Educational Disadvantage. Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency, p.10.

52 Machiavelli famously noted, “that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things”. The Prince, Chapter XI.

53 A recurring distinction emerges in the literature between two dimensions of services integration: the services-oriented dimension and the systems-oriented dimension (OECD, 1996). Services-oriented efforts are concerned with developing collaboration among service providers at ground level in order to link their various services for families at risk in a more coherent fashion. Systems-oriented approaches are concerned with the more fundamental policy and structural changes in whole systems at national/state level (e.g. education, health) and within participating agencies, which are necessary to integrate the planning and delivery of a range of services in a comprehensive way. In many initiatives, a services-oriented approach tends to dominate the work initially, but gradually, the need for more fundamental systemic change is recognised. Ultimately, systemic change, so central to successful integration, is determined by the commitment and role played by national policy-makers. (CORI, 2001)

academic year. In the design of the maintenance grants system, there is a presumption of parental support for higher-education students and the grant is intended to supplement this support where the reckonable household income falls below certain levels. While the full special rate of maintenance grant comes close to the estimated average costs, the standard rate of the (non-adjacent) grant covers roughly half of the average (median) costs of participation. Therefore, the presumed parental support is required in order to supplement the grant to cover the full costs of participation. It is important to appreciate that €7,000 is the median cost of participation and that the actual costs of participation vary considerably according to the circumstances of the individual learner. For example, parents of young children face very high costs of participation in terms of childcare and transport costs can be significant for people living considerable distances from higher-education institutions.

The income thresholds that currently apply⁵⁴ disqualify large numbers of salaried employees within the lower-middle income group (non-manual) from financial supports. This is likely to be a significant factor in their very low rates of participation. Many families within the non-manual sector have an income level that disqualifies them from accessing grants currently even though such income levels are clearly inadequate to allow participation in higher education. Addressing the situation of children from lower-middle income households is an emerging and significant challenge. Financial barriers should not prevent students participating in the full higher-education experience, including extra-curricular activities and opportunities to study abroad through the Erasmus programme.

In relation to the institutional funding available to promote access, many institutions find that the demand for access-related services is growing faster than their resources permit. There is continuing concern that the level of staffing and resources for access programmes and services is inadequate and that this is hampering the development of integrated access services. *“In some institutions...there is a lack of permanent staff, inadequate accommodation and a lack of appropriate secretarial, administrative and financial support for the effective operation of the access programme”.*⁵⁵ The variation in the earmarked resources for access available between institutions, as well as variations in how those resources are being managed at a local level has led to an imbalance in the supports available for learners. The challenge is now to create and implement a supportive national funding framework, in tandem with a broad consistency in the management of those resources at local level, that will enable institutions to equitably address the learning needs of an increasingly diverse student body.

Persistently poor participation by low to middle income working families needs special attention

The evaluation of participation by socio-economic background, outlined in section 2, demonstrated that children from low and lower-middle income households have the lowest levels of participation. Given the substantial numbers of such households in

⁵⁴ For the 2007-2008 academic year, the income threshold for full maintenance grant was €38,675. For the purposes of assessing eligibility for maintenance grants, reckonable household income (for applicants under 23 years of age) refers to the combined gross income (earnings) of the student and both his or her parents in the year prior to application. Reduced levels of maintenance grant were available to families under €48,335. See www.studentfinance.ie

⁵⁵ Higher Education Authority (2006), *Towards the Best Education for All, An Evaluation of Access Programmes in Higher Education in Ireland*, p.26.

the population, resolution of the issues that have resulted in their persistently low participation rates will present challenges in the period ahead. It is likely that the costs of participation in higher education and the limited opportunities to combine work and study are among the range of factors that explain the current low levels of participation in higher education by low to middle income working families. Our efforts to address these challenges will be informed by further research which has been commissioned on the costs of participation in higher education and on the low participation of the non-manual group.

We need to have special regard to the needs of recent immigrants

Immigration is a key emerging challenge in the context of equality in education. Estimates show that up to 11 per cent of our current population have been born outside Ireland. At present, over 10 per cent of higher-education students are originally from outside the state compared to just 4 per cent ten years ago. This presents challenges and opportunities for Ireland and its higher-education system. Ireland has rapidly become a much more diverse society in terms of nationality and ethnicity and it will be vital for the education system to reflect and accommodate that diversity. This is an immediate challenge at school level and it is certain to become a key higher education issue in the near future. There are a number of complex issues around the provision of higher educational opportunities to immigrants, which can include the differential level of fees charged by institutions, language barriers and the recognition of prior qualifications.

This plan does not include specific action points relating to ethnicity. Nevertheless, 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. During 2008, the National Access Office will focus on building good relations with representatives of minority ethnic groups. This will ensure that channels of communication are established and maintained. An assessment of trends in participation by ethnicity will be included in the mid-term review of this plan in 2010.

The widening gap in participation between males and females requires focussed attention

Women in Ireland have increased their rates of participation in higher education at a faster pace than men over recent decades. Women now account for almost 60 per cent of university graduates and two-thirds of post-graduates. Over the last decade in particular, there have been remarkable shifts in higher-education graduation patterns by gender and these shifts are clearly observable in the changing educational profile of the population. From a situation of parity in 1999, a 10 percentage point gap has now emerged between males and females in the 25 to 34 year age-cohort who have attained a higher-education qualification. The under-representation of males in higher education is largely a consequence of their higher rates of early school leaving and their lower levels of performance in the Leaving Certificate examinations. However, it

is exacerbated further by their low levels of participation in adult education. Although the severity of gender differences in Irish education are moderate in the international context, a significant and growing gender gap has emerged over recent years. Improving the participation rates of males in higher education will present challenges for the entire education system. In higher education, key challenges will include the achievement of a strengthening of the interface with further education and the expansion of opportunities to combine work and study.

We must continue to improve our data gathering systems

The research community in Ireland have generated a rich supply of survey data that has significantly advanced our understanding of the causes and consequences of educational disadvantage. However, the quality of data that arises as a consequence of public administration is not always sufficient or adequate to inform the implementation of policy or the effectiveness of interventions. This has undermined our ability to develop evidence-based approaches to addressing the challenges of greater equality in higher education.

Significant progress has been made over recent years in the development of a student record system within the Higher Education Authority and, in 2007, higher-education institutions began to collect access-relevant data for the first time using a common template. This 'equal access' student data initiative will provide comparable information on the social, economic and cultural background of entrants to higher education as well as information relating to disabilities. This will underpin funding allocations for access into the future and will greatly improve our understanding of the impact of existing strategies. It will also allow for target setting and will provide a solid basis for the exchange of good practice.

The two basic problems of making the most effective choices and using means to greatest advantage will always remain. With them will remain the need for adequate information if policy is to be as fully informed as possible.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Report of the Survey Team appointed by the Minister for Education in October, 1962, *Investment in Education*, p. xxxiv

Objectives

4

Objectives and supporting actions

THIS CHAPTER SETS OUT OBJECTIVES TO BE MET BY THIS PLAN AND THE ACTIONS WHICH WILL SUPPORT THEM. THE PRIORITY OBJECTIVES ARE SET OUT UNDER THE FOLLOWING HIGH-LEVEL GOALS:

- Institution-wide approaches to access
- Enhancing access through lifelong learning
- Investment in widening participation in higher-education
- Modernisation of student supports
- Widening participation in higher education for people with disabilities

A key aim of this Access Plan is to support the delivery of the educational objectives in the National Development Plan through analysis of the key challenges and articulation of the implementation strategies required for success. This plan identifies the steps that are required to achieve greater equality and wider participation in higher education. Not all of them can be undertaken by the Department of Education and Science or the Higher Education Authority, and the responsibility and resources for some areas of progress are shared with other agencies and institutions. The current economic downturn will add to the difficulty of advancing the objectives set out in this plan, but will also add to the urgency and importance of upskilling and widening educational opportunity.

Institution-wide approaches to access

Objective: The priority accorded to promoting equality in higher education will be reflected in the strategic planning and development of the Higher Education Authority and of higher-education institutions.

This plan supports the autonomy of institutions within a context of output-oriented information systems that support a robust accountability and transparency framework. This transparency will be achieved through systematic improvements in the evidence-base for higher-education policy and through multi-annual access plans, which institutions will develop and implement as part of their overall strategic planning process. In addition to providing clarity on institutional strategies to promote access and internal resource allocations towards access, institution-wide access plans will support the exchange of best practice in a transparent environment. This will provide a basis for institutional target-setting and for the development and refinement of institutional and sectoral approaches to widening participation. In light of the scale and complexity of the challenges outlined earlier, institutional autonomy will provide institutions with the freedom to continue to develop innovative partnerships and strategies for widening participation.

The institutional access plans will build on the statements of access policy that are required of higher-education institutions under existing legislation.⁵⁷ In conjunction with the revised funding framework, they are intended to support and encourage a greater emphasis on institution-wide approaches to the promotion of widening participation in higher education. The 2006 Evaluation of Access Programmes outlined a framework for successful programmes which emphasised the importance of senior management engagement and whole-institutional approaches to support widening participation (see Appendix 2). At a point in our educational history where just 29 per cent of our adult population has experienced higher education, we have too many under-represented groups to justify an over-emphasis on specialised approaches (which address “distinct” needs). The focus must be firmly on the quality of the learning experience of all students. Mainstreaming the access agenda effectively means that “*good practice for access becomes good practice for all learners throughout the institution*”.⁵⁸

A renewed emphasis on the quality of the learning experience of all students will require continuing innovation in teaching and learning. This was a key goal of the first National Action Plan. Much good work has emerged from the Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning, which have been established in many institutions over recent years. A key priority over the period of this plan will be to extend this work institution-wide and sector-wide, through continuing professional development within institutions and the exchange of best practice between institutions.⁵⁹ At national level, HETAC has been working to develop awareness of the importance of learner assessment strategies, policies and procedures to complement effective practice in teaching and learning in institutions.⁶⁰

57 Government of Ireland (2006) Institutes of Technology Act 2006, Section 21D and 21 F; Government of Ireland (1997) Universities Act, Section 36. See also Government of Ireland, Student Support Bill 2008, Section 25 : <http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/bills/2008/0608/b608d.pdf>

58 Higher Education Authority (2006), *Towards the Best Education for All, An Evaluation of Access Programmes in Higher Education in Ireland*, p.20.

59 The types of professional development that are most supportive of quality and innovation in teaching appear to be teacher networks which facilitate the sharing of experiences, joint problem-solving and team-researching. Mentoring and access to specialist expertise also appear to be very effective. See Archer, P. and Weir, S. (2004). *Addressing Disadvantage: A Review of the International Literature and of Strategy in Ireland*. Educational Research Centre, p.33

60 Higher Education and Training Awards Council - HETAC, (2006) “Consultation: Towards a new HETAC policy on learner assessment issues. Assessment of learning and for learning – are we asking the best questions?” http://www.hetac.ie/consultation_docs.cfm?slD=9

A recent report by the Irish Association of University and College Counsellors (IAUCC) highlighted the importance of “*stronger service links on campus*”.⁶¹ Institution-level planning for access will support this objective. Planning to support access at institutional level affords opportunities to enhance co-ordination of the various support services within the institution around the needs of students. Strategies to broaden the post-entry dimension of higher-education access programmes as a means of facilitating the successful participation and retention of all students need to be considered anew.

Addressing access issues at board level will also allow for more strategic engagement with other education providers and with business and community groups. The current social partnership agreement, *Towards 2016* contains a commitment to “support measures in the areas of further and higher education to enhance participation by those from disadvantaged backgrounds” and specifies that these measures will include “*community-based strategies*”.⁶² In this regard, reforms currently underway within the Social Inclusion Programme of the National Development Plan have the potential to create new, more simplified local delivery structures and to enhance their role in the delivery of exchequer-funded programmes. With the new arrangements, there is an opportunity to expand the role of the community in addressing educational disadvantage and to strengthen the involvement of institutions in community and regional development strategies.

Action points

1 Institution-wide access plans

Institutions will develop an institution-wide plan to promote greater equity of access and participation in higher education. These access plans will be integrated as part of the overall institutional strategic planning process. The National Access Office will provide practical assistance and guidance to institutions in the development and review of their access strategies.

2 Building capacity

The Higher Education Authority will facilitate sector-wide capacity building through a range of supports, including continuing professional development, practitioner workshops and seminars and through the Strategic Innovation Fund.

3 Supporting good practice

The Higher Education Authority will support the exchange of good practice in widening participation for practitioners, registrars and all interested staff. Working together with AMA, the network of higher-education access practitioners, the National Access Office will provide initial funding for the development of the creation of a web resource and will contribute regular updates on national policy developments.

⁶¹ IAUCC - Irish Association of University and College Counsellors, 2007, *Looking Forward Investigating the Counselling and Support needs of 'Non Traditional Students' in Irish Third Level Education*.

⁶² Government of Ireland (2006), *Towards 2016 Ten-Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015*, p 56

4 Recognising good equality practice

The National Access Office will promote equality training for staff in higher-education institutions and recognition of good equality practice as part of promotional criteria.

5 Research network on access

The Higher Education Authority will facilitate a research network on access and equality issues, to increase the level of research activity on higher-education equality policy and practice. This research network will compliment and build upon the work of existing networks of practitioners.

6 International conference on equity and excellence in higher education

The Higher Education Authority will host an international conference on the subject of equality and excellence in higher education.

Enhancing access through lifelong learning

OBJECTIVE: The lifelong learning agenda will be progressed through the development of a broader range of entry routes, a significant expansion of part-time/flexible courses and measures to address the student support implications of lifelong learning.

While Ireland has achieved a remarkable expansion of higher-education opportunities for Leaving Certificate students, many of our key weaknesses relate to our underperformance in terms of lifelong learning. The traditional model of full-time on-campus delivery of undergraduate higher education accounted for over 90 per cent of entrants in 2006-2007 and the Leaving Certificate remains the pre-dominant route of entry to higher education. Improving the extent to which higher education promotes lifelong learning over the course of this plan will require a broader range of entry routes and greater flexibility in the delivery of programmes. Since 2000, an excellent architecture for lifelong learning has been put in place through the National Framework of Qualifications.⁶³ The Framework will be further developed over the course of this plan with clarifications on the learning outcomes associated with each of the levels. Building on the framework, opportunities for access, transfer and progression between the various levels will continue to be developed over the course of this plan.⁶⁴

Broader range of entry routes to higher education

A substantial body of good practice has emerged over the last decade in Ireland in relation to the diversification of entry routes to higher education. Through funding provided initially under the Targeted Initiatives, universities have developed an

⁶³ See www.nfq.ie

⁶⁴ A key focus of national policy in this area will be to improve opportunities and supports for learners engaged in upskilling up to and including level 8 of the National Framework of Qualifications.

infrastructure of pre-entry and post-entry supports aimed at increasing the participation of under-represented groups in higher education (see Appendix 1 for more detail). There has also been progress in relation to the accreditation of prior learning.

The interface between further education and higher education is of particular interest in the promotion of greater access and lifelong learning.⁶⁵ Entry to higher education by the holders of further-education awards grew over the period of the 2005-2007 plan from 3 per cent of CAO acceptances in 2005 to almost 10 per cent in 2007. Strengthening the interface between further and higher education will require enhancing the capacity of further education to prepare learners for successful engagement in higher education. This will support the aim in the Programme for Government to “develop the further education sector to enable it to play a strong role in providing employment relevant education and training opportunities and to serve as a gateway to higher education”.⁶⁶ The extent to which further education serves as this gateway will also depend on the linkages and progression routes developed by higher-education institutions.⁶⁷

Over the course of this plan, the higher-education sector will work with the further-education sector and with FÁS to explore new ways of working together in support of national upskilling and lifelong learning objectives, particularly in areas of national skills needs. In the spirit of the one-step-up programme, the focus will be on the promotion of learning opportunities for students from disadvantaged groups and for adult learners engaging in upskilling (up to NFQ level 8). There is considerable potential to build on existing models of collaboration between further and higher education in the joint development and delivery of accredited access courses and modules supporting transfer and progression. The improvement of transfer and progression opportunities between higher-education institutions will also contribute to the achievement of our lifelong learning objectives.

Community education has featured strongly in the strategies for broadening entry routes to higher education outlined in the 2001 Action Group on Access Report and in the 2005-2007 Access Plan. It is also emphasised in the current social partnership agreement, *Towards 2016*.⁶⁸ Community education strategies have proved very effective in reaching out to ‘non-traditional’ learners and are purposely designed to build up and maintain resources within communities.⁶⁹

*Community education is an innovative and empowering approach to education and is gaining recognition as a strategy that has considerable potential for addressing the systemic causes of poverty and educational disadvantage.*⁷⁰

There will be a renewed focus on the linkages between higher-education institutions and community-education groups over the period of this plan.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Developing routes of access and progression to higher education was a key priority of the 2005-2007 Access Plan, which stated that “there is an urgent need for expanded, systematic access routes and connections to higher education, in particular from further education and training and community education”. Higher Education Authority (2004), *Action Plan 2005-2007 - Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland*, p16.

⁶⁶ New Programme for Government (June 2007) pg 47

⁶⁷ Progress in these set of issues would advance key national objectives outlined in the current National Development Plan 2007-2013 (NDP), particularly those relating to upskilling through the “promotion of access, transfer and progression and incentivising of stronger inter-institutional collaboration in the development and delivery of programmes”. Government of Ireland (2007), *The National Development Plan, 2007-2013*, p.204.

⁶⁸ *Towards 2016* proposes “targeted adult and community educational opportunities” as a lifelong learning strategy to enhance access to further and higher education. See Government of Ireland (2006) *Towards 2016 Ten-Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015*, p 64

⁶⁹ CORI, Education Commission (2001) *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education: An Analysis*, p17

⁷⁰ O’Connor, M (2007) *Sé Si - Gender in Irish Education*, Department of Education and Science, p 110.

⁷¹ This is already underway at institution level and is illustrated in the SIF (Strategic Innovation Fund) support for institutional involvement in com-

Flexible provision

In conjunction with improvements in relation to broader entry routes and clearer opportunities for progression, promoting access through lifelong learning will require enhanced flexibility in the provision of higher education. Building on progress to date in modularisation and credit-based learning, this enhanced flexibility will be pursued through the expansion of part-time courses and through distance and blended learning.

Part-time education is an established pathway to higher education for those from disadvantaged backgrounds and mature students in other countries. The fact that in Ireland the 'free fees' scheme applies only to full-time students and that part-time students are ineligible for maintenance grants and other supports diminishes the attractiveness of part-time study relative to full-time participation, especially for those on low-incomes.⁷² That said, the importance of part-time provision is being increasingly recognised within the national policy framework in Ireland. For example, the reform and modernisation of programme delivery in higher education is a key aim of the *National Development Plan 2007-2013* which explicitly seeks to "encourage a greater flexibility of course offerings to meet diverse student population needs in a lifelong learning context".⁷³ The Programme for Government 2007-2012, includes plans to "introduce a new system of means-tested free fees for approved part-time courses. Together with incentives for colleges to offer more flexible and diverse course structures, this will enable more people with work or family commitments to avail of opportunities at third level".⁷⁴

Expanding part-time and flexible learning opportunities in our higher-education institutions will require reflection on the extent to which institutions are incentivised to deliver flexible courses within the policy and funding framework. It will also require an examination of the student support implications of lifelong learning and the development of strategies to ensure equity of access to part-time higher education for under-represented groups.

Action points

7 Expansion of part-time/flexible learning opportunities

The Higher Education Authority and the Department of Education & Science will support the expansion of opportunities for flexible learning. Developmental funding will be available through the Strategic Innovation Fund and the Higher Education Authority will work to ensure that no disincentives to part-time provision exist within the recurrent funding allocation model. The Higher Education Authority will also advise on the development of national policy on open, distance and blended learning.

munity regeneration initiatives.

72 The recent OECD review of Irish higher education recommended that the numbers of part-time students as a percentage of the total should be increased and "that part-time and full-time students be treated on a similar basis in respect to fees and eligibility for maintenance grants and that institutions be reassured that part-time students should count fully (on a pro-rata basis) in the calculation of recurrent grant". See OECD (2004) *Review of National Policies for Education: Review of Higher Education in Ireland, Examiner's Report*. p. 31.

73 Government of Ireland, 2007. *National Development Plan 2007-2013*, p.201.

74 Government of Ireland (2007) *An Agreed Programme for Government, 2007 - 2012*, p. 47

8 Student supports for part-time learners

The Higher Education Authority will work with the Department of Education & Science to examine the issue of equity of access to part-time higher education and to explore the student support implications of lifelong learning. Along with this, the National Access Office will work with higher-education institutions to develop a framework of good practice for the provision of post-entry supports for part-time learners.

9 PATH - Programme for Access To Higher education

The Higher Education Authority will work with a range of educational agencies to explore the feasibility of developing a 'Programme for Access To Higher Education (PATH)'. The key objective of PATH would be to enhance collaborative actions and progression between the different levels of the education system. It is anticipated that the PATH programme will encompass actions listed below under 'diversification of entry routes to higher education'.

10 Diversification of entry routes to higher education

Key issues in relation to the diversification of entry routes to higher education that will be progressed as part of this plan include:

Progression

The Higher Education Authority will work with higher and further-education institutions to strengthen the interface between further and higher education by actively facilitating the development of access and progression routes, including innovative bridging arrangements and credit transfer between further and higher education. The enhancement of progression opportunities between higher-education institutions will also be pursued over the course of this plan.

A national policy for higher-education access courses

The National Access Office will work with the Department of Education & Science and further and higher-education institutions to advise on the development of a national policy for higher-education access courses.

Higher Education Access Route (HEAR)

The Higher Education Authority will support the work of the Irish Universities Association, DIT and other higher-education institutions to reform and extend the HEAR scheme (a supplementary admissions route) through the CAO for socio-economically disadvantaged students.

Supplementary admissions route for students with disabilities

The Higher Education Authority will support the work of the Irish Universities Association, DIT and other higher-education institutions in developing and refining the supplementary admissions route for students with disabilities.

Recognition of Prior Learning

The Higher Education Authority will support the NQAI and HETAC in their development and implementation of a national action plan for the recognition of prior learning.⁷⁵

11 An early second-chance strategy for 17-22 year olds

The Higher Education Authority will examine the particular needs of young adults in the 17-22 year age group who are not benefiting from higher education, with a view to developing an 'early second-chance' strategy for this cohort.

12 Workforce upskilling

The Higher Education Authority will contribute to and advise on the development of national policy for work-based upskilling for employees, especially those who have not previously benefited from higher education (up to NFQ level 8).

13 Promotional campaign

As part of the HEA's communication strategy and advocacy role, the National Access Office will introduce targeted promotional campaigns for under-represented groups, including boys, the Traveller community, immigrants and parents with few or no educational qualifications.

14 Transition year module on access to further and higher education

The National Access Office will work with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to facilitate the development of a transition year unit or module specifically on access to further and higher education. The module will be targeted at second-level schools with relatively low progression rates to higher education.

⁷⁵ National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2008), Strategic Plan 2008-2012, p.15.

Investment in widening higher-education participation

OBJECTIVE: The priority accorded to promoting equality in higher education will be reflected in the allocation of public funds to higher-education institutions.

The National Development Plan outlines the funding strategies that will deliver continuing progress in widening access to higher education. The key objective in the allocation of exchequer resources to higher education is to incentivise institutions to “align their strategies with national priorities through the implementation of the new funding arrangements”.⁷⁶ This is followed up in the current Higher Education Authority Strategic Plan which includes “refining our funding approaches to ensure better alignment with national objectives” among the key priorities for the period 2008 to 2010.⁷⁷ The prioritisation of greater equality and social inclusion at the national level is reflected in the new funding arrangements which will ensure that core funding for access reflects, through an “access weighting”, the number of students from under-represented groups in each institution.

The access weighting is a mechanism which will reflect and support institutional success in broadening access. It is an explicit acknowledgement of the institutional investments and supports that are and will be required to ensure greater equality in higher education. It will result in a shift in resources towards institutions that succeed in promoting greater equality within their student bodies over those that do not.

The Higher Education Authority proposes the introduction of a performance-based element within the recurrent funding model. This will further reinforce the alignment of institutional and national priorities.⁷⁸ In addition, equity of access is among the range of objectives that are being promoted through the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF).⁷⁹ This competitive fund is an important catalyst for change, collaboration and quality improvement in higher education institutions. €510m will be invested to support the full range of SIF objectives in higher education between 2006 and 2013. To date, €172m has been awarded under the first two cycles, of which over €21m was allocated to access in cycles one and two. In addition to direct investments in access projects, the SIF investments in teaching and learning and lifelong learning will also contribute towards the promotion of greater quality and equality in Irish higher education.

While acknowledging significant past and current public investment, the fact remains that if we are to achieve ambitious access and participation objectives, higher levels of overall resources will be required to support a more diverse student population. The

⁷⁶ Government of Ireland (2007), *National Development Plan 2007-2013: Transforming Ireland - A Better Quality of Life for All*, p. 189. Further detail is outlined on p. 252 of the National Development Plan.

⁷⁷ Higher Education Authority (2008), *Strategic Plan 2008-2010*, Dublin, HEA, p. 15

⁷⁸ The HEA has recently published a consultation document on proposals for performance-based funding. The model proposes that the individual strategic plan of each institution would be considered in the allocation of a small part of the overall institutional grant. In particular an institution would have to demonstrate that it had prepared and was implementing a coherent plan for institutional development. That plan would also have to take account of national priorities. In this context it is relevant that widening access is a specific priority. Individual institutions would have to demonstrate their commitment to widening access, and the sector as a whole would have to meet national targets. Further consultation and discussion will be required in the development of this approach.

⁷⁹ “One of the key objectives[of the Strategic Innovation Funds] is to support access, retention and progression both at individual institutional level and through inter-institutional, sectoral and inter-sectoral collaboration”. Government of Ireland (2007) *National Development Plan 2007-2013: Transforming Ireland - A Better Quality of Life for All*, p205

merits of further investment must be evaluated against the very significant returns to education, both to the individual and to society from such investment.⁸⁰

Action points

15 Institutional funding for access

The Higher Education Authority will further revise the recurrent funding model to better reflect the costs to institutions of equity of access programmes. Funding allocations will be informed by the *Equal Access* data initiative which will ensure transparency.

16 Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF)

The Strategic Innovation Fund will continue to support widening participation in higher education through the prioritisation of access initiatives and indirectly through support for lifelong learning and teaching and learning initiatives. The Higher Education Authority will monitor the extent to which SIF meets its objectives in widening participation and in other priorities areas.

17 Performance funding

In developing a performance element within the recurrent funding model, in consultation with stakeholders, the Higher Education Authority will ensure that equity of access features as part of the evaluations of progress.

18 Philanthropy

In light of the significant potential of access-related initiatives to attract philanthropic investment, the Higher Education Authority will continue to explore ways to increase the level of such investment and to increase its impact on the achievement of greater equality in Irish higher education.

19 Advocacy

The Higher Education Authority will continue to advocate the importance of investment to promote greater equity of access to higher education and will monitor the impact of funding on the promotion of greater equality in higher education. In addition, the National Access Office will ensure that there is clear information available to institutions on the range of funding sources available.

20 Dormant Accounts Funding for the Institutes of Technology

The National Access Office will assist the institute of technology sector to derive maximum benefit and capacity-building from the €3m Dormant Accounts access fund over the coming two years.

⁸⁰ The benefits of investment in education are shown in the finding that "Increasing either primary or secondary school enrolment rates by one percentage point leads to an increase in per capita GDP growth of between 1 and 3 percentage points". Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, *Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skill Strategy* (5th Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, March 2007) p.26

Modernisation of student supports

OBJECTIVE: Students will be assisted to access supports and those supports will better address the financial barriers to access and successful participation in higher education.

The National Development Plan acknowledges that “student grants are a major factor in encouraging the current record levels of participation in higher education” and aims to develop a “quality user-friendly application and payment service for the grants”.

⁸¹ In pursuit of this objective, significant improvements and modernisation in the administration of maintenance grants will be introduced by the Department of Education and Science and Vocational Education Committees (VECs) over the course of this National Access Plan. Developments will include:

- A new Student Support Bill to underpin the reform agenda
- Consolidation of the four existing student grant schemes into a unified scheme⁸²
- Consolidation of the administration of student grants, reducing the number of grant-awarding agencies from 66 to 33
- Timely payment of grants to students, and
- Payment of grants directly into personal bank accounts on a monthly basis

Towards 2016 prioritises “increasing participation in lifelong learning in particular among the workforce categorised as low-skilled/low paid by enhancing opportunities to access education and training”.⁸³ The trends in participation over recent years suggest that low to middle income groups face particular difficulties in accessing financial supports relative to the self-employed groups. A further issue that has arisen in relation to the promotion of higher education among low-income earners is the disparity in the supports available to them, relative to people in receipt of social welfare.⁸⁴ It will be important to examine the impact of grant levels and income thresholds in addressing the financial barriers to higher education.

Given the importance of means assessment in determining eligibility for services and supports in education and other public services, reform of means assessment procedures is an important element in supporting equity of access to higher education and wider social inclusion goals.⁸⁵ Centralising and simplifying our approach to means assessment

⁸¹ Government of Ireland (2007) National Development Plan 2007-2013: *Transforming Ireland – A Better Quality of Life for All*, pg 250

⁸² See Government of Ireland (2007) National Development Plan 2007-2013: *Transforming Ireland – A Better Quality of Life for All*, p 250-251

⁸³ The full quote reads as follows: “Increasing participation in lifelong learning in particular among the workforce categorised as low-skilled/low paid by enhancing opportunities to access education and training, the development of new skills, the acquisition of recognised qualifications and progression to higher level qualifications to equip all individuals with the skills, capacity and potential to participate fully in the knowledge-based society and progress to better quality jobs”. Government of Ireland (2006) *Towards 2016 Ten-Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015* p 51

⁸⁴ The current low levels of unemployment in the Irish economy raises questions about the appropriateness of targeting the special rate of maintenance grant specifically at those in receipt of social welfare. In 2006-2007, almost 10 per cent of full-time students in higher education were in receipt of this special rate of maintenance grant at a time when the unemployment rate nationally was approximately 5 per cent. The disparity in supports available to minimum wage workers and social welfare recipients has been examined in a recent policy submission. Stephen Stewart (2007), *A modest ‘policy’ proposal*.

⁸⁵ In its consideration of the supports required by adult learners, the Educational Disadvantage Committee identified the need to “integrate the costs of child care, elder care and of transport into programmes addressing educational disadvantage, and administer them in a way that meets participants’ needs”. The Committee acknowledged that “such an approach will require much greater interdepartmental co-operation.” Educational Disadvantage Committee (2005), *Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage*, p9. Childcare and transport also arose as issues in the evaluation of access programmes – Higher Education Authority (2006) p24.

would be a very practical way to advance inter-agency co-operation. It would also simplify the important task of communicating the available supports to the general public. Means assessment is currently carried out in various ways by numerous different government departments and state agencies. A more coherent interdepartmental and system-wide approach is required. Such inter-agency co-operation is a key goal of the current National Development Plan, which states that:

*Delivery of the priority goals for social inclusion will be achieved by strengthening administration through greater coordination and integration of procedures across Government at national and local levels, as well as between these levels... Particular care will also be exercised to avoid duplication of effort and to keep administrative costs to the minimum so that resources can be maximised directly to the assistance of the socially excluded.*⁸⁶

This objective could be advanced by a cross-departmental exercise aimed at achieving greater equivalence in means assessment in the short term and exploring the feasibility of a more centralised approach to means assessment in the medium term. Such an exercise would be entirely consistent with the recent OECD recommendation to move towards a citizen-centred approach to the delivery of public services.⁸⁷

For many prospective learners, further and higher education represent uncharted territory and a lack of information on study options and financial supports can be a significant barrier to participation. The *studentfinance* website (www.studentfinance.ie), recently launched by the Higher Education Authority, is a comprehensive, user-friendly guide to student supports. This website, together with student grant reform and consistent means assessment, should make the financial support schemes more accessible to more students.

Action points

21 Low and lower-middle income working families

The Higher Education Authority will work with the Department of Education and Science on a review of the support needs of students from lower-middle income working families. The forthcoming study on the costs of participating in college and the study of the participation of non-manual groups will provide a valuable evidence base for this work.

22 Part-time support

The Higher Education Authority will work with the Department of Education and Science to explore the establishment of financial and other supports for part-time learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. This will include building on the innovative Modular Accreditation Programme (MAP) and on the current *Progamme for Government* commitment to introduce means-tested free fees for part-time students engaged in upskilling.

⁸⁶ Government of Ireland (2007), *National Development Plan 2007-2013*, p.237.

⁸⁷ OECD (2008) *Public Management Review Towards an Integrated Public Service*, pp 183-234.

23 Developing awareness of the available supports

The Higher Education Authority will promote awareness of financial supports for students and prospective students through ongoing development and regular updating of www.studentfinance.ie. In addition, the Higher Education Authority will work with other agencies to support the development of information resources such as www.QualifaX.ie. The possibility of merging existing information resources into a unified comprehensive web resource for prospective students of further and higher education will be explored over the course of this plan.⁸⁸

24 Student Assistance Fund

The Higher Education Authority will produce good practice guidelines for the administration of the Student Assistance Fund and will use the sector-wide data collection initiative to develop and implement an allocation model for the fund that takes account of the numbers of students from under-represented groups in each higher-education institution.

25 Millennium Partnership Fund

The Higher Education Authority, Pobal and the Department of Education and Science will reform the Millennium Partnership Fund so as to focus on the development of community-based strategies to promote greater access to higher education.

26 Entitlements of ethnic minority students

The Higher Education Authority will work with the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and other relevant government agencies to clarify entitlements for ethnic minority students, including refugees.

27 Opportunities to study abroad

The Higher Education Authority will work to ensure that financial barriers do not prevent students from low-income backgrounds and students with disabilities from availing of opportunities to study abroad under the Erasmus programme.

Widening participation in higher education for people with disabilities

OBJECTIVE: The higher-education participation rates of people with disabilities will be increased through greater opportunities and supports.

Notwithstanding the encouraging progress that has been made over recent years, people with disabilities continue to be under-represented in higher education. In the case of people with sensory disabilities, physical disabilities and multiple disabilities, this under-representation is particularly severe. Current participation rates are estimated at 15 to 17 per cent for people with sensory disabilities and 14 to 16 per cent for people with physical disabilities.⁸⁹ These participation rates are well below the current national

⁸⁸ The domain name www.yourfuture.ie has been acquired with a view to exploring the development of such a comprehensive web resource.

⁸⁹ These estimates are based on a comparison of relevant students enrolled in higher education with Census 2006 data on the numbers of

entry rates of 55 per cent and lower than the entry rates of any socio-economic group. A particular concern remains with regard to opportunities for students with special learning difficulties from lower socio-economic groups.

Recent legislative developments require educational institutions to do all that is reasonable to accommodate students with disabilities.⁹⁰ This accommodation can be by means of providing special treatment or facilities if, without such accommodation, it would be impossible or unduly difficult for the person to avail of the service provided by the educational establishment.⁹¹ Despite that, students with disabilities cannot yet be assured of a minimum level of provision across the higher-education sector.

The dedicated expertise of a disability officer is regarded as central in an institution's capacity to achieve widening participation. This specialist expertise facilitates an overall institution-wide approach, components of which include supporting and implementing innovations in teaching and learning, consultation with learners and appropriate professional development for staff. The provision of core services to students with disabilities such as assistive technology and measures to ensure the accessibility of course materials will also be important components of an effective institutional approach.⁹²

At national level, the integration of services and support for learners with disabilities will require greater coherence between service providers and education levels. A further system-level issue relates to the current absence of established funding for learning supports for part-time students with disabilities in higher education. Part-time education is the route of choice for many adults with disability due to the impact of their disability and without these supports in place aspiring adults do not have equality of opportunity to access higher education.

Action points

28 Disability Officers

The Higher Education Authority will work with institutions and the Department of Education and Science to achieve a situation where all higher-education institutions have designated a disability officer who has responsibility for coordinating supports and accommodations for students with disabilities.

29 Reasonable accommodations

Higher-education institutions will work to ensure that:

course materials will be available electronically or in an accessible format to learners with disabilities

course assessments are flexible in relation to students with disabilities; and

people with disabilities (aged 18 to 20) in the population.

⁹⁰ The relevant legislation includes the Equal Status Acts (1998 to 2004), Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004), the Universities Act (1998) and the Disabilities Act (2005)

⁹¹ AHEAD Guide to the Equal Status Act 2000

⁹² "The learning environment is made more inclusive when there is effective use of new learning technologies... and where course materials are provided in alternative accessible formats for students with disabilities". Higher Education Authority (2006), *Towards the Best Education for All, An Evaluation of Access Programmes in Higher Education in Ireland*, p.22.

training in inclusive teaching and institutional practice is available to all staff through induction and professional development programmes

30 Support for part-time higher education

The Higher Education Authority will work with the Department of Education and Science to ensure that learners with disabilities who return to or continue with education through the part-time course route have access to supports.

31 Funding to support students with disabilities

The National Access Office will initiate a review of the Fund for Students with Disabilities. The review will include consideration of the appropriateness of the balance between individualised and institutional funding for disability support.

32 Coherence between different levels of education

The Department of Education and Science will work with all relevant educational agencies to ensure greater coherence in diagnostic assessments and in the provision of learning supports across the different levels of education.

33 Participation in an international study

The Higher Education Authority will work with the Department of Education and Science in producing an Irish country report on students with disabilities for a forthcoming OECD study *Pathways For Disabled Students to Tertiary Education and Employment*, thus advancing our understanding of strategies to promote participation in higher education in other countries.

34 Alternate format

The National Access Office will commission research on the provision of academic material in alternate format across the higher-education sector. Recommendations will be made and next steps outlined in the context of creating a model of good practice for the provision of alternative format.

Targets

5

5 Targets

This chapter sets out two headline objectives in relation to the evidence-base for higher-education equality policy and institutional plans and then more specific targets in respect of participation. The targets are set within the timeframe of the current National Development Plan which extends to 2013. The associated targets for the mid-point review of this plan in 2010 are also identified.

In the interests of simplicity and brevity, separate targets are set for different target groups. In reality, the various factors associated with under-representation in higher education overlap and interact. This can complicate the challenge of engaging people in higher education but it also means that progress on one dimension will effect wider progress across all target groups. The data that will become available through national evaluations of this plan and through the availability of institutional access plans will endeavor to capture the full diversity of the student body and the complexity of the challenges arising.

The evidence base and relevant data collections systems will be enhanced

Ireland is envied internationally for the quality of our survey data on the socio-economic profile of entrants to higher education in 1980, 1986, 1992, 1998 and 2004. These surveys testify to the enduring concern with equality in the development of the Irish education system over recent decades. Ireland's weaknesses in relation to evidence-based policy making lie primarily in the uneven quality of administrative data across the public services. A very thorough evaluation of the quality of administrative data undertaken in 2003 revealed that we are weakest in what could be broadly termed social and equality statistics.⁹³ This issue was recognised clearly in the 2005-2007 Access Plan which included the development of "*mechanisms to efficiently gather comprehensive and reliable data on access to and participation in higher education*" among the key action points.

As part of the implementation of the previous plan, an equal access data initiative was introduced into the registration process of higher-education institutions in the 2007-2008 academic year. This initiative builds on the considerable progress that has been achieved over recent years within the Higher Education Authority in the establishment of a student record system.⁹⁴ The continuing development of a world-class information system remains integral to the implementation of this current plan. The collection of equality data at the point of registration to higher education is too late to support the targeting of pre-entry initiatives operated by universities and other higher-education institutions. Therefore, the collection of equality data at the point of application to higher education will be explored in tandem with evaluation of the quality of data emerging from the registration process.

⁹³ Report of the Steering Group on Social and Equality Statistics, 2003. See also National Statistics Board (2003), Strategy for Statistics 2003-2008 and Central Statistics Office (2004), The Statistical Potential of Administrative Records.

⁹⁴ The fact that data collection has moved towards individualised student-record systems, which include Personal Public Service Numbers will, in the medium-term, facilitate coherent planning across a range of educational levels.

The improvements to data collection that are underway are not an end in themselves but a means to facilitate a quantum leap in the quality of self-evaluation. An evidence-base that commands public confidence and trust will be vital to underpin the evolving funding model which aims to reflect the importance of access in its allocation of public funds to institutions. It will also support target-setting at the national level and monitoring of progress towards the achievement of these national targets. The availability of robust, comparable data across all institutions will facilitate collaborative approaches and the identification of best practice within the sector. In addressing the data challenges at system level, a key aim will be to alleviate the bureaucratic burden on access practitioners that has emerged over recent years.

Institutions will develop access plans and processes for evaluation

Institutions will outline their strategies in institution-wide access plans. These plans should include:

- A clear statement of the institution's access policy
- Details of the access resources and personnel
- A clear statement of target groups, with reference to national and regional priorities
- An outline of pre-entry strategies and post-entry services and supports
- Links with partners in the community
- Outline of progression opportunities for access to the institution
- A profile of the student population in terms of key access criteria
- Targets for enhanced access
- A commitment to transparency, systematic data collection and evaluation
- Reviews of progress
- Upward feedback

The institutional importance attached to access may also be reflected in systematic staff training on access and diversity issues and in *“how they reward participation in access activities, for example in the promotion process for academic staff”*.⁹⁵ The improvements in data collection will provide institutions with a more robust evidence-base on which to evaluate their approaches to access and retention and provide a basis for target-setting.

In order to enhance the responsiveness of the Irish education system, it is envisaged that the institutional access plans will include upward feedback. This concept of upward feedback is a key part of the overall human resource strategy within the public services. As it is envisaged within the institutional access plans, it will draw on the expertise of institutions in their work with students and in terms of their role *“as a source of independent insight into matters that impact on our society”*.⁹⁶ Institutions will offer feedback to the Higher Education Authority on aspects of the policy and funding framework that are helping and hindering progress in their pursuit of national

⁹⁵ Educational Disadvantage Committee (2005), *Moving Beyond Educational Disadvantage*, p.28.

⁹⁶ Higher Education Authority (2008), *HEA Strategic Plan 2008-2010*, p.12

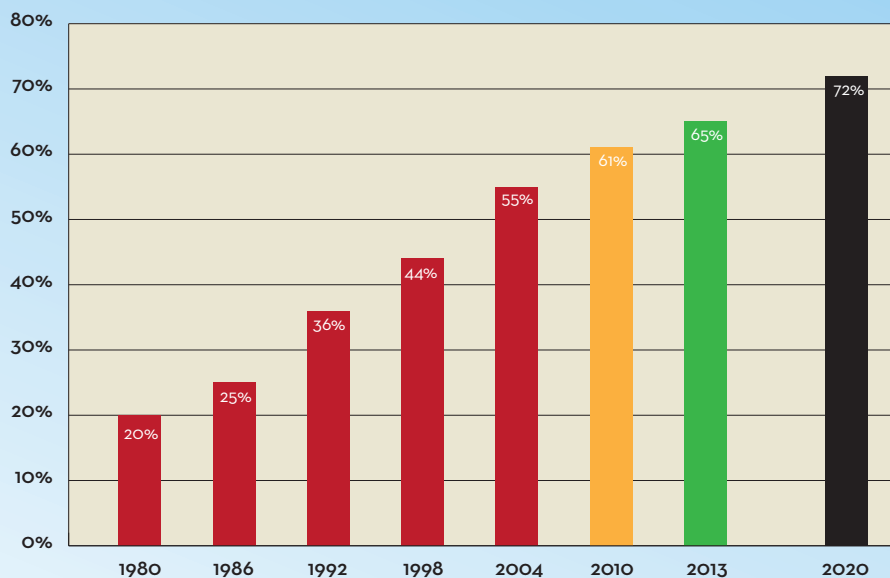
objectives. This will inform our understanding of the effectiveness of our overall policy and funding approach and will contribute to improvements in the quality and responsiveness of the higher-education system.⁹⁷

An entry rate of 72 per cent of the relevant age cohort will be achieved by 2020

This Plan endorses the headline participation target set as part of the National Skills Strategy. This strategy estimates that a higher-education entry rate of 72 per cent will be required by 2020 to meet the rising demands for higher-education qualifications.

Between 1986 and 2004, entry rates to Irish higher education increased by an additional 1.7 per cent per year on average. Going from 55 per cent (in 2004) to 72 per cent in 2020 will require annual increases of the order of 1.1 per cent up to 2020. As illustrated in Figure 5.1, this implies an overall entry rate of 65 per cent by 2013 and a target of 61 per cent by 2010. Steady progress towards the national skills strategy target of a 72 per cent entry rate by 2020 will require an annual increase of 778 entrants each year for the next twelve years (see Appendix 3).

Figure 5.1⁹⁸ **Targets for overall entry rates to higher education (entrants as a % of 17-19 year olds in the population)**



⁹⁷ Towards 2016 recognises that “making progress will require a capability to adapt flexibly to required institutional and service delivery changes at both national and local level and to learn from the insights provided by the lifecycle framework and evidence about effectiveness of different interventions”. Government of Ireland (2006) *Towards 2016: Ten - Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015*. p.41

⁹⁸ This statistic refers to the total number of full-time entrants to higher education divided by an estimate of the total numbers of 17 to 19 year olds in the population. Mature entrants (and other entrants outside the 17 to 19 year age range) are included in this statistic. Therefore increases in full-time mature students (entering higher education for the first time) will contribute to the achievement of this target. As of course will increases in the proportions of students from second-level education transferring to higher education.

All socio-economic groups will have entry rates of at least 54 per cent by 2020

The review of progress outlined in section 2 (Figure 2.1) demonstrates that most socio-economic groups have benefitted from the general expansion of higher-education opportunities but that inequalities persist. The traditional target groups of semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers remain significantly below national averages and the non-manual group currently derives least benefit from higher education.

In statistical terms, effective educational institutions and education systems are called on to achieve three major goals: to raise the mean attainment level; to reduce attainment variance and disparity, and to decrease the correlation between students' performance and their social background.⁹⁹ This articulation of the objectives of education reinforces the fact that “*reducing inequality is integral to fostering the quality of education systems*”.¹⁰⁰ It also provides a framework within which the socio-economic targets can be formulated.

The objective of raising the mean achievement level is embodied in the national level target to raise entry rates to higher education to 72 per cent by 2020. In terms of achieving reductions in the variance and in the correlation between social origins and educational outcomes, the socio-economic targets in this plan are based on the principle that no group should have an entry rate to higher education that is less than three-quarters of the national average by 2020.

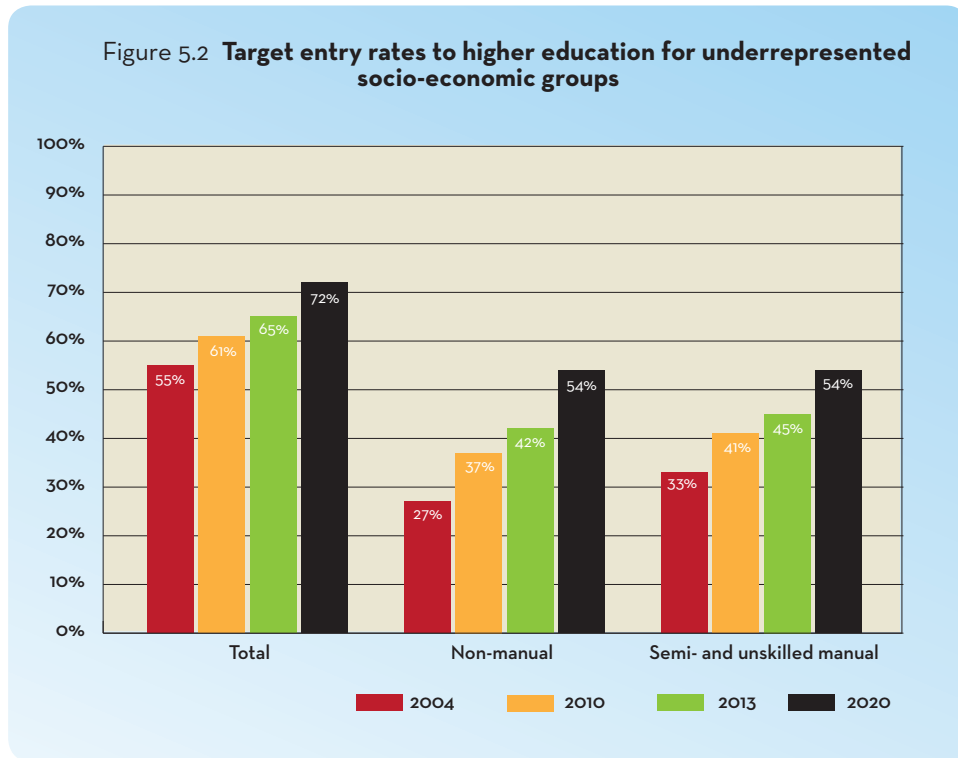
In 2004, which is the most recent year for which we have data, the following groups were below the national average entry rate of 55 per cent:

- Skilled manual (50 per cent)
- Semi- and unskilled manual (33 per cent)
- Non-manual (27 per cent)

Given the very encouraging trends in participation rates within the skilled manual group and their proximity to national average levels of entry in 2004, it is proposed to focus on the other two groups. On the basis of the principle outlined above, the long-term target is that all socio-economic groups will have entry rates of at least 54 per cent by 2020. Steady and substantial progress will be required to achieve this target within this timeframe. It implies a target of 42 per cent entry rates within the non-manual group and 45 per cent within the semi- and unskilled manual group by 2013. These targets and the interim 2010 figures are illustrated in Figure 5.2.

⁹⁹ Bloom, B.S. (1979) *Caractéristiques individuelles et apprentissages scolaire*, Labor, Bruxelles. Referenced in Hutmacher, W., Cochrane, D., Bottani, N. Eds. (2001) *In pursuit of equity in education - using international indicators to compare equity policies*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, p.14.

¹⁰⁰ Hutmacher, W., Cochrane, D., Bottani, N. Eds. (2001) *In pursuit of equity in education - using international indicators to compare equity policies*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, p.14.



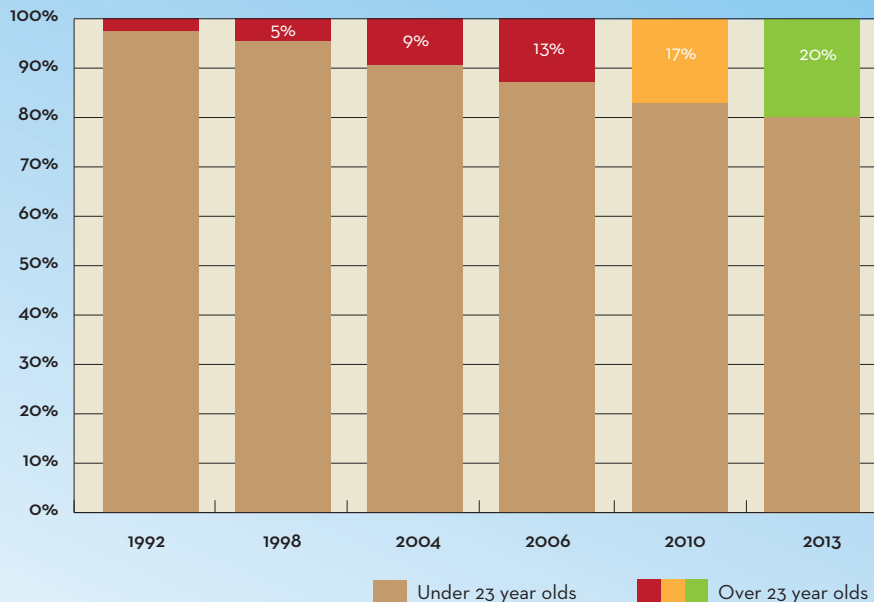
This plan sets out the general entry rates to which we are aspiring. Although it is not proposed to establish national targets across distinct fields of study, the plan is to pursue equity of access to all professions and careers and to monitor progress transparently and responsively.

Mature students will comprise at least 20 per cent of total full-time entrants by 2013

Our recent progress on the lifelong learning agenda is a key component of our successes to date in widening access and participation in higher education. The higher-education system has exceeded the national targets for full-time mature student entry set in 2001. Building on this success, this plan aims to further increase the proportion of mature students in higher education so that they comprise at least 20 per cent of total full-time entrants by 2013. This target and the interim target of 17 per cent by 2010 are illustrated in Figure 5.3.

Mature students are classified as those who are aged over 23 at the point of entry to higher education. Evaluations of our progress will take account of data on the full age spectrum of entrants to higher education.

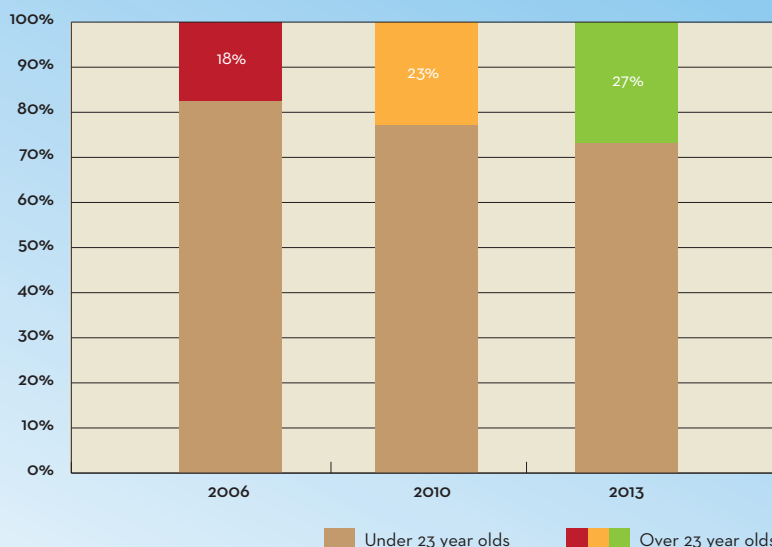
Figure 5.3 Target share of mature students among full-time entrants to higher education



Mature students will comprise 27 per cent of all (full-time and part-time) entrants by 2013

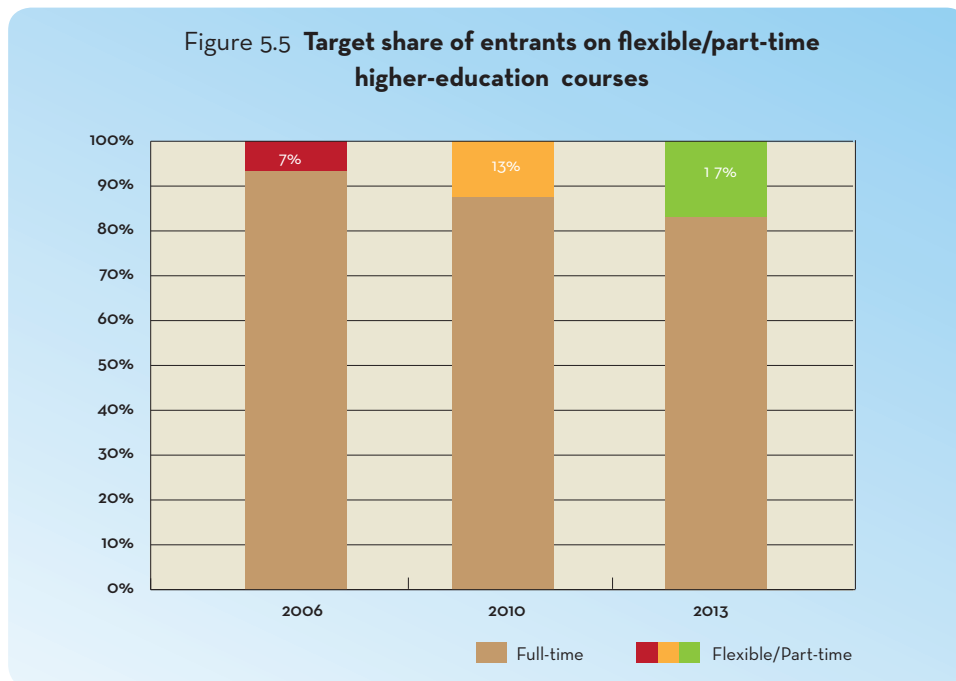
Figure 5.4 sets out a further target for the share of mature students among full-time and part-time entrants combined. In 2006, mature students accounted for 18 per cent of all such entrants. The plan is to increase mature student participation so that they comprise 27 per cent of all (full-time and part-time) entrants by 2013.

Figure 5.4 Target share of mature students among full-time and part-time entrants to higher education



Flexible/part-time provision will increase to 17 per cent by 2013

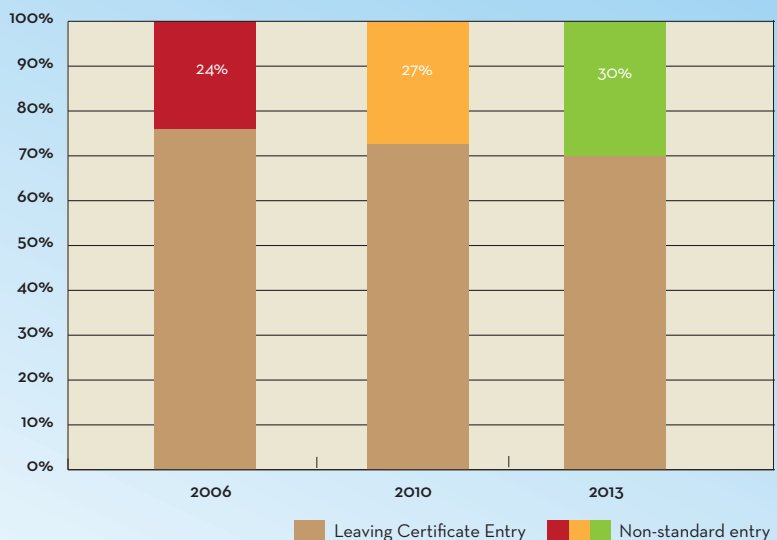
Improvements in the extent to which higher education promotes lifelong learning will require greater flexibility in the delivery of programmes and continuing progress in broadening entry routes. Figure 5.5 sets a target for flexible/part-time provision to increase from the current share of 7 per cent of undergraduate entrants to 17 per cent by 2013. This will be supported by the Strategic Innovation Fund over the period of the current National Development Plan. An interim target of 13 per cent is required by 2010. An interim target of 13 per cent is required by 2010.



Non-standard entry routes to higher education will be developed so that they account for 30 per cent of all entrants by 2013

Figure 5.6 outlines a target for our objectives to broaden entry routes to higher education. This measure will count all entrants to higher education outside of the traditional Leaving Certificate and deferred Leaving Certificate cohorts. At present, it is estimated that 24 per cent of entrants to higher education come through non-standard entry routes. In support of the objectives to diversify entry routes, the target is to increase non-standard entrants so that they account for at least 30 per cent of full-time entrants by 2013. The main 'non-standard' entry routes refer to transfer and progression from further education and mature student entry. Entrants under the HEAR scheme for supplementary admissions will also be counted in this indicator. The expansion of new access routes must build on the architecture that is in place through the National Framework of Qualifications and, where feasible, through the Central Applications Office. Links between higher-education institutions and community education groups will also contribute to the achievement of this target.

Figure 5.6 Target for broadening entry routes to higher education

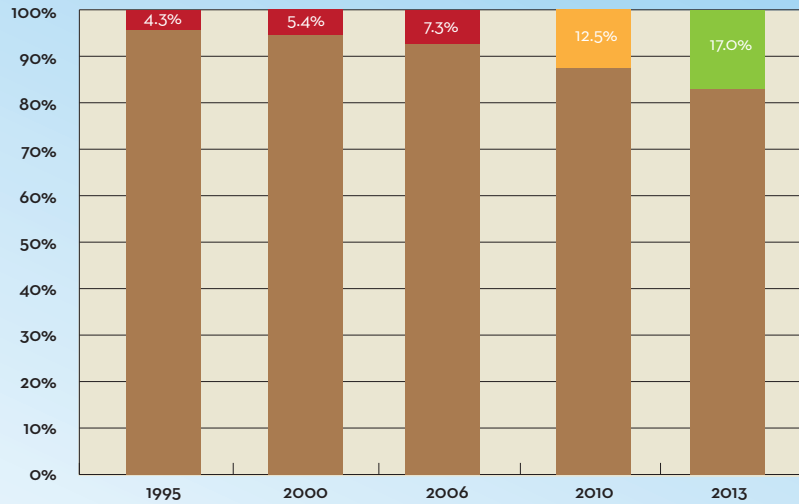


Ireland will reach EU average levels for lifelong learning by 2010 and will move towards the top quartile of EU countries by 2013

It is proposed to monitor our progress on lifelong learning in the international context. This will be done using Eurostat data collected as part of the monitoring of the EU *Education and Training 2010* strategy.¹⁰¹ Lifelong learning is one of five key areas where member states have agreed European benchmarks to be achieved by 2010. The prioritisation of lifelong learning within EU education policy arises because of concerns at the generally low levels of success in lifelong learning across Europe. Within this process, member states have agreed a shared objective to raise the EU average level of participation in lifelong learning to 12.5 per cent of the adult population by 2010. In 2006, the EU average was 10 per cent. At 7 per cent, Ireland was below the EU average in 2006. Our target for lifelong learning is that Ireland will reach EU average levels by 2010 and will move ahead of the EU average by 2013. These targets are set out in Figure 5.7.

¹⁰¹ For more details on Education and Training 2010, see http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/et_2010_en.html

Figure 5.7¹⁰² **Lifelong learning target: persons aged 25 to 64 participating in education and training**



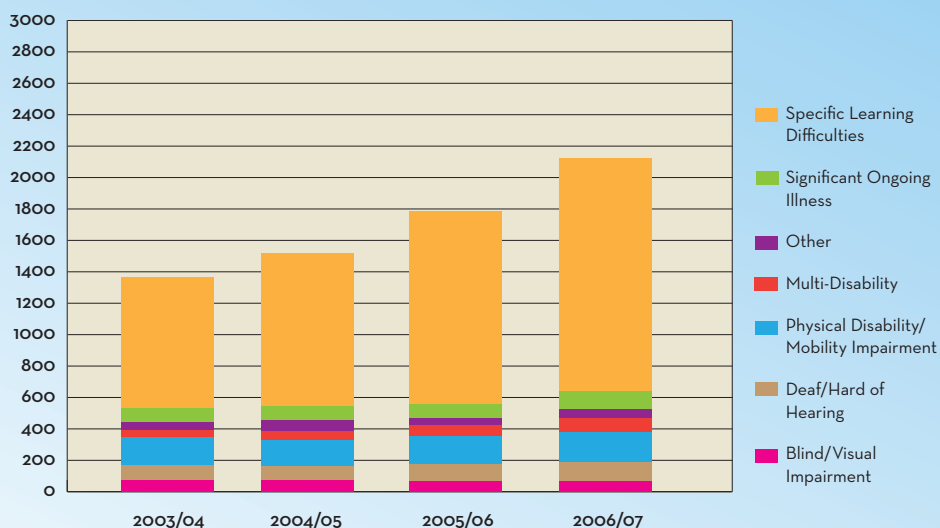
Annual updates on our progress towards this target will be available through the EU monitoring of *Education and Training 2010*. In addition, a fuller statistical exploration of lifelong learning will be undertaken by national statistical offices across the EU at the end of 2008. This survey will provide information on the level of engagement of Irish adults in all forms of learning. It will also provide insights into the motivation and supports of those engaging with learning and the motivation and barriers of those who do not.

Learners with a disability

A significant rise in the participation rates of students with disabilities has been achieved in recent years. The headline target set in 2001 has been met and exceeded. However, progress has been slow for certain people with disabilities, particularly people who are deaf or blind, people with physical disabilities and people with multiple disabilities. Figure 5.8 presents a profile of students in receipt of supports funded through the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) between 2003/04 and 2006/07.

¹⁰² The measure used in this indicator refers to adult participation (25-64 year olds) in all forms of education and training in the four weeks preceding the survey. In Ireland the data is collected by the Central Statistics Office as part of the Quarterly National Household Survey in accordance with guidelines agreed within Eurostat. This indicator covers participation in further education and in continuing professional development as well as participation in higher education. Nevertheless, higher-education systems contribute significantly to the overall performance of countries in lifelong learning and the indicator is a very good measure of the extent to which countries are succeeding in engaging the adult population in continuing education and training. Data are available on the web at: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?_pageid=1996,39140985&dad=portal&schema=PORTAL&product=REF_SD_SC&root=theme0/sd_sc/sd_sc_edu/tsdsc440&zone=detail

Figure 5.8 Profile of higher-education students in receipt of supports under the Fund for Students with Disabilities



While progress in widening participation across the full spectrum of disabilities will be supported and evaluated, it is proposed to confine the national targets for disability to the groups identified above on the basis of their continuing low levels of participation in higher education. The plan is to double the numbers of people with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities in higher education by 2013. The target is quantified in terms of number of higher-education students from the target groups who are in receipt of supports under the Fund for Students with Disabilities. Figure 5.9 provides details of the new disability targets, including interim targets for 2010.

The number of students with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities in higher education will be doubled by 2013

Figure 5.9 Disability targets - Number of students enrolled in higher education

Category of disability	2003/04	2006/07	2010/11	2013/14
Physical disability/ Mobility Impairment	175	190	285	380
Deaf/Hard of hearing	94	126	189	252
Blind/Visual Impairment	76	65	98	130
Multiple disabilities	48	85	127	170
Total	393	466	699	932



Implementation

Implementation

Given the growing importance of education in supporting and sustaining economic and social development, all developed countries are actively pursuing strategies to improve the education and skills profile of their populations. In pursuit of these general upskilling objectives, there is widespread appreciation of the importance of lifelong learning and of the fact that continuing expansion of higher education will rely on success in achieving greater equality of opportunity. As noted in chapter 1, the countries which successfully address these challenges will have a competitive advantage into the future in terms of economic competitiveness, social inclusion and civic engagement. Ireland has recently achieved top-decile status in terms of national wealth per head of population. Top-decile performance in terms of the education and skills of our population is now vital if we are to maintain and sustain this success.

*“World-class skills, education and training can provide Ireland with a unique competitive edge which will allow us to remain ahead of the curve economically, while improving living standards in a participative and truly inclusive society”.*¹⁰³

A key aim of this plan and of the broader reforms of the HEA recurrent funding model is to ensure that higher-education institutions in Ireland are innovative and responsive to national development goals and to the needs of an increasingly diverse student body.

¹⁰³ Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007), *Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy*, p.108.

Joined-up approaches

Given the multi-dimensional and cumulative nature of educational disadvantage, it is clear that strategies which rely solely on one agency (e.g. the higher-education institution) to effect change will have limited success. Acting alone, few agencies can take responsibility for the pursuit of greater social inclusion, but by joining with other agencies, strategies can be devised to ensure that the significant challenges are addressed in a comprehensive meaningful way. This emphasis on joined-up approaches has been strongly supported in the recent OECD Public Management Review, *Towards an Integrated Public Service*:

“Ireland now needs to look towards the development of a more integrated Public Service, with greater connectivity across the different sectors/ agencies. A more integrated approach at national and local level will better allow Ireland to more effectively meet the challenges of achieving wider societal goals and the delivery to the citizen of more coherent and integrated services”¹⁰⁴

There are a number of dimensions to the pursuit of greater connectivity in our efforts to achieve equality in higher education. The first relates to greater inter-departmental coordination as part of a ‘whole-of-government’ approach. The second relates to the achievement of greater coordination between the various levels of education and a third dimension relates to community involvement in the design and delivery of joined-up services. The over-riding goal of joined-up approaches is the delivery of more appropriate and locally-responsive services which are holistic and cater for the range of an individual and family’s needs. A priority over the term of this plan will be to enhance co-operation across government departments, relevant agencies and all levels of education in order to achieve a more accessible and flexible education system.

The remaining sections of this chapter provide an overview of how the targets link to the actions and how the actions link to agencies.

¹⁰⁴ OECD (2008) Public Management Review *Towards an Integrated Public Service*, p. 18

Linking targets to actions ¹⁰⁵

Target:

All socio-economic groups will have entry rates of at least 54 per cent by 2020

Actions:

- Institution-wide access plans (1)
- Investment in widening participation in higher education (15 – 20)
- Expansion of part-time/flexible learning opportunities (7)
- PATH – the Programme for Access To Higher education (9)
- Diversification of entry routes to higher education (10)
- Student supports for part-time learners (8, 22)
- Review of student supports for lower middle-income working families (21)
- Raise awareness of available student supports (23)
- Review of funds within the Third Level Access Measure (24, 25)
- Workforce upskilling (12)
- Promotional campaign (13)
- Transition year module on access to further and higher education (14)

Target:

Mature students will comprise at least 20 per cent of total full-time entrants by 2013

Mature students will comprise 27 per cent of all (full-time and part-time) entrants by 2013

Actions:

- Expansion of part-time/flexible learning opportunities (7)
- Student supports for part-time learners (8, 22)
- PATH – Programme for Access To Higher education (9)
- Diversification of entry routes to higher education (10)
- An early second-chance strategy for 17-22 year olds (11)
- Workforce upskilling (12)
- Promotional campaign (13)
- Investment in widening higher-education participation (15 – 20)
- Review of student supports for lower middle-income working families (21)
- Raise awareness of available student supports (23)

¹⁰⁵ The numbers in brackets following the actions within the tables correspond with the numbering of action points in chapter 4.

Target:

Flexible/part-time provision will increase to 17 per cent by 2013

Actions:

Expansion of part-time/flexible learning opportunities (7)
 PATH – Programme for Access To Higher education (9)
 Investment in widening higher-education participation (15-20)
 Institution-wide access plans (1)

Target:

Non-standard entry routes to higher education will be developed so that they account for 30 per cent of all entrants by 2013

Actions:

Diversification of entry routes to higher education (10)
 PATH – Programme for Access To Higher education (9)
 Institution-wide access plans (1)

Target:

Ireland will reach EU average levels for lifelong learning by 2010 and will move towards the top quartile of EU countries by 2013

Actions:

Expansion of part-time/flexible learning opportunities (7)
 Student supports for part-time learners (8, 22)
 Diversification of entry routes to higher education (10)
 PATH – Programme for Access To Higher education (9)
 Workforce upskilling (12)
 Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) (16)
 Institutional funding for access (15)
 Modernisation of student supports (21-27)

Target:

The number of students with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities in higher education will double by 2013

Actions:

Disability Officers (28)
 Reasonable accommodations (29)
 Support for part-time higher education (30)
 Funding to support students with disabilities (31)
 Coherence between different levels of education (32)
 Diversification of entry routes to higher education (10)
 Alternate format (34)

Linking actions to agencies

The Higher Education Authority will progress the following action points:

2 Building capacity

The Higher Education Authority will facilitate sector-wide capacity building through a range of supports, including continuing professional development, practitioner workshops and seminars and through the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF).

5 Research network on access

The Higher Education Authority will facilitate a research network on access and equality issues, to increase the level of research activity on higher-education equality policy and practice. This research network will compliment and build upon the work of existing networks of practitioners.

6 International conference on equity and excellence in higher education

The Higher Education Authority will host an international conference on the subject of equality and excellence in higher education.

13 Promotional campaign

As part of the Higher Education Authority's communication strategy and advocacy role, the National Access Office will introduce targeted promotional campaigns for under-represented groups, including boys, the Traveller community, immigrants and parents with few or no educational qualifications.

15 Institutional funding for access

The Higher Education Authority will further revise the recurrent funding model to better reflect the costs to institutions of equity of access programmes. Funding allocations will be informed by the *Equal Access* data initiative which will ensure transparency.

16 Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF)

The Strategic Innovation Fund will continue to support widening participation in higher education through the prioritisation of access initiatives and indirectly through support for lifelong learning and teaching and learning initiatives. The Higher Education Authority will monitor the extent to which SIF meets its objectives in widening participation and in other priorities areas.

17 Performance funding

In developing a performance element within the recurrent funding model, in consultation with stakeholders, the Higher Education Authority will ensure that equity of access features as part of the evaluations of progress.

The Higher Education Authority will progress the following action points:

18 Philanthropy

In light of the significant potential of access-related initiatives to attract philanthropic investment, the Higher Education Authority will continue to explore ways to increase the level of such investment and to increase its impact on the achievement of greater equality in Irish higher education.

19 Advocacy

The Higher Education Authority will continue to advocate the importance of investment to promote greater equity of access to higher education and will monitor the impact of funding on the promotion of greater equality in higher education. In addition, the National Access Office will ensure that there is clear information available to institutions on the range of funding sources available.

24 Student Assistance Fund

The Higher Education Authority will produce good practice guidelines for the administration of the Student Assistance Fund and will use the sector-wide data collection initiative to develop and implement an allocation model for the fund that takes account of the numbers of students from under-represented groups.

31 Funding to support students with disabilities

The National Access Office will initiate a review of the Fund for Students with Disabilities. The review will include consideration of the appropriateness of the balance between individualised and institutional funding for disability support.

34 Alternate format

The National Access Office will commission research on the provision of academic material in alternate format across the higher-education sector. Recommendations will be made and next steps outlined in the context of creating a model of good practice for the provision of alternative format.

The Higher Education Authority will progress the following action points with higher-education institutions:

1 Institution-wide access plans

Institutions will develop an institution-wide plan to promote greater equity of access and participation in higher education. These access plans will be integrated as part of the overall institutional strategic planning process. The National Access Office will provide practical assistance and guidance to institutions in the development and review of their access strategies.

3 Supporting good practice

The Higher Education Authority will support the exchange of good practice in widening participation for practitioners, registrars and all interested staff. Working together with AMA, the network of higher-education access practitioners, the National Access Office will provide initial funding for the development of the creation of a web resource and will contribute regular updates on national policy developments.

4 Recognising good equality practice

The National Access Office will promote equality training for staff in higher-education institutions and recognition of good equality practice as part of promotional criteria.

20 Dormant Accounts Funding for the Institutes of Technology

The National Access Office will assist the institute of technology sector to derive maximum benefit and capacity-building from the €3m Dormant Accounts access fund over the coming two years.

29 Reasonable accommodations

Higher-education institutions will work to ensure that:

- course materials will be available electronically or in an accessible format to learners with disabilities
- that course assessments are flexible in relation to students with disabilities
- that training in inclusive teaching and institutional practice is available to all staff through induction and professional development programmes

The Higher Education Authority will progress the following action points with the Department of Education and Science:

7 Expansion of part-time/flexible learning opportunities

The Higher Education Authority and the Department of Education and Science will support the expansion of opportunities for flexible learning. Developmental funding will be available through the Strategic Innovation Fund and the Higher Education Authority will work to ensure that no disincentives to part-time provision exist within the recurrent funding allocation model. The Higher Education Authority will also advise on the development of national policy on open, distance and blended learning.

8 Student supports for part-time learners

The Higher Education Authority will work with the Department of Education and Science to examine the issue of equity of access to part-time higher education and to explore the student support implications of lifelong learning. Along with this, the National Access Office will work with higher-education institutions to develop a framework of good practice for the provision of post-entry supports for part-time learners.

21 Low and lower-middle income working families

The Higher Education Authority will work with the Department of Education and Science on a review of the support needs of students from low-income working families. The forthcoming study on the costs of participating in college and the study of the participation of non-manual groups will provide a valuable evidence base for this work.

22 Part-time support

The Higher Education Authority will work with the Department of Education and Science to explore the establishment of financial and other supports for part-time learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. This will include building on the innovative Modular Accreditation Programme (MAP) and on the current *Programme for Government* commitment to introduce means-tested free fees for part-time students engaged in upskilling.

28 Disability Officers

The Higher Education Authority will work with institutions and the Department of Education and Science to achieve a situation where all higher-education institutions have designated a disability officer who has responsibility for coordinating supports and accommodations for students with disabilities.

30 Support for part-time higher education

The Higher Education Authority will work with the Department of Education and Science to ensure that learners with disabilities who return to or continue with education through the part-time course route have access to supports.

32 Coherence between different levels of education

The Department of Education and Science will work with all relevant educational agencies to ensure greater coherence in diagnostic assessments and in the provision of learning supports across the different levels of education.

33 Participation in an international study

The Higher Education Authority will work with the Department of Education and Science in producing an Irish country report on students with disabilities for a forthcoming OECD study *Pathways For Disabled Students to Tertiary Education and Employment*, thus advancing our understanding of strategies to promote participation in higher education in other countries.

The Higher Education Authority will progress the following action points with the Department of Education and Science and other relevant agencies:

9 PATH – Programme for Access To Higher education

The Higher Education Authority will work with a range of educational agencies to explore the feasibility of developing a Programme for Access To Higher education (PATH). The key objective of PATH would be to enhance collaborative actions and progression between the different levels of the education system. It is anticipated that the PATH programme will encompass actions listed below under ‘diversification of entry routes to higher education’.

10 Diversification of entry routes to higher education

Key issues in relation to the diversification of entry routes to higher education that will be progressed as part of this plan include:

Progression

The Higher Education Authority will work with higher and further-educational institutions to strengthen the interface between further and higher education by actively facilitating the development of access and progression routes, including innovative bridging arrangements and credit transfer between further and higher education.

A national policy for higher-education access courses

The National Access Office will work with the Department of Education and Science and further and higher-education institutions to advise on the development of a national policy for higher-education access courses.

Higher Education Access Route (HEAR)

The Higher Education Authority will support the work of the Irish Universities Association, DIT and other higher-education institutions to reform and extend the HEAR scheme (a supplementary admissions route) through the CAO for socio-economically disadvantaged students.

Supplementary admissions route for students with disabilities

The Higher Education Authority will support the work of the Irish Universities Association, DIT and other higher-education institutions in developing and refining the supplementary admissions route for students with disabilities.

Recognition of Prior Learning

The Higher Education Authority will support the NQAI and HETAC in their development and implementation of a national action plan for the recognition of prior learning.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2008), Strategic Plan 2008-2012, p.15.

The Higher Education Authority will progress the following action points with the Department of Education and Science and other relevant agencies:

11 An early second-chance strategy for 17-22 year olds

The Higher Education Authority will examine the particular needs of young adults in the 17-22 year age group who are not benefiting from higher education, with a view to developing an 'early second-chance' strategy for this cohort.

12 Workforce upskilling

The Higher Education Authority will contribute to and advise on the development of national policy for work-based upskilling for employees, especially those who have not previously benefited from higher education (up to NFQ level 8).

14 Transition year module on access to further and higher education

The National Access Office will work with the National Council Curriculum Assessment to facilitate the development of a transition year unit or module specifically on access to further and higher education. The module will be targeted at second level schools with relatively low progression rates to higher education.

23 Developing awareness of the available supports

The Higher Education Authority will promote awareness of financial supports for students and prospective students through ongoing development and regular updating of www.studentfinance.ie. In addition, the HEA will work with other agencies to support the development of information resources such as www.QualifaX.ie. The possibility of merging existing information resources into a unified comprehensive web resource for prospective students of further and higher education will be explored over the course of this plan.¹⁰⁷

25 Millennium Partnership Fund

The Higher Education Authority, Pobal and the Department of Education and Science will reform the Millennium Partnership Fund so as to focus on the development of community-based strategies to promote greater access to higher education.

26 Entitlements of ethnic minority students

The National Access Office will work with the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and other relevant government agencies to clarify entitlements for ethnic minority students including refugees.

27 Opportunities to study abroad

The Higher Education Authority will work to ensure that financial barriers do not prevent students from low-income backgrounds and students with disabilities from availing of opportunities to study abroad under the Erasmus programme.

¹⁰⁷ The domain name www.yourfuture.ie has been acquired with a view to exploring the development of such a comprehensive web resource.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Members of the Advisory Group to the National Access Office of the Higher Education Authority

The members of the Advisory Group to the National Access Office are:

Berni Brady	AONTAS
Loman Conway	Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA)
Dr. Thomas Cooke	Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)
Jennifer Doran	National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
Brendan Goggin	Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI)
Professor Gary Granville	Higher Education Authority (HEA)
Ann Heelan	Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD)
Cathal Kelly	The Equality Authority
Hamidreza Khodabakhshi	Union of Students of Ireland (USI)
John MacGabhann	Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)
Bernie McDonnell	Pobal
Finola McDonnell	Irish Business Employers Confederation (IBEC)
Brian McGonagle	Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI)
Collete Murray	Pavee Point/Irish Traveller Movement
Ann O'Brien	Access Made Accessible (AMA)
Trish O'Brien	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)
Mary O'Grady	Disability Advisory Working Network (DAWN)
Rory O'Sullivan	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
Eleanor Petrie	National Parents Council
Lewis Purser/ Áine Galvin	Irish Universities Association (IUA)
Dr. Carmel Quinlan	Network of Mature Students Officers (NIMSO)
Philip Watt	National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI)

Appendix 2

Members of the Higher Education Authority

The members of the Higher Education Authority are:

Mr. Michael Kelly	Chairman
Professor Mary Daly	Principal, College of Arts and Celtic Studies, UCD
Professor Tom Boylan	NUI Galway
Dr. Cepta Brougham	Lecturer/Researcher, Athlone Institute of Technology
Dr. Mary Canning	Education Consultant
Dr. Thomas Cooke	Head of Community Links Programme, DIT
Ms Grace Corcoran	Lecturer, School of Engineering, Institute of Technology, Sligo
Mr. Michael Cotter	School of Education Studies, DCU
Mr. Martin Cronin	Chief Executive, Forfás
Ms Doreen Delahunty	Self-employed business person
Mr. Louis Dockery	Solicitor
Ms Sheila Drumm	Principal, Dominican College, Sion Hill, Co. Dublin
Dr. Pat Kelleher	Retired Director, Cork IT
Mr. Hamidreza Khodabakhshi	President, Union of Students in Ireland
Ms Kathleen Lough	Lecturer in chemistry, Galway Mayo Institute of Technology
Professor Sarah Moore	Dean of Teaching and Learning, UL
Professor Frances Ruane	Director, Economic and Social Research Institute
Dr. Jim Ruane	Company Director, Corporate Banking

Appendix 3

An overview of current initiatives on access to higher education

The objective of promoting access to higher education has a long history in Irish education policy. As far back as the early 1970s, “*promoting the attainment of equality of opportunity in higher education*” was included among the core functions of the Higher Education Authority, when it was established in 1971.¹⁰⁸

Student Financial Supports

The maintenance grants, which aim to alleviate the financial barriers to participation, were introduced following the enactment of the Local Authorities (Higher Education grants) Act in 1968. This represented the first governmental support for the promotion of greater equality in higher education. Maintenance grants remain a key element of national policy and provide financial supports to approximately 36 per cent of full-time students in higher education. In 2000, an additional Special Rate of Maintenance or ‘top-up’ grant was introduced. This was targeted at students from households at the lowest income levels and in receipt of long-term social welfare payments. The numbers benefiting from the Special Rate of Maintenance increased steadily since its introduction and reached 13,299 students in 2006/07.

Graduated cut-off points introduced in 2003 extended lower levels of grant to families within roughly €10,000 of the main threshold. For the 2007-2008 academic year, the income threshold for full maintenance grant was €38,675. This refers to annual combined household income prior to income tax. Reduced levels of maintenance grant were available to families with combined income between €38,675 and €48,335.

In 1990, the Department of Social and Family Affairs introduced the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA). This scheme allows people in receipt of long-term social welfare benefits to retain social welfare payments and to access maintenance grants while participating in approved full-time courses in further and higher education.

The creation of a Student Assistance Fund and a Fund for Students with Disabilities by the Department of Education and Science in 1994 increased the range and scope of student supports. The Student Assistance Fund is a financial hardship fund administered within institutions to students experiencing particular or unexpected hardship. The Fund for Students with Disabilities helps further and higher-education institutions to provide additional supports and services to address the learning needs of students with disabilities. A Millennium Partnership Fund was launched by the Department of Education and Science in September 2000 with an objective to support students from disadvantaged areas with regard to retention and participation in further or higher education courses. These Funds are co-financed by European Structural Funding.

The range and complexity of student support schemes has made it difficult for students and their families to understand and to access the supports available. Research has shown that knowledge of the various schemes tends to be lowest among those who are most likely to benefit. In order to address these information barriers to participation, a comprehensive, user-friendly website was launched by the Higher Education Authority in January 2008. The website *studentfinance.ie* provides up-to-date and clear

¹⁰⁸ An Roinn Oideachais, (1971) Acht an Údaráis um Ard-Oideachas Cuid 3, Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair

information on the various financial support schemes available to students in further and higher education.

A new Student Support Bill is currently under consideration by the Oireachtas. This aims to place student support schemes on a statutory footing, and to introduce a simplified and more efficient system for administering student grants.

Institutional funding to promote access

From 1996 to 2005, the Higher Education Authority supported the development of access programmes within Irish universities and other HEA-funded institutions through its targeted initiatives funding programme. These funds have been used to develop an infrastructure of supports aimed at increasing participation in higher education among under-represented groups. A new funding model is currently being phased in for all higher-education institutions. As part of this process, baseline funding to support equity of access has been allocated as part of the core grant to the seven universities since 2006. In that year, the institutional funding for access amounted to €8m across the seven universities and other HEA-funded institutions. In the same year, approximately €1.3m of the Department of Education and Science's funding to institutes of technology was used to support access and retention.

Since the enactment of the Institutes of Technology Act (2006), the Higher Education Authority has assumed responsibility for funding allocations across the entire higher-education sector. While the Higher Education Authority has for the present maintained the existing Department systems of funding allocation to the institutes of technology, the objective is to devise an equivalent funding model for institutions. Considerable progress has already been made in this regard. A further objective will be to consider how the funding model can provide for greater support for widening participation by providing greater recognition of the costs involved in recruiting students not traditionally enrolled in higher education. It is planned that the allocation of core funding for access will relate to the number of students from under-represented groups enrolled in each institution.

The Strategic Innovation Funds are a further key element of government policy to support the objectives of the Higher Education Programme within the National Development Plan 2007-2013. These competitive funds are intended to enhance the quality and capacity of Irish higher education. *“One of the key objectives is to support access, retention and progression both at individual institutional level and through inter-institutional, sectoral and inter-sectoral collaboration”*. Increased participation, equity of access, implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications, flexible delivery to meet diverse needs and quality in teaching and learning feature strongly in the more detailed range of priorities supported through these Funds.

Access initiatives within higher-education institutions

The funding outlined above has supported the creation of a number of important posts within higher-education institutions specifically focused on the development and provision of supports for under-represented students. The universities typically now have access officers, mature student officers, disability officers and support staff to

coordinate their access programmes. In the institutes of technology, where there has not been a tradition of top sliced and ring fenced funding for widening participation, the access officer generally has responsibility for the development of supports for the full range of target groups.

Using the resources available, the access personnel within institutions have developed a wide range of pre and post-entry supports and interventions. At pre-entry level, access programmes have focused on working with designated disadvantaged schools with a view to improving participation, performance and progression to higher education. This work involves a range of activities including guidance, familiarisation and learning support. Typically, these activities include visits to schools, campus visits by students, open days, study skills, revision courses and extra tuition to support improved performance in the Leaving Certificate examination. Other significant initiatives pioneered by access officers and registrars in institutions include broadening routes of entry from the further-education sector, supplementary admissions routes and foundation/access courses.

The access offices of higher-education institutions also coordinate post-entry supports for students to ensure that, having gained access, these students are retained and supported in achieving their full potential. Examples of post-entry initiatives include intensive first year orientation programmes as well as on-going pastoral support and guidance from academic mentors and the access office. Extra tuition, peer mentoring and study skills workshops are offered to many students as well as information and referrals to other student support services, for example the career guidance or counselling services, as necessary.

Appendix 4

Template for effective access programmes

The 2006 Evaluation of Access Programmes provided a template for effective access programmes, as set out below:

Policy and practice

1. A clear statement of the institution's access policy and how it relates to the corporate level strategy.
2. Transparent information about the resources that are allocated to the access programme (including finance, personnel, accommodation).
3. A plan to provide systematic staff training on diversity and inclusion.
4. A clear and specific set of targets for the admission and graduation of students from the under-represented groups that are identified by the National Office and a system of monitoring and measuring achievement of the targets.
5. A focused programme designed to achieve the targets set. It should include:
 - pre-entry activities for students from all under-represented groups with special emphasis on working with teachers in targeted primary and junior cycle second-level schools and with community-based partnership groups;
 - individual and group support for new entrants in their first year, including personal, social, financial and academic assistance where necessary;
 - individual and group support as needed for students throughout their course, including advice on careers and post-graduate study.

Partnership

1. A clear statement of how the institution's access programme links with relevant partners in the community and how it relates to the corporate level community mission.
2. A plan to involve staff of the institution actively in partnership with the community and other education sectors.
3. A full agenda for action agreed between the institution and its partners in local communities, aimed at promoting clear routes of progression to higher education for targeted groups of learners.
4. A commitment to engage students and their families, specialised expert bodies, community agencies and representative groups in planning and monitoring access programme activities.

Targeting

1. A clear and explicit plan to address the needs of all target groups at appropriate critical stages, based on research, needs analysis and consultation.

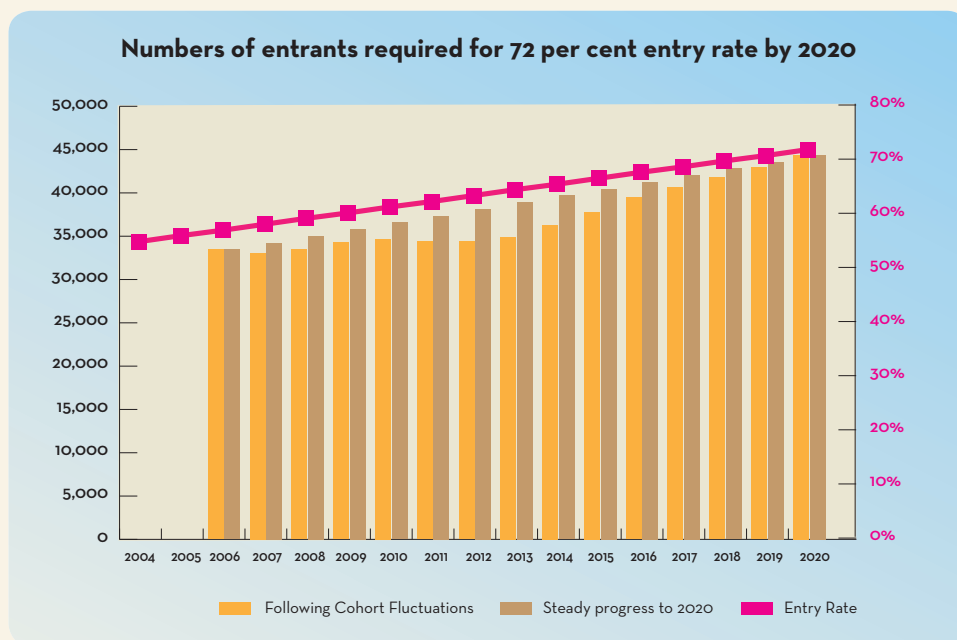
2. A set of clear and specific access targets and timescales for admission and graduation of students from all target groups.
3. A rigorous and systematic approach to data collection and analysis to monitor achievement of the targets set.

Appendix 5

Quantifying the scale of the 72 per cent target for entry to higher education

The National Skills Strategy aims to achieve an entry rate to higher education such that the number of full-time entrants in 2020 will be equivalent to 72 per cent of the population at typical age of entry. In the Clancy studies of entry to higher education, an average of those aged 17 to 19 years is used. The recent publication by the Central Statistics Office of updated population and labour force projections allows for a quantification of this overall target.¹⁰⁹ The Central Statistics Office present six different scenarios for population growth based on various assumptions around fertility and migration. For the purposes of this projection, we have used the average (mid-point) of all six scenarios in their projection of 17 to 19 year olds up to 2020.

Achieving the 72 per cent target for entry to higher education will require an intake of 44,400 (full-time) entrants in 2020, up from 34,250 in 2007. Steady progress towards the target will therefore require an annual increase of 778 entrants each year for the next twelve years.



¹⁰⁹ Central Statistics Office. (2008) Population and Labour Force Projections, 2011-2041

Appendix 6

Data tables corresponding to the charts produced in the plan

Figure 1.1 **Upper second-level attainment by age cohort across OECD countries, 2004**

	55-64	45-54	35-44	25-34	25-64
Top decile	79%	86%	92%	94%	88%
Top quartile	73%	83%	88%	91%	84%
OECD country average	53%	64%	71%	77%	67%
Ireland	39%	54%	68%	79%	63%

Data source: Derived from Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development - OECD (2006). *Education at a Glance 2006*, Table A1.2a

Figure 1.2 **Higher-education attainment by age cohort across OECD countries, 2004**

	55-64	45-54	35-44	25-34	25-64
Top decile	27%	33%	40%	49%	37%
Top quartile	23%	31%	34%	39%	32%
OECD country average	18%	23%	27%	31%	25%
Ireland	16%	22%	29%	40%	28%

Data source: Derived from Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development - OECD (2006). *Education at a Glance 2006*, Table A1.3a

Figure 1.3 **Percentage of the adult population (aged 25-64) participating in lifelong learning across the European Union in 2004**

Sweden	35.8%	Germany	7.4%
Denmark	27.6%	Ireland	7.2%
Finland	24.6%	Italy	6.8%
United Kingdom	21.2%	Estonia	6.7%
Slovenia	17.9%	Lithuania	6.5%
Netherlands	16.8%	Czech Republic	6.3%
Austria	12.0%	Poland	5.5%
EU 25	9.9%	Spain	5.1%
Belgium	9.5%	Malta	5.0%
Luxembourg	9.4%	Portugal	4.8%
Cyprus	9.3%	Hungary	4.6%
Latvia	9.1%	Slovakia	4.6%
France	7.8%	Greece	3.9%

Data source: European Commission (2005). *European Commission Communication: Draft 2006 Progress Report on the implementation of the "Education and Training 2010 work programme"*, p.24.

Figure 1.4 **Annual expenditure per student by level of education, 2003**
(in equivalent US\$ converted using PPPs)

	Pre-primary	Primary	Second level	Higher education	Primary to higher education
Top decile	\$7,153	\$8,305	\$10,919	\$24,074	\$12,023
Top quartile	\$5,497	\$7,366	\$8,183	\$13,444	\$8,641
OECD country average	\$4,508	\$5,450	\$6,962	\$11,254	\$6,827
Ireland		\$4,760	\$6,374	\$9,341	\$6,118

Data source: Derived from Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development – OECD (2006). *Education at a Glance 2006*, Table B1.1a

Note: The figures refer to annual expenditure on educational institutions per student for all services (2003). The data are reported in equivalent US dollars converted using purchasing power parities (PPPs) for GDP, by level of education, based on full-time equivalents.

Figure 2.1 **Entry rate to higher education by socio-economic group, 1998 & 2004**

	1998	2004 (adjusted)
Higher professional	100%	100%
Farmers	65%	89%
Own account workers	39%	65%
Lower professional	63%	65%
Employers and managers	65%	65%
Skilled manual	32%	50%
Semi- and unskilled manual	23%	33%
Non-manual	29%	27%
Total	44%	55%

Data sources: O’Connell, P., McCoy, S. & Clancy, D. (2006) *Who Went to College in 2004? A National Survey of New Entrants to Higher Education*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority and Clancy, P. (2001) *College Entry in Focus: A Fourth National Survey of Access to Higher Education*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Figure 2.2 **Occupational profile of the “non-manual” group, 2006**

	2006
Clerical and office workers	33.2%
Sales occupations	23.6%
Personal service and childcare workers	16.4%
Central and local government workers	7.7%
Garda and Army occupations (Srgt & below)	6.6%
Social workers and related occupations	2.3%
Other (incl. not stated)	10.3%
Total	100%

Data source: Data derived from further analysis of the Census of Population 2006 conducted by the Central Statistics Office and paid for by the Higher Education Authority.

Figure 2.3 **Mature students (aged 23 and over) as a percentage of new entrants to full-time higher education, 1986 to 2006**

1986	1992	1998	2004	2006
1.6%	2.5%	4.5%	9.4%	12.8%

Data sources: Clancy, P. (2001) *College Entry in Focus: A Fourth National Survey of Access to Higher Education*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority and Statistics Section, Higher Education Authority.

Figure 2.4 **Highest level of education attainment among Irish adults 25-64 (CSO, QNHS 2005)**

Age cohort	Primary or below: NFQ L1-2	Lower secondary: NFQ L3	Higher secondary: NFQ L4-5	Further education/ PLC: NFQ L5-6	Higher level: NFQ L6&7	Higher level: NFQ L8-10
55-64	42.2%	17.8%	16.0%	7.2%	6.1%	10.8%
45-54	21.6%	22.8%	24.4%	9.3%	8.2%	13.6%
35-44	10.2%	20.3%	27.3%	12.2%	11.4%	18.6%
25-34	5.4%	12.9%	27.8%	13.2%	14.6%	26.1%

Data source: Central Statistics Office, Quarterly National Household Survey, March to May 2005.

Figure 2.5 **AHEAD estimates of undergraduate students with disabilities as a percentage of all undergraduate students**

1993/1994	1998/1999	2005/2006
0.65%	1.10%	3.20%

Data source: AHEAD - Association for Higher Education Access and Disability.

Figure 5.1 **Targets for overall entry rates to higher education (entrants as a % of 17-18 year olds in the population)**

1980	1986	1992	1998	2004	2010	2013	2020
20%	25%	36%	44%	55%	61%	65%	72%

Data source: Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007). *Towards a National Skills Strategy*, Dublin: Forfás.

Figure 5.2 **Target entry rates to higher education for under-represented socio-economic groups**

	2004	2010	2013	2020
Total	55%	61%	65%	72%
Non-manual	27%	37%	42%	54%
Semi- and unskilled manual	33%	41%	45%	54%

Data source: Higher Education Authority, The *Equal Access* data initiative.

Figure 5.3 **Target share of mature students among full-time entrants to higher education**

	1992	1998	2004	2006	2010	2013
Under 23 year olds	97.5%	95.5%	90.6%	87.2%	83.0%	80.0%
Over 23 year olds	2.5%	4.5%	9.4%	12.8%	17.0%	20.0%

Data source: Statistics Section, Higher Education Authority.

Figure 5.4 **Target share of mature students among full-time and part-time entrants to higher education**

	2006	2010	2013
Under 23 year olds	82.3%	77.0%	73.0%
Over 23 year olds	17.7%	23.0%	27.0%

Data source: Statistics Section, Higher Education Authority.

Figure 5.5 **Target share of entrants on flexible/part-time higher-education courses**

	2006	2010	2013
Full-time	93.4%	87.5%	83.0%
Flexible/Part-time	6.6%	12.5%	17.0%

Data source: Statistics Section, Higher Education Authority.

Figure 5.6 **Target for broadening entry routes to higher education**

	2006	2010	2013
Leaving Certificate entry	76.0%	72.6%	70.0%
Non-standard entry	24.0%	27.4%	30.0%

Data source: Estimated by cross-referencing data from the Central Application Office (CAO), the Further Education Training and Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and from Statistics Section, Higher Education Authority (HEA).

Figure 5.7 **Lifelong learning target: persons aged 25 to 64 participating in education and training**

1995	2000	2006	2010	2013
95.7%	94.6%	92.7%	87.5%	83.0%
4.3%	5.4%	7.3%	12.5%	17.0%

Data source: Eurostat monitoring of progress towards the *Education and Training 2010* objectives.

Figure 5.8 **Profile of higher-education students in receipt of supports under the Fund for Students with Disabilities**

Disability	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Specific Learning Difficulties	831	977	1,227	1,482
Significant Ongoing Illness	93	90	92	114
Other	46	66	43	62
Multi-disability	48	56	73	85
Physical Disability/Mobility impairment	175	171	174	190
Deaf/Hard of hearing	94	90	107	126
Blind/Visual impairment	76	70	69	65

Data source: National Access Office, Higher Education Authority.

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