

The image features a red rectangular box at the top center containing the HEA logo and its name in both English and Irish. The background is a light green illustration of a university hallway with several students. One student in the foreground is seated in a wheelchair, while others are standing and talking. The overall style is clean and modern, using simple lines and flat colors.

HEA

Higher Education Authority
An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas

TOWARDS A NATIONAL STRATEGY

**INITIAL REVIEW OF HEA TARGETED INITIATIVES TO
WIDEN ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION**

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INTRODUCTION

It is now twelve years since the Government Green Paper *Education for a Changing World* formally articulated the need for Ireland's education system to ensure equity of access to higher education. Since that time, progress has been made with a range of initiatives and extra resources invested by the state and education providers. Most recently, a National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education has been established within the HEA and has begun the task of developing a national strategy to widen access to higher education. In developing this strategy it is important that the National Office builds on the progress and learning to date, and the preparatory work includes review and reflection on local and national initiatives since the 1990s. One significant intervention has been the HEA targeted initiatives¹ to widen access to higher education for people with a disability, mature students, young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and members of the travelling and refugee communities. The scheme is now in its ninth year, and a considerable amount of learning and expertise has been developed among the personnel and institutions participating in the scheme. This initial review aims to capture that experience, assess its impact and ensure that the learning and expertise gained by participants contributes to the emerging national strategy. The lack of adequate data to measure progress in schemes such as that of the HEA targeted initiatives has been highlighted before (Osborne and Leith, 2000, Equality Review Team, 2004). This review acknowledges that gap and the importance of building systematic means of gathering data in the future.

Promoting equality of opportunity in higher education is one of five overarching functions of the HEA (1971 Higher Education Authority Act). The HEA introduced the targeted initiative scheme in September 1996, following two national policy statements: the 1995 White Paper on Education which identified wider participation in higher education as a 'major policy objective' of the government, irrespective of social class, age or disability (Department of Education, 1995, p.97) and a report by a HEA commissioned steering committee on the future development of higher education which recommended 'targeted funding' to widen access and set out the aims of higher education:

Higher education must operate within a value system which acknowledges humanistic and spiritual values and in which the pursuit of quality and excellence is matched by a concern for equity and equality. [...] Higher education must support and facilitate individual students in achieving their academic potential, self-development and fulfilment. In preparing them for life as well as for the world of work, it must provide a caring and flexible environment responsive to individual concerns, needs, aptitudes and aspirations and utilising newly available systems and technologies to deliver programmes in more flexible and effective ways. (HEA, 1995, p.27)

In the first year of the scheme, HEA-funded institutions were invited to make proposals for initiatives under a number of headings, one of which was improving access to higher education. €1.27m was diverted from the grant available to the HEA for universities and designated institutions and allocated to widening access initiatives. Since the early years of the scheme, initiatives and resources have grown

¹ The HEA targeted initiatives scheme were renamed the "strategic initiatives scheme" in 2004.

considerably. To date, over €40m has been allocated by the HEA to support initiatives in nine participating institutions. These are the two teacher education colleges, Mary Immaculate and St Patrick's Drumcondra; Dublin City University; the National University of Ireland Galway; National University of Ireland Maynooth; Trinity College; University College Cork; University College Dublin and the University of Limerick. Over the past five years in particular, the institutions have developed access programmes and put in place personnel to work as access officers for under-represented groups. Several institutions have a dedicated disability service with up to six staff. Many have extensive links with second level schools. Staff working with mature students are in place in all the institutions. Although the participating institutions are only those funded by the HEA, much has been learned from almost a decade of experience.

A participative approach

The review of the scheme included several elements and followed participative evaluation principles developed over the past 30 years by evaluators such as Cronbach (1980), MacDonald (1976) and Stake (1995). Initial work included a comprehensive analysis of annual reports and submissions made by participating institutions. A review of previous research reports, reviews and relevant literature was also carried out; these included an evaluation commissioned by the HEA and completed by Osborne and Leith on initiatives to widen access to higher education for socio-economically disadvantaged young people (2000), a review of access to higher education in Ireland by Skilbeck and Connell (2000) as well as a report on university equality policies by a review group commissioned by the HEA (Equality Review Group, 2004). Self-evaluations by institutions were reviewed as well as reports, surveys and policy documents by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the Educational Disadvantage Committee and AHEAD. Relevant national and international literature on widening access to higher education was also reviewed.

Following this background work, a discussion paper was drawn up in February 2004 and circulated to 122 people. These included students, members of the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIU), senior college officers, access officers (including those working with all under-represented groups), representatives of the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD), the adult learner association AONTAS, the Union of Students of Ireland, and members and staff of the HEA. The discussion paper drew on available quantitative and qualitative data and indicators of progress to map the range of initiatives under way in the nine participating institutions. It also put forward four review questions:

- 1 What examples of best practice have emerged from the scheme?
- 2 What barriers to success can be identified?
- 3 To what extent can 'quality and equality' co-exist in higher education?
- 4 What further work is still required?

Between February and April 2004, group and individual meetings were held with over 80 participants to gather reactions to the discussion paper and the review questions. The draft reports of these meetings were given to the participants for further comment and interpretation. Participants were also invited to provide any further relevant data and information. Additional submissions were received by many participants and became part of the review material.

The initial discussion paper referred to the fact that the outcomes of the targeted initiatives scheme were difficult to measure, largely due to the absence of comprehensive data or indicators of progress on access initiatives. Further work is required to develop agreed indicators and outcomes; however, the willingness on the part of participants to engage in dialogue about the scheme and to provide additional data and submissions resulted in significant progress in answering the review questions. This is an initial review of widening access initiatives. It is hoped that, by the time of the next review, it will be possible to assess the impact of initiatives with much greater clarity and with reference to agreed indicators of progress that are both qualitative and quantitative.

In this report, current initiatives to widen access for the four target under-represented groups are mapped out. The impact of the scheme is examined, presenting key issues and findings, and conclusions and recommendations for the future.

CURRENT INITIATIVES TO WIDEN ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

This part of the document maps out the activities that are under way in the nine institutions participating in the scheme. It does not comprehensively list activities but rather aims to give a sense of the range and diversity of what has been developed since the scheme began in 1996. Quantitative and qualitative data is presented where available, and activities both wholly and partially funded through the scheme are described. At present institutions structure their activities according to four target groups – learners with a disability, mature learners, socio-economically disadvantaged learners, and those from the travelling and refugee communities. For clarity and ease of reference a similar structure is adopted in this document, and each section begins with a table summarising what activities are under way in each institution.

ACCESS ACTIVITIES FOR LEARNERS WITH A DISABILITY

People with a disability are a group that, to date, have been significantly under-represented in the Irish higher education system. Reasons for this include historic segregation of people with a disability within the education system, low educational expectations on the part of people with a disability and those caring for them, and lack of necessary supports for disabled people within our primary and second level systems. Despite this historic low base of educational participation, the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) believes that the number of people with a disability in HEA-funded institutions has grown since the introduction of the targeted initiative scheme². Figures from individual institutions support this view, with one university reporting over 300 students with a disability in 2003, compared to 61 in 1998³. In another, the number has grown from 11 in 1998 to 70 in 2003. Another institution reported that, between 2002 and 2003, the number of students registered with the disability liaison office increased from 142 to 193, an increase of almost a third in one year. Seven of nine institutions participating in the scheme have a disability officer, with five or more staff working in this area in certain institutions. Initiatives to widen access include work with primary and secondary schools, awareness raising, providing additional transport, learning support, and preparation for employment.

Summary: Initiatives to widen access for students with a disability in participating institutions

	UCD	UCC	TCD	NUIG	NUIM	UL	DCU	SPD	MIC
Work with primary schools		*						*	
Work with secondary schools	*	*	*	*		*			
Raising awareness	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Learning support	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
Assistive technology	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Preparation for employment		*		*		*	*		

² AHEAD has begun a new survey of the numbers of students with a disability in higher education.

³ Source for 1998 figure is *Report of HEA Survey on Participation rates of and Provision for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education for the Academic Year 1998-1999*.

Work with primary and second level schools

In recognition of the need to encourage participation and progression in education among students with a disability much earlier in the system, several HEA-funded institutions have developed links with primary and second level schools. A regional resource centre in assistive technology in University College Cork offers equipment and expertise to primary and second level schools in the city and county. Officers from the college also make presentations to teachers, guidance counsellors and other staff both inside and outside of the college. Information is provided on disability awareness and the supports available to learners with a disability in higher education. An in-career course has also been developed by the college for primary school and resource teachers on computer applications for students with special needs with a plan to extend the course to teachers and career guidance counsellors at second level and in further education. The career support officer has established links with 15 schools in Cork city and county and consultations on careers and course choices are conducted with second level students in these schools. The special education unit in St Patrick's College Drumcondra provides pre-service, induction and postgraduate courses for teachers of primary pupils who have special educational needs.

In NUI Galway, information services for learners with a disability at second level include an open day for interested students and their teachers, families and carers as well as literature and a web page advertising its service to schools and guidance counsellors across the country. Each year the University of Limerick offers a taster course for up to five second level students with a disability. The course includes introductory modules in various disciplines as well as computer and study skills.

A collaborative action research project 'Able4College' between Trinity College Dublin and the Institute of Technology Tallaght is examining barriers to higher education for students with a disability. Working with over 120 teachers and guidance counsellors in participating schools, it is developing initiatives and supports to facilitate students progressing from second level to higher education.

An initiative to help mature students with a disability access higher education is also under way in University College Dublin. The disability service in the college liaises with voluntary organisations to offer guidance and support prior to college entry.

Awareness raising

In recognition of the need to educate and promote awareness of the needs of students with a disability in higher education, disability awareness briefings are provided for lecturers and other staff in faculties in most institutions. Following the enactment of equality legislation in recent years, two institutions held a briefing seminar for all staff to raise awareness of the impact of the legislation on education provision. In all institutions, disability officers liaise with personnel responsible for physical facilities, buildings and for general student services so that the needs of students with a disability are adequately met. In some

institutions, disability officers are further aided by staff designated as disability liaison officers within academic departments and faculties. A disability liaison committee in NUI Galway develops and implements policies to meet the needs of students with a disability. The committee has student representatives as well as personnel from key service areas such as computer services, library and academic staff as well as the disability liaison officer.

Learning support

Additional learning support is offered to students with a disability in the majority of institutions. In University College Dublin, a comprehensive screening, referral and support service has been developed for students with dyslexia, physical, sensory or psychological disabilities. An orientation programme is held in University College Cork over five days in early September, prior to enrolment. This provides learners with information on available services and financial support and establishes a peer mentoring network. A support programme contracts postgraduate students – 102 in 2003 – to act as tutors on a one-to-one basis to students with disabilities. Similar initiatives are under way in Trinity College and NUI Galway; in Trinity College, 72 educational support workers, some post-graduate students, others recruited externally, provide individual academic support, including note taking, dyslexia tutoring, readers, and academic assistance and library assistance. A learning and educational agreement (ILEA) is also drawn up for each student and forwarded to faculty staff; this aims to set successful learning and assessment schedules for students in agreement with their lecturers. In NUI Galway, 56 postgraduate students provided one-to-one tutoring and support to students with a disability in 2003.

To cater for growing numbers of students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities, several universities employ a learning support tutor. This tutor provides advice, assessment and one-to-one tuition for students as well as developing services and information technology support for learning-disabled students in college. In the University of Limerick, a two-day seminar is held for students with dyslexia before the start of term and a dyslexia tutor provides one-to-one tuition for up to 50 students during term-time. A dyslexia support service in NUI Galway caters for approximately 54 students each year. Over 140 students are supported by a tutor in University College Dublin and more than 40 in NUI Maynooth.

Assistive technology

An important source of support to learners with a disability is assistive technology: specific software programmes and equipment for students with physical and learning disabilities. These include scanning devices, voice synthesis and close circuit television, adapted keyboards, speech input systems and software packages. In several colleges, the demand for such technology has resulted in new assistive technology centres, located in an easily accessible place such as the library and staffed by qualified personnel. Such centres can provide an integrated and comprehensive service, and their professional staff are developing innovative services for disabled students. Among these is an audio book service for visually

impaired students that is being piloted by the University of Limerick and that will become available to students around the country. In Trinity College, the Assistive Technology and Information Centre (ATIC) carries out needs assessment, service provision, and staff and student training. It also provides and develops library and information services. Similar services are provided in UCD's assistive technology centre, and students in need of technology support are guaranteed equipment and instruction within 48 hours of being assessed.

Preparation for employment

A number of the participating universities have developed careers support for learners with a disability so that they can make informed career choices following graduation. A programme of personalised careers and support service is offered in the University of Limerick, and a dedicated careers support officer provides a career support programme specifically for students with a disability in Dublin City University, University College Cork and NUI Galway. This programme includes individual consultations, workshops, seminars, conferences, employer liaison, and work placement. DCU also offers a sports development programme to students with a disability, with a range of supervised sports and leisure activities on offer.

ACCESS ACTIVITIES FOR MATURE/ADULT LEARNERS

A second significantly under-represented group in higher education are mature students, and activities to widen access for them are well established in the institutions participating in the scheme. Some have developed a particular reputation for welcoming mature students: one university reports a mature student population of over 170 in 2003, which is equivalent to 15% of their undergraduate entrants. Another reported over 200 mature student entrants in 2002, equivalent to 8% of total new entrants. All participating institutions employ a mature student officer, and initiatives to widen access include introductory and foundation courses, information and counselling, learning support, and careers preparation.

Summary: Initiatives to widen access for mature students in participating institutions

	UCD	UCC	TCD	NUIG	NUIM	UL	DCU	SPD	MIC
Taster courses	*				*		*		
Foundation courses	*		*	*	*	*			*
Outreach programmes	*	*		*	*			*	*
Information and guidance	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Learning support	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

Taster courses

A range of initiatives facilitates entry to higher education among adult learners. Three institutions offer taster courses for adults from the local community or the parents of children in linked schools. Run over several evenings or as a one-week summer school, participants are introduced to the campus, complete modules in areas such as information technology, digital photography or drama, hear lectures by faculty staff, and receive guidance on course choice and on supporting children in higher education.

Foundation courses

The majority of institutions offer full-time, one-year foundation courses for mature students. One in engineering, information technology and science operates on a collaborative basis between NUI Galway and Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. On successful completion of the course, learners can progress to either institution. The programme is designed for adults who did not have the opportunity to continue to higher education after school, and up to 40 learners participate each year. The course also aims to reduce skills shortages in engineering, science and information technology in the Border-Midlands-West (BMW) region. NUI Maynooth offers a similar full-time course for 25 students in science and engineering. Successful participants are guaranteed entry to degree programmes.

Mary Immaculate College offers a part-time foundation course each year for 28 mature students two evenings a week. Successful participants can enter the arts faculty and Bachelor of Education programme. The University of Limerick offers a full-time access course for up to 35 mature students each year. On successful completion students are guaranteed access to certain degree courses. Of the 20 students who completed the course in 2003, 17 progressed to degree studies. The Trinity Access Programme (TAP) offers a full-time course for up to 26 socio-economically disadvantaged mature students each year. On completion of the course, successful students are guaranteed interviews with the departments to which they apply but compete with all other mature student applications. In 2002, 18 students from the group of 26 progressed to undergraduate courses in Trinity College and a further two to another higher education institution.

Outreach programmes

The adult education department in UCD offers three access courses. One, called Return to Learning, is offered both on campus and at four outreach centres in Dublin. The course prepares over 100 adults for courses in the arts and social sciences. A higher education place in UCD is not guaranteed to participants on the course. However, it is reported that a number do progress to either UCD or another college. Fifteen places are available on a foundation course in commerce and a further 21 places on a science course, both of which are offered on-campus. Participants who achieve a final examination mark of 60% or above on either course are guaranteed a place in college. Over 500 mature students participate in 21 other outreach courses offered by the UCD adult education department in a number of centres, and

the UCD Women's Education Research and Resource Centre (WERRC) co-ordinates 17 outreach courses in women's studies and a number of related subject areas to over 300 participants at centres throughout the country.

Some institutions offer access courses for mature students in outreach centres, many of which pre-date the targeted initiative scheme. The centre for Adult Continuing Education (ACE) in University College Cork offers 71 programmes in 78 learning centres with over 2,000 students. The majority of courses lead to modular credits awarded by UCC and recognised if students decide to pursue further studies. In a county with a large rural hinterland this outreach provision targets adults who might otherwise have no opportunity to reach higher education. The ACE centre also employs three 'education animateurs' to develop programmes in conjunction with community-based stakeholders, including students. UCC also offers a diploma in applied business computing in collaboration with Cork Institute of Technology and Cork City Partnership. This two-year full-time programme had 24 graduates in 2002, seven of which have progressed to higher education and a further 11 to employment.

An extensive outreach programme in NUI Galway has almost 2,000 participants in locations mainly in Connaught but also in parts of Munster, Leinster and Ulster. Courses are offered on both a part-time and distance learning basis, are accredited by NUI Galway and serve as a possible route of progression to the university. Successful completion of some access courses guarantees entry to NUI Galway or St. Angela's College in Sligo: 49 students are reported to have progressed to higher education from such courses in 2003. Additional outreach courses are currently being developed through the Lónra Regional Higher Education Network in the BMW region. Programmes through this initiative will be jointly accredited by NUI Galway and HETAC, and graduates will progress to the university and institutes of technology in the region.

Information and guidance

Information and guidance counselling are an important element of access initiatives for mature students. Mature student officers in all institutions spend time briefing local career guidance counsellors and making presentations to participants in adult and community education programmes. Information is provided on application procedures, mature student support and courses on offer in college. Handbooks and guides for mature students have been produced in several institutions as well as websites and audio-visual material that detail the opportunities, supports and challenges associated with undertaking a course of study. Mary Immaculate College employs an adult learner support counsellor to assist mature students with academic and pastoral needs. The mature student officer in St Patrick's Drumcondra liaises with education providers, offering a range of community and adult education programmes and ensuring that opportunities for progression are known and availed of. The University of Limerick has developed links with adult guidance counsellors in the region through a 'one-stop' facility that is run by the adult

guidance service in Limerick city and Ennis. Adults who drop in receive information on courses, supports available and application procedures for entry to higher education.

Several institutions host open evenings and days for mature students and their families. Undergraduate mature students in NUI Maynooth facilitate open days and information evenings for up to 400 prospective mature students each year. They provide practical information and insight into their experience prior to application. This peer guidance and reassurance is reported to be influential in encouraging adults to apply for a higher education place. In several institutions, feedback and guidance to unsuccessful applicants encourages adults to address any gaps in skills and to reapply at a future date.

Learning support

Many institutions provide welcome programmes for incoming mature students where they can meet each other, refresh study and writing skills, computer and maths skills, and make contact with key support personnel. An orientation day is held in UCD prior to the college registration day, briefing incoming mature students on registration details, timetables, the library as well as giving them guidance on the third level environment and study skills. In Trinity College a two-week orientation programme is offered each year. As with the open days in NUI Maynooth, continuing mature students provide a valuable contribution to the orientation day. Peer mentoring for first year students is considered an important initiative in several institutions. Second year and third year mature students volunteer their time as mentors and are provided with training and follow-up support and guidance. Typically, those within the system meet once a month, with the mentor offering the new student friendship, support in accessing services and facilities, sharing the experience of being a student and discussing study-related concerns. At the University of Limerick a number of specific support centres exist such as the Mathematics Learning Centre, the Centre for Teaching and Learning, the Science Learning Centre, and the Information and Communication Technology Learning Centre. The availability of extra tuition in maths, study and writing skills, and science and computing subjects is evidence of the university's support facilities.

Mary Immaculate College offers academic support to adult learners on a weekly appointment or drop-in basis through its learner support unit and adult learner support counsellor. Guidance is provided on writing skills, essay structure, research techniques, project design, and study and examination skills. Part-time peer tutors, pre-session courses for new mature students, student monitoring, and weekly learner training seminars are also provided. Dublin City University offers study skills seminars and one-to-one tuition to first year mature students. In Trinity College, the TAP centre provides a focal point for the academic and social activities for mature students entering through the access course as well as being a source of support, information and referral. Study workshops are held on a regular basis in St Patrick's College and are attended by up to 60 mature students each year, most of whom are in their first year of study. An accredited study skills programme was introduced in NUI Galway in 2003 for mature students; its aim is to promote independent study skills and equip students with study skills for higher education.

Careers support

Dedicated careers support and advice is offered to mature students in some universities. The careers service in the University of Limerick provides a tailored career development module for mature students. In both Dublin City University and NUI Maynooth, a dedicated careers advisor supports the needs of disadvantaged entrants, including school leavers and mature students.

ACCESS ACTIVITIES FOR SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED LEARNERS

Initiatives to widen access for socio-economically disadvantaged young people are the longest running and most developed within the targeted/strategic initiative scheme, and the description of activities below reflects this development. Some institutions employ four or more staff in this area, including project officers working exclusively with primary and second level schools and tutors providing in-college learning support. Initiatives to widen access for socio-economically disadvantaged students include work with primary and second level schools, extra tuition, further education links, foundation courses, direct entry arrangements, learning support, financial support, and access to teacher education.

Summary: Initiatives to widen access for disadvantaged young people in participating institutions

	UCD	UCC	TCD	NUIG	NUIM	UL	DCU	SPD	MIC
Work with primary schools	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*
Work with secondary schools	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Extra tuition	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
Further education links	*	*			*		*		
Foundation/access courses			*	*		*			
Direct entry	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	
Learning support	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Financial support	*	*	*		*		*		
Teacher education			*					*	*

Work with primary schools

To encourage participation in education at an early age, a number of institutions work with local primary schools. 'Fun to Learn' in the University of Limerick involves 136 ten-to-twelve year-olds annually in four primary schools in a programme combining sports, art and educational activities on campus⁴. Taking place after the school day, the programme introduces the children to the university campus, encourages them to stay in school and demonstrates the sports and educational opportunities available if they progress to higher education. The children involved are at risk of leaving school early, having being identified through the state Schools Completion Programme and the local youth service. Fun to Learn operates four days a week, two hours a day, over 26 weeks. Half of each session is spent on homework and the other half

⁴ Fun to Learn is not restricted to primary schools - there are participants in youth programmes such as the South City Youth Initiative.

playing sports or doing artwork. An evaluation recorded that school attendance had improved due to children's participation in the programme. During 2003, to respond to increasing interest in the initiative, co-ordinators began training Transition Year students to run the programme partly in their local communities and partly on campus.

A sports programme for primary school children is also offered in NUI Galway: Soccer 4 Success involves more than 50 children each year in two primary schools. Teachers in each of the schools assist with the programme which operates after school and uses the university sports facilities. Officers in Dublin City University work with up to 500 children each year in 26 schools located in Finglas, Cabra, Coolock, Darndale and Ballymun. The initiatives combine sports activities, information provision, achievement awards, and visits to the campus and aim to raise awareness of opportunities in higher education. The 'Open Doors' project in St Patrick's College offered an introduction to its campus as well as sporting and musical activities to 51 children from local primary schools during 2003–4. In Trinity College, up to 250 children and their parents from 15 primary schools participate in workshops in mathematics, science and art over four days each summer. University College Dublin collaborates with the Institute of Art, Design and Technology in Dun Laoghaire to offer 20 sixth class children an on-campus summer programme and workshops. The programme operates in four disadvantaged primary schools in South Dublin, introducing the children to the UCD and Dun Laoghaire campuses and encouraging them to stay in school. Mary Immaculate College offers a foundation certificate in after-school support for parents of all local children, including those living in disadvantaged communities.

Work with second level schools

All participating institutions have developed links and activities with second level schools; some of the initiatives pre-date the targeted initiative scheme⁵. In general, links are with schools that have been classified as disadvantaged by the Department of Education and Science, but some institutions also work with disadvantaged students on an individual basis. The numbers of students, schools and geographic areas involved have expanded significantly since the scheme began. One university currently links with 33 schools and up to 3,000 second level students in five surrounding counties. Another works with 48 schools in six counties, reaching up to 1,200 students. Another works with 16 second-level schools, an increase from six in 1993.

Activities at second level include presentations several times a year by access officers to students, parents and school staff on opportunities in higher education. Faculty staff also welcome groups of second level pupils on campus, introduce them to staff and students and provide introductory presentations and lectures. In some institutions, second level students can also attend lectures in a faculty of their choice for a day. Two institutions offer introductory programmes during the summer, enabling students to spend longer on campus and learn more about higher education subjects and options. Certain summer

⁵ The Ballymun Initiative for Third Level Education (BITE) started in 1990 and the Limerick Community Based Educational Initiative (LCBEI) started in 1991. The Second Level Project was established in TCD in 1993.

programmes concentrate on particular subjects such as mathematics, science or languages. In 2003, a mathematics summer school was offered in Dublin City University to eight students. Following the two-week programme, all progressed into the course of their choice. A collaborative one-week programme during the summer between the four Dublin and Kildare-based universities and the DIT, called 'Take 5', introduces 70 Transition Year and fifth year students to each campus. Activities include taster lectures, science experiments, cultural and sporting activities, and an introduction to journalism in which the students produce a magazine and website entry describing the week's events. In the University of Limerick 94 pre-Leaving Certificate students participate in a three-week programme with similar activities to Take 5. Residential scholarships for the programme are provided to 65 of the students who live at a distance from the university. A four-week summer programme is also provided for over 100 primary and second level students from community networks and the School Completion Programme. Each year University College Cork runs a drama programme and a computer camp for second level students from up to 15 regional schools.

Extra tuition

In recognition of the fact that Leaving Certificate students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds have limited opportunities for extra tuition or 'grinds' compared to many of their peers, most higher education institutions offer extra classes in particular subject areas as well as weekend workshops in study, revision and examination techniques to targeted second level students. In 2004, St Patrick's Drumcondra supported a three-week revision programme in English, Irish and mathematics for ten prospective entrants to the college. Each year in University College Dublin, up to 90 undergraduate students provide one-to-one tutoring on a voluntary basis to over 97 junior and senior cycle pupils in seven schools in Crumlin and Ballyfermot. In University College Cork, students completing the Higher Diploma in Education and part-time second level teachers offer supplementary tuition and supervised study to up to 850 students in 22 designated disadvantaged schools. NUI Maynooth provides Easter revision classes in Irish and mathematics to approximately 50 students each year. An access outreach centre linked to the University of Limerick provides supervised study and tutorials in English, Irish, mathematics and information technology. NUI Galway provides study support to over 300 students in 11 schools each year. Trinity College provides supplementary mathematics and language classes to 50 students and language classes to 300 students in linked schools and also offers a voluntary tuition scheme. Within this scheme, up to 300 undergraduate and post-graduate students provide extra tuition to primary and second level students in Inner City Dublin. Trinity also runs the 'Parallel Programme' in one local school which assists development of core and academic skills among students.

Several institutions offer awards to individual second level students who excel in school-based projects or examinations as well as weekend workshops in study, revision and examination skills.

Further education links

In 2001, the National University of Ireland formally recognised FETAC (NCVA Level 2) awards for matriculation purpose. University College Cork subsequently developed an entry route for students with FETAC (NCVA Level 2 and Level 3) awards to apply for a quota of over 30 degree places in seven faculties. In 2002, the first year of the scheme, 18 students progressed to degree programmes through this route. To date, all of the further education entrants are participating successfully in their courses. In 2004, 80 places will be available in UCC to students with a FETAC award. Trinity College is currently exploring possible entry routes from further education, and Dublin City University reports links between its Faculty of Science and Health and its School of Education and four further education colleges in the North Dublin area. University College Dublin also has added an entry route from further education to its nursing programme.

Foundation and access courses

Three institutions offer a foundation course for socio-economically disadvantaged school leavers. Those offered by Trinity College and NUI Galway are one-year and full-time, and each admits 25 students who have not gained sufficient Leaving Certificate points but who have, in the view of a selection committee, demonstrated academic potential. Both universities report that over 80% of the participants progress to higher education and participate successfully in college. In Trinity College, students who achieve a 2.2 grade or higher are guaranteed entry to one of their courses of choice. Students in NUI Galway are not guaranteed a degree place. No nationally recognised award is made to students in either institution on successful completion of the course. The University of Limerick offers a 13-week full-time access course for socio-economically disadvantaged young people between January and June each year. Twenty school leavers with minimum matriculation requirements are admitted, and participants complete modules in study skills, mathematics and statistics, computer skills, personal development, career and educational advice. On successful completion of the course students are guaranteed entry to a degree course at the university.

Direct entry

In 2001, six universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology began a shared direct entry scheme for socio-economically disadvantaged school leavers. The Higher Education Direct Applications Scheme (HEDAS) is open to students in designated disadvantaged schools and other linked schools. The seven institutions pool their reserved places and invite students to apply, using a single, shared application form. Following interviews, offers of places are co-ordinated, avoiding duplication in administration and offers. The numbers of entrants via this route have risen each year since the scheme began, with a total of 157 entering the six universities in 2000 and 588 in 2004.

Some access officers operating the HEDAS scheme have pointed out that only accepting applications from students in certain schools excludes other individuals who are experiencing disadvantage. To respond at least in part to this, both the University of Limerick and Dublin City University accept direct entry applications from socio-economically disadvantaged students throughout the country, irrespective of school attended. Sixty-eight students entered the University of Limerick through this access route in 2003.

Learning support

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds who enter college each year through an access programme are further supported with extra tuition, faculty-based workshops, book and equipment loans, counselling services and subsidised accommodation. First year students in UCD can avail of a 'diagnostic enrichment' course in mathematics during their first week in college with follow-up support afterwards. Language students also receive financial support for study and courses abroad. A network of faculty lecturers and staff promote equity of access in the university policies and strategy, in mission statements and core funding allocations. In Dublin City University, scheduled receptions and faculty meetings are held throughout the academic year to facilitate access students in continuing their links with each other and with the access service. There is also a peer tutoring system in DCU, where groups of students study and work together, co-ordinated by the access service. A subsidised accommodation scheme is available to 40 students living beyond commuting distance to the college. Similarly in Trinity College, there is a supported accommodation scheme that 20 students availed of in 2004. In the University of Limerick, approximately 115 students each year receive advice, book and equipment loans, personal development seminars, an information technology clinic, and photocopying and printing services. In Trinity College, up to 55 students each year complete a two-week introductory programme. They can avail of extra tuition in a range of subjects and also use equipment and services in a dedicated learning centre and writing resource centre. In the writing centre, four peer tutors are available each week to assist students with assignments and preparation for examinations. To develop these activities more broadly, a number of institutions have established centres to research and implement innovative forms of teaching, learning and assessment, including the University of Limerick, Mary Immaculate College, and St Patrick's Drumcondra.

Extra support and tuition has been extended to all students from disadvantaged backgrounds in NUI Maynooth. A counsellor liaises with students experiencing personal, social or financial difficulties, and workshops are provided in study skills, money management and coping with the transition from second level to higher education.

Financial support

Many students who enter higher education through access programmes receive additional financial support so that they can engage in their studies and student life and do not have to do extensive part-time work. Such financial support can also aid students who are repeating a year and have lost grant aid from the state. As the targeted initiatives scheme is not designed to provide such support, funding from private and other sources is used. Financial assistance is also provided for equipment, books and field-trip costs. In University College Dublin, 275 students participating in New ERA received an additional grant of €2,500 in 2003-4, with grant aid guaranteed throughout their undergraduate degree years. €2,000 is awarded each year to access students in NUI Maynooth. In University College Cork, approximately 127 students receive a bursary of €1,500. In Dublin City University, scholarships of €1,300 per annum, which are guaranteed for the duration of the degree programme, are provided to students entering the university through HEDAS or the North Dublin Access programme. Such additional financial support is considered by the access officers involved to be an important feature of the access programme. Participating students also referred to this support as a key feature of the initiative.

Teacher education

The central role that teachers play in promoting equity of access to education is well-established. Similar to other higher education courses, students from socio-economically disadvantaged communities are significantly under-represented in primary and secondary teacher education. To address this, St Patrick's College Drumcondra will, from September 2004, operate an alternative entry route to its Bachelor of Education programme for up to 20 students (5% of its first year intake) from 30 designated disadvantaged schools. Students who meet low-income criteria and achieve within a 60 points range of the 2004 CAO points requirement for the course will be eligible. The application process includes an interview. One other teacher education college, Mary Immaculate, plans to introduce an alternative entry route for students from socio-economically disadvantaged communities in September 2005. The route will be open to all students who provide evidence of socio-economic disadvantage and achieve within a 40 point range of the CAO points for the course. As standard entrants to the course do not complete an interview, this will not be a requirement for students entering the alternative route.

In addition to work on entry routes, both St Patrick's Drumcondra and Mary Immaculate College conduct research on equity of access and educational opportunity in pre-primary and primary education and also work with primary teachers through pre-service, in-service and post-graduate courses. In St Patrick's, elective modules on educational and socio-economic and socio-cultural disadvantage are completed by up to 100 of 368 student teachers each year. A Masters of Education degree offers students an opportunity to specialise in an area of particular interest to them, including educational disadvantage, education for diversity and special needs education. The Educational Disadvantage Centre in the college supports development and delivery of modules for both pre-service and in-service teacher education.

Research and teacher education in Mary Immaculate College includes a number of networks established by the Targeted Educational Disadvantage (TED) project. These networks promote links between 205 teachers in disadvantaged schools in Limerick city and 198 teachers in the Border-Midland-West region. Through these networks, the TED project researches, evaluates and disseminates models of best practice to tackle educational disadvantage. It also provides in-service and continuing professional development opportunities for teachers through meetings, seminars and training. Absenteeism, progression from primary to second level education, and the particular features of rural educational disadvantage are the focus of particular initiatives and research, and this research is widely disseminated. Also partly supported by the targeted/strategic initiative scheme, the Centre for Educational Disadvantage Research (CEDR) in Mary Immaculate College works to develop and change the practices of teachers so that 'the system' can be more responsive to the needs of diverse learners. CEDR projects also include a new framework for multicultural/intercultural education in Ireland that includes curriculum guidelines and work on policy and practice in the emerging area of development education. In Trinity College, the Department of Education offers a diploma in Educational Access: Curriculum Studies which can also be counted by teachers towards a Masters degree in education.

ACCESS ACTIVITIES FOR LEARNERS FROM THE TRAVELLING COMMUNITY AND ETHNIC MINORITIES

In 1999, the Higher Education Authority invited universities and colleges to develop initiatives targeting individuals from minority ethnic groups, in particular those from the travelling and refugee communities. Initiatives are under way in seven of the nine participating institutions. In general, these initiatives are co-ordinated by access officers. Initiatives include work with primary and second level, provision of academic courses, and research.

Summary: Initiatives to widen access for the travelling community in participating institutions

	UCD	UCC	TCD	NUIG	NUIM	UL	DCU	SPD	MIC
Schools Programmes		*	*				*		
Resources & Courses	*			*		*			*
Research			*		*	*	*	*	*
Networking	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

Summary: Initiatives to widen access for the refugee community in participating institutions

	UCD	UCC	TCD	NUIG	NUIM	UL	DCU	SPD	MIC
Courses	*	*		*					*
Outreach/ networking	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

Work with the travelling community at primary and second level

As many traveller children do not complete second level education, work with primary and second level forms an important part of access activities in the higher education institutions. A schools programme in University College Cork has established links between the university and ten regional schools with significant numbers of young people from the travelling community. Homework support groups, parenting courses, cultural awareness initiatives, and an induction programme for transfer from primary to secondary school are offered, with all activities organised and delivered by the schools.

Since 2003 DCU has been working in partnership with traveller visiting teachers on the development and delivery of a programme targeted at students in both primary and second level schools in the North Dublin area, and aimed at improving retention and increasing awareness of educational opportunities. Several activities focus on broadening access for members of the travelling community. A traveller programme begins in fifth class and is continued throughout second level. This initiative is aimed at raising awareness of educational opportunities, campus familiarity, role model creation and parental involvement in the student educational decisions. In addition, an open day was held in the university for women from the travelling community; 97 attended. Trinity College has begun development of a programme promoting education opportunities and choices for fifth and sixth class pupils and parents from the travelling community. The initiative will include a series of on-campus workshops for parents.

Resource development and courses

In UCD, eight members of a traveller women's group completed a certificate in equality studies in 2003. The Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) in Mary Immaculate College has developed multimedia resources to support teachers, parents and pupils including distance-learning materials for the travelling community. Some members of the travelling community have undertaken the After School Support Educational Training (ASSET) programme which assists adults in educational work with children. Two hundred and five children from travelling and the refugee communities are currently attending after-school clubs run by ASSET-accredited facilitators. Twelve traveller women completed the ASSET course in 2003–4 in an outreach centre in county Tipperary.

A women's group and a men's group participate in a traveller access programme in the University of Limerick assisting completion of the Leaving Certificate for some. Three women students are due to progress to degree programmes in 2004. The Irish World Music Centre in the University runs the Nomad programme which aims to provide recognition for traveller music, running workshops, supporting an artist-in-residence, co-ordinating performances and making recordings in community settings.

Research

A national forum on access for travellers in university education was hosted by NUI Maynooth in 2003, and proceedings from this conference are due to be published shortly. At Mary Immaculate College, the learner support unit completed a needs analysis of travellers and 'non-national' learners in third level education as part of its 'Moving On' project. In conjunction with a Limerick traveller development group, Mary Immaculate is training a group of traveller women to research traveller children's experiences of primary school. Dublin City University is researching existing student participation from all ethnic minorities and aims to develop stronger links with representatives from minority ethnic groups and statutory agencies working in the area.

Work with the refugee community and people from ethnic minorities

Initiatives to widen access for learners from the refugee community are so far relatively underdeveloped. They include a programme in University College Dublin which offers English language programmes on an outreach basis and an annual cultural diversity week across campus. Staff training events are planned for 2004. NUI Maynooth has worked with refugee groups; two graduates of its access programme in 2004 are from the refugee community. At Mary Immaculate College, three students from the refugee community will complete a specifically tailored access course in 2004. Of these three students, two hope to enter a degree programme in Mary Immaculate College and the third hopes to enter Limerick Institute of Technology. The Irish World Music Centre in the University of Limerick offers a programme called Sanctuary which uses music to bring members of the refugee community to the Centre. Activities include a choir, a drumming group, performances and archiving of ethnic music. In University College Cork, courses in Irish politics and citizenship are running both on and off campus with 50 participants from the refugee community. In Trinity College, two students from the refugee community have completed the foundation course. Research has also been completed in Trinity College on the needs of ethnic minority school children.

SUMMARY

The past eight years have been a time of experimentation and development for those working to widen access to higher education through the targeted/strategic initiative scheme. Pioneering ideas and initiatives have been put into practice and improved during that time, and more learners from under-represented groups are now going to higher education. Initiatives to widen access for students with a disability include events and publicity to raise awareness of disability issues and the needs of individuals in college. Awareness-raising activities also take place in some institutions with prospective students at primary and second level and also with parents, teachers and guidance counsellors. Supports for students include transport on campus, orientation programmes, needs assessment, extra tuition, provision of technology and equipment to aid learning, and, in some institutions, career guidance counselling.

Up-to-date figures of the numbers of students with a disability in higher education are due shortly from AHEAD; an initial estimate shows approximately 1,000 such students enrolled in institutions participating in the scheme.

Initiatives for mature students are well developed in all institutions and include taster courses, information evenings and foundation courses in a range of subject areas. Some universities collaborate with Institutes of Technology and community education networks in these activities. Information and counselling on course choices and options are also provided for prospective students during open days and evenings as well as visits to community and further education centres. Supports for mature students in college include orientation programmes, study skills courses, peer mentoring, and mature student networks. A careers advice service is also provided in some institutions. Numbers of mature students in the participating institutions have not been collated; however, it is estimated from HEA statistical returns that over 1,200 full-time mature students currently enter HEA-designated institutions each year.

Initiatives for socio-economically disadvantaged school leavers have developed into substantial programmes in many institutions. Primary-age children are encouraged to stay in school, with an emphasis on the opportunities available in higher education. Activities at second level provide information and an introduction to the higher education environment as well as extra tuition for Leaving Certificate students. Further education links are limited but some new contacts have been initiated in the past year. Three universities offer one-year foundation courses for 20–25 socio-economically disadvantaged students each year, and a direct entry scheme has also been developed. Support continues for students in college with peer tutoring, extra tuition, pastoral services and financial support. Up to 450 socio-economically disadvantaged students now enter college through direct entry or an access programme, a group who, without the scheme, might not otherwise have done so.

Initiatives to widen access for learners from the travelling and refugee communities are less developed than those for the other groups. At present, efforts are largely focused on research although some institutions have developed networks with learners from each community. To date, just eight women from the travelling community have completed a certificate course in UCD. Several institutions reported that between 2–5 students from the refugee community are now entering their institution each year; however, total numbers have not yet been collated.

The description of the targeted initiatives scheme shows that significant activity and development have happened over the past eight years. Incomplete data on the number of students from under-represented groups entering higher education or on other outcomes relating to participation and retention make it difficult to fully assess the impact of the scheme. This review has, however, provided an opportunity for institutions to share their experiences and discuss what is working best among the initiatives and programmes that have been developed.

IMPACT OF THE SCHEME

Over the past eight years the HEA targeted/strategic initiative scheme has been instrumental in developing access activities and opening the doors of higher education institutions to under-represented groups. Some senior officers in the participating institutions believe that the dedicated funding has been 'critically important' in efforts to widen access and open the institution, to under-represented groups. Such progress is a strong endorsement of the HEA decision in 1996 to embark on the scheme, and clearly, much can be achieved through the allocation of ring-fenced funding and resources over a sustained period of time. But a more detailed assessment of the impact of the scheme is required, and this emerged most strongly through dialogue with participants on the review questions. Participants responded to questions on examples of good practice that had emerged, barriers to success, the extent to which quality and equality can co-exist in higher education and what further work is required. Notwithstanding the absence of comprehensive indicators of progress in the scheme, some key issues and findings have emerged. These are now presented with recommendations for the future.

1 A national strategy

Although institutions value their autonomy and emphasise the need for initiatives to be tailored to the needs of a particular region, they also appreciate the benefit of clarity and coherence in national plans and targets. It was acknowledged that the need to widen access to higher education had been expressed numerous times since the 1990s as a policy priority for the state. However, a coherent plan or strategy to realise this goal had not followed. Examples were given of the uncertainty and lack of clear direction experienced by higher education institutions. Regarding initiatives at primary and second level, questions were asked by some about the desirability of higher education institutions being involved in these sectors. Initiatives by the state to tackle educational disadvantage at primary and second level were welcomed, but participants identified a lack of connection between such activities and the goal of widening access. The absence of a coherent policy to promote equity of educational opportunity for students with a disability was also identified; this has resulted in interventions that tend to be fragmented and dependent on the expertise and commitment of particular individuals within particular institutions. Participants representing mature students pointed out that, despite the publication of a White Paper on Adult Education in 2000, a policy to widen access to education for mature students is non-existent. The lack of a national policy has resulted in a wide range of foundation courses and a lack of consensus between institutions as to where these courses should be offered and for whom. Financial support is not available from the state to students who complete foundation courses, and questions have been asked about the progression opportunities open to students who successfully complete these courses, in particular where there is no formal accreditation or recognition of achievement available to students.

Some progress on a national strategy has been made over the past year, however, following the establishment of a National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education. The National Office is assisted in developing the strategy by an advisory group comprising student and parent representatives,

educators and related national agencies, and it is due to be completed by the end of 2004. The aim is to provide a vision and rationale for equity of access to higher education for all learners in Ireland and to set out the practical steps that are required to realise this vision. The experiences of the targeted/strategic initiative scheme provide a valuable source of knowledge and insight for the strategy to build upon.

In addition to the work of the National Office, the Educational Disadvantage Committee, a statutory body which was set up following the 1998 Education Act, is completing a comprehensive review of programmes to combat educational disadvantage at primary and second level. This work aims to ensure that the range of activities and investment of resources have clear strategic objectives and targets to achieve equity of educational opportunity for all students. The work of both the Committee and the National Office will complement each other. It will work towards a coherent connection between activities to widen access and equity of opportunity for students across the education system. Higher education institutions will be able to draw on the work of both to fit their own activities into an overall framework that has sufficient flexibility to meet the needs of students in different regions while at the same time providing clarity of purpose on overall national strategy and policy.

As an important element of the implementation of a national strategy, the targeted/strategic initiative scheme will also require further development. Participants in the scheme acknowledged that, to date, there has been considerable emphasis on the inputs and process elements of activities to widen access, but less on the results of such activities. A small number of institutions who have set, and in some cases exceeded, targets for widening access have pointed out that there should be tighter evaluative criteria and a much closer connection between the resources that are made available through the scheme and the results achieved. Such results would by no means be solely quantitative as qualitative indicators and results are equally important. It is proposed that both kinds of indicators of progress as well as national and institutional targets for each under-represented learner group be developed and agreed between the institutions and the National Office and used by the HEA to allocate funding in future years.

A number of developmental steps undertaken by the HEA would substantially enhance the operation of the scheme. More concise guidelines could be provided to institutions on initiatives that are likely to receive funding and the criteria that are used to make allocations. (A start on this has been made in 2004 and will be developed further.) The model of multi-annual funding could be further developed so that institutions can plan effectively and the scheme can fulfil its strategic potential. More detailed feedback and interaction with institutions on funding decisions and further development could take place. Inter-institutional collaboration could be further encouraged and could include institutes of technology, the DIT and other higher education colleges. These institutions have developed access activities that HEA-funded institutions have not exploited to any significant extent up to now. These include joint projects undertaken with the workplace and corporate sector by the DIT as well as innovative work with parents and communities.

2 Data collection

The review has highlighted the need for comprehensive and systematically collected data on participation in higher education on a scale that has not happened to date. An inability to report fully on quantitative as well as qualitative indicators of progress means that the full progress and achievements of institutions cannot be articulated. On an individual basis, institutions have provided a significant amount of information on their activities and there is no doubt that the majority of initiatives undertaken are worthy and effective, but it is difficult to make a strong case for continued and increased resources in the absence of data that can be presented and interpreted in a coherent format. The absence of data also makes it difficult to build a national picture of access to higher education and to plan effectively. It is proposed that a framework for collection of data is agreed and begins immediately.

3 An institution-wide access policy

The importance of an institution-wide policy to widen access has been highlighted by commentators like Woodrow (1996) and Skilbeck and Connell (2000). They point out that as long as initiatives to widen access for under-represented groups remain on the periphery in higher education, results are likely to remain marginal and limited despite the efforts of the most committed access officers. Central to an institution-wide policy is involvement and commitment on the part of senior officers and staff as a whole. The issue of widening access goes to the heart of an institution's function as a centre of teaching and learning. In their evaluation of HEA targeted initiatives in 2000, Osborne and Leith found that there was a need to ensure that the institutional culture in universities and colleges changed from one where widening access is a 'marginal, bolted-on activity' to one where institutions have a rounded and robust rationale or policy for widening access initiatives and the need for a more socially inclusive student population is understood and proactively supported by academic staff. There is a need for all institutions to develop such a policy on widening access.

Evidence of good practice in this regard has emerged in some of the participating institutions, where widening access for under-represented groups is part of a formal strategy, with explicit targets for wider participation expressed in terms of student numbers from under-represented groups. Staff in senior positions promote access as part of the practical agenda of their institution and provide important leadership and evidence of commitment. Access personnel attend regular team meetings to review their work. Debate is encouraged on the social imperative for widening access and the impact of a more diverse student population on the institution's identity and place within a changing society. Increasingly, access personnel are developing liaison arrangements with academic staff to ensure that the physical and learning needs of students are met, additional learning and pastoral support is provided where necessary, and assessment arrangements are sufficiently inclusive. In one institution, the opportunity for additional learning support has been extended to all students, thereby tackling issues of overall retention and successful participation.

It must be pointed out, however, that to date, these structures are present in only a small number of institutions, and in others, access remains at the margins. This constitutes a barrier to the success of the overall scheme. Where the responsibility for promoting wider access and working with under-represented students is seen to be the sole responsibility of an institution's access personnel instead of being embraced as an important goal by all staff, initiatives and new developments are destined to remain on the periphery of the institution. In some institutions, access personnel are on temporary contracts and have relatively low rates of pay; when they leave the institution loses expertise and efficiency. Financial and other resources that are not 'ring-fenced' tend to be difficult to get and to be the most vulnerable to cuts in more straitened times. Access personnel and other advocates of under-represented student groups sometimes find it difficult to have their voice heard by those influential in policy development and resource allocation within their institution.

To implement a successful policy to widen access for a range of under-represented groups, coherent organisation of access personnel and reporting structures is required. Initiatives require regular review to ensure that they are effective and fulfilling their objectives and that the sum of a range of activities for different student groups is contributing to a clearly articulated institutional policy. Access personnel and senior staff need to work and communicate as a team. Access must become an integral part of an institution's policy and practical agenda. It must be an explicit element in each institution's strategic plan with targets and indicators to measure progress. A person in a senior position in each institution should take responsibility for overseeing access activities and co-ordinating the work under way. Finally, ways for involving all members of staff in access activities should be developed. The perception of access personnel 'ploughing a lonely furrow' within an institution should become a thing of the past.

The wider student body should also be included in the development of an inclusive institutional ethos. Their attitudes and interaction with students from under-represented groups have a significant impact on the experience of those entering college through alternative routes. Those students who were interviewed as part of the review stressed the importance of acceptance and positive interaction with their peers. Institutions should proactively promote diversity and inclusiveness as part of the ethos of their community as a whole.

4 Partnerships across the education and training community

Promoting equity of access to higher education must draw and build upon effective policies and activities to ensure equity of access to education from pre-school through primary and second level and into further and adult and community education. A key element of such policies are effective connections and partnerships between each sector; such partnerships should build strong collaborative relationships between teachers and access personnel and senior staff in each sector. They should also foster interest in higher education among students of all ages, backgrounds and disabilities and a view of higher education as an accessible and exciting choice. Through such partnerships, institutions can play an

important part in promoting the value of learning in communities. They can also build upon and complement the work under way as part of sectoral initiatives such as the Giving Children an Even Break programme, the School Completion programme, the Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme, and work-related education and training. Partnership activities such as these do not necessarily produce immediate results; they facilitate equity of educational opportunity in the long term. Nonetheless, they constitute an important contribution by higher education institutions to widening access throughout the educational system.

Several of the institutions participating in the scheme have developed successful partnerships with education providers in other sectors. There are some notable examples at primary level, and teachers working with socio-economically disadvantaged children, traveller children and children with a disability emphasise the positive, long-term impact of the interaction with the higher education campus and personnel. The positive impact of local and regional partnerships with second level education providers is evident in initiatives to widen access for socio-economically disadvantaged young people. Data that tracks participating second level students into higher education or elsewhere is not available; however, access officers confirmed that each year a significant proportion of the students progress to higher education either in the HEA-funded institutions or other institutions offering higher education. The second level initiatives also encourage students to consider higher education as part of their future and promote a wider sense of educational opportunity among families and communities. Access personnel who have developed partnerships at second level for students with a disability emphasise the need to connect with students and teachers, particularly since support and guidance at second level for this group of students remains underdeveloped.

Higher education opportunities for adults in urban and rural communities have been developed through outreach programmes offered in partnership with adult and community education centres by a number of institutions. Good practice guidelines ensure that students undertaking outreach modules and courses receive credits that are part of the institutions' modular system and thereby provide a clear route of progression to further study. Programmes are also tailored to meet students' needs in terms of curriculum, assessment, and teaching and learning strategies. To date, there is, however, limited activity with workers who wish to access higher education; this is an area in need of further development.

As part of its policy to promote equity of educational access, higher education institutions should develop local and regional partnerships with other education and training providers. Such partnerships would make important teaching and learning connections between the sectors, widen understanding on all sides of the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, and identify and support the activities that most effectively facilitate all learners to reach their full potential. The higher education sector occupies a position of natural leadership, and it should use this position to positively influence development of the system.

5 New routes of access

At present, the main route of entry into higher education is through the Leaving Certificate points system, and new routes of access to higher education are in need of immediate development. Current alternative entry routes are not formally articulated, and students often find them difficult to navigate. This absence of alternative routes of entry affects students from all under-represented groups. In many cases, entry arrangements are valid for one institution alone, and a different set of arrangements may operate in another. More extensive and transparent routes are urgently required for students transferring from second level, from further education and for mature students with other qualifications and experience. Experience of alternative routes of entry have been developed by the institutions; one such route is the Higher Education Direct Application System (HEDAS). HEDAS has been operating for the past four years on a pilot basis. Overall numbers entering through HEDAS remain small, and there is a need now to examine the principles of direct entry and whether a scheme such as HEDAS should develop into a formal, more extensive route of entry, not just for socio-economically disadvantaged school leavers, but also for mature students and students with a disability.

There are also important new entry opportunities to be developed between further and higher education. Further education provision has been in existence in practice, if not in theory, since the foundation of the state, but the sector has expanded enormously since the late 1970s, supported by the European Union. The sector received formal recognition through the 1999 Qualifications (Education and Training) Act which established the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and consolidated the activities of five agencies engaged in further education and training. Each year, over 140,000 further education students complete a range of vocational qualifications, including industrial, catering and agricultural programmes as well as apprenticeships. Although only one of the participating higher education institutions to date has developed formal links with the further education sector, the value and potential of this link is beginning to emerge. The links fit clearly into the national framework of qualifications and provide an important stepping stone to the university in question from what is a rapidly expanding further education sector in Ireland. Collaboration between the partners on a range of broader issues is increasing. Students completing further education qualifications can consider a range of progression options, one of which is to further studies in a higher education institution. This access route is clearly structured and articulated and does not require students to be singled out for relatively subjective 'special treatment' – a criticism of some existing entry routes. Formal routes of progression from community colleges to higher education in the United States could provide a model for further development of the connections between further and higher education, the key to success being 'long term and effective collaboration between the different stages of progression' (Hoyler, Hexter and Casey, 2002, p.178).

To date, many further education and training qualifications are not oriented towards progression to higher education, and new collaboration on curricula and teaching and learning strategies will be necessary. In addition to widening the opportunities for learners, the benefits for educationalists in both sectors will be significant. The further education and training sector has extensive experience in teaching and learning strategies that ensure success among diverse groups of learners, including adults, students with a disability, and those whom the education system had previously let down. It is proposed that further and higher education providers work together to expand the opportunities and routes of progression available to students wishing to progress from further to higher education.

6 Quality and equality in higher education

The extent to which more equitable participation in higher education affects an institution's traditional image is a question that seems to have been largely avoided in institutions to date. There is a need to engage in much more extensive debate on 'quality' and 'equality' within higher education and the impact of a more diverse student population on the academy. (One institution did have a debate on the issue in 2003.) National and international commentators have argued that quality and equality can co-exist in higher education, and further evidence for this was provided by the institutions participating in the scheme. Indeed there is evidence from the review that the achievement of students from under-represented groups equals and, in many cases, surpasses that of the traditional Leaving Certificate entrant. The importance of students' achievements in addition to academic success was also emphasised by participants, in particular the development of richer teaching and learning experiences as well as their participation in and contribution to sport, music and other extra-curricular activities.

Data showing a strong record of retention, progression and academic achievement among students from the target under-represented groups included figures on socio-economically disadvantaged entrants and mature students who enter college via a direct route. In one institution, 80% of students entering via a direct applications route complete on time, with 75% achieving a first or second class honours degree. A second institution reported that the drop-out rate of direct entry students is 6%, compared to a rate of 14% amongst the larger student body; 83% of these direct entrants achieve a first or second class honours degree. A third institution reported from a study of mature student participation between 1999–2001 that 90% of its mature student cohort entered and successfully completed honours degrees during this period. Within a more extended timeframe, between 1996–2003, 91% of full-time mature students achieved an honours degree. In another institution, data on mature student participation shows that despite entrants achieving an average of 65 points in their Leaving Certificate, the majority of entrants left with honours degrees.

The positive and enriching contribution of students from diverse backgrounds was also noted by participants in the review. Although there is still a considerable distance to go, the presence of increasing numbers of students with a disability, mature students, and students from a much wider range of

socio-economic and cultural backgrounds is reported to have begun to change the campus, lecture halls and tutorial rooms in positive ways. Students sometimes raise questions about the curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment methodologies; on the whole this contribution is welcomed and has a positive impact on the learning experience. Mature students were credited with challenging fellow students and lecturers to think and learn and question in new ways and with a different perspective. The increasing participation of students with a disability, a group who, until relatively recently, were largely invisible in society, broadens the experience of students and lecturers about living with a disability and experiencing a full and rich life in spite of it.

7 New approaches to teaching, learning and assessment

Innovative teaching and learning strategies are an important part of meeting the needs of a more diverse student population and ensuring that every student has adequate opportunity for successful participation in higher education. Increasingly, assumptions about what Lawrence (2002) terms the 'traditional élite student' are changing in higher education institutions around the world. Students who wish to overcome previous educational, social or cultural disadvantage or the barriers created by a disability are entering higher education in ever greater numbers with a determination to succeed and excel in their chosen field of study. Higher education institutions need to systematically develop an environment that supports the academic needs of students with diverse backgrounds and ensures that they have sufficient opportunity to achieve.

A number of institutions participating in the scheme have centres for teaching and learning which aim to develop good practice in teaching and learning, curriculum development, and assessment practice across the institution as a whole. As yet, these centres are relatively new and considerable work remains to be done. However, some good practice is emerging in the form of in-service teaching qualification opportunities for academic staff, guidelines on inclusive assessment practice that are developed in conjunction with access personnel, and also in development of course curricula. For students with a disability, assistive technology centres are also in place in several institutions that provide a range of equipment and support and aim to use the internet and e-learning strategies to the full to assist students with course material, notes and tutorials. Students who were interviewed referred to this type of support as a crucial factor in their successful participation. Students and access officers emphasised the need for such learning support to be available as part of the mainstream teaching and learning activity of the institution rather than only as a 'special' intervention requiring a formal request and arrangements to access it. In the case of students with a disability, the Association of Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) endorse the need for 'baseline' learning support to be available to students as part of mainstream teaching and learning activities in higher education. Examples of best practice include provision of an assistive technology centre as a core library service, availability of lecture and tutorial notes and material on the internet or intranet, and clear assessment policies that provide options

for students for whom the traditional examination format reduces their ability to demonstrate what they have learned.

Learning and pastoral support for new entrants to higher education is another important activity and should be incorporated into core services for students. Students who were interviewed referred to the positive impact of orientation briefings, contact personnel and networks, and an awareness of the range of support structures and services in place, including academic and pastoral counsellors. An opportunity to become acquainted with academic staff in advance of formal lectures was also valuable. Guidance, workshops and short courses in study skills and writing and research skills were identified as hugely helpful initiatives. In addition to the benefits for students from under-represented groups, institutions have recognised the positive impact of innovative teaching and learning strategies on rates of drop out and non-completion of courses by students from the 'traditional' cohort.

CONCLUSION

This initial review has found that targeted/strategic initiatives in HEA-funded institutions have resulted in wider access to higher education for students with a disability, mature students, and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. They have also resulted in significant experience and learning for everyone involved. In assessing the impact of the scheme, directions for the future have emerged that will be of benefit not just to the scheme but also the emerging national strategy to widen access to higher education. Collection and dissemination of comprehensive data will be essential activities. National and institutional targets for each under-represented learner group in higher education as well as indicators of progress that are both quantitative and qualitative will be developed and used to evaluate activities and ensure that financial and other resources are used to full effect. Necessary financial resources will be identified, and a model for stable, multiannual funding put in place. A policy and ethos that operate on an institution-wide basis will build scale and momentum for widening access activities and ensure that the needs of students in different locations and backgrounds are met. Partnerships across the education and training system and new routes of access will underpin the future national policy. Open debate and dialogue will promote a widespread realisation that quality and equality can and do co-exist in higher education. Increasingly, strategies for teaching, learning and assessment will develop so that students of all backgrounds, identities and disabilities have the opportunity to successfully participate and reach their full potential in higher education.

The challenge in the coming years for both the HEA scheme and the national strategy is to ensure that all partners work together to achieve equity of access to higher education and the best education for all.

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