Royal Irish Academy Advice Paper on Equity of Access to Higher Education

RIA

Key Points

- Early intervention is important to improve the progression rates of under-represented socio-economic groups from second-level education to higher education. Particularly effective modes of intervention include enhanced guidance-counselling provisions at second level and higher-education-engagement programmes.
- Future funding models for higher education should include a well-developed student-support system.
- All higher-education providers, further-education providers and schools within a local region should work together to set out targets on progression to, and retention within, higher education.
- The inclusion of part-time education in the Free Fees Scheme has the potential to increase the accessibility of higher education for non-traditional and under-represented participants.
- Data on the social profiles of part-time students should be consistently recorded and analysed to ascertain the extent to which part-time students are drawn from under-represented groups.

1. Introduction and Context

It is widely acknowledged that the matter of access to higher education is quite complex. The causes of inequality of educational opportunity to higher education for all social groups are many, and the solution will involve interventions by government at all levels of education—primary, secondary, further and higher education. This paper is set against the backdrop of numerous national policy initiatives already underway or being developed and which are pertinent to the issue of equity of access to higher education. Relevant initiatives include the *National Strategy to Higher Education to 2030*, the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2014–2017*, the appointment by the minister for education and skills of the Expert Group for Future Funding Options for Higher Education, 2014–2015, the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007–2016*, the *National Disability Strategy, 2013–2015*, and the roll-out of the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) Higher Education System Performance Framework. The Royal Irish Academy, Ireland's national academy for the sciences, humanities and social sciences, is happy to contribute to this continuing debate and dialogue within higher education and beyond on how best to remove inequalities in access to higher education. This paper suggests that the overarching long-term goal for equity of access should be to achieve equality of educational opportunity to higher education for all social groups, and that current targets should be seen only as key performance indicators and not an end in themselves.

It is important firstly to acknowledge the considerable progress made in recent years in broadening access to higher education amongst non-traditional participants (see HEA, 2014a, p. 7). This paper examines areas that could further aid this progress, with a specific focus on:

- Early intervention;
- Financial barriers to higher education;
- Alternative pathways to higher education.

2. Early Intervention

The recent *Leaving School in Ireland* study (McCoy et al., 2014) highlighted the importance of school experiences in shaping later pathways to higher education. Higher-education aspirations emerge early in junior cycle and are relatively stable thereafter, highlighting the importance of early intervention. This paper identifies two areas that could support early intervention: guidance counselling at second level, and higher-education community-engagement programmes.

(a) Guidance counselling at second level

Not surprisingly, higher-education entry reflects earlier educational success, but there are significant differences by individual social background and school social mix in the access to, and take-up of, the higher-level subjects that will facilitate such success. Guidance about the implications of subject-level take-up (and, indeed, subject take-up) is crucial from early on in the junior cycle. Since the removal of ex-quota provision for guidance counsellors,[1] significantly fewer hours have been allocated to guidance (NCGE, 2013, p. 61). This will have a disproportionate effect on young people from disadvantaged and immigrant backgrounds and on those attending schools with a concentration of disadvantage as they are more reliant on school-based guidance and because their families have less 'insider' knowledge of how the educational system works (Smyth et al., 2011; McCoy et al., 2014).

Even before the removal of ex-quota provision for guidance counsellors, constraints on time meant that formal guidance provision was focused on senior cycle, especially on sixth-year students. However, by this stage of their studies, some options are closed off to young people because of their prior choices in picking Leaving Certificate subjects. Research from the Economic and Social Research Institute indicates a high level of dissatisfaction among young people with senior-cycle subject choices (Smyth et al., 2011).

The National Centre for Guidance in Education's 2013 *Review of Guidance Counselling Provision in Second-level Schools, 2012–2013* found that 'The ex-quota allocation for guidance in schools should be restored as a priority when resources become available' (NCGE, 2013, p. 68). It is reasonable to conclude that in the restoration of such resources, prioritisation should be considered for disadvantaged schools given the aforementioned reliance that disadvantaged students have on school-based guidance support in making decisions about their future academic options.

(b) Develop higher-education community-engagement programmes

The 2011 *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* recommended that 'Engagement with the wider community must become more firmly embedded in the mission of higher education institutions. Higher education institutions need to become more firmly embedded in the social and economic contexts of the communities they live in and serve' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p. 79). Community-outreach programmes already exist in many of the higher-education institutions in Ireland and are set to expand with the adoption of the Campus Engage Charter for Civic and Community

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[1] The minister for education and skills announced that from September 2012 guidance counselling in second-level schools will be funded from within the General Teacher Allocation.

Engagement.[2] These outreach and engagement programmes provide students in disadvantaged communities with a familiarity with higher education and lead to improved attainment in the Leaving Certificate. These programmes are not only beneficial to the communities they serve but are also academically beneficial for the students participating in their delivery. As an incentive to expand these programmes, academic accreditation could be considered, as recommended by the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*: 'Recognise civic engagement of their students through programme accreditation, where appropriate' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p. 81). This academic accreditation could be awarded in a similar fashion to the Dublin City University Uaneen Module.[3]

3. Financial Barriers to Higher Education

To increase participation and completion rates amongst under-represented groups, financial impediments that hinder access to higher education should be addressed.

(a) Address the costs associated with attending higher education

According to research carried out by the Irish League of Credit Unions in 2014, the average cost of attending college away from home is €11,000 per annum, including accommodation, bills and other living expenses. This survey also revealed that seventy-two per cent of family budgets were adversely affected by the Student Contribution Charge, and that fifty-one per cent of students have to work throughout the academic year to fund their third-level education, working on average nineteen hours per week. To support attendance at college, forty per cent of parents/students incur debt. This has a particularly negative effect on lower-income groups, which tend to be debt averse and which consequently may decide against participation in higher education. The increase in the Student Contribution Charge from €1,500 in 2009 to €3,000 in 2015 is likely to increase these statistics and have a greater impact on young people at the margins of grant-eligibility thresholds (lower middle class, lower non-manual groups), those groups least likely to have benefited from the rapid expansion in higher education (McCoy et al., 2011).

(b) Financial support available to full-time students

The maintenance grant is the main source of financial assistance available from the Irish state for students in full-time higher education, eligibility for which is determined on the basis of family and/or personal income. The current maximum 'special rate of non-adjacent grant' is €5,915;[4] therefore the maximum rate of support does not cover the average overall costs associated with attending college for students living away from home. The removal of tuition fees did not see a reduction in social inequality in access to higher education. Reducing one element of the direct costs was not sufficient to produce a change where other direct costs (such as the cost of living, accommodation, etc.) remain high (McCoy & Smyth, 2011).

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[2] The Campus Engage National Network has been set up to promote civic engagement as a core function of higher education on the island of Ireland by better enabling higher-education institutions, their staff and students across all disciplines to engage with the needs of the communities they serve. See http://www.campusengage.ie/.

[3] The Uaneen Module formally recognises and rewards the achievement of holistic education by accrediting a module in extracurricular activities. See www.dcu.ie/uaneen.

[4] http://www.studentfinance.ie/mp9552/grant-levels/index.html.

The 2012 HEA report on student progression rates noted that student financial hardship may be increasing and that the monetary benefit for those in receipt of a grant is not having the same impact as it did before (HEA, 2012a, p. 15). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) classifies Ireland as a country with 'relatively low levels of support for students' (OECD, 2014, p. 266). This paper notes the opportunity that is presented by the establishment of an expert group to examine future funding policy for higher education. This group should—if increasing equity of educational opportunity and outcomes is a key national goal—give considerable attention to developing a funding model that takes into account the overall costs associated with attending higher education.

4. Alternative Pathways to Higher Education

(a) Collaboration between schools, further-education institutions and higher-education institutions

The 2014 HEA consultation paper on equity of access noted that 'all higher education providers, further education providers and schools will be required to work together to ensure that there are clear educational pathways and opportunities available for students' (HEA, 2014a, p. 16).

With the establishment of the sixteen Education and Training Boards, higher-education institutions (HEIs) now have the opportunity to work within their regional cluster[5] in tandem with further-education institutions (FEIs) and local schools in developing sustainable pathways of progression from primary education right through to higher education itself. This approach was recommended in the Office for Fair Access 2013 *Interim report on National Strategy for Access and Student Success to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Office for Fair Access* (OFFA). The report concluded that:

- Outreach is most effective when delivered as a progressive, sustained programme of activity and engagement over time;
- Outreach programmes need to be directed towards young people at different stages of their educational career and begin at primary level;
- The effective delivery of outreach programmes requires the full, adequately resourced involvement and engagement of HEIs, FEIs and schools;
- The collaborative provision of outreach delivers benefits in terms of scale, engagement, coordination and impartiality;
- Progression pathways for learners with non-traditional or vocational qualifications need to be clearly articulated;
- Outreach to mature learners depends on good links with FECs [further-education colleges], employers and the community;
- Retention and success depends on fostering a sense of belonging;
- The academic sphere is key to establishing belonging, so issues of curriculum design, pedagogy, learning and teaching environments, and student engagement and support are crucial (OFFA, 2013, p. 4).

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[5] The five regional clusters: Dublin I (UCD, TCD, IADT, NCAD, MIE); Dublin II (DCU, MDI, SPD, NUIM, AIT, IT Dundalk; DIT, IT Tallaght, ITB); Mid-west (UL, LIT, MIC); West/North-west (NUIG, GMIT, LKIT, IT Sligo, St Angela's College); South (UCC, CIT, IT Tralee, WIT, IT Carlow).

In developing this approach, each regional cluster could be encouraged to develop partnership agreements similar to the Access Agreements[6] adopted in the UK that set out targets on progression to, and retention within, higher education. These agreements could be evaluated on an annual basis and linked to a proportion of the Recurrent Grant Allocation.

(b) Part-time education as a route to higher education for under-represented participants

There are nearly forty thousand students studying part-time[7] in higher-education institutions in Ireland (HEA, 2015). Part-time students now represent sixteen per cent of the student cohort at undergraduate level, up from seven per cent in 2008 (HEA, 2014a). To build on this progress, the HEA's Higher Education System Framework identified the need to increase part-time places within higher education as a key target in developing alternative routes to higher education for non-traditional participants: 'Increased numbers and proportions of entrants into flexible learning opportunities in higher education into part-time or flexible/springboard programmes' (HEA, 2014b, p. 5).

Part-time education gives students, particularly mature students[8] who cannot participate in full-time education due to work, family or other commitments, an alternative route to higher education. Ireland's success in recent years in increasing participation in higher education from less than 70,000 in 1991 to 169,000 in 2014 (CSO, 2014) has created a significant divergence within educational attainment among the adult population. Amongst 25–34-year-olds, Ireland ranks joint first in the EU at fifty-one per cent of adults with a higher-education qualification, but this figure drops to twenty-five per cent for 55–64-year-olds (Eurostat, 2015). Expanding part-time education could address this imbalance of academic attainment amongst the adult population. The effectiveness of part-time education in attracting this cohort of students is supported by the fact that ninety-two per cent of part-time entrants to higher education in Ireland are mature students, compared with thirteen per cent of full-time entrants (HEA, 2012b, 2014a).

Part-time education is seen in many countries as an established route through higher education for students—often mature students—from disadvantaged backgrounds (OECD, 2014). However, in Ireland this route is impaired by the fact that, unlike full-time students, part-time students (with the exception of jobseekers on the Springboard initiative)[9] are not eligible for the Free Fees Scheme or maintenance grants. While tax relief[10] is available at the standard rate of twenty per cent, the first €1,350 of any such claim is disregarded. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008–2013 committed the HEA and the Department of Education and Skills 'to explore the establishment of financial and other supports for part-time learners from disadvantaged backgrounds' (HEA, 2008, p. 51). However, the nature of the responses received by the HEA during the consultation process on part-time and flexible education in Ireland strongly suggest that financial pressures continue to be the biggest impediment for prospective part-time students in accessing higher education. Almost all of the submissions received in response to the current consultation process

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[6] An access agreement sets out a university or college's fees limits and the access measures it intends to put in place—e.g. outreach work and financial support. See more at http://www.offa.org.uk/access-agreements/.
[7] Part-time/flexible participation in higher education is defined as participation that leads to less than sixty credits per academic year.
[8] A mature new entrant is defined as a student who was twenty-three or over on 1 January of the year of entry to the higher-education institution.
[9] The Springboard Initiative offers free courses at certificate, degree and masters level to the unemployed in areas where there are employment opportunities in the economy. See more at http://www.springboardcourses.ie/.
[10] http://www.revenue.ie/en/tax/it/leaflets/it31.htm.

agree that student financial support continues to be 'by far the most significant issue that needs to be tackled in terms of successfully developing flexible provision in Irish higher education' (HEA, 2012b, p. 27).

The target set in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008–2013 (HEA, 2008, p. 12) to have twenty-seven per cent of the student cohort made up of mature students has fallen short, at twenty per cent. Given the aforementioned correlation between mature students and part-time education, it could be hypothesised that expanding part-time education would lead to an increase in participation amongst mature students. If part-time and full-time students were to be treated on a similar basis in respect of the Free Fees Scheme and eligibility for maintenance grants and other student supports, it could increase the accessibility of higher education for working adults and adults with caring responsibilities. It could also offer an alternative route to higher education for school-leavers who could not afford to commit to higher education on a full-time basis.

Furthermore, there is a lack of systematic data on the social profiles of part-time students, making it difficult to look at the extent to which part-time students are drawn from other traditionally under-represented groups. Given that mature students account for ninety-two per cent of the part-time-student cohort, data analysis of the mature-student population amongst full-time students may be pertinent in identifying patterns in the profiles of part-time students. According to a 2011 HEA study, *Profile of Undergraduate Mature New Entrants*, a greater proportion of the mature new-entrant respondents are represented by the skilled-manual, semi-skilled and unskilled groups, and a smaller proportion of mature new entrants are classified as employer and manager, higher professional, lower professional and farmers. These proportions are in contrast to non-mature-student entrants. In addition, it was estimated that 9.5 per cent of all full-time mature new entrants indicated they had one or more disabilities, compared with 5.9 per cent of all non-mature new entrants (HEA, 2011, p. 28).

Conclusion

Ireland has made enormous strides in a relatively short period in expanding its progression rate to higher education. In doing so, Ireland is now the highest-ranked country for higher-education attainment amongst 25–34-year-olds in the EU. However, it is generally acknowledged that Ireland must do more to expand the reach of higher education to traditionally under-represented groups. This paper suggests three areas of focus to achieve this: firstly, the importance of early intervention; secondly, the importance of addressing financial barriers to higher education; thirdly, the development of alternative pathways to higher education, with a particular focus on part-time students. To effectively achieve these goals national access policies should not be implemented in isolation from other government programmes targeted at alleviating poverty and addressing social exclusion.[11]

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