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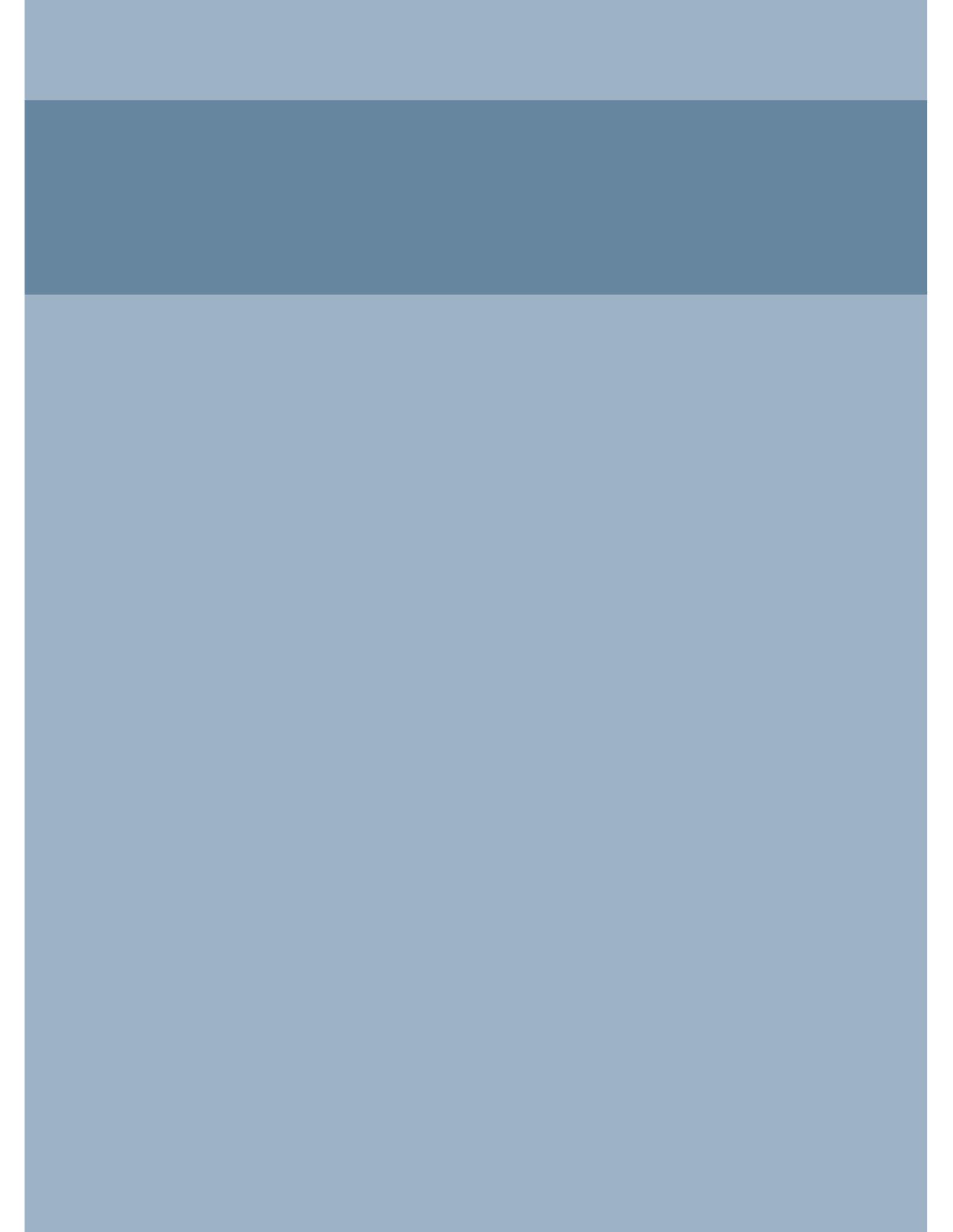
ACHIEVING EQUITY OF ACCESS  
TO HIGHER EDUCATION

SETTING AN AGENDA  
FOR ACTION IN IRELAND

**CONFERENCE  
PROCEEDINGS**

6-7 December 2004  
Kilkenny, Ireland





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## CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

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6–7 DECEMBER 2004

KILKENNY, IRELAND

ISBN 1 - 9 - 5135 - 00 - 9

Dublin

Published by the National Office for Equity of Access  
to Higher Education, Higher Education Authority

To be purchased from the  
Government Publications Sales Office,  
Molesworth Street, Dublin 2.

or through any Bookseller

Price €10  
February 2005



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## INTRODUCTION

These conference proceedings present the papers and workshops of the first conference of the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education. The conference took place on 6–7 December 2004 in Kilkenny, with the theme ‘Achieving equity of access to higher education: Setting an agenda for action in Ireland’. A three-year action plan was also launched at the conference by the Minister for Education and Science, Mary Hanafin, TD. Over 220 delegates attended and included students, teachers, policy makers, practitioners and administrators in primary, second level, and further and higher education and training.

There were two conference aims:

- To create dialogue and debate about the challenges in achieving equity of access to higher education over the next three years
- To begin work on a practical agenda to implement the national Action Plan 2005–2007.

The conference provided the opportunity to draw together people working in different areas of access to higher education. In her keynote paper Professor Kathleen Lynch of the Equality Studies Centre in University College Dublin highlighted the need to tackle inequalities that are still prevalent in our education system and in wider social structures, such as our everyday language, economy, socio-cultural environment, the way in which social power and authority is distributed and our relationships with each other. In his response to Professor Lynch’s paper, Niall Crowley, chief executive of the Equality Authority, proposed an agenda for action based on legislative change and work by organisations specifically formed to promote and support educational and wider social equality.

On the theme of ‘Setting the agenda for action: Essential steps for success’, Dr Dermot Douglas argued that institutes of technology require resources similar to

the university sector if they are to contribute fully to achieving equity of access to higher education. Professor Jim Browne presented a proposal from the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIU) for socio-economically disadvantaged school leavers. Maeve O’Byrne gave the perspective of an access officer working with students from under-represented groups and outlined six practical steps to success. In his paper, Professor Máirtín Ó Fathaigh reflected on the experience of an educational partnership between a community northside of Cork city and University College Cork. Stan McHugh described the opportunities that have been created for access, transfer and progression from further to higher education through the new national framework of qualifications and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC).

Minister Hanafin, in launching the national action plan, underlined the importance of opportunities for self-development and fulfilment through education for all members of our society.

The final part of the proceedings presents a summary of the dialogue and proposals of each of the six conference workshops. The dialogue that took place in the workshops as well as the papers presented at the conference are an important starting point in implementing the national action plan.

### Thank you

The National Office team would like to thank all those who attended the conference and contributed to the debate. We would also like to thank our speakers and workshop facilitators who put such effort and care into their preparation for the conference –

Professor Jim Browne, Dr Anastasia Crickley, Niall Crowley, Dr Dermot Douglas, Brian Fleming, Brendan Goggin, Dr Jen Harvey, Ann Heelan, Tina Lowe, Professor Kathleen Lynch,



Bernie McDonnell, Brian McGonagle, Stan McHugh,  
Edwin Mernagh, Maeve O'Byrne, Muiris O'Connor,  
Professor Máirtín Ó Fathaigh, Dr Michael Shevlin and  
Dr Don Thornhill.

A particular word of thanks to the conference team of  
Modesta Mawarire and Justin Synnott of the National  
Office, to Gerry O'Sullivan, head of public relations and  
communications in the HEA, and to Tom Boland, chief  
executive of the HEA, for his support and  
encouragement.

**Dr Mary-Liz Trant**  
**Head of the National Office for Equity of Access to**  
**Higher Education**

## LAUNCH OF CONFERENCE

**Dr. Don Thornhill, Chairman, Higher Education Authority**

I am delighted to welcome you here this morning to Kilkenny on behalf of the HEA. This is the first conference organised by the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education.

We have chosen a practical, focused theme for this conference – setting an agenda for action to achieve equity of access to higher education in Ireland. Over the next two days, we hope that there will be extensive debate, dialogue and interaction between all of us on the vision and ways and means of developing and moving this agenda forward.

There are over 200 delegates here this morning. This reflects the level of interest and engagement in this conference theme. I extend a particularly warm welcome to the students who have come as well as teachers/ lecturers and practitioners, policy makers, senior administrators and representatives of the education system from primary, through second level, further and higher education and training. Such a broad representation will provide us with rich and constructive interaction during the next two days.

Today's event builds on the main action points agreed at the Forum on Equity in Higher Education held by the HEA in 2000.

As many of you may recall, at that event Professor Malcolm Skilbeck presented the findings of an international review of equity of access to higher education which he carried out for the HEA. While highlighting and commending many areas of good practice both in Ireland and internationally, Professor Skilbeck advised that further progress required more co-ordinated approaches across several sectors of public policy.

These findings were reinforced in a contribution by Professor Bob Osborne who, in reviewing the HEA-targeted initiatives for socio-economically disadvantaged school leavers, concluded that a coherent and consistent national strategy was required to develop policy and practice on equity of access to higher education.

Subsequent to the Forum, the HEA made a submission to the Action Group on Access, recommending that a dedicated unit be set up to develop a national programme to tackle inequality in higher education. As we know now, this formed one of the key recommendations of the Action Group and in 2003 the Minister for Education and Science announced the establishment of the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education within the HEA.

One of the first tasks the National Office was charged with was the development of a national multi-annual plan to achieve equity of access to higher education. The Office was assisted by an advisory group. The plan was prepared in consultation with a wide range of other stakeholders and practitioners. We are delighted that the Action Plan 2005–2007 will be launched later on today at this conference by the Minister for Education and Science.

The plan represents an important milestone both for the HEA and the education sector generally. There have been significant improvements in overall participation in higher education in recent decades, including the participation of under-represented groups. However, if we are to make real progress a more concerted effort is required to transform our higher education system into one that encourages and enables diverse learners to enter, successfully participate and complete higher education.

As you are aware, the HEA has commissioned five major surveys of access to higher education institutions at regular intervals since 1980, the last of which took place

in 2003 and was based on a sample of new entrants. The first four surveys, which were carried out by Professor Pat Clancy of UCD, record the background and destination of students entering higher education for the first time.

The findings of these surveys, particularly the earlier surveys, demonstrated the need to increase representation by students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The series has shown that substantial progress has been made over time. Significant but not sufficient progress was made between the period 1980 and 1998. Some new data for 2003 suggest that the participation rate for the least well-off socio-economic group has increased to 47%. These data are taken from a sample survey commissioned by the HEA.

The full results of this survey will be published shortly by the HEA. These participation rates will be comprehensively measured through a full survey of all new entrants to higher education that is taking place this academic year.

#### Action plan 2005–2007

The action plan, which is to be launched this afternoon identifies six strategic areas for future action. One of these is developing and communicating the rationale for equity of access. This may sound quite obvious and in a sense with this audience one is preaching to the converted. However, there are many others in the education system and beyond for whom these issues may appear to be less compelling. Therefore it is vital to make sure that a level of awareness, commitment and momentum is generated where it most needs to happen, especially in what Skilbeck calls the ‘equity heartland’ of the higher education institutions themselves.

The plan identifies a number of other important goals for immediate action, including the development of a national framework of equity of access policies and initiatives towards the linking of all disadvantaged regions, schools and communities with at least one higher education institution, as well as supporting higher

**Participation rates in higher education BY FATHERS' SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUP (OLD CLASSIFICATION) 1980-2003**

	2003	1998	1992	1986	1980
Farmer	88%	72%	53%	42%	30%
Higher Professional	87%	97%	85%	71%	59%
Lower Professional	42%	47%	42%	47%	33%
Employers & Managers	64%	81%	67%	45%	42%
Salaried & Intermediate Non-manual Employees	30%	35%	31%	33%	29%
Other Non-manual	52%	31%	26%	11%	9%
Skilled Manual	60%	32%	28%	12%	9%
Semi-skilled & Unskilled Manual	47%	23%	16%	8%	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>20%</b>

Source: ESRI, Survey of new entrants to higher education in 2003–04 and derived from Clancy various

education institutions in pursuing a practical agenda for achieving equity of access as a core part of institutional strategy. The work of this conference is to generate and agree on the practical steps and actions which are required to achieve these goals and action points.

These goals complement and reflect strategic priorities that the HEA has for the higher education sector, as articulated in the submission to the OECD review team and subsequently endorsed in the final report of that group. The HEA view is that core funding structures should incentivise increased participation of students from all types of backgrounds and the reform of core funding structures currently being progressed through the HEA will address this issue. Strategic funding will reward success by institutions in responding to national and regional priorities. Securing funding to support new strategic programmes remains a priority for the HEA. Change and reform is essential to enable our higher education system to develop and continue to meet the needs of a dynamic society and economy such as ours.

Many of us here this morning have a strong commitment to what has been called the 'access agenda'! Sustained pressure in this area has resulted in significant progress. But there is more that needs to be done in this area – as in so many other areas of national policy. Enhancing access is a transcending area of national policy. It is certainly about social justice and improving life chances. But it is also about social policy in a wider sense and also is directly relevant to economic policy. Putting it in the crudest utilitarian language, each additional person who succeeds in entering third level is an additional source of enhanced economic output and efficiency and contributes to higher living standards and to national prosperity. Access policy should not be an area of contention over resource allocation. It should transcend ideology and be a unifying win-win rather than a zero-sum game!

I hope that the next two days will be a constructive prelude to the implementation of the action plan prepared by the National Office. We look forward to lively debate and interaction on what is clearly an area of key importance for individuals, for our education system and our society and economy.

## NEO-LIBERALISM, MARKETISATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION: EQUALITY CONSIDERATIONS

Professor Kathleen Lynch, Equality Studies Centre, University College Dublin

*The paper opens with introductory remarks regarding the difference between equity and equality. It goes on from there to outline the four major contexts in which equality in higher education need to be promoted if one is to move to an inclusive and comprehensive policy framework for higher education. The paper highlights how achieving equality is not simply a problem of distributing the 'goods of educational services' more fairly. It is also about equalising power relations in education, respecting differences in cultures, lifestyles and values within colleges, and recognising that caring is a basic principle underpinning both the practice of education and equality. An egalitarian educational system is one driven by care.*

*Having highlighted the challenges that need to be addressed from pre-school to second level, the paper then goes on to identify the specific challenges that must be addressed in higher education, including the foreclosure of dissent about the equality project itself and the silences that have been created in higher education, particularly with the rise of the neo-liberal agenda. It takes as an example of silence the failure, in both the media and within higher education itself, to evaluate and critique the ranking criteria set down by one technological university in China, Shanghai Jiao Tong.*

*Another challenge that higher education has to address is the rise of neo-liberalism as an implicit, if not explicit, framework for appraising public institutions. The paper examines the implications of adopting a neo-liberal market model for equalising access, participation and outcomes in higher education. It highlights the many unforeseen and unarticulated dangers of treating higher education as yet another market commodity; it calls for a rights-based perspective on education, given its foundational role in developing both individual and collective potentials in a knowledge society.*

*Drawing on extensive research undertaken in the Equality Studies Centre, UCD on education and on other national and international research, the paper closes by arguing*

*that the neo-liberal agenda is firmly antithetical to equality in any substantive sense. It argues for equality of condition as a prerequisite for realising substantive as opposed to formal equality in higher education.*

### Introduction

I want to bring to your attention the difference between the word 'equality' and the word 'equity'. The word 'equity' is not synonymous with equality. At best it implies fairness, but one can treat people in education fairly by treating them equally badly! The word 'equity' does not have legal standing in the way that the word 'equality' has, not least because the word 'equality is written' into the Education Act, (1998), the Universities Act (1997), the Equal Status Act (2000), the Employment Equality Act (1998) and into the legislation governing the other institutions of higher education as well. Moreover, there is an extensive philosophical, legal and sociological and political literature on the concept of equality whereas the word 'equity' does not have the merit of such extensive research, but that is the subject of another paper (see Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh, 2004 for an extensive discussion of the meaning of equality).

### Distributive justice is necessary but not sufficient

A focus on distributive justice has dominated the equality debate about education, as was noted by Dr. Thornhill in his introduction. The focus of distributive policies has been on reducing inequalities in access and participation (not so much on outcome or achievement) arising from socio-economic or social class origins. The distributive tradition has neglected some key equality issues. It has not analysed the participation experiences and outcomes of higher education for working class students, neither has it given much attention to access, participation and outcome issues for other marginalised groups such as people with disabilities, ethnic minorities (including travellers), lone parents and older students.

Most of the focus of the discussion as well has been on access, to a lesser degree on participation, with very little on outcome or achievement. If we are to have substantive equality in higher education, we must recognise the need to have equality of *participation and outcome*. There is little gain for working class students if their entry into higher education does not really enable them to do well in college and to benefit from their college education when they leave. We know from countries like Norway for example, where they have relatively open access to the legal profession, that students from working class backgrounds who get into law do not have access to the same forms of employment on leaving college compared with their middle class counterparts. This arises because they do not have the right social networks or social capital that is required to succeed in the legal profession. So I am saying that we need to address the issues of participation and outcome in higher education if we are to be serious about equality in higher education. We have very little analysis of outcomes, in terms of either how students achieve within higher education, in terms of social class, gender, age, disability, ethnicity, or in terms of where students go when they leave, what their career trajectory is.

While there has been some attention given to gender, race and ethnicity (religion in N. Ireland), there has been little attention given to disability, family status such as lone parents or other minorities such as lesbians or gays. For many groups the equality problem is not resolved by a simple reliance on *distributive* measures. The problem of equality may be as much about *recognition and respect*, about *access to power* or about recognition of *care status* as it is about one's social class origins. It is important to identify the generative source of inequality for a given group and also the secondary, tertiary and ancillary sources. For low working class groups, those who are welfare dependent, who are migrant workers or who are refugees, the equality problem in education is often a resource problem, it is about lack of money. However, for people with disabilities, it may be about more than

resources or it can be about respect, recognising their differences in abilities, language (deaf sign) or the need for disability-specific technologies such as Braille.

For people with young children, it may be about having access to a subsidised crèche; for older people or mature students, it may be about having classes at accessible times; for women, it may be about respecting their care needs or indeed their interests in women-specific research subjects and courses.

It is important to identify the generative cause of inequality for a given group and also the secondary, tertiary and ancillary sources of inequalities that they might experience. Economic inequalities tend to be the generative sources of inequality (albeit not exclusively so) for those on low incomes; for others, it is inequality of respect that is the issue, for example for older people, ethnic minorities, or people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transsexual; for others, it may be lack of power and influence over the system itself. While many groups may feel powerless in higher education, it is felt especially by those who are 'outsiders' to places like universities such as students with disabilities or travellers; they feel they have no say, they do not belong, they are being tolerated rather than welcomed. Of course, no one individual has a singular identity, so all types of issues may apply to any one individual at the same time, albeit to varying degrees.

#### **Four major contexts and sets of relations where inequality is generated**

What I am suggesting is that there are four major social contexts and sets of relations through which inequality is generated in higher education and that different social groups are affected by these in different ways. The first set of relations are *economic relations* – in the economy – through inequalities in earned incomes, wages, wealth ownership and welfare systems. The second set of relations are *socio-cultural relations* – through systems of interpretation, representation and communication that define certain identities as 'naturally' inferior to others; this happens in the media, education, literature,

cinema/theatre and music in the way older people, people with disabilities, black people or women are often portrayed as subordinate, trivial or lesser. The third set of relations are *power relations* – wherever power and decision-making is enacted– in formal politics, on boards, committees, in meetings, in work relations (and family relations). This happens in multiple forums, including education where teaching and learning relations are defined in a deeply hierarchical way. The fourth set of relations are *affective or caring relations* – wherever the emotional work of caring takes place - in personal relations, in teaching, in community and associational relationships. In so far as care work is defined as women's work and is in turn defined as low status, it is women who are especially vulnerable to care exploitation. Care inequalities also arise in terms of receipt of care, and some people are especially vulnerable to lack of care, particularly if in prison or if involuntarily isolated from intimate others some way.

If I could put these issues in colloquial language, the first equality question would be 'Who owns Ireland economically and how does this impact on equality in education?' The second would be 'Who defines Ireland culturally, who controls the definition of what is culturally valuable in education and how does this impact on the higher education experiences of marginalised or subordinated groups?' The third would be 'Who controls Ireland and who controls education, who has power and who does not have power in colleges and does this impact on learning?' and the final would be 'Who cares for Ireland, who does the caring work and how does this impact on access, participation and outcomes in higher education?'

So those four contexts have very different implications for different groups entering higher education.

## **Relationships between social groups and the contexts generating inequality**

### **Economic equality and education: Fundamentally a social class problem**

There is a wealth of research literature indicating that greater economic equality is crucial for eliminating social class and other income-related inequalities in education (for a detailed discussion of this Lynch, 1999a). There is no 'internal settlement' to the problem of class inequality in education. If we have a very low-paid service economy (and remember that this is the case in this Ireland, with over 50% of the population earning less than the average industrial wage), those who are lowly paid are not on a *par* with people who earn four, five, ten or twenty times their wage. They cannot participate successfully in education, not least because education itself is defined competitively, and competing successfully in it is about having the necessary resources, be it to buy grinds, lap tops, books, etc. What we need therefore is to create a more egalitarian society in wealth and income terms. We cannot allow income inequalities to grow as they have done in the last five years; to do so is to delude ourselves about providing equality of opportunity for all. This is a matter for social and economic policy primarily although education policy needs to be closely integrated with the former.

Inside education what we can do is to devise a national equality strategy for education to address all forms of economically generated disadvantage (*de facto* class disadvantage) from pre-school to higher education. The plan must be resourced with time frames, targets, monitoring, sanctions and review. We have a model already in the national anti-poverty strategy. We also need to devise an equality index for education based on detailed comprehensive data on retention, participation and outcome. Unless we measure inequality systematically, we cannot monitor it; we will have no system-wide information to place in the public domain to create the necessary political debates about equality in education on

an ongoing basis. In devising a national equality strategy, those affected by the different inequalities need to be part of the planning team and to do this they must be resourced to have their voices heard. There can be no planning about people without their participation. To do so is to recreate the mistakes of top-down policy-making from the past. This is a serious issue for those devising access programs nationally. New voices, those of working class communities, people with care responsibilities, travellers, lone parents, etc. need to be party to designing access programs for themselves.

**Socio-cultural equality: Respecting diversity symbolically and organisationally**

To promote respect for differences in higher education we need to move from tolerance to an appreciation and celebration of cultural differences in a spirit of critical inter-culturalism. We need to do this in terms of what we teach, how we teach, how we assess students and how we organise learning in college life. Respecting differences involves putting services and symbols in place that facilitate and respect those from diverse backgrounds, be it in terms of gender, beliefs, sexualities, care responsibilities, abilities, ethnicity, gender or age. We need to explore new ways of teaching and organising courses. We need to reflexively examine our curricula and syllabi for biases against particular social groups. Most importantly we need to review our modes of assessment to make them gender-fair, class-fair, ability-fair.

Yet we appear to be introducing new selection modes for higher education that work against equality, especially for low-income working class students and for women. There is a huge body of research internationally indicating how different modes of assessment, such as multiple-choice tests, are inherently biased against certain types of students. The recent proposal to introduce a version of the SAT, (Scholastic Aptitude Test) for selecting for entry to Medicine and possibly Law etc. is seriously problematic on equality grounds. Such tests are known to be biased against working class students, certain ethnic

minorities and women (see numerous articles on this in journals such as the *Harvard Educational Review*). While all examinations favour those with most resources, school examinations have the benefit of giving students with limited resources the opportunity to be prepared. Who will prepare people for SATs – the grind schools? So we will have a new business now selling test preparation to those who can afford to buy it. This has already happened in the UK. Many of the leading universities in the US for example have stopped using SATs as a mechanism of selection due to their known biases, so why are we introducing them if we are serious about equality?

Other biases take symbolic forms. I have been co-operating with a student doing some research on posters put up in higher educational institutions and that is very interesting, if somewhat depressing. Many are profoundly sexist, highly offensive to women and often offensive to older people, to people who are gay or lesbian and to people with disabilities, yet they appear to go unchallenged in many cases. There is little point in having a 'Dignity and Respect' or 'Anti-Sexual Harassment' policy if posters can be billeted all over the college that deny people basic respect in a symbolic way. There is a whole mental change that has to occur in the way we represent people, so that those who are ethnic minorities, who are female, lone parents, or those who are with disability are not experiencing themselves as the 'other', the outsider symbolically in the higher education sector. And this is an issue for the way we treat staff as well as the way we treat students.

**Power relations: Democratising the internal and external relations of higher education**

Equality in education is also about democratising schools and colleges both in their internal and external relations (moving from traditional hierarchical forms of authority to more rational and negotiated forms of authority). We need to move to a more *accountable, diverse and participatory* democracy in higher education if we are to create learning climates that are fully respectful and open.

This applies both to our relations with students, students' relations to each other, internal staff relations, and the relations between the college and the wider community. We cannot develop critical thinking among students without a culture of dialogue. Dialogue is not only vital for a truly liberatory education; it is also vital for a dynamic academic life.

I think this is really a serious matter at the moment, not least because there are new forms of authoritarianism emerging in Ireland in the name of 'efficiency' and 'good governance'. New- right politics have taken a strong hold on Irish political life and with it have emerged new forms of authoritarianism. This has manifested itself in education in the move to have a 'chief executive' model of governance, not only at central level, but at all levels in the colleges. What is emerging is a return to the nineteenth century and new forms of centralised control and a lack of respect for democracy in education. I find this profoundly disturbing, not least because it forestalls learning among both those who govern and the governed. As Paulo Freire has noted, dialogue is of the essence in education. There can be little mutual learning in an authoritarian system of governance.

If we are to be truly egalitarian, we also need to democratise our relations with civil society, especially in terms of opening up our knowledge and research to less privileged groups; we need to develop education coalitions with non-traditional partners in the community and voluntary sectors that represent marginalised groups (see Lynch, 1999b).

We need a *politics of presence* (see the Phillips book 1995 of the same title), whereby those at the negotiating and decision-making table have direct experience of the inequality they claim to understand, especially in planning for equality in higher education. We need to recognise the difference between experiential knowledge of inequality that those who have direct experience of inequality have and the theoretical knowledge that

academics and administrators may have. Only through opening up new channels for dialogue can we address the understanding deficit that most of those who work in higher education have of inequality and the information deficit among certain parents and students regarding higher education.

**Promoting equality in the affective domain: Students are also carers (especially women)**

We also need to recognise that dependence and inter-dependence are integral to the human condition and that the emotional work, planning and responsibilities involved in caring are integral to both the personal and educational life of students and staff. We are not simply Cartesian women or men. *Cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am, is only part of what humanity is. *I feel therefore I am* is as important in defining who we are. We are carers and creators in the affective or emotional domain of life as well as in the intellectual and material domains.

Moreover, care is central to the process of learning itself. As Paulo Freire noted in his wonderful book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, to be a good educator you have to love the people you educate. And I do not think that this will be easily measured in 'peer review'!

To have equality in higher education we need a comprehensive and subsidised system of child-care supports and services for students and staff. This is especially important if we are to diversify our higher education intake. Mature students have care demands on their time (as indeed do most staff). We need to recognise the care demands on mature students in making grant aid and in terms of support services. At present, there is an assumption that all students are school leavers. Even at postgraduate levels, doctoral research grants implicitly assume that one has no dependents as scholarships and grants make no allowance for this. It is assumed indeed that one is just a middle class student living at home with no children as grants such as the Government of Ireland or the Irish

Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) require one not to be employed and to live on €17,000. This is an impossibility, given rents and living costs, especially if one has a child.

**Changing what is in our control: Issues at pre-school, first and second level**

There are a number of issues, particularly information deficits and attainment differences that need to be addressed if there is to be a serious attempt to address inequalities of access to higher education.

**Class differences in educational attainment: The problem of silence and lack of data**

If students are to enter the universities and other higher educational institutions, they need to be properly prepared for entry. And this leads us to another serious question, the very real differences in educational attainment across social classes in Ireland (see Lyons, Lynch, Close, Sheerin and Boland, 2003; see also ESRI studies by Emer Smith, Damien Hannan, Chris Whelan on second level, and studies by the Educational Research Centre in Drumcondra on primary school differences).

We know for example that students from lower-income backgrounds are more likely to take subjects at foundation or ordinary level than middle class students. This has a direct impact on their ability to enter higher education, as they simply cannot compete on equal terms. The problem is not simply a university or higher education problem, however. There is also a very serious problem at primary and second level and indeed at pre-school although we have no data on the latter.

Yes, there is an amazing silence on social class difference in attainment in Ireland (and indeed on the differences between students with disabilities, travellers and new ethnic minorities and others). We fail to collect data on Leaving and Junior Certificate students by parental social class and/or occupational backgrounds although we know that this type of data would only require students to

answer one or two simple questions on a LC or JC application form when registering for the examination. Failing to collect data is a way of hiding the truth from ourselves. Because knowledge is power, lack of knowledge is lack of power. Failing to bring out into the public domain major social differences in educational attainment across classes, between children with differing abilities, children from different ethnic backgrounds, we are *censoring a debate about inequality*. We are denying people who receive relatively little gain from education from having their voices heard.

Let me be clear, however, that I am not talking here about having league tables for schools. League tables between schools are primarily good for selling newspapers and making the rich feel good about their privileged educational choices. They have little value in terms of bringing about changes in educational funding or improving the lot of disadvantaged schools as the evidence from the UK shows clearly (Ball, 2004; Whitty, Power and Halpin, 1998; etc). The reasons are simple. Once a school is labelled as low, it is under threat of losing staff and students. This in itself creates a self-fulfilling prophecy accelerating a downward trend in investment and attainment. The underlying conditions that led to students performing poorly in some schools compared with others is not changed if a school is closed, it is merely moved on somewhere else.

What I think we do need is to face up to the scale of the problem at pre-school, first and second level. This is not to exonerate the higher education bodies, merely to note the prior work that needs to be done.

**What can be done?**

If we are to promote equality in higher education, we must have a national equality in education strategy that spans all levels of education as well as a strategy for reducing wealth and income differentials.

Focusing on education, we need to address several issues. First, pre-school education and childcare are largely a private business in Ireland. Only a tiny minority are subsidised by the state. This is the first major inequality that must be addressed. There is a need for a system of subsidised childcare and pre-school education for all children. There is an urgent need for national childcare and pre-school education strategies that are driven by egalitarian principles.

There is also a need to focus on privilege. In so far as access to higher education is competitively determined, there is an urgent need to curb the advantage of the already advantaged. We need a national study on grinds and grind schools to measure their impact on education and particularly their role in promoting inequality of access.

#### **Addressing information and guidance deficits**

We know that students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to do subjects at foundation or ordinary level, which disadvantages them educationally and occupationally. We need to create a culture of expectation for working class, low-income and disabled students. And to do this there are a whole series of information deficits that need to be addressed. First we need to address the information deficit regarding subject levels among many parents and students and the implications of this. For example six A1's in ordinary level equal 360 points max. Students who take ordinary level papers only are excluded automatically from entering courses that exceed 360 points; they are excluded effectively from the great majority of university degree courses and definitively from the high points courses in professional fields such as Dentistry, Law, Medicine, Pharmacy, etc. Our research for the book *Life In Classrooms* (2003) suggests that many parents who have limited education do not know this. They do not even realise the difference between higher and ordinary level courses and no one has a duty to explain it to them. And the parents who know least, on

average, are those who have little education themselves, those who are socially and economically disadvantaged.

We also need to address the lack of information that those coming from families where no one has been to college have about college itself. Universities and higher education institutions are very intimidating places when you do not know how they operate. Parents and potential students need to be informed about the real costs of going to college, particularly the hidden costs. They need to know how to manage the costs and how they can get support, especially if they are in financial difficulty. Students need to be told about the nature of the work they will do in college; the culture of college life; the modes of examining and how they differ from school; holidays and the opportunities there are for earning money and supplementing one's income when in college. We know from research that those who have not been to college trust what is called 'hot' knowledge, information from trusted people (family, friends, mentors such as trusted teachers, etc). They tend not to trust or make as much use of 'cold' knowledge (brochures, internet sites, etc.) (Archer et al., 2002).

Those students whose families have no tradition of higher education also need to see that it is good value for money. I believe there is insufficient attention given to the issue of the 'value for money' aspect of higher education. The opportunity cost of higher education is very real, and poorer people cannot afford to take risks. They need reassurance, and the assurances need to have a real financial foundation. There is a need to have a good grant system in place, to have grants paid on time, and to have provisions for supplementary support in the event of delays or difficulties. There is a need to have a designated higher education interactive web site to address concerns such as these. It could also address the information deficit regarding subject level, grades, points, grants and so on.

There is moreover a need for a fully developed higher education guidance service. This is especially urgent for mature students who have left school and want to return to higher education. There is no clear system of guidance and support for non-traditional entrants to higher education, yet encouragement and guidance is vital if we are to successfully address the access problem.

### **Raising expectations of those working with non-traditional entrants**

As Ireland becomes more economically polarised, class expectations are also polarised. There is a very real problem of relatively low educational expectations for other marginalised groups as well. The expectation among parents and teachers for students from working class backgrounds, students with disabilities, travellers and other marginalised groups must be addressed. Research we have been doing in recent years on second level schools shows you that that expectation deficit is becoming increasingly visible. In Dublin middle class people are moving their children into the fee-paying sector (almost one third of second-level students are in that sector now compared with less than one quarter twenty years ago). They are moving as they know there is a body of powerful parents involved in these schools; there are high expectations, maybe even unrealistic expectations at times. This drift out of the public sector can create an expectation deficit in the public sector, especially where schools are segregated. (Many would argue that it happens already in towns throughout Ireland where the middle classes attend the more socially select schools.) Whether we like it or not, it is the middle classes that are most likely to hold schools to account; given their class interests, it is they who keep up expectations and demands. If they move out of the public sector, the educational, social and cultural capital that they have is lost to that sector. Less well-educated parents and those who are poorer are simply not in a position often to hold schools to account. I really do question the privatisation of second-level education because as people segregate into fee-paying schools and

grind schools, the resources, including high expectations and extensive educational, financial, cultural and social capital, that middle class parents have are lost to the public sector.

We must also recognise the role of emotions in decision-making about higher education— it is a process that takes place over a long time. The decision to go to college is made in middle class households when children are in primary school or even at birth! It is assumed they will go and only if there is some unforeseen difficulty will expectations change. For households where there is no tradition of higher education, where people lack experience and knowledge of higher education, the reverse is the case. College is not naturally part of the life trajectory unless there is outside intervention. People need to be encouraged to attend and told it is possible at every stage of education. The seeds of expectation need to be sown when children are young. Only then will it seem natural. What I am saying is that going to college is as much about what people feel about college as it is about what they think. In research we did on attitudes to higher education some years ago, we found that students from communities who had no prior access to higher education were very fearful of college. They felt ‘they did not belong’ and they lacked a sense of ownership (Lynch and O’Riordan, 1998). The same applies to other students who have traditionally not gone to college, including students who are travellers or students with disabilities. If we are to overcome these fears and the sense of exclusion, we have to set about it systematically and that means changing the way people perceive the universities, institutes of technology and other colleges of higher education. It goes without saying that raised expectations must be met with adequate resources. If resources are not put in place in the context of raised expectations, it leads to deep cynicism and alienation.

### **The culture of the college: Changing the institution**

Opening up access to higher education is also about changing the mindset within universities and colleges of

higher education. We must learn to define diversity as normality. Up to now we have seen students with disabilities, older students, lone parent students, working class students as some kind of exception in college. They come, we see them, but we do not expect them so we do not accommodate them. When we do not expect them, we do not provide them with the necessary services, such as Braille, signing interpreters, crèches, flexible timetables, transport services, language supports, information and financial supports. But a truly inclusive university is a diverse university, and diversity must begin at home, accommodating the diverse peoples within our resident population. I am not suggesting we do not welcome students from other countries, of course we should. But there is a danger that the desire to bring in international students for financial reasons will mean that we will ignore the diversities within the resident population.

Being inclusive also means we must eliminate hidden costs and discriminations. A number of colleges have introduced regulations for particular courses such as the requirement in certain degree programmes that all students have a lap top computer. This is a very clear form of indirect discrimination against low-income students. If students are required to have a laptop, then direct provision must be made by colleges for low-income students to have them. Without such provision, one is excluding those who cannot afford laptops from attending college.

And this raises another issue, what might be called the poor services impact. It is very important to have good general services in higher education such as libraries, guidance, medical supports, restaurants, crèches, sports facilities, etc. If we do not have these, it is low-income students who lose out most as they cannot afford to make up the service deficit privately (Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998).

For those entering higher education from non-traditional backgrounds, we also need to address the fear of identity

loss and fear of isolation. Once again, research on non-traditional entrants shows that they often feel they neither belong in college or at home. They are '*outsiders within*' in both the college and their own community. I believe that colleges need to be imaginative in how they address this issue, for example they could set up a diversity forum in each college where the question of diversity in college can be explored intellectually as well as socially and politically.

What is often forgotten in discussions about access is that what happens to non-traditional students after they leave college matters, not just for the students individually, but for the community from which they have come. If students from working class communities attend college but make no apparent gain from this, it can have a negative impact on others' expectations. The student's position after college contributes to local perceptions (positively or negatively) about college itself. Do we know what has happened to working class students who have gone to college? Do we know what has happened to mature students, to people with disabilities? I referred already to recent research from Norway on students from working class backgrounds who became lawyers and who for example found that they do not earn the same kind of income or attain the same high status jobs as their middle class counterparts. We need to know if this type of pattern is occurring here. We need research on what happens to non-traditional entrants when they leave college.

If we are serious about inequality of access to higher education, we need to engage in an extensive range of actions, some of which I have outlined above. But we also need to democratise the relations of research production and educational exchange so that communities that have no access to universities and ITs can have such access. We need to have sites in which we can interchange our learning, where universities and the other colleges can learn about marginalised communities and vice versa. As I have argued elsewhere, we need to establish community

and university dialogues for both teaching and research planning (Lynch, 1999b). Every faculty in every college should have an outreach programme offering alternative entry routes to higher education and courses of value to local communities.

### **Silence and the normalisation of inequality in higher education**

So far I have outlined institutional issues that need to be addressed. There are also ideological considerations that must be taken into account if we are to promote real changes in access to higher education.

While I recognise the achievements of access programmes in the different colleges within the limits of their resources and the targets set out for them, we all know that in absolute terms the gains to date have been relatively minor. And I speak as someone who was intimately involved in UCD's access programme. Why has there not been pressure for greater action? Why have relatively high levels of inequality become normalised in Ireland? And there is ample evidence that social and educational inequalities are deepening in the social class field in particular, yet we have lost our sense of outrage about educational and other injustices. It seems that the better off can afford to live increasingly physically and psychologically distant from the poorer members of society. Those on the margins become invisible to the comfortable and the powerful when the latter never see them or converse with them on an equal footing. Those who are better off, those in positions of power and authority have become geographically and socially distant from the poor and the marginalised. Those who are excluded have become invisible on a day-to-day basis.

What is facilitating silence? There is also a deep consensualism in educational analysis, in policy analysis, in the media and in academia. Intellectual differences are interpreted personally in a small society with no history of major intellectual divisions. A more generalised foreclosure of dissent also plays a part. There is a

demonising of critical analysis. It has become fashionable to be quiet and this serves as a social control mechanism masquerading as 'loyalty' and 'politeness'.

Within the university sector there is currently a fixation with 'peer review' to the detriment of public engagement. While 'peer review' is necessary in appraising the work of academics, it is not a sufficient tool for appraising academic institutions. When there is no 'peer review' value in engaging in public debate, there is no incentive to dissent within the very institutions that are charged with the task of dissent. This perspective has been exacerbated by recent OECD and other reports that focus academics even more strongly on a narrowly defined concept of 'career' where peer-reviewed writing and publications are highly rewarded and public intellectual work has been down graded.

The reward system of academic life means that the 'good' academic is encouraged to become increasingly a silent academic. Self-censoring then replaces public censorship. Have academics internalised codes of silence? I think they have and I take as an example the unquestioned acceptance of Shanghai Jiao Tong (a technological university) ranking of Irish universities. There has been no dissent from this analysis in public by any academic or indeed by the media. Yet when we look at how they assessed universities, it is clear that their measures are driven by a narrow set of technological considerations.

In the Shanghai Jiao Tong world ranking of universities five criteria were used in 2004. This is how they graded the universities:

- Only published articles are included, all books are excluded! Publications in literature, the arts and humanities are excluded.
- 10% for Nobel laureates among graduates in Chemistry, Physics, Medicine, Economics and Fields Medals in Maths five subjects only

- 20% for Nobel laureates awarded to current staff in above five areas
- 20% for articles in two science-related journals (*Nature and Science*)
- 20% for highly cited researchers in twenty-one areas (all twenty-one subject areas bar one and part of another are in science or technology). I checked several major European scholars and none of them are listed as highly cited. (As the HCI index is run by a private company, does this mean one has to pay to be listed as important?!)
- 20% for articles in Science Citation Index-Expanded and Social Science Citation Index. (Many of the most prestigious journals in the social sciences are not listed. All arts/humanities are excluded.)
- 10% for scores on the above divided by full-time staff members
- Total: 100%

This league table may have value for Jiao Tong but it is extremely biased and selective. The recent *Irish Times* higher education league table has several similar weaknesses.

What I want to emphasise also is that these 'league tables' direct us away from access issues. They focus higher education attention on a narrow set of higher education considerations. None of the so-called league tables focus on the quality of student experiences, none of them assess universities in terms of their inclusivity and respect for diversity. In fact, they strongly discourage us from focusing on access as they are fundamentally about ensuring that universities become even more elite in their orientation.

**The educational implications of the growing allegiance to a neo-liberal perspective on citizenship<sup>1</sup>**

Before I finish I want to comment on the way neo-liberal politics are impacting on higher education. It is self-evident that Irish political culture has been driven by what are broadly termed new-right, neo-liberal politics in

recent years (Kirby, 2002). The neo-liberal position is premised on the assumption that the market can replace the state as the primary producer of cultural logic and cultural value. It proposes to erode the social and economic rights guaranteed by the state, including the right to good education for all. The neo-liberal position is fundamentally Hobbesian in character, focusing on creating privatised citizens who care only for themselves. In turn, it creates a culture of insecurity that leads to anxiety and competition and indifference to issues such as equality of access, participation and outcome in education.

There have been deliberate attempts to privatise state services and to marketise areas of public services that are ill-suited to the market. The privatisation push has been especially evident in transport and in health and now it is entering education. Within neo-liberalism, the citizen is a 'consumer', an economic maximiser, a 'free chooser' in health, education, etc. This concept of the citizen as a 'free chooser' of educational services completely ignores the well-researched reality that those without resources have no choices about schools, hospitals or services. What most people want is not a choice of hospital or college but access to a good hospital or college. They want an affordable, accessible and available higher education of high standard. Choice is secondary to quality and access.

As Irish society has become increasingly dependent on higher education to drive the economy, access to higher education is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for survival. We need to challenge the neo-liberal agenda in education, not least because higher education is increasingly a necessity, not a privilege in a knowledge-driven society.

**Conclusion: There is no substantive equality of opportunity without equality of condition<sup>1</sup>**

I have identified four major equality objectives for promoting equality in higher education: equality of

1. This is the central theme of our most recent book, (2004) *Equality: From Theory to Action*, London. Palgrave Macmillan (J. Baker, K. Lynch, S. Cantillon and J. Drudy)

resources, equality of respect, equality of power and affective equality. What is evident is that each of these equality considerations impact on all groups although some groups are affected by one more than another. Most notably, those who are low income are clearly far more directly affected by inequalities of wealth and income than are people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual. For the latter, equality in higher education is more to do with respect than it is with money. For others, especially those with care responsibilities, mostly women, it can be about a failure to appreciate the fact that they are carers and that both care work and education work have to be integrated into the working day.

In realising any form of equality, we must recognise there cannot be equality of access to education without equality of condition. Put another way, *there cannot be equality of competition without equality of condition*; without equality in life circumstances, people simply cannot participate equally in education terms.

This is clearest in the economic sphere. It is evident that those with superior resources can and do buy merit. The strong correlation that we find between upper middle class status and entry to 'high points' courses is annual proof of this fact (see Clancy, 2001, 1995, 1992). While there are exceptions to this trend, it has remained persistently true for the last thirty years and is likely to remain so without a strategic and targeted attempt to change it. Unfortunately, this fundamental principle is not fully appreciated in the policy domain. While there has been some attempt in the recent budget to target resources at the more needy, this has not been the pattern for the last six years so that we are now in a situation where Ireland is the most unequal country in the EU and the second most unequal to the US among the wealthy states of the world (UNDP, 2004; O'Hearn, 2003; Kirby, 2002: Combat Poverty, 2000; Layte, Nolan and Whelan, 2000). International evidence is overwhelming that the more unequal a society is economically, the more unequal it is educationally;

this means that there is no meaningful equality of opportunity without equality of conditions (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). There can be no simple internal education settlement to these problem of class inequality in education (Thrupp, 2000). The reason for this is very simple. Once the state attempts to introduce more egalitarian measures to offset inequalities of opportunity for low-income or other disadvantaged groups, those with superior resources utilise these to counter the impact of such initiatives by simply buying more and more education supports to advantage their own children or more subtly by opposing directly or indirectly initiatives that would give equal advantage to those who are relatively disadvantaged (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh, 2004: 140–168). It is no accident that many middle class families support the points system for example. While the 'Points' system is better than many other selection systems, especially the SAT-type tests, nonetheless those with superior economic resources can out-buy those with lesser resources in a system of competitive higher education entry. By investing considerable resources in grinds, summer camps, trips abroad, private tutoring and other ancillary educational services, the evidence is that, *ceteris paribus*, those in whom most is invested in education are those who are generally most likely to enter higher education, especially degree programmes, and especially those degree programmes that select on the basis of high grades (Gamoran, 2001).

To argue for an economically more egalitarian society in order to eliminate class problems in education is not to suggest, however, that the higher education institutions themselves have no role to play. Nothing could be further from the truth. All education institutions, including the higher education institutions, are active players in the equality game and can either promote or challenge class, gender, disability and other inequalities in education. Higher education institutions need to assess their internal cultural and organisational practices to make them places of learning that are equally accessible to all groups.

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## TAKING ACTION FOR EQUALITY – A RESPONSE TO KATHLEEN LYNCH

Niall Crowley, Chief Executive Officer, Equality Authority

### Introduction

It is an honour to be invited to respond to this paper by Kathleen Lynch. It is equally a major challenge to respond to a paper of such quality and inspiration and to an author who has so inspired the work and thinking of the Equality Authority. This response does not attempt to address the breadth and depth of the analysis presented. Rather it seeks to draw from some of the points made and identify the implications they hold for action for equality in the higher education sector.

Don Thornhill in his opening address spoke about all of us here at this conference as the converted. Indeed all of us here are part of very valuable foundations for equality that have been created. That is something that we should celebrate. However, it is important that we do not become complacent as the converted. These are foundations that have to be built on and with some urgency. Three points made by Kathleen Lynch highlight the urgency in this challenge:

- There are relatively high levels of inequality within education and these have become normalised.
- There is a relative silence about inequality in the education sector.
- Equality of opportunity is no more than a myth.

These points challenge us all to work for change with some urgency.

### Levers for change – legislation

In taking up this challenge we need to look at some of the levers for change. Kathleen Lynch has focused on the importance of institutional change in terms of the way institutions go about their business and in terms of the culture of institutions. This suggests we need to look to two particular levers for change – legislation and organisations with a mandate in relation to promoting equality.

The Universities Act, the Employment Equality Acts and the Equal Status Acts are valuable levers for institutional change. The Universities Act contains requirements to promote gender balance and equality of opportunity among students and employees, and to prepare and implement a policy in respect of access for those under-represented and in respect of equality in all activities.

The Employment Equality Acts prohibit discrimination in the workplace. The Equal Status Acts prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services, accommodation and educational establishments. Both Acts cover the nine grounds of gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion and membership of the traveller community. Both Acts prohibit sexual harassment and harassment, require a reasonable accommodation of people with disabilities, subject to exemption, and allow for positive action.

Reference to this legislation reinforces the point made by Kathleen Lynch that we need to focus on equality rather than equity of access. This is a focus on equality that encompasses equality of opportunity, of participation, of outcome and of condition as suggested by Kathleen Lynch. The legislation enshrines a focus on equality of opportunity. However, a broader focus is suggested by the new definition of positive action recently incorporated into the Employment Equality Acts. Positive action in the workplace is now allowed in support of full equality in practice.

This equality legislation means that individuals covered by the nine grounds have a mechanism through which to resolve particular experiences of discrimination. This legislation provides a stimulus for change that can be deployed by the converted to construct and drive proactive approaches to equality within their organisations – approaches that encompass non-discrimination, making adjustments to take into account the practical implications of diversity and positive action for equality. This legislation also serves as a focus for a broad debate

in relation to discrimination and equality and the implications of these for institutional practice and culture.

This legislation is a lever for change but it is a lever for change that needs further development and evolution. Kathleen Lynch highlights the inequalities associated with socio-economic status. The equality legislation fails in its ambition to be comprehensive as it still does not cover the ground of socio-economic status.

Kathleen Lynch emphasises equality of recognition and socio-cultural issues of difference and diversity in society. The legislation begins to grapple with this issue with its requirements in relation to making reasonable accommodation of people with disability. However, this requirement needs to be extended across all nine grounds covered by the legislation such that the practical implications of difference and diversity are taken into account in the manner in which institutions go about their business.

Finally Kathleen Lynch refers to the need for institutional change. This should be driven by equality legislation that combines a prohibition on discrimination with positive duties on institutions to be planned and systematic in their approach to equality.

**Levers for change – organisations with an equality remit**

Another key lever for change are the organisations that have an equality mandate. These include the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education and the Equality Authority. These are organisations that can envision, stimulate and support the institutional change emphasised by Kathleen Lynch. In our work in the Equality Authority we have focused on the importance of supporting an institutional competency for equality. This competency is reflected both in planned and systematic approaches to equality by the institution and the extent to which equality is a focus within their governance structures and processes.

Being planned and systematic in their approach to equality requires universities and institutes of technology to look at their roles as employers and as service providers. These two roles need to be encompassed in a formal commitment by the institution to equality for employees and for students. This commitment needs to be activated by ensuring a staff capacity to put it into practice. There is also a need to ensure an institutional context where staff can deploy new capacities in activity for equality.

Being planned and systematic therefore is about universities and institutes of technology having equality policies that set out their commitment to non-discrimination, accommodating diversity and achieving full equality practice. It is about these institutions making equality and diversity training available to all staff – the recent report on equality practices within universities went as far as suggesting such training should be mandatory which would be a positive development. This training needs to build an awareness of equality issues and equality legislation alongside the development of skills to enable staff to build an equality dimension into their work.

Finally planned and systematic approaches to equality involve universities and institutes of technology preparing and implementing equality action plans. These plans would encompass all nine grounds covered by the equality legislation and would set clear objectives and steps to be taken to achieve these with timescales and targets set. It is important that they are evidence based and should be prepared on foot of conducting a review of the current situation in terms of equality for the diversity among employees and among students – both in terms of presence, participation and outcomes being achieved. This review would include an examination of policies, procedures, practice and perceptions in the institution for their impact on equality. This should generate the material from which to design an effective and ambitious equality action plan. The Equality Authority has already

supported employment equality reviews in two universities and this is an area we wish to further develop both in terms of employment equality, but also in terms of equality in service provision.

Governance is also a focus in building an institutional competence for equality. An equality focus in governance involves data gathering, participation in decision-making and ensuring equality is a factor in decision-making.

Gathering data in relation to diversity among staff and students allows decision making to be evidence based. It breaks the link between decision-making and negative stereotypes held and false assumptions made about people who experience inequality.

Kathleen Lynch challenges the term 'targeting' for reflecting an ambition to control those who are targeted. Participatory governance embraces empowerment over control. Participatory governance involves a real dialogue with the diversity of staff and with the diversity of students and with the organisations that bring forward, represent and articulate the interests of that diversity both within the institution and within the wider community.

Equality impact assessments are a key mechanism for building equality factors into the making of key decisions within the institution. This involves an exercise to assess the likely impact of a decision, plan, programme or budget allocation on those who are currently experiencing inequality.

These then are the institutional practices that the Equality Authority seeks to stimulate and support. They are practices that can lead to the institutional change highlighted as necessary and urgent by Kathleen Lynch.

## **Barriers**

There are, however, contextual and situational barriers to change as Kathleen Lynch has pointed out. Contextual barriers focus our attention on what is happening outside of the educational institution in terms of inequality and the search for a more equal society. This highlights that universities and institutes of technology play roles as employers and as service providers, but also as advocates for change.

These institutions need to be a voice for greater equality in society. They need to be a source of expertise for greater equality in society so that when people are trained into the various professions and jobs they aspire to they are also trained to play these roles from an egalitarian perspective. An advocacy role also requires these institutions to be a source of knowledge and of knowledge development in relation to inequality issues and the promotion of equality.

Situational barriers focus our attention on the disposition and experience of those who currently experience inequality. Kathleen Lynch refers to the challenge of building a culture of expectation within these communities. This suggests a further role for universities and institutes of technology – a role of solidarity with those who experience inequality. This role is about how these institutions communicate with these communities, how they outreach to and provide information to these communities. It is about how they target resources to these communities and build institutional relationships that empower and benefit these communities.

## **Vision**

Finally, Kathleen Lynch challenges us to have a clarity of vision in terms of equality and the pursuit of equality. Institutional practice needs to be based on objectives for equality that are valid and effective in terms of creating a more equal society. This is a vision for equality that must go beyond non-discrimination to include a new accommodation of diversity and to go further again to

include positive action for equality that seeks equality of opportunity, of participation, of outcome and of condition.

This vision requires not only the presence of a broad diversity of students but also a participation by that diversity in all areas of the institution's life and provision and, further, outcomes for students across this broad diversity. It requires a staff complement that mirrors the diversity in society with diversity present at all levels and in all areas of employment. It requires decision-making that is participatory involving a diversity of staff and students and their organisations.

### **Conclusion**

The agenda for action for equality therefore that flows from Kathleen Lynch's paper should include:

- institutional change that involves creating an institutional infrastructure for a planned and systematic approach to equality, that involves a practice that places equality at the heart of governance and that involves institutions as employers, as service providers, as advocates for equality and as providing solidarity with those experiencing inequality.
- legislative change that develops positive duties to promote equality, that prohibits discrimination on a socio-economic status ground and that is coherent in imposing requirements in relation to equality in both universities and institutes of technology.
- developing a support infrastructure to support a new institutional practice that is non-discriminatory, that accommodates diversity and that promotes full equality in practice.
- new investment in equality to address significant resource deficits and to create an accessible context and a culture of expectation among those communities experiencing inequality.

## ACHIEVING EQUITY OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION – THE PERFORMANCE OF THE INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY SECTOR

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The purpose of this conference is to set the agenda for action in order to achieve equity of access to higher education. My take on this is to examine the current situation in the higher education technological sector and by that I mean the institutes of technology established under the RTC and DIT Acts<sup>1</sup>. If we have a destination in mind – i.e. equity of access – then we can only realistically plan the journey we have to take by knowing where we are starting from.

Growth in higher education in Ireland has been phenomenal in the last twenty years. It has greatly out-paced the steady growth in our population and currently some 55% of school leavers go to higher education compared to 20% in 1980. This growth has seen student populations in the institutes of technology increased tenfold over the last thirty years. The continued steady growth in this sector since the introduction of free fees for all in higher education has been quite dramatic and this has occurred despite negative demographical trends.

As the higher education population has increased, we have observed that not everybody has an equal opportunity of participating. With the overall increase in admissions since the 1980s, unsurprisingly, most social groups have shown increased participation. This was confirmed by the figures shown by Don Thornhill<sup>2</sup> this morning, but despite this overall increase the same groups continue to remain under-represented. We have attempted to address under-representation by certain socio-economic groups by setting as a goal the achievement of ‘*equity of access*’ to higher education. However, this begs the question of what do we mean by *equity*? As Kathleen Lynch<sup>3</sup> pointed out earlier, we certainly don’t mean equality of access. If we were to treat everyone equally, then anyone who met minimum matriculation standards would be offered a place and in our continuing competitive environment for places in higher education this is not yet possible and as a result we have settled for this concept of equity.

My Collins Shorter English Dictionary offers two options in terms of what this means. The first is ‘the quality of being impartial and founded on principles of natural justice and fair conduct’ – this is the fairness to which Kathleen referred in her presentation – or an alternative view is that it is activity that takes place ‘in conformity with rules and standards’.

Our actions speak for themselves. I believe that the latter definition is the one we have adopted. I do not have a problem with this, but I think we should be clear about what we are doing and why we are doing it. We have seen a need for affirmative action as a means of levelling the playing pitch for all and have committed resources and adopted procedures to address issues of improving access for disadvantaged groups.

Our approach is also conforms to the OECD definition<sup>4</sup> of equity as ‘policies which seek to overcome social or labour market disadvantages thereby promoting equality of opportunity’.

It is true to say that the minimum academic hurdles for gaining access to higher education are not very high. *Ab initio* Bachelor (Honours) degrees, for example, require a minimum of two C3s in honours papers and four D3s in ordinary level papers; Higher Certificate and Ordinary Bachelor degree programmes require either five or six ordinary level D3s with a minimum points score of 140 for the Ordinary Bachelor degree programmes.

While getting in may not be the greatest problem, remaining in often is. Access needs to encompass the issues of retention and successful completion – i.e. achievement of the award for which the individual is registered – if it is to be meaningful. Let us examine how we are doing in general. Depressingly, the last survey by Pat Clancy<sup>5</sup> showed that the same, groups namely the manual unskilled groups, still show poorest

1. Regional Technical Colleges Acts 1992–1999; The Dublin Institute of Technology Act 1992

2. Thornhill, D., 2004. Speech to launch the HEA conference ‘Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education – Setting an Agenda for Action in Ireland’.

3. Lynch, K., 2004 ‘Neo-Liberalism, Marketisation and Higher Education: Equality Considerations’. Keynote address at the HEA Conference ‘Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education – Setting an Agenda for Action in Ireland’.

4. Society at a Glance; OECD Social Indicators – Social Issues: 2001. OECD, Paris.

5. Clancy, P., (2001) ‘College Entry in Focus – A Fourth National Survey Of Access To Higher Education’. HEA, Dublin.

representation, although Don Thornhill's figures hint at some improvement in these. If we are to look at how this breaks down at an institutional level, we can see that the universities had a greater proportion of the higher socio-economic groups relative to the institutes of technology – about 50% on average across the universities and 35% in the institutes. When we examine the lower socio-economic groups, we can see that the situation is reversed. The institutes average about 40% while the universities have somewhere in the region of 25%. It will be interesting to see if the new figures being produced by the HEA show any change in this trend, which has persisted over several of the Clancy surveys.

The poor representation of lower socio-economic groups is greatest in the east of the country and particularly in Dublin. It is evident that special action needs to be targeted towards Dublin, Carlow and Wicklow if we are to effectively address equity of access for the lower socio-economic groups.

It's also worth noting that Ireland has the youngest higher education population in OECD<sup>6</sup> countries (Figure 1).

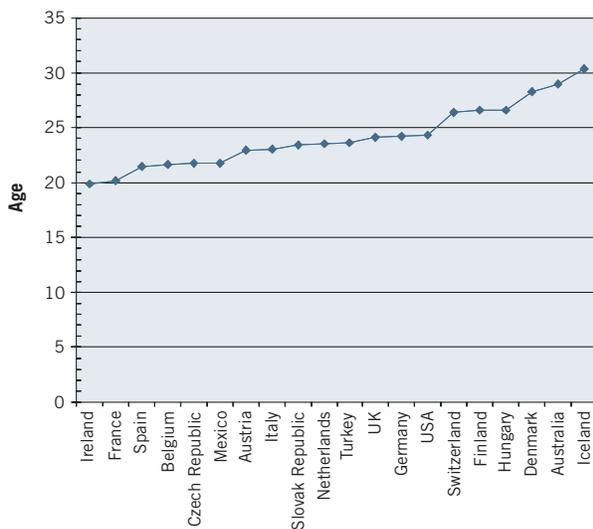


Figure 1. Age at entry to higher education (80th percentile)

6. Education at a Glance – OECD Indicators :2004. OECD, Paris.

This can create its own difficulties, particularly in terms of the preparedness of younger school leavers for higher education and consequent problems of retention and completion – something we are all very familiar with in higher education. The full-time population in the institutes of technology and indeed in the universities clusters around the seventeen-to twenty-year age group (Figure 2). There is a slight increase in the thirty-plus age group which may reflect people entering as second chance candidates or people seeking to up-skill or change their career.

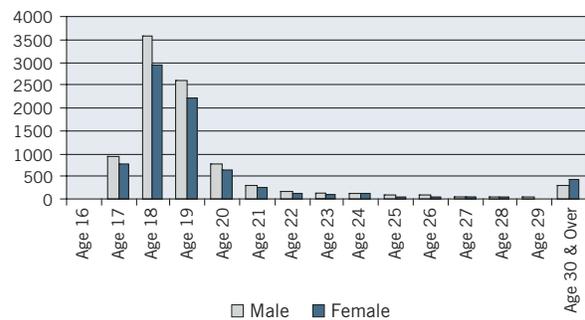
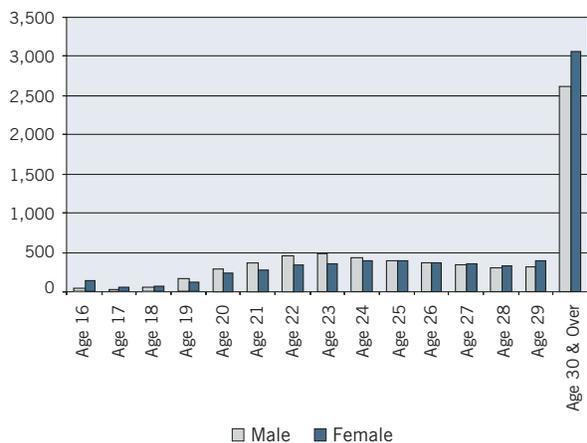


Figure 2. Number of new entrants in third level full-time full session courses by age and gender in the 2003/2004 academic year (institutes of technology only)

This is also reflected in the part-time enrolment where the dominant group in our sector is the thirty-plus age group.



**Figure 3.** Age profile of part-time students in technological higher education

When we attempt to compare how we are doing with others, particularly other countries, we must take care to ensure that we are comparing like with like. Figures in the OECD *Education at a Glance* report for 2004 are based on headcounts. They do not distinguish between full-time and part-time study. We must be careful therefore that we do not mislead by using inappropriate comparisons when judging our own performance, for example we tend to count participation only where it is based on full-time entrants. The OECD report indicates that 25% of higher education participants are over twenty-five years of age in Norway, Finland, Denmark, New Zealand and Australia and 38% are over twenty-five in Sweden. We need to look at how we compare. The most recent figures available from the Department of Education and Science show that the percentage of mature new entrants, i.e. those over twenty-three coming into higher education for the first time, in the technology sector is 10%. If we include all the students registered on our programmes who are over twenty-three, irrespective of year of study, this rises to 15%. Of the part-time students registered on our programmes, 80% of them are over twenty-three. If, therefore, we calculate the total

participation in technological higher education (i.e. full-time, part-time, all years), then 30% of the student population is, by definition, mature. This compares very favourably with the other OECD countries mentioned above.

A consideration of gender participation in higher education in Ireland shows that females (58.5%) participate in greater numbers than males (41.5%) in universities. However, in the institutes of technology this is reversed with slightly more males (52.2%) being registered than females (47.8%). This may well reflect the type of curriculum on offer and the concentration on more technological subjects, although that may not be the full story. Unfortunately, the published data<sup>7</sup> available at the moment is somewhat old, representing data for the 1998/1999 higher education population. This data shows that of the 1,367 undergraduates who were registered with disabilities 54% were studying in institutes of technology. This data was compiled at a time when institutes of technology didn't have well-resourced access initiatives. The situation regarding resources has improved in recent years, but does not appear to be reflected in a significant increase in the proportion of students with disabilities accessing the institutes<sup>8</sup>.

An analysis of how the institute of technology sector is performing with regard to disadvantaged groups and the targets set by the action group on access to higher education<sup>9</sup> shows that the sector, generally speaking, is on target. Some of the numbers shown for 2003 are most likely underestimated and if the figures indicated by Don Thornhill this morning are confirmed in the new HEA study, then the numbers for unskilled and agricultural workers will certainly improve. The figures for students with disabilities show that while the proportion is holding its own it is not increasing to any significant extent. A HEA/AHEAD<sup>10</sup> report, published earlier this year, identified 1,367 undergraduates in thirty-eight higher education institutions with disabilities in the academic

7. 'Survey on Participation Rates and Provision for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education for the Academic Year 1998/1999': 2004. HEA/AHEAD.

8. Ann Heelan (pers. Comm.) – 6th December 2005. Heelan has also confirmed that the proportion enrolled in universities has increased significantly over the period (unpublished data).

9. Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education: 2001, Dublin.

10. Survey on Participation Rates and Provision for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education for the Academic Year 1998/1999: HEA/AHEAD (2004)

year 1998/1999. A breakdown of these figures showed that 54% were studying in institutes of technology and 39% were studying in universities. A conservative estimate, based on the total number of students with disabilities remaining the same since the 1998/1999 study was undertaken, would translate to 1.4% of total enrolments for 2003.

Internationally, between 2 to 4%<sup>11</sup> of those participating are disabled; our national participation rate is 1.1% (the proportion of disabled in the population is estimated at 10%). While we are making some progress, we still have a long way to go if we are to achieve the international average. The performance of the institute of technology sector over the time period 2000 to 2004 indicates that we are on target with the levels set in the Action Group report. (See Table 1 below)

Institutes of technology, generally speaking, are meeting their targets. Some of the numbers shown for 2003 are, most likely, underestimates as they are extrapolated from published ratios – much of which was derived before access officers were appointed in the sector or significant funding was allocated to improving access.

The Action Group report, in making recommendations in relation to access programmes, defined several categories of students. In the first category were students

who achieved just over 300 points. The Action Group concluded that exclusion within this category stems from rationing of places rather than the individual's abilities. Students in this category could be catered for through a system of reserved places with direct entry and this would offset the competitive disadvantage facing such students. Unfortunately, I feel that this misrepresents what access to higher education should mean. The majority of students entering the institutes of technology fall into this category. They have a wide choice of courses and a large number of places. The issue of access is not simply one of entry to a university but entry to higher education. The mind set represented in this view of disadvantage may provide one explanation of why increasing numbers of applicants are turning down college places<sup>12</sup>.

The second category identified by the Action Group is students who achieve only minimum matriculation requirements. Students in this category were deemed to be at high risk if they enter tertiary education without further preparation. These students were deemed to need a pre-entry preparatory programme as well as reserved places with direct entry. Supports post-entry were considered by the Action Group to be insufficient. Again, these students get into the institute of technology sector in some numbers. Skilbeck and O'Connell<sup>13</sup> noted that it is poor economy to admit large numbers and then accept high failure and drop-out rates. What is needed is properly

**Table 1. Meeting the targets of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education**

	Target 2003	IoTs (2003)	Target 2006
Unskilled/Agricultural Workers	22%	33%*	27%
Unskilled	27%	28.5%	33%
Students with Disabilities	1.35%	1.4% (based on trends in the 1988/89 study)	1.8%
Mature Participation (Full and Part-time)	26%	30%	30%
Mature Participation (Full-time only)	7%	10% new entrants 15% all students	10%

11. Skilbeck, M. and O'Connell, H. (2000) 'Access and Equity in Higher Education – An International Perspective on Issues and Strategies'. HEA, Dublin.

\* Based on 0.8% and 4.5% (respectively) of entrants to IoTs and 50% of the baseline HE population for these groups, given that half of new entrants to higher education enrol in an institute of technology.

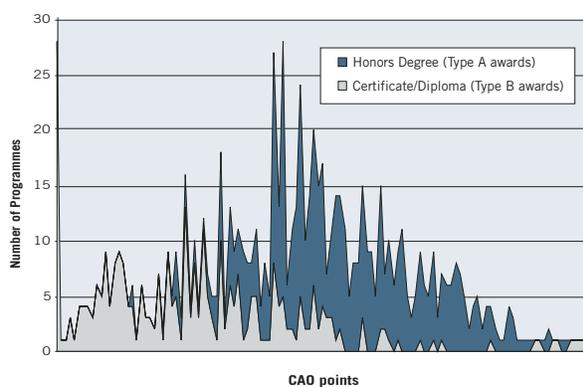
12. Clancy, P. (1999). 'Declining a Third Level Offer'. HEA, Dublin.

13. Skilbeck, M. and O'Connell, H. (2000) 'Access and Equity in Higher Education – An International Perspective on Issues and Strategies'. HEA, Dublin.

resourced post-entry support such as academic and personal counselling and specific tutorial arrangements. Our efforts in this sector have resulted in a decrease from the reported non-completion figure of 46% in the 1995 study<sup>14</sup> to 35% in the 2000 academic year and this compares with an OECD average of 33%<sup>15</sup>.

The third category is students who would not have attained minimum matriculation requirements for access to higher education. Bridging courses must be a major part of the strategy. Foundation courses to cater for this group have been provided by the institutes of technology since the mid-1990s, and these are now validated by FETAC as Level 5 courses in the new national framework of qualifications.

The bulk of certificate and diploma (now Ordinary Bachelor degree) programmes together with a significant number of ab initio Bachelor (Honours) degree programmes had cut-off points, from the CAO process in 2003, below 300 (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Final CAO cut-off points for Type A and Type B awards

What I am contending is that students in these particular programmes with this level of achievement had plenty of choice and reasonably good access but prejudice about

what were known as sub-degree awards, that they are not as good as university awards, prevented many people from accepting offers made at what is now Level 6 and Level 7 of the national framework of qualifications.

The Action Group, in recommendation number 17, stated that there should be recognition for access for NCVA and FETAC awards as well as former PLC awards. Institutes of technology have also offered a route of access to their courses through the FETAC Level 2 Higher Education Links Scheme since 1994. Recently, the institutes of technology have broadened this scheme to give students greater choice. The sector has led the way in providing recognition for people following LCVP programmes and created a route through FETAC/NCVA Level 2 for students following the Leaving Certificate Applied programmes.

All of this brings us to the question of resources. While the overall amount of money provided for higher education has increased significantly, in real terms the money received by each higher education institution has barely kept up with rising student numbers and rising costs. Much of the increase over the last few years reflected the change introduced by the free fees initiative in 1995 and 1996, which resulted in greater cost to the exchequer but little increase to the institutions. This is exacerbated by the fact that the institutes of technology and universities do not have a level pitch when it comes to funding. Traditionally the institutes of technology have been treated differently. This is particularly exemplified when you look at the value put on our efforts in terms of payments made to higher education institutions in respect of free fees. In the first two to three years of certificate /diploma-type programmes which could become the first three years of a four-year honours degree programme the institutes of technology receive €935<sup>16</sup> per student. Universities receive €3,299 per student per year for each year of a four-year honours degree programme. This has a negative knock-on effect when institutes are costing part-time programmes and revenue generating programmes

14. Flanagan, R., Morgan, M. and Kellaghan, T. (2000) 'A Study of Non-Completion in Institute of Technology Courses' Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology.

15. Education at a Glance – OECD Indicators: 2004; p. 62. OECD, Paris.

16. "Supporting Equity in Higher Education – A Report to the Minister for Education and Sciences": 2003; p. 46. DoES, Dublin.

with industry. I am not complaining here that the unit cost of educating a student in our sector is significantly different from universities and that this is not largely being met through our total recurrent grant, what I am pointing out is the relative value accorded to the efforts of the two sectors enshrined in public policy.

This undervaluing of our efforts is also reflected in how national resources are shared when it comes to access initiatives, even though we are expected to discharge the same responsibilities as the universities and to meet the same targets. For example nine Higher Education Authority institutions had access in 2003/2004 to €7.3 million for access initiatives. In contrast thirteen institutes of technology, DIT, NCI and the Tipperary Institute had access to a total of €1.8 million. The student assistance funding is allocated on a per capita basis to each higher education institution, and smaller institutions such as the institutes of technology, who are actively addressing issues of inequality and deal with greater numbers of disadvantaged students, lose out as a result and this dilutes what can be done in terms of support for any individual. However, it's not just money, although money is the lubricant that oils the machine. Without oil the machine cannot operate efficiently and may even grind to a halt.

We can afford an access officer who looks after disabilities (in all but two of the institutes where there is a dedicated disability officer), who looks after mature students, who looks after socio-economic disadvantage, administration and reporting, the student assistance fund, data gathering, data evaluation and programme monitoring, etc. etc. This leaves little time for policy development, new initiatives, constructive partnerships with other sectors of education, with parents, communities, employers or the corporate sector. It is greatly to the credit of our access officers that they have made some progress these areas despite the other pressures on their time. Better resourcing means

that universities, rather than having an access officer, can afford an access service. This means that they have individuals who can look after the needs of disabled students exclusively and others who can deal exclusively with the problems of mature students. We have a careers officer. Better resourcing means that universities can afford a careers service. We have a student counsellor. Better resourcing means that universities can afford a counselling service.

Now I do not mean to bleat or to breast-beat about what we don't have. Neither am I denigrating the efforts of others; they do a good job with the resources available to them. However, if you reflect objectively on what I have presented and on what we have managed to do with limited resources, you will conclude that we have shown that we can and will respond to challenges. Just think what we would be able to do if we had adequate funding to actively address equity of access – and in this instance, at a minimum, I mean equality of funding with the university sector.

## SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED SCHOOL LEAVERS

Professor Jim Browne, Registrar and Deputy President, National University of Ireland, Galway

Thank you for the invitation to the conference and especially for the opportunity to make this presentation. I am going to focus on the issue of socio-economically disadvantaged school leavers and to bring to this conference a proposal that has emerged from some work carried out by the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIUI) in the past six to eight months. My problem statement is in some ways a very simplistic one and it focuses on trying to find a solution. I should also point out that this work was initiated and led by Professor Áine Hyland of University College Cork, who deserves great credit for her long-standing commitment to educational access for disadvantaged students.

Problem statement:

- Under-representation in higher education, in particular universities – why?
- Admissions system driven by Leaving Certificate performance
- Socio-economically disadvantaged students in general under perform

I respect completely the analysis we heard this morning from Kathleen Lynch and I would agree with most of it. My challenge, however, is to generate a problem statement that will ultimately lead to a solution in the short to medium term. Based on that problem statement I will offer the response that CHIUI has developed over the past few months. The issue of disadvantaged students, in very simple terms, and I use the words 'simple terms' very deliberately, is that we have under-representation of disadvantaged students in third level and particularly in the universities. This I think is clear to everybody. The

number of applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds who gain entry through the CAO system into Irish universities is low in terms of their proportion in the overall population and the reason at a very shallow level is very simple: The *admission system to university is driven by Leaving Cert performance, and in general socio-economically disadvantaged students under perform at Leaving Cert*. That is a reality that we as universities have to deal with, and to indicate the extent of the problem I have some data here which I have taken from a Clancy and Wall report (2000). (See Table 1)

This report provides the latest available scientific data. Now Don Thornhill gave us data this morning that perhaps is more encouraging but I guess it is probably not saying that the problem has been solved. This first piece of data which I have taken from Clancy and Wall's report focuses on three groups from the ten or so socio-economic groups and shows very clearly that for example, compared to higher professionals, students from disadvantaged backgrounds under-perform. In fact, based on these figures it seems that 9.1% of the children of unskilled manual workers do not even get a qualification; 25% do not participate past Junior Cert and about 65% go on to Leaving Cert as compared to for example, 92% of those in the higher professions. So we have a problem initially in that the children of the unskilled manual group do not even get to the starting gate!

I want now to look then at attainment at the Leaving Certificate, those who stay in the second level system to Leaving Cert; how do they perform? (See Table 2)

**Table 1: Educational Attainment by Fathers' Socio-Economic Group**

Socio-economic group	No Qualification	Junior Cert	Leaving Cert
Farmers	1.6	9.6	88.8
Higher Professionals	0.3	7.7	92.0
Unskilled Manual	9.1	25.4	65.4

All figures are in % [Source: Clancy and Wall (2000) Table 18]

**Table 2: Attainment at Leaving Certificate by Fathers' Socio-Economic Group**

Socio- economic group	<5Ds	Pass	1 Honours	2-4 Hons	5+Hons
Farmers	4.1	15.4	12.8	37.6	30.2
Higher Professional	1.0	8.6	3.4	31.0	55.9
Unskilled Manual	12.1	33.6	11.2	31.1	11.9

All figures are in % [Source: Clancy and Wall (2000) Table 19]

**Table 3: Enrolment at HE by Level of Attainment & Fathers' Socio-Economic Group**

Socio-economic group	Pass	1 Hon	2-4 Hons	5+ Hons	Total
Farmers	22	33.3	67.9	91.8	<b>63.5</b>
Higher Professionals	32	30	70.5	90.7	<b>77.2</b>
Unskilled Manual	9.2	8.3	62.5	84.6	<b>38.1</b>

All figures are in % [Source: Clancy and Wall (2000) Table 20]<sup>1</sup>

In terms of, let us call it, non-matriculating performance, it is clear from the data that a very significant number of people in the socio-economically disadvantaged group do not achieve the level of matriculation and therefore are not eligible for entry under the existing CAO system. Those who achieve 2–4 honours and therefore matriculate constitute about 31%; those who get 5+ honours, which in effect means 300 plus points because 5 Honours is at a minimum 300 points, constitute circa 12% of the group – a stark contrast with the numbers, for example, in the higher professions where 56% or so achieve that level of performance. For the majority of programmes, as Dermot Douglas indicated earlier, an applicant must be in this category at least to enter university. So it is clear that even for those in the socio-economically disadvantaged category who progress to the Leaving Cert, and that is a small majority of the group, many do not perform at the level that would allow them to enter university using existing admissions regulations. (See Table 3)

But further data, taken from the same source, shows that *very many students from disadvantaged backgrounds who perform well at Leaving Cert go on to university*, which I think is very interesting. The data suggests that of those who matriculate and achieve high points, very many in

fact go on to third level and this may partly explain the high figures that Don reported this morning. Also the data suggests that of those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who perform modestly (pass or 1 honour) at Leaving Cert, few go on to third level. Many more of those from the higher professions who perform modestly go on to third level. This I think is very interesting as it suggests that there might be a cultural issue here. A much smaller portion from the lower socio-economic group go on to third level and I suspect that the majority of those are in the IoTs.

So based on that very quick analysis of the data taken from Clancy and Wall's report there are a number of key points. Firstly, it is clear that many people in the disadvantaged group do not even get to the starting gate. They do not get past Junior Certificate. Secondly, those who go on to sit the Leaving Certificate perform more modestly than their peers, and furthermore of those who perform reasonably well, many do not necessarily avail of the opportunity of higher education. However, for those who perform well, that is those who get better Leaving Cert results, there is very little difference in their transition rate to higher education compared to, let us say, the children of parents in the higher professions.

1. Clancy, P. and J. Wall (2000) *Social Background of Higher Education Entrants* Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

So what then is the real problem? In simple terms, the problem goes back to Leaving Certificate performance, but of course, the problem starts much earlier than that. We have to recognise this, and references from various authorities, including the World Bank, support that view. They make it very clear that the issue does not, as it were, appear suddenly at third level! The issue in fact precedes third level, precedes second level, perhaps even precedes primary level. The issue fundamentally has to be tackled at a much earlier point in the education cycle. It is too late to tackle the problem at third level. I will not read the quotations for you, they are all there in your handout but I think they are fairly clear statements and they support the analysis that Kathleen Lynch offered this morning.

So in terms then of making a response as a university and indeed as a university sector what should we do? I would say the first point to bear in mind in making a response is that we have to understand the limitations of any response that we might make. As I have said the problem is created at a much earlier stage in the cycle, so there is no real sense to us thinking we can solve it on our own. *We simply cannot solve it at third level. We can alleviate it but we cannot solve it.* We also have to recognise that there has been a lot of work done in the past number of years – as Dermot Douglas said – in both the IoT sector and the university sector and the report which you have in your pack is a very sharp analysis and a very good inventory of all the work that has been done. The access officers in the various universities and IoTs have done a tremendous job and they have made a difference. Those initiatives that they have put in place, those local initiatives which involve interaction with schools, interaction with disadvantaged pupils and so on, those must be sustained and must be continued. *However, what is also needed in my opinion and in the opinion of CHIU is a national initiative in parallel with the existing local initiatives.* We need to review admissions policies in such a way as to *admit those with potential as well as those with achievement.*

The existing CAO system is based almost exclusively on recognition of achievement to date, that is achievement

at the Leaving Certificate examination. What we are trying to do now is look at the possibility of a different style of admissions system to support disadvantaged students by recognising their potential as well as their achievement. In that context I should maybe draw your attention to a report that was produced in the last couple of months in the UK in response to a request from the Secretary of State for Education in the UK, Charles Clarke. He asked an expert group, chaired by Professor Schwartz, to analyse admissions policy in the UK. Now the UK has a very different system to what we have but fundamentally their system is driven by merit and achievement rather than potential. I have taken some quotations from the report because I think they support the analysis that was undertaken by CHIU. What they are saying is that *merit could mean admitting applicants with the highest examination marks or it could mean taking a wider view of each applicant's achievements and potential.*

The UK report points out, and I agree, that examination grades do not necessarily reflect equal potential. That is particularly true in the context of the so-called grind schools and the unintended impact of free third level fees which have effectively allowed some middle class parents to transfer fees that might have gone to universities back to grind schools in order to have their children 'ground up' to achieve the points level required for certain courses. I think Kathleen Lynch made that point this morning, perhaps not as strongly as I make it. This is a reality we have to face: in effect we have students whose potential perhaps has been overstated by the decisions of parents to pay for access to grind schools. Clearly this is an issue of interpretation of merit and fairness but it is clear that equal grades at Leaving Certificate do not necessarily mean equal potential.

The UK report suggested some principles of fair admission and I include a subset of those principles in this slide. This report argues for selection of students based on merit, potential and diversity. Now we in Ireland select students on the basis of merit insofar as merit is reflected by achievement at the Leaving Certificate. I want to emphasise the issue of potential and to argue that a fairer admission system might enable institutions to *select*

*students who are likely to be able to complete the course and further are selected based on their achievements to date as well as their potential for academic achievement.* CHIU was guided by that type of thinking, although I emphasise the UK report came out after the CHIU work was complete.

What we have here is a proposal from CHIU that was made to the Department of Education and Science in the past few months. This proposal argues for a national *affirmative action programme in favour of disadvantaged school leavers* in parallel with existing access initiatives. It is important to emphasise that this proposal is not meant to be a replacement for the work underway by access officers; rather it is a parallel route with no intention of compromising the existing activity which we think is excellent.

This affirmative action programme recognises those Leaving Certificate students who are disadvantaged, who meet a defined minimum entry level because it is important that when students enter the system they have every chance of succeeding, and who have not been offered a place in the normal CAO process. The proposed scheme will provide a quota of places for such students. The Department of Education and Science has a scheme which provides for free examination fees at Leaving Cert for certain categories of students; our intention in CHIU is to use that scheme as, if you like, the instrument to separate those who are disadvantaged from those who are not. It is not a perfect scheme but it is the best available to us. CHIU has agreed that if the DES categorises a student as disadvantaged, the universities will accept that and will provide a quota of places which will be allocated to those students post the first CAO round. *Universities will offer such students places based on their achievement because we will need some minimum entry requirement depending on the programme and their potential, recognising the fact that perhaps their performance to date has been driven partly by the context within which they have had to learn.* We also argue, and argue very strongly, that in doing this we need state support for the student and for the university. Clearly a student entering university via this route needs support. Indeed this point

has already been made by participants in this workshop. We also need university support because again, as has been pointed out, such students need support within the university in terms of extra tutorials, extra financial support, extra contact with the staff of the university in order to realise their full potential.

We are suggesting a *'skills' style programme for disadvantaged students*. Over the past ten years or so the HEA has managed a very significant programme in the 'skills' area, in the disciplines of engineering, applied science and information technology where with government support the HEA has provided higher than normal levels of funding for students who are entering these skills areas. We argue that if Irish society is serious about dealing with educational disadvantage, then we should have a similar scheme for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We should develop a new programme similar to the existing 'Skills' programme which allows students who enter in this way to take full advantage of the educational opportunity that is available to them and allows universities to treat them in a way that ensures they achieve their full potential.

The proposal from CHIU is a clear statement of intent and commitment by the heads of Irish universities; a clear statement of commitment to the access agenda and to the equality agenda. If this proposal were to go ahead, and we are not saying it will solve the whole problem because as I pointed out the problem is deep in the total education cycle, it would certainly help a number of individuals and that is very important. It would also, I think, help to change the culture and expectations of disadvantaged students who would see they could realistically aspire to enter for example Medicine or Law through this route.

A final point I would like to make is in reference to the OECD Report. The OECD report argues strongly for access for disadvantaged people and it recognises that in doing that we have to support both the students and the universities.

## ACCESS AGENDA FOR ACTION: A PRESENTATION ON BEHALF OF ACCESS MADE ACCESSIBLE (AMA)

### Maeve O'Byrne, Access Officer, Wexford Campus, IT Carlow

Written and prepared on behalf of AMA by:

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It is not unknown for senior management in third level institutions to say to their access officer as she or he arrives for a meeting, and I quote, 'Don't start with your emotional stories'. In other words, 'Don't come with your case histories and your hard luck stories; concentrate on the issues, the strategy, the statistics, the big picture'. That's because senior management, by necessity, operate at a macro level in the system, and systems are by and large unable to cope with real people.

We are going to concentrate on the issues and the big picture in the main body of this paper, but as access officers working on the ground every day we cannot ignore the real people. So in order to frame our thoughts on the way forward for access we wanted to give you a sense of the reality and remind you of the complexity and the experience of the people with whom we work and for whom the system as it stands is not designed.

*A short video was included in the presentation at this point, featuring a range of student voices and experiences:*

'My name is Martina, I am sixteen and I'm from Wexford town. I like the harbour because of the boats and when I see the boats it makes me think that I can get away from Wexford, the world is a bigger place. All I done was I dropped out of school because they had no one to help at home with the kids. Mum was dead and the three kids were at home and dad is a drunk alcoholic. I feel frustrated, so I drink and I smoke a bit of hash because there is no escape. It's a vicious circle. I'd like to get some help with the kids, I'm only a child myself. I'd like my dad to get some help and I'd like to go back to school. The trouble at the moment is that there is no job without qualifications but I can't go back to school because of the situation at home.'

'My name is Bridie. I was brought up in Wexford and live on one of the estates. They call me a settled traveller but I've been living in a house since I was born. They never say it to you but I know that I've been turned down for jobs because they know that I'm a traveller. When I was at school they used to get on to me. I'd love to be able to get a good job and my children not to be annoyed at school'.

'As soon as I walked into school I wanted to get out, so I left school at sixteen beginning to work straight away. There wasn't a job that suited me. There was something missing, I needed something. I enjoyed the academic part of school, I just didn't enjoy the actual process of school so I went back in 1990 and did the Leaving Cert and one of the subjects happened to be Art and it was something I was always interested in when I was small kid was Art and so I went to several different classes and joined several groups. In one of the groups I met a chap who was a mature student who returned to college and he had just finished his final year and he encouraged me and said I should go for it and so I began in Ballyfermot and from Ballyfermot into Dun Laoghaire. I just needed to be an artist. I disregarded everything else. If it wasn't for me wife, she's fully supportive like doing this. If not I wouldn't have had the chance.'

'If we're going to create a more pluralistic Ireland we can't just talk about multiculturalism without looking at how we are educating all of our children. I think it's really important that kids from pre-school to Leaving Certificate age start off with opportunities, chances and choices. If help is required you build it in, you don't problematise a child because of their identity.'

Access is like motherhood and apple pie – everyone agrees that it's a 'good thing'. But why is it a 'good thing'? Why is it in all our interests to promote access?

As we saw from the video, access is about real people, individuals who are excluded from the education system for a range of personal, societal and structural reasons. The benefits of access to individuals are obvious enough; it affords the opportunity to improve their standard of living and to develop their personal and professional potential. But the picture is more complex than that. The individual is also part of a family and we know that attitudes children have to learning, the facility with which they negotiate their way around the education system, the chances they have in that system and their experience of it are all mediated and influenced by the socio-economic group to which they and their family belong.

And families form communities. For the wider community, access to education can be about breaking a cycle of marginalisation and alienation. It is about empowering communities to own their own culture and values and to have a say in planning for their own future.

And then we come to education providers. Why should it be in their interests to promote an access agenda? There has been somewhat of a push/pull, carrot and stick dynamic at work here. On the one hand, we have a pull towards access from outside the sector due partly to the onus on education providers to respond to the educational demands of a developing economy and by government policy, legislation and resourcing which has highlighted access as a key concern right across the sector.

There is also a push towards access from within the system fuelled by a number of factors: firstly, the decline in the numbers of so-called traditional third level students. Secondly, the presence of policy makers and workers from pre-school to third level whose role it is to promote greater equity in education, which has opened up the access debate and has seen policies and aspirations put into action and now, of course, we have

the establishment of the National Office which will drive the agenda even further.

Finally, there is the leadership role that third level institutions and the education system as a whole have, in reflecting on its own shortcomings and mapping out a more diverse and equitable system.

Another important subsystem where access has an impact is the economy, which has need of a skilled workforce to maintain a competitive edge in the age of the knowledge society. And in our wider society, if we are to achieve social cohesion and promote active, equal, responsible citizenship then we must promote access, and if we are to follow a social justice agenda then we must promote access in the attempt to bridge our ever increasing gap between rich and poor.

Overseeing our subsystems is the government in whose power it is to widen participation through policy, funding and resourcing and through reform of the current system. So if that is our rationale for access what are the consequences of failure? In short, is it about the loss of potential. The loss to the individual and his or her family or community of a better quality of life, the loss to the economy of a skilled worker, the loss to society of an active participant and the cost to society when potential is denied in terms of health, welfare and the justice system. Finally, there is a loss to the education system of a student – a bum on a seat and more importantly the loss of the diversity and contribution that each student brings to the institution.

So what has been happening, what progress has been made? In the last nine years we have had significant legislation, policy and investment around this issue. The outcomes are impressive. With the introduction of policy in 1995, access officers have been in place in the university sector from 1997 and in the institute of technology sector from 2000 on. And there has been creative and innovative work done both on an in-reach basis, within institutions, and on an outreach basis.

Much developmental work has been done at the pre-entry stage, taking access beyond the walls of institutions out into the community. Building strong foundations for the future by reaching outwards to primary and secondary schools, marginalised communities and other target groups. This has brought about gradual changes in attitude in terms of the institution as an accessible and welcoming place and to education in general as a desirable and obtainable option.

Access is by its nature collaborative and a strong feature of the work so far has been the forging of partnerships across the sectors and between institutions, leading to better communication and trust, the formation of working networks and many joint initiatives, an example of which is the common access entry initiative now known as the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR).

New and more flexible modes of entry and progression routes have been established opening up opportunities to students who would never otherwise go to college. And complementing that there is now a whole range of student supports, which have impacted positively on retention and achievement rates for students who have benefited from them. Energy has been directed towards accommodating diverse teaching and learning methodologies to reflect a learner centred ethos. And work has begun within our institutions to begin to look at a whole culture of inclusiveness.

Many of these programmes have been evaluated and a body of research, however small, has begun to emerge from the work that has been going on. Important as these outcomes have been they need to be unpacked in terms of the challenges we face in our role and which need to be taken into account if we are to make real headway.

I want to flag up some of these issues and I will come back to them in a little more detail later.

- Numbers – why are numbers still relatively small? Why hasn't there been more impact? There is a difficulty with targeting socio-economic disadvantage

in particular from the third level perspective. This is a complex issue, which is not just about income; it is about educational, social and cultural indicators also. We need more clarity on who is an access student. And because of the structural inequalities and the inflexibility of the system. We are cherry picking at the moment we are not getting the hard-to-reach students.

- Measuring success – we can measure numbers but that's not the whole story. Much of what we do does not fit neatly into a box or a form; our successes are anecdotal and qualitative but no less powerful and valid for that; turning around the attitude to education in marginalised communities and with adults who have had a bad experience of formal education is not done overnight. We need a national tracking system to give us more information on what is happening and we need mechanisms for capturing and evaluating our progress. And we welcome the inclusion of these in the national plan.
- The education system itself perpetuates many structural inequalities. The cycle of disadvantage begins much earlier in the system. We come in at the end of the road. We have a two-tiered system; we have marked differences in schools in terms of resources, culture and expectation, subject choices and opportunities. There is a lack of guidance resources and under-achievement at primary and second level. And we have the inflexibility of the system itself. The points system, the nature of the LC exam and the entry routes available, all present barriers to participation for many students, e.g. students doing foundation level subjects find themselves with very limited choices. In many ways we are constantly trying to change the student to fit the system without very much indication of the system changing in any meaningful way to fit the student.
- Student funding is a crucial issue, which I will come back to later.
- The culture of institutions I will also come back to.

- The role of the access officer I will also look at in more detail in the steps for success. But I would like to make the point that the role of the access officer differs according to the sector. In the university sector there is an equal emphasis on developmental and post-entry initiatives. In the IT sector the role is concerned far more with student support, partly because they have traditionally larger numbers of students from lower socio-economic groups. Obviously there is a need for a balance of both areas of work.

So what are our essential steps for success, how do we move forward?

Firstly, we need to look at the culture of access and change the way we view it. Access is about widening participation, widening the system; it is not just about increasing numbers. It is about participation, achievement and outcome. It is about creating an opportunity for as many under-represented groups as possible to gain entry into the system and to ensure that they have an equal chance of fully participating in it, and new groups will continue to emerge.

But it is also about the fact that people move in and out of different phases in their lives and the education system needs to reflect this. The education system assumes that people's lives are static and is very rigid and inflexible when it should be accommodating different needs.

The criteria for entry system assume that our point system is essentially fair as it stands, and in her presentation earlier in the conference Kathleen Lynch has thrown this open to debate. It also assumes that students are single standard human beings, that they are school leavers, that they have a Leaving Certificate, that they can afford to go to college, that they see the value of education, that they have supportive parents, that they have the time to go to college full-time or the money to attend part-time.

In so far as teaching and learning are learner centred they tend to be centred on a learner who is the traditional eighteen-year-old school leaver. Teaching and learning should reflect the diversity of the student body. We need to look at our modes of delivery, how we deliver, what courses we deliver and where they are delivered – there is a need to reach out into the community much more than we are doing.

In terms of access as a culture within institutions it is still a 'bolted-on activity' and there is a feeling that there is something fluffy and 'touchy feely' about it; it is not a central part of the business of the institution. In fact there is a tendency to assume that once you have an access officer in place the problem has been addressed. Many access officers will be familiar with the 'your student syndrome' where someone will say, 'one of yours failed' or indeed, 'one of yours came first in the class'. Although there has been a lot of great support and enthusiasm on the part of many decision makers, academics and administrative staff in third level, there are serious issues there: the fear of 'dumbing down' if you have to go too far down the access road and there is no incentive for academics to get actively involved because there is no recognition for them if they do. Sometimes also institutions may automatically operate out of a charity model of access instead of a rights model, which has implications for how students are identified, how they are treated and how they are expected to perform and behave. So, widening participation needs to become the culture for all. Changing the culture is not going to be easy and is not going to be achieved without resources. Clearly you have to invest in pre-school, primary and secondary level. But at third level the issues around resourcing centre on long-term strategic funding to resource services to widen participation to achieve long-term sustainable outcomes. We need to be able to plan for the longer term instead of on an annual basis. If our aim is a more diverse student population then we have to have the resources to provide appropriate supports. For the post-entry element of participation to be successful these supports are very necessary. We need to recruit and retain experienced staff.

There should be appropriate resources to do the developmental work with these key groups, to build on the links and partnerships we have already made, for example with schools, communities, other agencies, and to do the changing of the culture in the campus as well. We've talked about resourcing the service but we believe the key area where dramatic progress can be made is in financing the student. Money is a major issue it; always has been and it will continue to be. While we welcome the recent developments in student funding there are glaring inefficiencies in the current system. In fact, these initiatives are papering over the fault lines of a system which is not working. As you can see, we have a situation where one student could claim from all of these different sources – and when all else fails there is always the St. Vincent de Paul. All of these initiatives need to be administered and this is an administrative quagmire, it's wasteful, it's full of duplication, it's demeaning for the student, especially around financial support, and it still doesn't work.

We need one central agency to process student funding and we need adequate funding for students which is a real grant and not a supplement – it should at least be on a par with a training allowance; the funding should follow the individual student and should be linked in with targeting at the earliest stages of the system. And it should be flexible enough to accommodate different student needs as they progress through the system. And if a student needs additional financial support, which they will, they should be able to go back to the central agency for that.

There is also a real disparity in the distinction between full-time and part-time study at present where students who study part time are not eligible for any funding and have to pay fees. Students are punished by the system for failing and for changing course. All this administration adds to the daily grind of what access officers do – we add to the duplication, we are increasingly tied to our desks, processing applications and pushing paper. This is not what our role is about.

Which leads us on to the final step for success, which is a re-examination of the role of the access officer. We've explained what an access officer should not be, so what is our role? Essentially we are agents of change within our institutions and we work for change in the wider system. We report back from the margins of the system on who is being excluded and inform the system accordingly, and those under-represented groups will continue to emerge as they have done even in the seven years since we have been doing this work. In the last five years for example, refugees have come to the fore as a target group for access officers. We are innovators and we should continue to be. As well as identifying excluded groups we need to develop new ways of promoting inclusiveness and flexibility in the system in order to widen participation.

We have been effective in forging partnerships, which is a strength, because the causes of non-participation are complex and interconnected and require a partnership approach to address effectively.

These are our essential steps for success.

What we have said is nothing new and can be done; the big difference is that there is now a National Office for Equity of Access to Education.

We welcome the establishment of this Office and of the recognition of the need for a co-ordinated national approach. This is a watershed, which is both a challenge and an opportunity, and we look forward to working closely with the National Office. We don't claim the monopoly of expertise around widening participation but we, and others like us, are key partners in progressing the agenda for action. Maybe we are the bringers of emotional stories, but we make no apologies for that. We want to ensure that the realities of lived experience can be fed into the system. Because these are real people and education changes lives.

## ACCESS AND PARTNERSHIP: SOME PERSPECTIVES AND ISSUES IN 'TRADITIONAL' AND 'TECHNOLOGICAL' APPROACHES

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### Introduction

This presentation today seeks to delineate salient aspects and learning lessons attained from participation in the Cork northside Education Initiative over the past decade.

It will explore some of the institutional implications of this initiative and identify partnership development as a key aspect of this equity of access programme. Also, the presentation will focus on the importance of partnership as an animating basis for more technical, e-learning proposals in the access debate.

### Equity of access and the Cork northside partnership:

#### Background, rationale and process

In 1992, the Cork northside Education Access Initiative was established in response to calls for a project which would specifically target the lifelong learning needs of adults on the northside of Cork city. The northside of Cork city was (and still is) an area of major social and economic disadvantage with very high levels of unemployment, dependency, early school leaving, relatively meagre educational 'capital', and low levels of take-up of further education by traditional and non-traditional learners. It may be argued that many northside residents were experiencing social exclusion, a concept which embraced the dynamics of poverty and disadvantage.

Brian Harvey, in his evaluation of the Third EU Poverty Programme in Ireland, *Combating Exclusion* (1994), defined social exclusion as:

the structures and processes which exclude persons and groups from their full participation in society. It explains that poverty does not just happen: it flows directly from the economic policies and the choices which society makes about how resources are used and who has access to them... Social exclusion may take a combination of forms – economic, social, cultural, legal – with multiple effects. The term exclusion has connotations of process, focusing on the forces by which particular categories of people are closed off from the rights, benefits and opportunities of modern society. Social exclusion is not

just about lack of money, but may be about isolation, lack of work, and lack of educational opportunities, even discrimination. (pp. 3–4)

However, the people on the northside of Cork city, who were most in need of the benefits which education may bring, were cut off from these benefits due to factors which were largely beyond their control. These factors included unemployment, poverty, lack of a higher educational tradition within the families and communities in which they lived, and experience of discrimination through the operation of the formal educational system. When these and other factors combined it was exceedingly difficult for people experiencing them to reach, or indeed aspire, to the higher levels of the educational system. It was within this broad context of these socio-cultural circumstances that UCC, Cork Institute of Technology, Cork VEC and others engaged in an access partnership and negotiated learning process, a process which, in a positive and challenging way, caused institutions to reflect deeply upon their role and contribution to local society. Access provision, as well as promising potential of increased and different participation by non-traditional learners, also presented as a challenge to institutional stakeholders.

In other national contexts the crucial importance of 'socio-cultural capital' and psycho-personal barriers to participation by adults in traditional access programmes are evident in the extensive research in the UK by Veronica McGivney (2001), recent qualitative research at UCC, and others who argue that, in the access process:

many institutional strategies to widen participation have been designed to remove the practical obstacles. Other socio-personal barriers, such as attitudes, perceptions, expectations... educational self-concept... social class... are particularly resilient and difficult to change". (McGivney, 2001, pp. 70–71)

Gorard (2000) has identified the importance of long-term, socio-economic-cultural background characteristics in the access process, especially the role/effect of families' in creating a learner identity and form of 'social capital' which does not view current opportunities as 'appropriate, interesting or useful' (p.189). In some respects, in the broad area of equity of access a form of socio-personal-cultural affective filter operates as a membrane through which institutionally designed programmes, technological devices, economic-instrumental arguments, and lifelong learning rationales may not (can not) permeate.

Here I seek to contextualise and delineate some salient aspects in the development of the northside social and educational inclusion partnership process, which was undertaken and motivated not as a pragmatic institutional response to declining numbers and demographic imperatives, but on the basis of social equity and educational inclusion. It seeks to be a praxiological presentation blending theory and practice. The partnership approach to equity of access provision, on a *festina lente* basis, was particularly important in the Cork context in grappling with these aforementioned factors.

Participation by a mid-nineteenth-century Irish university in a partnership with socially excluded/disadvantaged communities to advance their access agenda was a relatively unexplored form of socio-educational engagement for that institution. In some respects, the concept 'partnership' had, or may, become an educational cliché, an almost dubious euphemism to include any association or relationship, however tenuous, between third level institutions and a community of excluded learners. Partnership, in the Cork northside Initiative context, was animated on the basis of the following characteristics:

- a two-way process of open communication (much emphasis on interpersonal communication), e.g. active listening
- a shared unity of purpose (broad socio-educational purpose)

- high trust and mutual respect (equality of roles, contributions and partners)
- willingness to negotiate learning
- inclusivity (parity of esteem for all contributors)
- sharing of information, decision-making and responsibility (emphasis on the 'with'/'we' nature of the project)
- community and individual empowerment process (dualism in approach).

Essentially, we sought to develop a symbiotic relationship, i.e. a mutually beneficial partnership between organisms /stakeholders of different kinds and backgrounds. This relationship involved, in as far as was possible, local residents and all statutory and voluntary providers of education on Cork's northside.

*Ab initio*, the partnership viewed education as playing a crucial role in the process of *social inclusion and the promotion of access*, but this role depended very much on how education was conceived, organised and delivered.

If organised according to principles of justice, solidarity, and equity, the education system can ensure access to education by all social groups, minorities, geographical areas, all ages and both genders. Education can provide new opportunities for training, reintegration to the workforce and training for citizenship participation. (Harvey, p.46)

It was by the concept of social inclusion that the northside Education Initiative was animated and by the potential of a targeted educational intervention based on:

- social commitment, or a commitment to social change through education, accessible to/by all members of the community
- opportunities for full and open participation in the intervention by the members of the target population, so that they could co-determine and co-direct the educational process rather than be its victims or subjects

- attention to the best conditions for learning to take place. These conditions included induction, confidence -building, and the use of teaching methods conducive to learning, collective awareness, and community empowerment.

The strategy proposed in this partnership initiative constituted a focused and integrated intervention which included the course provision currently provided by different agencies. The consultation process had identified the importance of the establishment of an integrated education strategy, involving a physical centre on the northside. The strategy would be based on the principles of social inclusion, open access, outreach, progressive accreditation, and the idea of lifelong learning. Engagement with local communities and individuals was a core part of this strategy. Currently, provision of such a centre is under active consideration at government level.

A process of consultation and dialogue was undertaken by the northside Education Initiative and involved group meetings (23) with a variety of voluntary and statutory bodies operating on the northside, and the organisation of a series of seminars and conferences (9) on issues relating to access to education and equality of educational opportunity. A myriad of meetings with individuals constituted a further dimension of the partnership process.

The process of partnership in access provision of the symbiotic relationship kind adverted to earlier has placed my institution on an important institutional learning curve in its interactions with this very important cohort of non-traditional learners. One of the central issues which has been negotiated, perhaps not to everyone's satisfaction all the time, related to the sensitive and central issue of ownership and control of the learning engagement. An educational institution like a university with its traditions and reputation in guaranteeing the quality of its accredited

awards may legitimate the innovative, flexible, well-focused and formative learning programmes already in existence in community settings in such a manner as to drain the community of some of its most important assets. One sensed this issue in the defensive manner in which community activists sometimes jealously guarded their own sterling programme of personal development and community education. The symbolic importance of third level recognition, but not control, of such valuable community-based learning was obvious on many occasions. A power differential in relation to the relative status, roles and contributions of the different stakeholders and partners was manifest as a healthy tension during the process of access provision.

#### **Partnership for educational inclusion and equity of access: some institutional issues and perspectives**

Professor Denis O'Sullivan (1995), writing on the theme 'Cultural Strangers and Educational Reconstruction', contends that, at its broadest, 'cultural strangers' can be taken to refer to anyone who experiences a sense of distance, incomprehension, dissonance, lack of integration or alienation in relation to the cultural space in which they find themselves. In the context of partnership for inclusion and access provision the use is much more selective and may refer to the process within which the 'actors' engaging in partnership may come from and represent such widely divergent and different educational traditions, backgrounds, attainment levels, experiences and expectations, affective responses to learning and community involvement, and concepts of 'social capital', so as to be 'cultural strangers'. A significant 'power differential' may mediate or block the access process. In some respects, the university sector, which has long been the province of the socially and economically advantaged in Ireland, may be regarded as 'non-native' educational personnel or actors by representatives of the 'native' disadvantaged and excluded indigenous communities and groupings. This tension between the partners and actors in the partnership process in Cork

over the past decade served to emphasise the fact that their respective roles and contributions in socio-educational engagement and innovation is best conceived as positions on a broader socio-cultural process and continuum of educational partnership. The partners, as it were, were impacted upon by a combination of different influences, experiences, attitudes, expectations, anxieties and insights, a type of 'socio-cultural capital', which created a background, or 'habitus', from which they engaged new challenges, situations, and relationships.

A major challenge for the third level sector, perhaps especially for traditional universities in equity of access partnership development, may be in bringing about a paradigm shift which may be necessary to accommodate and legitimate different aspects of empowerment development programmes at the community level. Professor Chris Duke (1992) in *The Learning University: Towards a New Paradigm?* confronts this issue and he asks:

Is it helpful to speak of a new paradigm of the university - a new way of seeing and understanding? Has a new idea of the university emerged from the chrysalis of the old, needing but a name for recognition? Do prevailing old assumptions obscure new practices? Does naming alter the reality - for there may be much in a name? It has been said that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet - but changing the terms, fostering new discourse, acknowledging a new paradigm, can in themselves assist a shift of values and assumptions which makes new practices more than superficial. Conversely, is playing with new words a form of protectionism - gestures of change to mask an abiding dominant reality? (p. 1)

Paradigms, if viewed as overarching frameworks or models, may be valuable in exploring some aspects of partnership in the access process. Policy paradigms are viewed as socio-cultural frameworks that govern the policy process and it is contended that:

they embody linguistic, normative, epistemic, empirical, and methodological dimensions. They regulate how the process of education is to be conceptualised; how it is to be thematised and described; what is to be defined as a meaningful problem; what is to be considered worthy as data; who is to be recognised as a legitimate participant, and with what status; and how the policy process is to be enacted, realised and evaluated. (O'Sullivan, 1995, p. 3)

A policy paradigm, acting as a form of cognitive and/or affective filter in the access interactions and partnership process between third level institutions and disadvantaged /excluded communities, may operate as a powerful regulatory force and its 'boundary maintenance' function may exclude community issues, themes, problems, data, and 'unacceptable' community education representatives from participation and involvement in the process. Policy paradigms, if sufficiently ingrained, strong and inflexible, may assume the status of institutional 'doxa' and as such they may be difficult 'to effectively question or challenge since they are considered to coincide with the limits of normality and common sense'. (O'Sullivan, 1995, p.4)

The access partnership process in Cork exposed real divisions and differences between the various partners and stakeholders on the link between participation and partnership and on the continuum of issues ranging from the more traditionalist (and perhaps the dominant one in the university sector) model of dependency creating courses on one side to community empowerment development programmes on the other. The degree of influence and ownership at the socio-personal levels of the project emerged as an essential element in the northside partnership process and, as one observer noted 'people will not commit their own community resources, i.e., labour, energy, information, social relationships, enthusiasm, commitment, if they do not have the impression that the community education activity to which they are contributing is, to a considerable extent,

theirs, i.e. controlled and owned by them'. This sense of ownership and belonging may in turn be intimately linked to the eventual sustainability (or collapse) of the educational partnership and access process at the community level.

Perhaps the most important resource, community-based information, may not be forthcoming in a consistent, integrated manner if the joint effort is not built on the basic premise that 'people' too are professionals ('experts') and on some fundamental comprehension, working knowledge, and practice of cross-cultural communication strategies and empathic understanding.

We are adverting here in an Irish setting to radical socio-cultural and educational changes. This change and challenge is not simply at the administrative and organisational level in the third level institutions, but is at the very heart of the educational enterprise, namely, who defines knowledge? Who owns knowledge? Who decides what is knowledge and what is new knowledge? The present model of traditional third level adult education provision and the assumptions which underpin the modes of delivery and organisation may be in contrast to the 'lived experiences' and needs of the disadvantaged/excluded community sectors. In Cork they presented themselves in stark relief during the consultation process.

It may be valuable to focus on some of the significant differences, presented as a continuum, between both types of programmes, and it is important to emphasise that each issue was part of a broader learning process for those personally involved in the northside Initiative (Figure 1). From the university perspective, many aspects of the traditional role of the university, its modes of programme development, forms of assessment and evaluation, one-way style of communication with students, sense of institutional ownership of learning, and status in society, were challenged, formally and informally, during the partnership process. It may well be that traditional

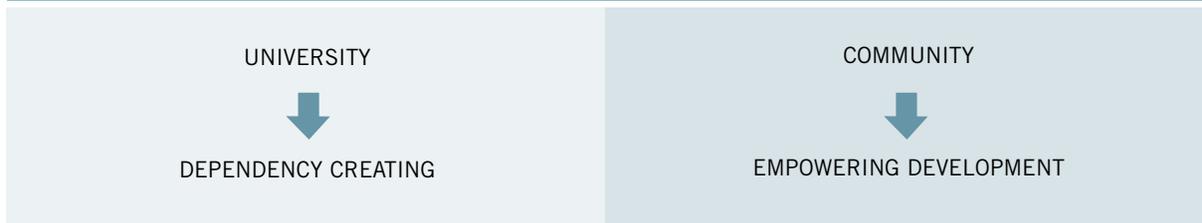
universities, as organisations, are similar to individuals in terms of their 'status passage' as they move from one social position to another. The words of Glasser and Strauss (1971) resonated with this writer as he reflected on his institution's role and 'status passage' in the partnership process with disadvantaged/excluded communities on Cork's northside, viz.

ongoing process involving development of strategies, adjustments, negotiations, relationships and interactions, while meeting new problems, commitments and situations which form social change.

Perhaps a university as an institution, akin to individual behaviour, possesses its own 'life-world' (to borrow from Schutz, 1973) in which it maintains a number of societal positions and roles based on its conferred status, dominant ideology, historical position and socio-cultural obligations. In the changing and challenging phases of open and full partnership the navigation of these 'life-world' roles and positions shift and balance against each other, sometimes disruptively.

Furthermore, in seeking to bring out 'the darkside' of this educational challenge, Stephen Brookfield's (1994) analysis of the demands of individual adult learning may have some institutional application. The increased and deeper sets of relationships with excluded communities, consideration of challenging ideas, and the development of empathic understanding (almost solidarity) with the partners may challenge established educational and institutional certainties, traditions, and modes of behaviour.

**FIGURE 1**



PROGRAMMES		
Starting Point		
<b>Initiation</b>	Prevailing ideology, doxa of the . educational institution	Open agenda, needs identified in community.
<b>Focus</b>	Output – awards measured.	Problem solving.
<b>Style of Communication</b>	Top-down. One-way.  Impersonal.	Participatory, two-way, listening and sharing  Personal, interpersonal.
<b>Direction</b>		
<b>Thrust of Development</b>	Existing status quo or top-down.	Built from bottom-up. Recognises every participant.
<b>Ownership</b>	Resides with institution. High control.	Shared ownership and control.
<b>Evaluation</b>	External. Expert-led. Summative.	Participatory. Continuous. Process oriented. Formative.
<b>Status</b>	Formal accreditation. Mainstreamed.	Often non-accredited. Marginalised.
<b>Trust</b>	Low trust. Low discretion. Protecting backs. Risk avoidance. Discourages participation.	High trust. High discretion. Openness-honesty encouraged. Permits/encourages risk-taking. Promotes participation.

Brookfield uses the term 'lost innocence' to describe this process at the individual level and that concept may easily transfer to an institutional setting. While open partnership has the potential to enhance institutional empowerment, it may also induce organisational confusion and anxiety which may in turn lead to a rejection of the access partnership and its implications. A third level institution, if and when pressed to fully mainstream and integrate radical and innovative changes, may perceive itself as discarding an old and trusted *modus operandi* without adequate compensatory structures and practices. This may cause the institution to seek the comfort of old assurances and reject the consequences and implications of open partnership in educational development with excluded communities to provide broader and deeper levels of participation.

The ongoing partnership interactions with other community groups have highlighted also the importance of proceeding in a thoughtful and structured series of stages and steps. A modified version of McGivney's (1990) six-stage process of access facilitation provided a pathway to follow, viz.

- targeting
- contact and communication
- consultation and negotiation
- programme development
- programme implementation
- progression

The six-stage process placed heavy emphasis on the importance of full and open communication before any consideration is given to programme development and implementation. It highlighted, *inter alia*, that special targeting is essential if opportunities are to be extended to excluded sectors, who may experience a significant socio-cultural divide between their norms, values and educational expectations and those reflected in the education system.

To attract non-participating adults from excluded communities requires addressing at first contact stage,

by listening and sharing, some of the ingrained attitudes and perceptions engendered by factors such as socio-economic background, community circumstances, personal disabilities, lack of confidence and self-esteem, and lack of trust in the system thus engaging with 'social capital' realities.

Work with excluded communities requires a basic shift away from what has been termed the 'come and get it' approach towards outreach methods and strategies. 'Outreach' has been described as a process:

whereby people who would not normally use adult education are contacted in non-institutional settings and become involved in attending, and eventually in jointly planning and controlling activities, schemes and courses relevant to their circumstances and needs. (Ward, 1986, p. 3)

Thus, outreach is not merely programme provision in a number of locations, geographically distant from the campus, but a proactive process of socio-educational engagement.

The involvement of new, traditionally under-represented groups in the adult learning process requires patient consultation, dialogues and negotiation of their learning needs, interests and requirements and must take place on a basis of mutual equality and respect. All aspects of the learning process for adults should be negotiated in advance, not just the form and nature of provision but methods of delivery, styles of learning, modes of evaluation, etc. The starting point for programme development is working from where people are, using their environment, issues and concerns as a basis for development.

Full partnership of mutual respect and high trust may be the only enduring basis for the development and consideration of these and many other issues on the access agenda.

In many respects this six-stage process has been integrated into practical community education projects facilitated by the Centre for Adult Continuing Education in the university. Many initiatives, such as the innovative Diploma in Social Studies, Certificate in Housing Estate Management, Certificate in Non-Formal Guidance, etc., were developed using McGivney's developmental process of access facilitation. Interestingly, recruitment of learners for these and other similarly developed programmes has never presented difficulty, given the sense of community ownership and prior commitment. The six-stage process, in addition to the structural steps, is animated by many of the partnership characteristics outlined earlier such as open communication, building high trust, shared decision-making, etc. Thus, the practice of access provision in partnership mode and community empowerment programme development has indicated the value of being guided by the structure and spirit of a staged, socially sensitive process.

In summary, the positive aspects of this project of socio-educational partnership and equity of access project included:

- the development of a cohort of adult role models in an excluded community
- progressive ladders of accreditation
- full partnership in programme design and implementation
- participative methodology which recognised and valued participants' educational/life experiences and perceptions
- build on/with existing foundations in the community
- provision of a wide range of services
- shared ownership of learning
- building high trust and mutual understanding.

**The 'digital divide': Some emerging implications for equity of access**

Interestingly, in contrast to the positive potential presented in favour of the newer technological e-learning in access provision, there is growing evidence that the

expansion of information and communication technology (ICTs) in Europe may risk generating a new form of 'social inequality'. Extensive research evidence has revealed significant disparities in levels of ICT use, with particular social groups far less likely to make use of computers or the Internet. These disparities appear to mirror pre-existing social inequalities. Indeed, it seems clear that those least likely to make use of ICTs are those groups most likely to suffer from or to be at risk of suffering from social exclusion. A significant study in the UK by the British ICT regulator, OFTEL (2000), found 'that Internet usage was still predominant amongst the higher social groups, younger age cohorts, larger households with children... while consumers over 55 years of age, early school leaver, females, disabled persons, and the lower social groups were considerably less likely to use the Internet at home or in a work setting' (p. 39).

A study by the National Organisation for Adult Learning (NIACE) in 2001 concluded that people with access to the Internet were twice as likely to be part of learning groups/activities than those without Internet access and that use of the Internet, while generally increasing in the broader society, was similar to the differential pattern of participation outlined above. Interestingly, research by Gorard, Selwyn, Williams and others in Wales (1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2002) has tended to confirm that ICT has failed to provide a means of overcoming existing barriers to participation, particularly barriers of 'time, space and pace'. In fact, it is argued that, to a large extent, inequalities of access to ICT reinforce rather than ameliorate existing barriers to participation (Williams, Selwyn, Gorard, 2000). It is claimed that:

the role of technology in widening participation in adult lifelong learning remains largely untested. Many in government and even in education, distracted perhaps by the allure of the technology concerned, may have tended to treat these new media as relatively unproblematic in their impact... It is suggested that the application of technological fixes to underlying

socio-economic determinants may solve some problems but create others, and leave the majority unaffected (Gorard and Selwyn, 1999a, p.2)

Similar patterns of differential ICT access, attitudes and use were evidenced in recent research data in Ireland. Such disparities have come to be known as both the 'digital divide' and 'digital exclusion'. This latter term highlights the potential links between digital and social exclusion and thus the reasons why increasing uptake of ICTs, particularly among excluded groups, has become a policy priority and project development in third-level education efforts to broaden and deepen participation in lifelong learning provision.

The almost cliché term 'digital divide' has emerged as a much debated/analysed topic and representative of widely divergent views/solutions and manifestations from the rather narrowly constructed binary divide of access/non-access to computers to other positions embracing levels/types of access, actual use/utilisation of e-services, personal/functional ICT values, training needs analyses, community content issues, community/individual orientations, socio-cultural norms, and the relative value/contributions of ICT to a broader lifelong learning agenda in society. Di Maggio and Hargittai (2001) point to at least five manifestations of 'digital inequality', viz. equipment, location of access, autonomy of use, technical skills, social support and purposes for using ICTs. The 'digital divide' is not a homogenous concept, reality, or process. National, local, group and culture-specific differences indicate significant diversity.

Interestingly, recent research in Wales, Australia and other systems point out that 'supply-side' policy solutions may not be sufficient to bridge the 'digital divide'. Improved infrastructure may enhance the quality of services in regional areas but may not overcome the disparities in access/use rates for different social groups.

One Australian study concluded that:

even in metropolitan areas where infrastructure is well developed, Internet take-up rates for certain social groups – low income learners, the unemployed, early school leavers, the elderly – have been low. A more complex social policy agenda, directly targeting digitally disadvantaged/excluded communities and families, is necessary if Australia is to seriously address the root causes of the digital divide. (Lloyd and Hellwig, 2000, p.34)

This report further pointed out that a large proportion of the Australian population did not participate in the growing knowledge economy – not because of where they live per se, - but as a consequence of socio-economic and psycho-personal circumstances. The most important determinant, for example, of internet access in Australia was educational qualification level, followed by income. After accounting for other factors, region and location of residence by themselves did not explain differential Internet take-up rates" (Lloyd and Hellwig, 2000, p.41).

The importance of digital exclusion in the current equity of access context hinges on its relationship with social exclusion and 'social capital'. Many in academic and policy circles now argue that those who cannot make use of digital technologies risk becoming increasingly excluded, not just from the use of ICT, but from society as whole. Most contemporary definitions of social exclusion are framed in terms of a four-fold model of 'systems'; for instance Berghman (1995) refers to the democratic and legal, labour market, welfare state and family/community systems, each of which may promote social integration. If any individual is prevented, by whatever means, from participating fully in any of these systems, they are deemed to be excluded. As we have seen, ICTs are spreading into all of these areas of life. Thus, in the UK it is argued, participation in all of these systems will come to be increasingly mediated by ICT. It may be that those who cannot make use of these technologies will risk becoming increasingly excluded and marginalised, not just from the use of ICT, but from

all of the systems on which inclusion in society depends. Further evidence suggests that many of those groups who currently do not use ICT are already either excluded or are at risk of exclusion. It is contended that failure to increase uptake of ICT is likely to lead both to a worsening of exclusion among such groups and also, potentially, to the emergence of a new form of exclusion:

digital exclusion' is seen as a dual threat, with access to ICT and the ability to use it potentially creating a *new* form of exclusion as well as reinforcing existing patterns of exclusion from society. (Selwyn, 2002 p.4)

This rationale has major import for those of us seeking to broaden and deepen the bases of participation in lifelong learning by adults in Ireland. Many would argue that the over-emphasis on promoting ICTs as a means of overcoming exclusion is misplaced and reflects a simplistic, deterministic view of the relationship between society and technology (Selwyn, 2002). Many also point to the lack of empirical evidence to support the belief that ICTs can assist in regeneration or the promotion of inclusion. Indeed, some contend that there is little firm evidence of the existence of benefits of any kind associated with the use of ICT by excluded groups (Foley, 2000).

It appears that there is a consensus emerging among a broad range of commentators and researchers regarding the nature of the digital divide. Physical access, or lack of it, is now deemed insufficient to distinguish the digitally excluded from the digitally included. It is recognised that a wide range of skills and resources beyond those of basic ICT access and literacy are required to make effective use of these technologies and that the distribution of hardware and infrastructure rapidly becomes outdated, necessitating costly replacement. Lack of relevant individual and community content is also seen to contribute to the divide. The digital divide is seen to be a multi-dimensional and dynamic phenomenon with differential rates of use among different groups shifting over time. Thus a neat dichotomy

between haves and have-nots, or users and non-users, is no longer considered valid by many. These conclusions have implications for how the digital divide is measured and problematised and for the types of policy instruments and approaches deemed most likely to be successful in tackling the problem and promoting broader participation in lifelong learning activities by participating adults. They have much to add to the on-going debate and development associated with the theme of this conference.

Major recent research on the contribution of ICTs to the social inclusion agenda in Europe (Lambrakis Research Foundation, 2003) established as a key finding that technology per se could/should be used as a tool to integrate learning and socio-personal development with community empowerment in order to achieve maximum social, personal and economic benefits. Studies in the Leonardo da Vinci framework (EU-sponsored ICT projects) to 'promote social cohesion, prevent exclusion of disadvantaged groups, provide equal opportunities for women etc.' concluded that some key aspects of ICTs (learning delivery systems, curriculum content, intervention strategies, etc.) which had been shown to promote socio-educational inclusion/access included:

- availability of equipment
- use of 'first rung' learning opportunities and "bite sized chunks" of learning
- use of a wide range of technologies
- careful inclusive planning and partnerships of learning
- structured, gradualistic, negotiated approaches to learning
- use of assistive technology for learners with disabilities
- need for broad-based flexible communication networks. (Lambrakis Research Foundation, 2003, pp. 5–7)

Some of these findings associated with e-learning were similar to aspects of the more traditional access project in Cork which were outlined earlier.

## Conclusion

Some researchers argue that in access provision partnerships, negotiated learning and consultation are little more than tokenism. However, the New Economics Foundation (1998) assert that cross-sectoral partnerships are now recognised as significant in modern policy-making and that 'a more equitable approach is required at community level, one that transcends the inherently exclusive nature of traditional information society partnership models.' (p. 318)

Day (1998) describes the model of 'tripartite collaboration' based on respect, equity and mutuality which recognises that each member contributes differently to a partnership of learning but in that difference and synergy is the partnership's strength. In the equity of access debate, partnership diversity of experience, knowledge skills, mutual understanding, shared values and empathetic socio-educational understanding are regarded as primary assets in the ultimate success of the process, be the process 'traditional' or 'technological' in character and structure.

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## LINKING FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

**Stan McHugh**

**Chief Executive, Further Education and Training Awards Council**

The theme of my presentation today is national arrangements – broad, systems-wide approaches to linking further education and training, and higher education and training. Firstly, I would like to emphasise that we are talking about education and training together. Education and training were separate streams prior to the 1999 Education and Training Act, which brought them together to create opportunities for learners from all sectors to develop themselves and contribute to the economy.

It's safe to say that further education and training was unheard of as a sector in Ireland five years ago. Since FETAC was set up in June 2001, a quarter of a million FETAC awards have been made (awards that would have been made in the past by NCVA, CERT, Teagasc, BIM and FÁS). That in itself is a significant statement of where the sector is at. It has been FETAC's role to bring all these awards together and create coherence.

Another of our key responsibilities under the 1999 Act is to contribute to the development of the national framework of qualifications. Central to making the framework achieve influence in Irish society are the elements of access, transfer and progression.

Access carries with it the idea that learners gain access to programmes for which they have the relevant standards of knowledge, skill and competence to succeed. FETAC's role here is to encourage providers to make their entry systems less restrictive and more transparent.

The concept of transfer means that people may move from one programme to another, having got full recognition for the learning they already have. At the moment, this happens only rarely; too often the learner has 'to start again'.

Progression refers to a learner being able to move up the ladder. We are seeking to improve progression options for FETAC graduates to higher education.

The roles of the bodies involved in this process

- The National Qualifications Authority, who were responsible for setting up the framework, determine the procedures to be implemented by providers.
- FETAC and HETAC ensure compliance.
- Providers are key players – we need to get their full co-operation to make this work.

If we establish clear information and transparent procedures we will make great progress. We are not there yet but we are moving in the right direction.

Another key element of FETAC's mission is to develop a national credit system. This will enable learners to move from one sector to another. It will also facilitate recognition of awards from other countries enabling people who come to Ireland to participate in education and training and in the workplace. A considerable body of work remains to be done in the coming months on the credit system.

FETAC has responsibility for making awards at Levels 1–6 of the framework. A quarter of a million awards were made in the first three and a half years. Over the past year and a half FETAC has been working with the former awarding bodies to place these awards in the framework. Higher education institutions and employers will soon find it easier to recognise more precisely the different levels of achievements. This should facilitate the opening up of access routes that were previously closed.

HETAC has placed the national certificate at Level 6, the national diploma at Level 7, and degrees at level 8. FETAC has placed over 300 awards and recommended those placements to the NQAI. This reflects a significant step forward. Future work will focus on the further classification of those awards into major, minor, special purpose and supplemental categories.

The Leaving Certificate examination is placed over Levels 4 and 5. Learners can progress from there to Level 8. This is an important point because it illustrates that learners do not have to progress from Level 4 to 5, from 5 to 6, from 6 to 7, and from 7 to 8. It's possible to move from Level 4 to Level 8. The potential exists for a variety of combinations and enhanced progression options.

FETAC would like to see all the key awarding institutions placing all awards on the framework, for example, certificates and diplomas issued by the universities, that don't relate to the National Certificate or the National Diploma as previously awarded by NCEA. Learners know the institutions they come from but not the level at which they are pitched. It would also help learners if the three versions of the Leaving Certificate were placed individually on the framework. At the moment they are positioned across Levels 4 and 5. So there is work to be done to improve the transparency of the Leaving Certificate and of the national qualifications system in general for the benefit of the learner. Improved transparency will also help employers.

There is an assumption that people in the universities know the status of all their awards. There is not, however, the level of transparency or understanding that is needed for people coming from the further education and training sector. Any progress that can be made on that would be much appreciated.

#### **Existing progression options**

At the moment, there are many individual schemes in various institutions linking higher education to further education. However, the information is not available from any one source. Most learners from further education and training will not approach an institution of higher education as individuals. They need information which is clear and transparent. You are asked to take this need

into account. Open up progression pathways but also disseminate information in relation to them.

The FETAC Higher Education Links Scheme was developed by NCVA with the institutes of technology and the NCEA in the mid-1990s. The scheme grew to about 3,000 applications annually. One third of these get offers through CAO and 700 plus take up places every year through the scheme. We also know that others progress with FETAC qualifications through different routes.

There are many reasons for this low take up other than the information deficit referred to earlier. Awards within further education and training are not just about progressing to higher education and training; many graduates go straight into the workforce. We would like higher education and training to be informed of the learners' calibre and progression needs and to create opportunities for them to progress to higher education. We would look to higher education to add value by extending the links scheme with the understanding that many graduates have work as a priority.

There was a concern that higher education and training would be flooded with applications through the scheme. That has never happened. Learners are more likely to return to education and training throughout their lives. While many learners will go on to work, they are the very ones who need opportunities to return to higher education and training in later life. Adult learners bring insight, spark, richness which is to be encouraged and drawn into higher education and training. We are asking you to work with us on this.

#### **Changes in the higher education links scheme for 2005**

The package proposed by the institutes of technology for this year is that any award at FETAC (NCVA) Level 2 would be recognised as meeting the basic requirements

for entry to any award in the institutes of technology. Before now, all NCVA Level 2 awards were linked to specific certificate and diploma courses. FETAC welcomes this move forward which signifies recognition of the value of the whole award. Difficulties have arisen because of different interpretations locally. We are looking for consistency across the higher education and training sector in order to build a solid base for progression overall. Universities have become involved with links between this programme and various degree programmes in recent years. Boundaries are being broken slowly but surely. We would like to see the rate of progress being increased. If we work together we can move forward. In this regard, FETAC would like to thank the access officers for their sterling work in promoting new progression options within their institutions.

**The national framework of qualifications and Levels 5–8:**

**Placement**

NCVA Level 2 will not exist once placement is agreed. What we will have instead is awards at Levels 3, 4, 5 and 6. Many other awards from Fáilte Ireland, FÁS and Teagasc will be placed at these levels. The next task is to ascribe an award type to all former awards – confirm whether they are major, minor, special purpose or supplemental. In the future we will not only be expecting progression routes for major awards, but also for, for example, special purpose awards. The learner will have demonstrated the commitment, the capacity and the readiness to progress. A broader and more inclusive links scheme will be needed to incorporate an even wider range of learners than before.

FETAC welcomes the HEA action plan and in particular page 16. We look forward to implementing this and congratulate you on this work.

## SPEECH BY MS MARY HANAFIN, TD, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

### On the Occasion of the Launch Of Action Plan 2005–2007 ‘Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland’

A chairde,

I was delighted to accept the invitation from the National Access Office to join you all here in Kilkenny this afternoon. I know that you are coming towards the end of a long day's consideration of the Office's Action Plan for 2005 to 2007, *'Achieving equity of access to higher education in Ireland'*, which I now have the pleasure of formally launching.

We have made enormous strides in higher education in Ireland over recent decades. When you look at the levels of participation today, it is hard to imagine that just a generation ago this was a highly elitist system, with less than 20,000 students enrolled in the mid-1960s for instance. Many of you present, who still consider yourselves to be young, will recollect that throughout the 1970s and well into the 1980s the prevailing view of a third-level education was that it was the exclusive preserve of the educational cream. We have since witnessed a transformation of society's expectations of the level of opportunity that should now be on offer to all learners. That is extremely welcome and has been a key factor in our broader economic and social progress.

The higher education system has responded to, and indeed led, that change very admirably over the last three decades. We should acknowledge that major achievement with pride. It is a tribute to the vision and leadership within individual higher education institutions and to the role of policy makers in successive administrations that we have now got to a point where some 63% of students who sat the Leaving Certificate in 2003 went on to higher education.

The role of parents in influencing, encouraging and providing financial support to their children has also been a fundamental factor in achieving that seismic shift.

This despite the fact that a majority of them would not themselves have benefited from a third-level education. They were prepared to make the personal sacrifices involved, however, because they recognised the very real advantages that higher and further educational qualifications would confer on their children throughout their lives.

A multitude of research points to how individuals with a higher level of education enjoy greater health, wealth and general well-being. Society also flourishes where its members feel confident and informed enough to interrogate and engage with the democratic processes and structures of the state.

And that is at the heart of the challenge facing the National Office for Equity of Access over the coming years. We know that the significant growth in participation in higher education has not been evenly distributed. We can readily identify those groups in society that are under-represented and who are, by extension, being disadvantaged in economic, social and health terms. And we know that, as a society, we cannot justify limiting the potential for self-development and fulfilment of so many among us so directly.

Equity of access must be a fundamental principle of educational policy at all levels. We need to make meaningful progress in advancing participation in higher education among socio-economically disadvantaged school leavers, mature students, students with a disability, members of the traveller community and ethnic minorities.

The establishment of the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education by my predecessor in 2003 was in recognition of the need for a dedicated unit to

develop and effect a coherent and co-ordinated response to that issue. The launch of the action plan today marks an important milestone in its work.

The plan provides a practical strategy for action and progress. It benefits, in my view, from being succinct and to the point. We have had sufficient weighty analysis and discussion around this topic. We need action. The plan provides us with a roadmap of six very practical goals, each accompanied by relevant action points that spell out the steps required and, most importantly, the range of actors whose commitment and determination will be absolutely vital for success.

I very much welcome this action-oriented approach and I know that the work of the conference today and tomorrow is modelled on a practical, problem solving approach to the questions that we face. I hope that some immediate value can be yielded from your inputs and efforts here over these two days.

I say that because time is of the essence when it comes to tackling issues of educational exclusion and disadvantage. It is universally agreed that in order to fully address equity of access to higher education, effective interventions have to be in place as early as possible in the education life-cycle. Our wider efforts at addressing educational disadvantage at pre-school, primary and post-primary levels are essential longer-term underpinnings of the work of the National Office in relation to higher education. I am currently finalising a national action plan to address disadvantage at these earlier educational levels. The key actions to be advanced under that plan will hopefully provide a successful long-term foundation for implementation of the practical interventions at a later stage that are under discussion here today.

These proposed practical interventions are of considerable importance and I would like to briefly comment on some of the key ones as I see it.

In terms of the first goal set out, it is essential in communicating the importance and value of access to higher education that we find innovative ways of reaching and connecting with the target audiences. That is not a straightforward exercise and I hope that some useful suggestions on this front can emerge from our discussions here over these two days.

In developing a national framework of policies and initiatives to widen access, we need to be able to critically evaluate the effectiveness of past interventions. We need to learn from these and share experiences without fear of admitting failures. I very much welcome emphasis in the plan on this need. If we are serious about ensuring that available funds are properly targeted, this will have to be one of the key priorities for the Office over the coming months. We need to ensure that the essential tools of basic uniform information sets are available for this task. Linked to this is the need to develop and agree quantitative and qualitative, national and institutional targets and indicators of progress which will closely inform funding decisions. I know that one of the workshops here this afternoon has been addressing this and I will be interested to hear of your progress.

I know that, also this afternoon, you have been considering another key goal in the action plan for the encouragement of more diverse teaching and learning strategies in higher education. This is essential in ensuring that the needs of a more diverse student population are met and in enabling every student to reach their full potential.

Allied to this is the development of new and expanded routes of access to higher education as a key means of promoting diversification of the student base. The ongoing work of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has a key contribution to make on this front and I know that they will be working closely with the National Office to research, develop, promote and resource clear and effective routes of access, transfer and progression. The National Office, at my request, is already in the process of evaluating existing access programmes and progression routes in order to identify what works. I look forward to receiving this review.

The planned establishment of arrangements so that, for the first time, all disadvantaged regions, schools and communities will be linked to access activities and initiatives in at least one higher education institution has tremendous potential. It is important in bringing this forward effectively, that we can identify and build on existing best practice initiatives.

Many very worthwhile access activities have been developed in the seven universities, the technological sector and other colleges offering higher education programmes over recent years. Core access infrastructure has been developed across the sector with the assistance of dedicated exchequer support since 1996. This has enabled significant strides to be made in opening up opportunities for disadvantaged students and in providing a range of practical supports to them once they enter higher education. We need to build on these efforts to make further substantial progress over the coming three years. This action plan provides the key pointers for us in that regard.

I would like to finish by thanking all of those involved in the production of this important publication. Most particularly, I want to acknowledge the work of the members of the advisory group and the staff of the National Office who have devoted considerable time and effort over recent months in formulating the action plan. I am delighted that the implementation of the plan is to begin without delay and I look forward to hearing of early and significant progress.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

## WORKSHOP

### A NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF POLICIES AND INITIATIVES TO ACHIEVE EQUITY OF ACCESS

**Facilitators:** Edwin Mernagh, Development Officer, NQAI  
Dr. Anastasia Crickley, Lecturer, NUI Maynooth and Chairperson of the  
National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism

**Rapporteur:** Orla Christle, National Access Office, HEA

In mapping a national framework of policies and initiatives to achieve equity of access to higher education, the facilitators asked the group to consider the following:

- How best to map a framework that ensured equal access to supports for all under-represented groups and communities at all stages of the learning process?
- Whether it was possible to set minimum support targets and if so, how should these be provided and by whom?
- How to address the differing needs of urban and rural communities?
- How to achieve the appropriate balance between 'push' and 'pull' or actions that encourage entry and actions that support continued participation and successful outcome?
- What have access activities contributed to third level to date, given that activities are often 'token' or peripheral rather than part of mainstream strategic planning and provision?
- Are the competitive objectives of the Lisbon agenda and the OECD review in contradiction with the objectives of the action plan?

Priorities identified in shaping a national framework included the need for local solutions to local problems, particularly in addressing the differing circumstances and nature of disadvantage in urban and rural communities.

A partnership and continuum approach was required at different levels of the education sector and between different players (schools with schools; schools with communities; further and higher education with schools and communities; the corporate sector also had a role to play).

There was an urgent need for the long-term tracking of outcomes in tandem with a recognition that initiatives were often long-term in nature and impact.

A national framework should ensure continuum of rights-based support for students with a disability from the earliest juncture in their education onwards.

Third-level institutions had a critical role to play in addressing information and expectation deficits in marginalised schools and communities. The value of familiarisation activities in engaging the interest of children was stressed, particularly through music, drama, sport, science and IT. Personal support and mentoring was also important in addressing non-completion.

Parity of esteem for other routes and career choices should not be lost sight of in the drive to increase participation in higher education.

Induction programmes for teachers at all levels of the education system in understanding and addressing the needs of diverse communities and student bodies were highlighted as another area for address.

There was a need to strike a balance between the competitive goals of the EU (Lisbon Strategy, Bologna Agreement) and the OECD and that of improved educational access as articulated in the action plan and Irish educational legislation. It was considered that while access activities were not by their nature competitive they could serve the twin aims of greater social inclusiveness and increased economic competitiveness.



There was some discussion as to why higher education entrants without a Leaving Certificate were categorised as 'non-standard'. Other qualifications, as articulated through the national framework of qualifications, could be viewed simply as alternative but parallel routes to higher education.

The medical card was not considered to be an appropriate means of identifying disadvantage for the purposes of higher education entry.

A more flexible approach to funding, student support and course provision for part-time students would greatly advance participation, particularly of mature students.

There was a general consensus while there were already a lot of activities and good practice underway in the sector, too often these occurred in isolation and that a national framework would serve to identify and facilitate greater collaboration.

## WORKSHOP

### FOCUSING EFFORTS: TARGETS AND EVALUATION TO ACHIEVE EQUITY OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

**Facilitators:** Muiris O' Connor, Statistician, Department of Education & Science  
Bernie McDonnell, National Education Co-ordinator, ADM

**Rapporteur:** Peter Brown, National Access Office, HEA

The facilitators introduced the theme of the workshop. The group was then asked to consider the issues by means of addressing the following specific questions:

**1 How can we improve the evidence base to support informed dialogue and exchange of good practice in widening access to higher education?**

There is a need for a standardisation of application definitions and formats which are used for the purposes of target setting, data collection and evaluation. The introduction of a *National Registration Form* for entry/enrolment to higher education would be a major step forward in this respect.

The evidence base to support targets and evaluation must be linked to the nine grounds of discrimination as per the Equal Status Act.

There is a need to move beyond outdated forms of data to a framework which is more contemporary and reflective of diversity, e.g. collecting mothers' occupational details as well as fathers.

**2 What difficulties may emerge in relation to standardising a core set of questions of direct relevance to the target groups at the point of registration?**

It was felt that measures could usefully be implemented to raise awareness among students and others preparing to enter higher education of the specific information being sought as part of a core set of questions.

It was agreed that confidentiality and trust is paramount. It was suggested that consideration could be given to a basic data collection process at registration followed by a more comprehensive data collection process later in the academic year.

There is a need for objectivity at all times in data collection for targets and evaluation purposes.

Measures could usefully be implemented which raise awareness among staff within HEIs of the roles and importance of data and data collection (i.e. not just among systems or technical staff).

**3 How shall we use these data as part of a cohesive approach to evaluation?**

There was agreement that data needs to be more up to date and that access to data by policy developers be facilitated in a timely fashion.

There is a need for data to be agreed and collected at different levels to support the targets and evaluation process, i.e. individual, institutional, regional and national.

**4 What do you see as the key elements of participatory evaluation?**

It was agreed that the purpose of the evaluation should be clearly articulated and all stakeholders should be involved in the process. All are equal partners in participatory evaluation and have an equal right to be at the table and to participate.

It was suggested that national guidelines on participatory evaluation in connection with equity of access to higher education should be developed and agreed.

It was stressed that evaluations required adequate resourcing.

## **5 How would you make evaluation democratic?**

The key requirements in achieving this objective were identified as

- inclusiveness
- recognition of differing perspectives
- diversity in approaches to evaluation, e.g. focus groups or qualitative research
- taking steps to allay any fears of evaluation.

## **6 Is bi-annual evaluation a good idea? –Why/ why not?**

There were differing views on the optimum term for evaluations. It was agreed that short-term evaluation, focusing on easily measurable indicators is not enough. There was a broad consensus that evaluation should not be any longer than bi-annually.

## **7 Who should conduct bi-annual evaluations?**

It was agreed that evaluations should be conducted by both internal and external sources, depending on the nature and scope of the evaluation. It was suggested that an evaluation which involves all stakeholders and features external facilitators is a good model. Ultimately, those conducting evaluations should be operating from nationally agreed guidelines.

## **8 What should progress indicators measure?**

It was agreed progress indicators should be both quantitative and qualitative in nature and should measure key variables such as:

- retention and completion
- progression to higher courses and the labour market
- the impact on communities
- the 'mainstreamability' of pilot or new initiatives.

## **9 Should funding for access programmes/activities be linked to results?**

'Results' is a term open to diverse interpretation, which presents difficulties with regard to attaching funding for initiatives to them. A 'rounded' view of results is required.

## WORKSHOP

### A BROADER RANGE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**Facilitators:** Dr Jen Harvey, Head of Lifelong Learning, DIT  
Dr Michael Shevlin, Lecturer, TCD, Member of the National Council for Special Education

**Rapporteur:** Caitriona Ryan, HEA

Teaching and learning are fundamental to education. It is important to respond to increased diversity with appropriate teaching and learning strategies. Diversity should be celebrated. Non-traditional students are good for higher education as they challenge and question accepted wisdoms.

The workshop addressed these questions:

- What are the potential barriers to responding to diversity?
- What are the drivers for change in responding to diversity?
- What should be the strategies for the way forward?

#### 1. What are the potential barriers to responding to diversity?

- Information not available in accessible formats for everyone
- Fear on behalf of teachers and perhaps a lack of confidence in own ability to respond to diversity and include everyone as part of their approach to teaching and learning
- Lack of knowledge/awareness of potential diversity in the classroom
- No incentives for teachers to take time out to learn about diversity and devise appropriate responses
- Absence of any defined formal qualifications for higher education teachers
- Dominance of 'one size fits all' approach
- Academic careers are perceived to progress on the basis of publishing outcomes, not teaching and learning outcomes
- Funding system and HEI systems geared towards full-time students – needs of part-time students are not being addressed
- Present formats of student assessments – there has been little analysis carried out of what type of learning is produced for the dominant forms of assessment

#### 2. What are the drivers for change in responding to diversity?

- Interest and desire of academics to meet needs of all students – highly motivated group
- Diversity of skills is evident among our academic staff
- Increased exposure to diversity is in itself a driver to enhanced teaching and learning performance

#### 3. What should be the strategies for the way forward?

- Better dialogue with stakeholders
- More training for staff, with an emphasis on methodologies. In addition, awareness training should be compulsory
- More research into best practice should be carried out
- Increased focus from academics on interpersonal skills – would lead to better interaction with students
- Increased levels of student feedback should be facilitated
- Review of curriculum and assessment techniques
- Improved academic staff accessibility
- Enhanced focus on language and medium accessibility for all students
- Transition from second to third level should be more effectively managed and support given to students, e.g. more induction programmes
- Parity of esteem should be given to part-time students
- The staff reward system should be based on teaching and learning
- There should be greater recognition that multiple teaching and learning strategies are required
- Student expectations should be addressed
- Higher education institutions that respond to diversity by looking at their approaches to teaching and learning should be rewarded in the funding framework
- A top-down approach is required – change must be driven from the top
- Higher education institutions need to look at their admission procedures and test that no-one is being excluded

## WORKSHOP

### REMOVING FINANCIAL BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS, COMMUNITIES AND EDUCATION PROVIDERS

**Facilitators:** Peter Brown, Programme Manager, National Access Office, HEA  
Brendan Goggin, Registrar, Cork Institute of Technology

**Rapporteur:** Caitriona Ryan, HEA

Having set the background and context, this workshop was asked to consider three questions:

- What are the financial barriers?
- How could these barriers be removed and what should the priorities be?

The workshop considered these questions from the perspective of students, the community and education providers.

#### Students' Perspective

##### *What are the financial barriers?*

- Costs of repeating
- Multiple funding support mechanisms – should be able to apply for support just once
- It is a source of indignity for students to have to apply to several funds. A properly managed maintenance grant system is required
- Family pressures – to repay money spent on education
- Difficulties for students who fall outside certain categories, e.g. students estranged from their families – these students have difficulty accessing support
- Student living costs and insufficiency of the grant size
- Requirement to work part-time in order to meet living costs

##### *How could these barriers be removed?*

- Provide free travel pass to families of social welfare recipients going to third level
- Improving clarity regarding the grants system and ensuring that genuine students access grants

- Ensuring that information is available to potential learners in a clear, accessible and empathetic format
- Student loans for living expenses should be available on an interest free basis (government sponsored)
- Mainstream all sources of financial support into one fund (e.g. ESF, maintenance grant, Millennium fund, etc.)
- Removal of administrative barriers for applying for financial support
- In the allocation of financial support, there needs to be better recognition of the costs of living, e.g. accommodation, food, child care, transport, etc.
- Better information provision regarding grants and scholarships schemes

#### The community' perspective

##### *What are the financial barriers?*

- Childcare and transport costs. Health Boards have cut the funding available.
- Absence of free fees for part-time students
- Low-income families reach the grant eligibility limit of €38,000
- Information deficit for students
- Rural isolation results in a transport deficit

##### *How could these barriers be removed?*

- Childcare issues need to be addressed at a macro/national level. Childcare support funding should be allocated separately from any funding to support access.
- Ensuring that centres (also libraries) are learner focused

- Fostering a culture of education ensuring that attitudes towards and experiences of education are positive
- Development of community ownership for education (this should be prompted by the education provider.)
- Strengthening of relationships with local education providers (development of symbiotic relationships)
- Establishing community networks and peer support networks

### **Education providers' perspective**

#### ***What are the financial barriers?***

- Disparity in funding between the universities and the IoTs
- The absence of security of funding for the institutions does not allow for proper planning.
- Cuts in the student assistance fund
- The funding process is bureaucratic and lacks clarity
- Administrative problems associated with distributing funds

#### ***How could these barriers be removed?***

- Establishment of multi-annual funding
- Funding to broaden access should be mainstreamed
- Better targeting of funding at students who need it. Also ensure that only genuine students get funding.
- The awarding of grants should be timed better in the interests of students (start of year).
- Funding and administrative bodies need to work together in order to introduce better clarity.
- Better resourcing of training in areas such as awareness, attitudes to change and equality, and planning for diversity.

## WORKSHOP

### CREATING NEW AND EXPANDED ROUTES OF ACCESS AND PROGRESSION

**Facilitators:** Brian Fleming, Principal, Collinstown Park Community College  
Brian McGonagle, Access Officer, Letterkenny IT

**Rapporteur:** Orla Christle, National Access Office, HEA

The facilitators introduced the theme of the workshop. A number of aspects of the theme were considered by the group.

#### **1 What opportunities for progression did the national framework of qualifications offer?**

The national framework of qualifications is a positive development, supporting more transparent admission criteria and wider participation. It encourages and facilitates different types of learning and serves as a means of acknowledging formal, non-formal and informal learning. It also provides and promotes a better public and consumer understanding of the currency of qualifications.

#### **2 How should the Leaving Certificate Applied be developed as a route of entry to higher education?**

It was suggested that the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) was not initially considered as a route of direct entry to higher education as it had been devised as an alternative to the more academic, third-level focused Leaving Certificate curriculum and to prevent second-level drop out. However, with the advent of the national framework of qualifications, the LCA has increased potential as a means of preparation for entry to higher education, for example through the development of links with cognate disciplines in further education or by the addressing of gaps through a foundation year.

There is a need for greater clarity for Leaving Certificate Applied students on their subject options, and progression routes were on the basis of choices made at second level.

#### **3 Foundation courses – who should provide them and for which target groups?**

There is a case for the provision of foundation courses in both communities and institutions. In either instance the importance of post-entry support structures was stressed as regards both study support and guidance as to opportunities for further access, transfer and progression.

As to target groups, foundation courses were felt to address the needs of both mature students and school leavers, particularly those who had left school without progressing and were now seeking to re-engage with further and higher education.

#### **4 What barriers to collaboration were there between second level and higher education and further and higher education?**

Five main barriers were identified:

- Institutional – Competing priorities can mean equity of access and the level of social commitment on the part of an institution being secondary considerations. Inter-institutional competition was also considered to act as a potential barrier as well as fear of more diverse student groups.
- Informational – For example lack of support and guidance in the transition from second to third level
- Situational – Circumstances of a learner (e.g. location; family status) that present as a barrier to participation
- Dispositional – Low motivation on the part of a learner due to current or past experience of education
- Policy – State and institutional policy which do not serve to support equity of access

## **5 How best to distribute resources to achieve inter-institutional collaboration on routes of access, transfer and progression?**

- Continuity of resources (including multi-annual funding) and partnership between sectors are considered to be critical to supporting the seamless transition between the various levels of education.
- There should be a stronger focus on the individual student and who they are linked to.
- Consistent recognition between different institutions of prior learning and awards is an important factor in facilitating greater collaboration.
- The resourcing of a network of access officers in the PLC/further education sector would enable more formal and structured links between this sector and both second level and higher education institutions.
- Uniformity of funding criteria is also necessary, particularly as regards what initiatives may qualify for ongoing support.

### *The role of local communities, schools and higher education institutions in expanding routes of access and progression?*

The need for locally based, one-stop information shops on routes of access, transfer and progression was highlighted.

Also the need for more dialogue and a stronger commitment to co-operation between higher education institutions and the community sector

### *Steps to create system-wide routes for mature students (including APL)*

Greater national clarity and consistency is required on routes of access for mature students, particularly as to what for the purposes of admission is accredited prior

learning, how and by whom are standards of APL determined and what is the appropriate mix of knowledge and work-based experience.

Potential students also need to know that progression is not confined to entry to academic courses but could also include professional development for those working in industries such as catering and hairdressing.

## WORKSHOP

### STUDENT VOICES ON EQUITY OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

**Facilitators:** Ann Heelan, Director of AHEAD  
Tina Lowe, Graduate and Project Co-ordinator for GET AHEAD

**Rapporteur:** Justin Synnott, National Access Office, HEA

During this workshop, delegates discussed seven areas of interest, guided by supplementary questions.

#### 1 Information and guidance on courses and routes of entry to higher education

*What aspects of your experience were useful?*

*What aspects of your experience were difficult?*

*What would improve the situation?*

- Advice on post second-level options came too late in their schooling. In some situations it was a stopgap procedure rather than an ongoing source of information and advice.
- Access courses should be linked to all schools. Best practice was described as situations where HE institutions visited schools to describe the option of third-level education.
- Often the supportive and positive nature of careers advisors/ school staff can be as effective as financial or other supports in furthering a student's academic career.

#### 2 Making the transition into college

*What aspects of your experience were positive?*

*What aspects of your experience were difficult?*

*What would make the transition easier?*

- Transfer to college can be problematic due to a stigma sometimes attached to being an 'access student'.
- Access students often do not have the same support out of college as other students. Students felt they had to prove themselves academically before being accepted by their peers.

- In planning supports for access students, supports should be individually tailored to some extent. A 'one size fits all' access path to higher education does not cater to individual needs of 'non-traditional students'.
- Grants were of immense help, yet hidden costs were not taken into consideration in the amount issued in the grant.

#### 3 The teaching and learning experience

*What was your experience of accessing texts, the library?*

*What was your experience of learning from lectures, tutorials, field trips?*

*What was your experience of assessment?*

*What improvements in teaching and learning would you like to see?*

- Hidden costs were a central aspect of the students' experience of teaching and learning; lecturers sometimes presumed that students had access to a computer at home, could easily afford expensive books, photocopying, etc.
- Teaching and learning strategies should cater to a diverse student body.

#### 4 Social life

*What is your experience of social life in college?*

- Access students sometimes felt isolated both outside college (in families and communities unfamiliar with HE) and inside college where a stigma was sometimes felt by their title.
- Due to the fact that students had to work during their spare time they often missed out on the social aspects of attending HE.

- The language of 'access' can be divisive as it separates individuals into an alternative category to the 'traditional' student.

## **5 Career progression**

*Has your experience of work placement been positive?*

*What would improve your experience of work placement?*

- Once in higher education, students would succeed better with clearer paths of progression into the professional arena.
- Students felt that more links between higher education and possible areas of work would be beneficial.

## **6 What changes would you make to the system in order to improve the actual experience of higher education for the student?**

- Dealing with practical considerations that relate to a diverse student body and ensuring a positive atmosphere are steps that would benefit the student.
- Simple, straightforward, common sense procedures are often more effective than elaborate, overarching initiatives.

## **7 How could the students be more involved in evaluating the system?**

It was suggested that the conference could have had a better representation of students.

## HEA MEMBERS

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*Higher Education Authority.*

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HEAD OF ADMINISTRATION	Padraic Mellett	Frank Condon	
HEAD OF INFORMATION AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS	Gerry O'Sullivan	Adrian O'Donoghue	
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ASSISTANT SECRETARY	Jennifer Gyax - <i>Recurrent Grants</i>	Leonora Harty	
ASSISTANT SECRETARY	Sheena Duffy - <i>Research, Socrates /Erasmus</i>	Oliver Mooney	
ASSISTANT SECRETARY	Dr. Lisa Higgins - <i>Research</i>	<b>RECURRENT GRANTS</b>	
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Mary Meade  
Charlotte Farrell

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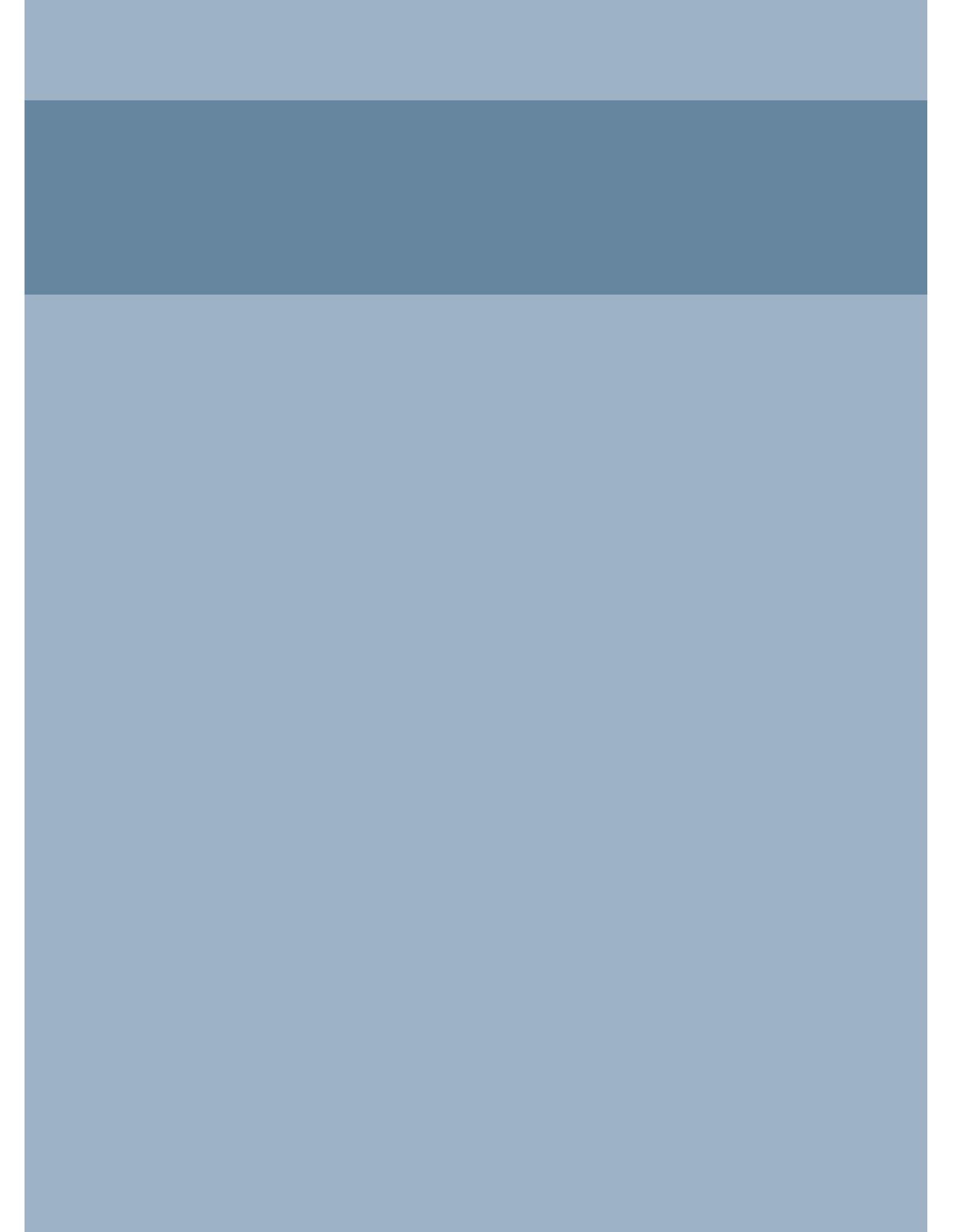
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