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National Survey of New Entrants to Higher Education: Presentation.

Joint Committee on Education and Science
Debate

Thursday, 18 May 2006

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Chairman:   The committee is meeting the representatives of the Higher Education Authority to discuss the second report into colleges in 2004, namely, the national survey of new entrants to higher education. On behalf of the committee I welcome from the HEA Ms Catriona Ryan, head of the policy and planning division; Ms Mary-Liz Trant, head of the HEA's national office for equity of access to higher education; Ms Orla Cristle, the senior policy adviser; and Mr. Fergal Costello, head of the institute of technology division.

Before we begin, I draw the attention of delegates to the fact that members of the committee have absolute privilege, but this does not apply to witnesses appearing before the committee. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against any person outside the Houses of the Oireachtas or an official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I call on Mr. Costello to make the presentation on behalf of the Higher Education Authority.

Mr. Fergal Costello: I thank the committee for the opportunity to meet it to discuss this report which the HEA has published this year: Who Went to College in 2004? I will make a brief presentation and then take questions.

To give some background, the HEA views this as a very significant report. It surveys the entire cohort of students entering higher education in 2004. It provides very valuable data in the insight it provides on what is happening as regards the student cohort, particularly since higher education is seen as especially critical to national development. Higher education has always had a role in development of the individual and in enabling him or her to grow to full potential. That is increasingly important today as we look at issues of social equity and inclusion. We know from the data that those who have an opportunity to enter higher education tend to benefit significantly later in life. It is normally important as well in terms of the economic strategy or policy underpinning the country. The skills being acquired in higher education are becoming ever more critical for the needs of the economy. I will deal briefly with the background to the survey, say a few words on how we did it and give some headline findings in terms of what the report told us.

The HEA has been doing surveys such as this since 1980. We attempt to assess the characteristics of new entrants into higher education across a range of dimensions — age, gender,

county of origin, level of financial aid support and social backgrounds from which the students come. The studies were initially carried out over a long period of time by Professor Pat Clancy of UCD. We owe a debt of gratitude to him for the work he has done in setting up the surveys. The reports have been particularly useful for policy formulation in recent years in setting out where we stand and, from that, having a basis on which to set targets. In particular, the McNamara report on equity of access to higher education in 2001 drew heavily on the 1998 HEA survey to set targets for improving social equity and equity of access.

In terms of the way we did the study, three main pieces of information were being sought. A survey was issued directly to all students entering college in 2004 which contained a range of questions primarily related to their social backgrounds. Further information was gathered from a census of all the higher level institutions. It was a matter of looking at their data banks and finding out where students came from, what they were studying and so on. We used other data sources to back up this material, primarily the national census of population and school-leaver surveys for additional information. The year 2004 was the first time Professor Clancy did not carry out the survey. It was done by the ESRI and Fitzpatrick Consultants for the HEA. However, it very much replicated the approach taken by Professor Clancy, particularly in its use of the CAO to access information on students.

In the headline findings gathered from the report, we see a clear sustained increase in participation in higher education at a rate that is not paralleled throughout many OECD countries. We have a good record for expanding the system and providing more opportunities for students. We see some narrowing of the gap between the manual and other social classes. The inequity between the classes has been a disappointing and long-standing feature of the system, but some narrowing has occurred, which is encouraging. However, some gaps still remain.

We see high rates of transfer from those who have completed the second level — leaving certificate — cycle into higher education. This is important information in terms of looking at leaving certificate completion rates and setting targets for the future. Specifically, we found that the last full survey in 1998 had moved from 44% to 55%. That is quite strong growth and shows our system is expanding at a very healthy rate when measured against any OECD country. When broken down by county, all but four were above 50% in terms of admissions. There were some discrepancies in counties close to the Border. Building on past practice we have taken account of students entering Northern Ireland colleges. That increased the rate overall from 55% to 56% and had particular implications for counties such as Donegal and Monaghan, where much higher rates were discernible, when those admissions were taken into account.

We have also surveyed admissions on the basis of postal codes in the Dublin area. This is the only area in which we can use postal codes. That is informative in so far as postal codes provide some degree of proxy as regards issues of equality and equity. Some judgments may be made on what is happening as regards narrowing gaps. However, postal codes are always subject to considerable variation. Nonetheless, they showed considerable increases and as a result gaps were again seen to be narrowing. Clearly there are still enormous gaps — 11.7% versus 86.5% is significant. Again, looking back at 1998 we have seen that even those postal codes with very low rates of participation have shown considerable rates of increase, doubling in some cases. There are some grounds, therefore, for encouragement.

As regards socio-economic access, we have data showing the distribution of entrants between the various groups in percentage terms coming into higher education between 1998 and 2004. In general one sees a fairly strong pattern of continuity. The groups in 2004 maintained roughly the



same weights as in 1998. The big exception was farmers, for which the rate had declined significantly, from 16% down to 12.7%. It is helpful to think of those numbers not just as percentages, but in terms of what they mean as regards the number of students coming in. Because the overall pool of applications is increasing in all areas, one again sees an increase in numbers, with the exception of farmers. There has been strong growth across all groups, even where the distributions are not changing significantly.

One of the key findings of the surveys over the 24 years we have been doing them has been a measurement of the participation rate by the different socio-economic groups coming into higher education. To try to measure participation rates we looked at the socio-economic classification of the entrants to higher education and measured the total number of a particular group in the population. We tried then to develop proportions to determine what percentage from a particular group would go on to higher education. This provided the ranges and shows the changes that occurred between 1998 and 2004. In most cases there was significant improvement. That was particularly encouraging as regards some of the manual groups, which have shown strong increases over a relatively short timeframe. In the case of skilled manual workers the movement was from 0.32% to between 0.5% and 0.6%. The reason we used ranges in 2004 was that the data were becoming increasingly difficult to manage. When we looked at the census data between 1998 and 2004, for example, we saw that Ireland had changed so much. There was an enormous increase in the number of people at work over a short period of time and great changes between social groups. There has also been an increase in the number of people not reporting themselves in the census in terms of a socio-economic group. This meant the "unknown" figure had gone from about 12% to 17%. That created some uncertainty since we could not be sure as to whether the "unknown" group fitted into a lower or an upper end profile or was equally distributed across the sector. In developing the ranges, therefore, we took a conservative approach and assumed the growth in the "unknowns" would, perhaps, be heavily weighted towards the lower groups and that is why the ranges were coming into play.

I want to mention the school-leaver survey as a separate source of data to help us understand whether the trends can be validated. This is a survey carried out by the ESRI for the Department of Education and Science, in which a small sample of students is looked at to see where they are going nine months or a year after they have left second level. This could include people who leave at the junior certificate or leaving certificate cycles. We took into account those who go into higher education, and also those who go into employment or other pursuits. Even though the numbers were different because the bases and the measurement methods were different, the trends were, nonetheless, very similar. That was quite encouraging for us in terms of having some degree of confidence in the findings. I do not want to go through the full survey, because as members will appreciate it is a very extensive report. However, there is a range of other areas on which we have extensive data as regards the type of colleges or institutions students go to, the fields of study and so on. If there are specific questions regarding those issues, we will be happy to answer them.

On the broad conclusions we might draw from the report, the distribution of new entrants seems to be relatively stable over time, but the overall pool is growing. We are still seeing certain groups maintain their traditional advantage which they have consistently enjoyed in gaining access to higher education, especially higher professional farmers who show very high rates of participation. We think their participation is maximised and it is hard to see them get any higher. There has been some significant improvement in the participation rates of the under-represented groups and with that, some narrowing of the groups that are coming through. However, we are very aware that the extent to which improvement in entry rates can be measured is itself a factor of completion at primary and second level. More than 70% of those who complete second level



education and do their leaving certificate enter higher education. There has been increased participation by some of the manual groups and mature students. That is very helpful to the policy framework in which we are operating. In 2001, the McNamara report set us specific targets for mature students, disadvantaged students, disabled students and other groups. While this study did not measure disabled students, it appears on the basis of the numbers in the study that we have managed to exceed the McNamara targets two years ahead of schedule. This does not mean the job is done or we can relax because clearly there is still inequity in access to higher education and there are major issues about increasing the level of participation overall but it is encouraging to see that we are making significant progress, which gives us a good platform.

Deputy Enright:   I thank Mr. Costello and the witnesses for the presentation. The statistics are interesting and it is good to see that there are changes in the non-manual, semi-skilled and unskilled sectors. I am more interested in how we got to the results rather than the results themselves. What has been the biggest influence on their achievement? To what extent did the free fees initiative contribute or make a difference? I know somebody has to be at the bottom, no matter how good the statistics are but why have Westmeath, Wicklow, Waterford and Offaly not had admission rates above 50%? In Offaly, the county in which I live, it is often said that consistently we have lower rates than elsewhere because so many people sought employment with the ESB and Bord na Móna. I am not sure if that explanation is valid any more because we have moved a full generation beyond those who automatically went into employment in such industries. I am not sure what the position is in the other counties mentioned but there may have been a similar trend in Waterford in seeking employment in Waterford Crystal. What is the HEA's role in addressing this problem?

On the statistics for Dublin, has the creation of the Institute of Technology, Tallaght had any impact on the increased third level participation in Tallaght and Firhouse? Westmeath contains Athlone Institute of Technology, which is only a few miles from Offaly. Does the position of a third level college, a university or institute of technology, have any great impact on participation rates? We tend to say that it does and we all demand a third level institution in our county but does it make a great difference?

On the tracking of students, the drop-out rates in the institutes of technology are quite a bit higher than in the universities, but they are still relatively high in both. Does the HEA track students from the under-represented groups — semi-skilled, unskilled and manual — to see if there is a greater or smaller proportion of those students dropping out? This is crucial to determine if what we are doing is working. We need to provide greater assistance for certain groups once they go to college, but we need to find out whether the drop-out rate is evenly spread across the board.

The OECD report on mature students is based on statistics from 1997. I do not know if there are more recent statistics but, at that stage, the proportion of mature students over 26 years of age was 2.3% of the total, while the OECD average was 19.3%. I imagine it has since gone up but what is the current level? What role has the HEA in addressing the issue? The institutes of technology are coming under the remit of the HEA, which we all welcomed when we debated it in the House this week. Universities and institutes of technology are spread around the country, although some complain that their area does not have a university. Does the HEA feel we need to look at the remit of universities and the fact that they are all specialising in key areas? To achieve a better balance in regional development, I am not suggesting the universities should over-specialise but should there be a far greater element of specialisation, where different parts of the country offer different areas of specialisation in order that from an economic perspective, we can develop pockets of expertise? I am critical of the OECD report, as it undervalues humanities, but the point needs to be addressed.

Deputy O'Sullivan:   I welcome the witnesses here today and the opportunity to address this issue. My first question is similar to Deputy Enright's. Does this report put to bed the argument that we should not have free third level tuition fees, an issue brought up again by the OECD, various other commentators, heads of third level institutions and so on? It seems that these figures represent a strong argument in favour of keeping access open as widely as possible. I am interested in the witnesses' comments on this.

Do the witnesses feel the lower participation rate of certain groups, particularly the non-manual socio-economic group, relates in any way to the possibility that the people in such groups are just outside the limit for third level grants? I have been having great difficulty in getting access to figures for higher education grants and socio-economic backgrounds. Is there any reason for that? There are no available figures for the past three academic years, even though I have tabled a series of parliamentary questions on the matter. The witnesses may have access to figures from some other source but in the absence of such figures, it is very difficult to determine how the groups are divided.



I wanted to ask a general question about access strategies, but especially about the Dublin postal code areas which are still greatly under-represented. The universities have detailed access programmes, while the institutes of technology have limited programmes, but they are not as well resourced for such programmes. What are the views of the witnesses? In areas such as Tallaght and those areas to which Deputy Enright referred, access programmes in ITs are also very important in bringing in students.

To what extent does the HEA work with second level schools in keeping young people in school? The witnesses referred to that as a major indicator of whether students will go on to third level. If they stay in second level, there is a fairly good chance they will progress to third level but if they do not, they will not progress or the only opportunity they will have is at a later stage on a second-chance opportunity.

With regard to second-chance opportunities, I do not know how much research the HEA has done with regard to people who enter as mature students, although the witnesses gave us some information in this regard. I am interested to know whether funding is an issue because although mature students may qualify for grants, they do not generally qualify for free fees if they study part-time. Does the HEA have a view as to whether this issue should be examined? How much would it cost to introduce free fees for part-time students?

Following on Deputy Enright's question on drop-out rates, does the HEA have information on the number of students who take a course which they quickly decide is not appropriate for them, perhaps because it is their third, fourth or fifth choice on the CAO form? Is this a big issue? If so, is there a guidance issue with regard to second level schools?

Chairman:   We will suspend because there is a vote.

Deputy English:   I wish to ask short questions and will get the answers off the record. Despite the cost of part-time courses, which can be €2,000 or €3,000, grant assistance is not available. Students can avail of some tax relief but many are not paying enough tax to do this. Therefore, they are in the worst situation. Will the witnesses comment on this?

With regard to studying while working, law and accountancy traditionally had work experience as part of the courses. Would many people rather take a course that links in with work in order that they would feel they are further up the work ladder when they leave college and that they do not

just get a piece of paper at the end of the course?

Sitting suspended at noon and resumed at 12.15 p.m.

Deputy Gogarty: 📍 As I am due to speak in the Dáil in approximately 15 minutes, I apologise to Mr. Costello and the rest of the delegation from the HEA. As with Deputy English, I may have to refer to the record. I thank the delegation for appearing before the joint committee.

I read this report several times with great interest when it came out. It was useful for scoring political points, although it is not always about that. As an elected representative one is trying to effect change, and I would like to speak mainly with this in mind. This includes effecting change in terms of encouraging people from more disadvantaged areas to participate at third level and giving them opportunities to do so.

Before moving into that specific area I have one query relating to a question raised by Deputy O'Sullivan with regard to participation rates in institutes of technology. It is interesting to note that even with the presence of IT Tallaght, Dublin has the lowest participation rates in institutes of technology, compared to Sligo, for example, which has a rate of 34%. Does the delegation have views on this, given the debate on the Institutes of Technology Bill 2006 yesterday in the Dáil? Does the delegation believe its stewardship of the institutes of technology will help to redress that balance? Is a marketing approach required to show people that the institutes of technology are on a par and sometimes exceed the universities?

As the delegation is not in a position to criticise Government policy I will do it. It would be good if the witnesses could answer as accurately as possible. There are no recommendations in the report, although there is a conclusion. What is the point of having a report, except to have statistics to use for political point-scoring, if there are no recommendations?



We have seen the rising tide has lifted all boats, but according to the figures on page 104, table 5.9, the admission rate in 1998 for Rathfarnham, Dundrum and Clonskeagh was 68.4% and in 2004 it was 86.5%. In my constituency of Clondalkin, Bawnogue and Neilstown the rate was 12.7% in 1998 but 22.8% in 2004. We have mentioned areas with lower rates, such as Ballyfermot, which went from 7.1% to 11.7%. Participation has increased across all social strata, but even so, there are areas of disadvantage where the vast majority do not get near third level education.

With regard to recommendations, I would like to see the position of children who will never get an opportunity to apply for third level education addressed, which it is not. This is regardless of a perception by some people that third level education might not be for them. This issue affects the children, whom I have mentioned in this committee previously, who are still not toilet trained at the age of six or seven, or children whom teachers can identify as future criminals. These children will put a cost not just on themselves, their parents and the community, but also on the taxpayer.

It also concerns the thousands of children who do not bridge the gap between primary school and second-level education, or those who leave education before the junior certificate. There are also thousands of classrooms full of children who miss more than 40 days' education per year due to the lack of investment in education welfare officers, for example, to carry out their statutory duties. Why have those issues not been addressed? Why is the fundamental problem with the education system lack of investment and resourcing at primary level, which will get children into second level education and beyond junior certificate level, not a feature of the report? The report is both meaningful and meaningless without the issue being a feature.

This is not to criticise the people involved, as it is an excellent report in so far as it refers to its terms of reference. Without a recommendation, particularly a call on the Minister to increase access through investment to ensure children stay in school, there will only be approximately a quarter of the people from areas in my constituency, for example, going to third level education. Even if rates go up in general, there will be a significant number left behind. That has a cost. I hate to repeat myself, but it costs money not to invest in education.

Why have recommendations not gone out, and will a supplement be published which will make a recommendation? In the absence of a recommendation, such a report is ammunition for me to criticise the Minister.

Deputy Crowe:   I apologise for having to leave. There was a launch related to undocumented Irish people which I am involved in, and I apologise for missing some of the questions. If I ask questions which have previously been aired, I apologise in advance.

The report is a welcome enhancement of our understanding of societal change in trends in Ireland. Reports such as this are an excellent guide to who benefits from policies in Ireland. We should welcome the rise in the rates of young people taking their leaving certificate and moving on to third level education, particularly the rise from 20% in 1980 to 60% in 2004.

Members should welcome the rise in the numbers of young people who sit the leaving certificate examination and who move on to third level education. I refer in particular to the increase from 20% in 1980 to 60% in 2004. The increased representation of lower income households in Irish colleges is also positive. However, as a representative of my party and my constituency, I must ask whether access to third level education is fair and truly representative of social groups. The answer, to judge by this report, is clearly “No”.

While one could argue that some groups are over-represented, that is probably unfair to such people. For example, the children of employers, managers and higher professionals account for 34.2% of the 2004 third level entrants, while this social group makes up 26.1% of the population. The other big change concerns the number of children of skilled manual workers who enter college, which has doubled since 1998. In 2004, this group constituted 12.3% of new college entrants and 13.5% of the population. I want the authors to comment on that trend.

The fact that the proportion of students from non-manual employment households is still substantially under-represented is important. This income group constitutes 19.7% of the population and supplied only 8.9% of college entrants. That is what the report states. The gap in the unskilled worker category is less pronounced, as this group makes up 5% of new college entrants while constituting 5.5% of the wider population. When one considers the data from this report with evidence from the CSO, the EU survey on income and living conditions and the quarterly national household survey, one finds clear evidence of growing social apartheid in Ireland. At the risk of boring members, I will cite some other figures. There is a ratio of 80:20, or even of 70:30 in Ireland today, whereby up to 30% of the population suffer deprivation and low wages because they are unskilled, exploited or without education. The modern market demands such skills.

I have a question regarding the quality and type of degree awards. Normally, the report refers to the quality and duration of the degrees being awarded. The State comes second in the OECD in the awarding of certificates and diplomas. However, this ranking falls to eighth when one considers the number of degrees conferred and to 13th in terms of postgraduate study. My fear is that although the building blocks of the knowledge economy are considered, there is no

comparison of the social class of those who attain complete degrees and who engage in postgraduate research and those students who receive diplomas and certificates. Did the authors find any social class differences in respect of the type of qualifications awarded?

Moreover, a sea change has occurred in the relationship between diplomas and degrees, owing to changes in the national framework for qualification. Many diplomas have been upgraded to the status of ordinary degrees. Do the authors believe this may have distorted the report's findings? Most of us consider a degree to be what the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland deems to be an honours degree. Hence the report's definition of degrees being awarded now includes a substantially broader range of third level qualification.

Who actually sits the leaving certificate examination? The most worrying figures in the report deal with the percentage of students in different social classes who sit the leaving certificate examination. A total of 89.8% of children of higher professionals sit the leaving certificate examination, compared to only 77% of children of semi-skilled, or unskilled manual workers. Some 23% of the latter social class do not sit the leaving certificate examination. The only conclusion is that while the proportion of college entries is increasing, a significant number of people do not go on from that class.



This issue also arose in respect of the institutes of technology sector. Although more people enter college, the drop-out rate among people who come from that social class is higher. This raises the question of the provision of supports for that sector. While such supports exist for university students, they are not in place for those who may have performed moderately well in the leaving certificate examination and have gone on to an institute of technology. Many such people enter the institutes of technology sector. The academic year for the institutes of technology sector raises similar issues.

Do the witnesses have a view in this regard? While this point may stray somewhat from the report's findings, should greater understanding be afforded to students who come from such a social background and whose leaving certificate performance may not have been as good as that of someone who went on to university? People with better leaving certificate results usually choose that path for reasons of snobbery or whatever. Can the issue be considered in this fashion?

Another factor which drives college entry is the changing nature of work and increasing credentialism across the labour market. While there has been a growth in the number of professional and managerial job opportunities, the demand for skilled workers has remained robust. However, I refer to the situation regarding lower paid and unskilled jobs. The ESRI has spoken of 500,000 workers with low skills who must be upskilled. However, judging from the data presented in this report, a significant proportion of the future workforce has no real route towards taking up such work.

As for college attendance in Dublin, the report notes an increase in the performance of certain geographical areas of Dublin in respect of college entry. As I come from Dublin, this appears to be positive. However, have the authors considered the ongoing and substantial shifts in population arising from the number of new apartments, developments and so on? This development skews the geographical breakdown regarding those who come from deprived backgrounds. The report shows a rise of one third in the level of college admissions in Dublin 24, from 26.1% in 1998 to 40% in 2004. However, this does not reflect the experience of those who live in west Tallaght or the RAPID areas. While there has been an increase in the percentage of such people who sit the leaving certificate examination, it is not shown and the figures are somewhat skewed. The report does not provide members with a picture of the population

changes.

Senator Tuffy:   The figures from the latest national survey of new entrants to higher education are extremely encouraging and must be taken in the context of previous reports prepared by Professor Clancy. I am a member of the Labour Party, which played a major role in the abolition of third level fees in 1996. The party has studied the impact of that decision and has produced a document, Keeping the Gates Open, on the issue of whether there should be fees for third level. We found that even by 1998, the evidence already appeared to suggest an improvement. For example, the previous study, carried out in 1992, found that college participation rates for three lower and middle income groups had fallen. However, that trend appeared to have been reversed in the 1998 report produced by Professor Clancy. Moreover, when considering figures from previous years, we found that from 1986 to 1998, and obviously subsequently, the participation of lower socio-economic groups, particularly in the institutes of technology sector, had increased. We attributed this rise to the operation of a free fees scheme in the institutes of technology, through European Social Fund funding, even before the abolition of fees. Many other factors have led to the increase in participation rates among various socio-economic groups but there is much evidence to suggest that the free fees initiative and ESF funding has had an impact on participation in third level education by students from lower socio-economic groups.

My second point concerns institutes of technology, which is addressed in the report, particularly on page 137. Data reveal a greater equality of participation between the higher and lower socio-economic groups in institutes of technology. The report, particularly in the second paragraph on page 137, suggests that this is partly due to greater flexibility in institutes of technology. I worked in the registration section of the Bolton Street campus of the Dublin Institute of Technology where I noted the flexibility afforded by the institute of technology system. People could initially study for a certificate on a part-time basis and transfer to diplomas or full-time degrees. These were people from lower socio-economic backgrounds who might not have been afforded the same opportunities if they had attended universities, which did not have that type of flexibility at that time.



Is there any measure the HEA can take to encourage institutes of technology and the universities, in particular, to be even more flexible in how they deliver third level education to encourage people to go to college in the first place and prevent them from dropping out? Lack of flexibility may be a factor in the drop in participation rates among people from non-manual labour backgrounds. Many of these people believe they should get a job upon leaving school. One way of persuading them to acquire third level qualifications is to offer them a more flexible model of third level education.

I have argued that people should be allowed to study on a part-time basis during the day, that those who study on a part-time basis should be able to avail of free fees and that there should be many opportunities to transfer from full-time to part-time study and from day to evening study. This flexibility should be enforced through third level structures and the way in which colleges are funded.



The figures in Table 6.5 reveal that the most unequal part of the country is Dublin. The average index for the country in terms of inequality is 1.601, which is a decline from 1.98 in 1998. The figure in Dublin is 2.513, while the figure in Galway is 1.061. One must inquire as to the reason for the high average index in Dublin. Offaly is another county which scores high in respect of inequality, as Deputy Enright noted. Dublin has very high levels of inequality. I once served as a county councillor and strongly believe that housing policy is a factor in the high levels of

inequality found in Dublin. The way which housing policy has developed in Dublin over the years has led to the segregated communities. Social housing has not been integrated with other types of housing.



Certain schools in Dublin must tackle the higher levels of inequality. They have lower reading age levels in students coming into second level schools from primary schools. Schools in disadvantaged areas need far more support to tackle this problem and ensure that more students remain in school and go on to third level education.

Deputy Andrews:   I welcome the delegation to the meeting. I, like Senator Tuffy, once worked as a teacher and taught in Ballyfermot Senior College. Coming from a privileged background, I was struck by the fact that much of the problem surrounding access to third level education was cultural. There was no culture of college-going among certain families, individuals and peers. We are always accused of being patriarchal when we try to help people think about these matters. We produce public campaigns about recycling and road safety but have produced no real public campaign to get people from certain backgrounds to think about sending their children to college. We have seen the pattern over many years. Do we go out into the community, talk to parents of children aged 12 and 13 and ask them what they are doing to encourage their children to aim for college? Do we ask them whether there are books in the house or whether the house merely contains banks of DVDs? Do we ask them whether they help their children with their homework? Do we talk to parents at that level? Is there any public awareness campaign to try to tackle this problem at this level? I accept that there are social and economic problems, which have been identified in the report. Is there any way to bridge the gap caused by the cultural problem, the history of lack of access to college? Has the authority come up with a solution to this problem and does it plan to do anything about it?

My second point concerns the free fees initiative introduced by Senator Tuffy's party. I understand that a total of 63% of all student supports go towards the free fees initiative, although the figure may be greater. One quarter of this percentage is spent on children of parents with an income over €75,000. Therefore, one could say that one quarter of this money is wasted and certainly untargeted. The free fees initiative may have had an impact but it was a missed opportunity. Does the delegation believe that a major root and branch review of the free fees initiative is crucial not only to the free funding of maintenance grants, but also because the current system is, to a large extent, inequitable?

Chairman:   Does Deputy O'Sullivan wish to add anything?

Deputy O'Sullivan:   No.

Deputy Enright:   I have a question about people with disabilities and their access to third level education, a subject which has not previously been raised. In light of the fact that the HEA is assuming responsibility for the institutes of technology, it appears that the percentage of people with disabilities attending institutes of technology is far lower than that pertaining to universities. I understand that Cork Institute of Technology has the lowest percentage, at 0.52%, while Tralee Institute of Technology has the best percentage, at 5.5%, and the average percentage is approximately 2.7%.

The funding which goes towards institutes of technology for disability access is on average approximately €50,000, while the funding for universities ranges between €500,000 and €1 million. How does the authority plan to address this? Obviously, an increase in funding for institutes of technology is required. It will become an issue for the authority very soon once the

legislation is passed. Does the authority have any plans to address this issue?

Mr. Costello: Perhaps we will divide up the answers and Ms Ryan and Ms Trant will answer some of them. A number of major issues have been raised by a number of speakers. One of the first questions relates to how we obtained these results and how we have seen the improvements in the overall participation and different improvements in different areas. A range of factors are at play here. One particularly strong factor is the demand for education from Irish students and families. Higher education is just as much a part of this demand as any other form of education. We have consistently witnessed people's desire to enter higher education, which is probably the reason for the existence of the points race. The number of students who are sitting the leaving certificate and trying to gain admission to higher education is far greater than the number of available places. This is possibly underpinned by very strong data revealing the effects of having a higher education qualification when one enters the workforce and data pertaining to the income premia people can expect to attain, their overall quality of life and chances of success in life.

The evidence for the advantages one can gain from having a higher education qualification is compelling, which has had an impact on student choices and student demand for higher education. Without this, we would be in a very difficult position. One can contrast the situation here with that of the UK, which I understand is struggling to achieve a participation rate of near 50% but which appears continuously to fall short of this target. We are in a much stronger natural position, as people value higher education and want to access it.

There needs to be a programme of investment and we have argued that there must be more investment in various areas. However, since the 1960s, there has been a sustained Government strategy to the effect that putting investment in education is something that rewards in terms of skills and economic growth in future. It has been helpful.

The Minister has set down for the HEA certain guidelines on free fees. This report did not explicitly evaluate the success or lack of success of free fees. It only recorded what has happened, leaving individuals to interpret it as they wish. At a high level, whenever a Government says it will invest significantly, there are bound to be improvements, but I am not sure that when one burrows into the issues raised by Deputy Andrews and others, the solution is as neat or simple as that. There are various factors that could move the matter in one direction or another. There are issues of targeting, linking up fees and free fees with student support grants and a range of work outstanding.

This matter relates to Deputy Gogarty's question on why there are only statistics and figures in the report rather than recommendations. Since the reporting began, the purpose of the reports has been to provide a snapshot of data and allow for further investigation or analysis to drive recommendations. The obvious example would be the 2001 action group on setting targets for policy, which drew heavily on the 1998 cohort study initiated by Professor Clancy. The reports are designed to provide a platform rather than be a complete guide to policy targets.

This study continued the trend of examining full-time new entrants into higher education rather than part-time provision. Undoubtedly, part-time provision is an issue. A number of Deputies and Senators have referred to a considerable number of people in the workforce with low skills and their chances of success, particularly when all of the evidence shows us that their opportunities will narrow while those for people with higher skills will be greater.

How do we target or intervene to help people in the workforce to gather the skills that will provide their basis to compete in the future economy? This is an area in which the reports of the

OECD, the enterprise strategy group and others have indicated a need for change. The HEA is examining its funding model for universities and institutes of technology to try to provide more support for part-time education but one must be aware of the fact that the pot is currently fixed. If we reallocate from one to the other, it thins out the money instead of enhancing investment.

I will ask my colleague, Ms Ryan, to discuss retention and related issues. My colleague, Ms Trant, will discuss the Access programme issues that have been raised. If I have left something out, members of the committee could revert to me.

Ms Catriona Ryan: Access to higher education is one matter, but access and successful completion is the priority. Since 2000, the HEA has operated a strategic initiative scheme, whereby we have top-sliced some of the core grants for the universities and allocated that money on a competitive basis to issues of strategic importance, including student retention rates.

Many of the initiatives in the teaching and learning of information and communications technology are aimed at improving retention. We have noticed that information technology subjects have tended to experience lower retention rates than others. Perhaps this is because students have an inaccurate perception of what is involved in studying ICT. They think of Nintendo and other computer games, but when they enter a higher education institution, they realise that there is a lot of mathematics and many unanticipated subject areas. The retention rate for ICT is approximately 1 million people per year.

We carried out a study on the reasons students do not stay in higher education. More than 50% of students do not stay because they believe that they made the wrong course choice, which raises issues regarding prior research and career guidance on how to help students pick the right subjects. Sometimes, a student makes a wrong choice and drops out, but he or she may take up another course instead. The situation is not as negative as it initially seems.

Members referred to participation rates by county. While it is a concern that certain counties are lower than the national average, nearly all counties experienced significant increases between 1998 and 2004. County Offaly has been mentioned a number of times. In 1998, its participation rate in higher education was approximately 37%, whereas that figure was 47% in 2004. While being below the national average is a concern, the county's rate has increased considerably in the time period.

It is of relevance to note that this study measures access to higher education only, but there are other pathways. Students may enter the successful further education sector, participate in PLC courses or go directly into employment. This relates to a point raised by Senator Tuffy, in that it is important to have other pathways for students. If they do not proceed into higher education upon leaving school, they can avail of these flexible routes at a later stage.

It is difficult to answer the question on the links between counties and the locations of higher education institutions, as the links are unclear. For example, Dublin has the most higher education institutions in the country, including universities and institutes of technology, but its participation rate is below the national average. Counties such as Limerick also have lower participation rates than expected, given the number of higher education institutions located therein or close by.

Ms Mary-Liz Trant: By way of introduction, a national access office was set up in the HEA three years ago with the principal task of co-ordinating all of the work commenced during the previous five to ten years on widening access to higher education. During the past three years, we have been working with all of the higher education institutions, communities and schools in this

regard.

The office was established because of a key recommendation in the 2001 McNamara report, which highlighted how fragmented our education system was. This relates to the importance of what happens early in the system, that is, pre-school, primary, second and further education levels, and not just access to higher education. One of our key tasks is to make these links and in respect of which we have undertaken a number of initiatives. An advisory group comprising representatives from those particular constituencies works with us. We are trying to ensure that all of the work taking place, such as in the educational disadvantage programmes, promotes the idea of access to higher education, directs the cultural and financial elements and ensures that people make the right higher education choices while they are in second level.

A number of questions were asked about counties, including Offaly. We have started to work on a community basis in County Offaly. We have been working with the VEC and partnership groups to determine why the county has a low participation rate. Issues such as former industries in the area have arisen but there is more work to be done. What we are doing does not only relate to socio-economic backgrounds, but also issues of people with disabilities, people from the Traveller community and the growing group of foreign nationals. It will be a good opportunity to examine County Offaly, in particular, and work with it to advance matters during the next three years.

We have undertaken an evaluation of Access programmes in all of the higher education institutions. The office is a little ahead, in that we are working with the entire sector. All of the institutes of technology, universities and teacher education colleges have completed evaluations of what they are doing and what is working to widen access to higher education. We have some emerging findings and we plan to publish a report in the next two or three months. It will be a useful document focussing on the measures that work. There is a wide range of knowledge on the initiatives that contribute to or underpin the findings of this report. We are making progress but more work is needed.

The HEA is working on figures and data so that it will have access to systematic, comprehensive data for every year. At this point we are working with higher education institutions on a set of proposals on how the data will be gathered. This will allow us to track the correlation between the policies we implement and the numbers enrolling.

Some ten years ago, the HEA decided to remove a percentage of funding available to universities and allocate it in a targeted way to improve, for example, access. The benefits of that step can now be seen. For a range of reasons, this did not occur in institutes of technology. At this stage, we are examining how resources can be increased. Students with disabilities are not entering institutes of technology in the same numbers as universities. Infrastructure and human resources are needed and the institutes of technology are examining the resources they have and discussing with the HEA how shortfalls can be made up. Over the next year, as the HEA takes over further responsibility for funding for institutes of technology, we will be able to resolve this matter.



Ms Cristle will address establishing and developing links with second level schools.

Ms Orla Cristle: Ms Trant referred to the action plan published in 2003. One of the goals we set was to link disadvantaged schools and communities with at least one higher education institution in the region. HEA strategic information suggests colleges have been developing these links for the past ten years but, as a first step, we decided to carry out a survey of institutions and examine the links currently in place. Deputies may wish to follow up on the data on primary schools,

secondary schools, area partnerships, adult education and community groups, presented on a county basis.



The survey revealed that almost 90% of designated disadvantaged schools, a category that is under review, are linked with a higher education institution. Higher education institutions not on that list are also linking with schools. The links focus on raising the aspirations of people who traditionally would not have considered higher education. Another goal is to steer people to choices through guidance and learning support, steer them to CAO choices and inform them of available student support.

Post-entry support is also available because the task does not end once the student is at the gates of a higher education institute. The HEA works closely with the social inclusion unit of the Department and those with responsibility for the DEIS, Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, programme. People are not making the transition from primary to secondary school, or from junior certificate to leaving certificate. The DEIS programme examines progression rates in particular schools and provides resources to tackle the problems that occur at these transition points. The HEA was set up to link this work with the higher education institutes, creating a continuous chain that will improve the rates of admission for social groups that are under-represented.

Chairman:   I thank the witnesses for attending. I apologise for the interruption occasioned by the vote in the Dáil.

The joint committee adjourned at 12.55 p.m. until 11.30 a.m. on Thursday, 1 June 2006.

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