



Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann  
Royal Irish Academy

# Equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education in Ireland and Northern Ireland

A discussion paper by the Royal Irish  
Academy Higher Education Futures Taskforce



## PREAMBLE

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*In an era of rapidly changing and unprecedented global challenges, the landscape of higher education continues to evolve. The benefits of higher education are many, for the individual, for society and for the economy: from advancing knowledge and critical-thinking skills and improving health and life expectancy, to enhancing social cohesion and diversity and increasing the quality of civic life. However, the intensifying climate crisis and extreme environmental disruption; the displacement of millions of people and mass migration; demographic change and geopolitical instability; economic and social inequality and cyber-attacks on democracy, pose unprecedented global challenges requiring holistic and creative responses. Mastering these challenges will also galvanise the modernisation of the landscape of higher education on the island of Ireland, in Europe and globally.*

*The Royal Irish Academy Higher Education Futures Taskforce was established in September 2020 to debate, identify and present a bold but viable vision for the higher education sector on the island of Ireland in the years ahead. The Taskforce paid special attention to the development of the higher education ecosystem over the longer term and how its development may affect and change the policy and structural framework for higher education on the island of Ireland. How must we reshape higher education to meet changing societal needs and urgent global challenges?*

*Existing higher education policies date from 2009 (in Northern Ireland) and 2011 (in Ireland) but the landscape has changed substantially since that time. Recent drivers of change include: the development of technological universities; enhanced emphasis on linkages with the further education sector; commitment to greater north-south collaboration in higher education provision and research; the UK's departure from the European Union; new modes of delivery in the higher education sector, accelerated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; and a growing awareness of the value of a strong science-policy dialogue.*

*The establishment of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) in Ireland offers an exciting opportunity to refresh strategic priorities for higher education and research, and to develop further the immense reservoir of expertise and talent housed and nurtured within higher education on the island. These ambitions are bolstered by the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland)'s long-term vision of a higher education sector that is vibrant and of international calibre; pursues excellence in teaching and research; plays a pivotal role in the development of a modern, sustainable knowledge-based economy; supports a confident, shared society; and recognises and values diversity.*

*Informed by recommendations and analysis provided by over 100 organisations, stakeholders, interested parties and individuals in response to an extensive consultation exercise, the Taskforce has produced five papers on the future of higher education in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The titles of the five papers are:*

- 1) Higher education on the island of Ireland in 2035: a values-based vision of institutions advancing society, culture and the economy*
- 2) The future landscape of higher education*
- 3) The role of regions and place in higher education on the island of Ireland*
- 4) Equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education*
- 5) Re-imagining research and innovation in higher education in Ireland and Northern Ireland*

*This paper considers equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in higher education (HE) in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Other position papers will address in detail some subjects that are briefly referenced in this paper.*

*The paper assesses what can be done at national and institutional level for various cohorts of students and staff to improve EDI in HE on the island of Ireland, and focuses on the impact of EDI issues on undergraduate and postgraduate students; postdoctoral researchers; academic staff and non-academic staff. It takes account of the nine grounds of discrimination set out in legislation, north and south – gender; sexual orientation; disability; age; race and ethnicity; religion; marital or civil partnership status; family status; membership of the Traveller community – as well as socio-economic and educational background. It recognises that individuals can be members of multiple underprivileged groups at the same time and may therefore face more barriers to success in the academic system. For example, a student may have a disability and come from a socio-economically deprived background, or s/he may be of mature years and be a member of the Traveller community, or a HE staff member might be disabled and a woman of colour.*

*(October 2021)*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

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<b>AHSS</b>	Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
<b>BAME</b>	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
<b>CAFRE</b>	College of Agriculture Food & Rural Enterprise
<b>CAO</b>	Central Applications Office
<b>CPD</b>	Continuing Professional Development
<b>CSO</b>	Central Statistics Office
<b>DARE</b>	Disability Access Route to Education
<b>DfE</b>	Department for the Economy
<b>DFHERIS</b>	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
<b>DIS</b>	Deprivation Index Scores
<b>DLSS</b>	Disability & Learning Support Service
<b>DoE</b>	Department of Education
<b>ECR</b>	Early Career Researcher
<b>EDI</b>	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
<b>ESS</b>	Employee Self Service
<b>FE</b>	Further Education
<b>FET</b>	Further Education and Training
<b>FETO</b>	Fair Employment Treatment Order
<b>HE</b>	Higher Education
<b>HEA</b>	Higher Education Authority
<b>HEAR</b>	Higher Education Access Route
<b>HEIs</b>	Higher Education Institutions
<b>HRB</b>	Health Research Board
<b>IoT</b>	Institute of Technology
<b>IRC</b>	Irish Research Council
<b>IUA</b>	Irish Universities Association
<b>MaSN</b>	Maximum aggregate Numbers of Students
<b>MoE</b>	Ministry of Education
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
<b>PMS</b>	Professional, Management and Support
<b>PRTLII</b>	Programme of Research in Third Level Institutions
<b>R&amp;D</b>	Research and Development
<b>R&amp;I</b>	Research and Innovation
<b>SALI</b>	Senior Academic Leadership Initiative
<b>SAC</b>	Student Achievement Component
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SDR</b>	Single Data Return
<b>SFI</b>	Science Foundation Ireland
<b>STEMM</b>	Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine
<b>SUSI</b>	Student Universal Support Ireland
<b>THEA</b>	Technological Higher Education Association
<b>TU</b>	Technological University
<b>UDL</b>	Universal Design for Learning
<b>UoSI</b>	University of Sanctuary Ireland
<b>USI</b>	Union of Student's in Ireland
<b>WAPPS</b>	Widening Access and Participation Plans

## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic offers the opportunity to move away from an approach to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in Ireland which has been based on small incremental changes, with the possibility now existing to build forward better, taking bold and ambitious steps. This position paper addresses EDI issues in higher education (HE) on the island of Ireland and considers what can be done at national and institutional level to improve the lived experience for those in the sector. EDI is currently at a pivotal moment as structures set up for gender equality expand to encompass broader EDI areas. As this happens, the structures that guide this process need to be embedded, resourced and strengthened. The recommendations that follow seek to build on much of the good work that has already been done in this area, and to create a higher education sector for 2035 that reflects the values of equality, diversity and inclusion.

### Main recommendations:

EDI in HE in Ireland and Northern Ireland has been to varying degrees fragmented and reactive rather than proactive. To address these issues in each jurisdiction, there is an urgent need for an overarching EDI strategy in HE (and further education (FE)). The EDI subgroup recognises that for political and legislative reasons developments may not proceed at the same pace in both jurisdictions. This group recommends that an EDI strategy should ideally be framed as an all-island charter (combining current targets and initiatives – gender plans, consent framework, Athena SWAN, University of Sanctuary etc.) which all higher education institutions (HEIs) (and further education institutions (FEIs)) would wish to subscribe to. It is also recommended that an EDI Advisory Council (or councils: one for each jurisdiction) be established to set targets, make recommendations and to monitor progress. The proposed EDI council (or councils) would be advisory to the Irish government, the Northern Ireland Executive and the HEIs. A co-ordinated EDI strategy would eliminate discrepancies in the relative focus on gender, religion, race, language, ethnicity, disability, LGBTQ+ issues etc. This strategy would empower HEIs to move away from reactive initiatives and would allow planning for the short, medium and long term. A harmonised approach would also enable a holistic approach to EDI, which considers the entire educational journey of the individual, rather than merely the segmented phases.

### Data

1. **A centralised and standardised approach** to data collection is necessary to allow for intersectionality<sup>1</sup>, benchmarking and longitudinal approaches. A properly resourced, uniform system would enable joined-up analysis of educational pathways and outcomes. Despite having multiple datasets, they are not linked up and the lack of a co-ordinated approach to data hinders efforts at improving equality, diversity and inclusion across the HE sector. Furthermore, agreed national categories for data collection would be extremely beneficial. Data which are not currently gathered, especially, for example, **linguistic data**, should be included in future EDI data collection, monitoring and policy development. A clear, societal/community understanding as to why these data are held and to what ends they will be used can be communicated by centralised systems. **Universal campaigns around surveys and data** to build trust and transparency are necessary. Finally, with centralised data collection, a strong case must be made for necessary legislative adjustments to enable comprehensive data collection across multiple and intersecting datasets.
2. Policy decisions need to be made using appropriate and comprehensive EDI data. Where it becomes obvious that a particular characteristic is under-represented in a discipline, employment sector, etc., then action can be initiated to determine why and remedy it. The current gaps in data collection need to be eliminated and data collected on all possible grounds for discrimination. A **robust and comprehensive system** will allow for tailored supports and interventions.

### Students

1. **Multiple Pathways:** There are an increasing number of access and transition pathways available for higher education students, north and south. These pathways must have long-term strategies with implementation or action plans on how to achieve them at a national and institutional level and must be coupled with supports that move with the student through the system. A credit recognition and accumulation system facilitated through hybrid, blended and on-campus

<sup>1</sup> Intersectionality is here defined as 'the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage' (Oxford English Dictionary). Our report recognises that individuals can suffer multiple disadvantage/discrimination in their attempts to access and progress through the HE systems.

learning, with greater availability of joint qualifications across learning environments and between north and south is the way forward. There should be pathways through apprenticeships and employment with lifelong opportunities for updating and reskilling. Such pathways should include a system of mutual recognition of educational qualifications and credits from other jurisdictions, recognising that HE can be accessed at all stages of life and career, not just directly after second level education. Learners will have multiple access and exit points.

2. **Flexibility of provision:** The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the capacity and flexibility that the HE/FE community can achieve when required. With many programmes of study capable of being delivered online or in a mixed mode, the doors are opened to a much wider range of students. Those who, because of dependents, part- or full-time jobs, disabilities, geographical location etc., are not able to be on site for full-time courses can still engage in learning and add extra value to their other responsibilities. New mixed models of delivery can open new opportunities, especially if partnered with mutual recognition of credits. However, these changes will require that infrastructures in society such as broadband, IT literacy etc. are in place or ever more multiple deprivations will occur.
3. **A student-centred approach to curriculum planning and delivery:** HEIs north and south should provide a student-centred system underpinned by principles of human rights. Inclusivity should not be solely the responsibility of the Access Office but should be a whole-institution responsibility. A co-ordinated and streamlined system is required at institutional and national level whereby a student can access information, application support and resources in a 'one-stop-shop' – not just at entry level but throughout the HE years. Barriers, both physical and psychological, which prevent access to and full engagement in HE by students should be removed. Financial barriers to participation by socio-economically disadvantaged students (especially at postgraduate level) should also be removed. Barriers to undergraduate and postgraduate students from Ireland seeking to study in universities in Northern Ireland and vice-versa should similarly be removed.
4. **Funding:** There is a need for better and more flexible funding for HEIs and for individual students with equal recognition for funding purposes of part-time and full-time programmes and for undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The challenges faced by students in accessing affordable accommodation also need to be addressed. While bursaries and additional resources are currently available for some categories of under-represented students, these might be expanded to include particular programmes where there is under-representation e.g. woman in engineering; men in the caring professions; black minorities in various programmes etc. There should be harmonisation of funding conditions between the various postgraduate funding organisations.

### **Staff**

1. Even with a more equitable employment and promotions system, it will take years to adjust to the historical exclusion of certain groups in the HE sector. There is therefore a need for **intervention, for affirmative action, minimum numbers and targeted initiatives** to ensure that diversity is achieved in the next 15 years and not in the next 50. Structured opportunities are needed to help the diversification of staff and to address areas where under-representation occurs. In all EDI initiatives and Athena SWAN submissions, HEIs should use a framework which is inclusive of **Professional Management and Support (PMS) staff** alongside academic and research staff. Positive discrimination/affirmative action should be used to recruit under-represented groups to PMS grades. For **Early Career Researchers (ECRs)** a central agreement is needed, based on their needs, whatever their background and characteristics, with a commitment to EDI, a fair research culture and integrity for people and projects.
2. An **inclusive institutional culture** should be at the heart of all EDI initiatives, with a clear link between values and decisions and actions. Governance and leadership are key to making this happen and therefore all appointments to managerial positions need **EDI awareness and experience as key recruitment and promotions/reward criteria**. Vice-presidents for equality, diversity and inclusion (or equivalent) should be part of every university management team. **Training and education** in EDI should be obligatory for all staff and students both at entry level and as part of continuing professional development (CPD).

## 2. INTRODUCTION - THE IMPORTANCE OF EDI IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Most democracies have accepted the importance of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and have ensured that these principles are built into legal frameworks. In Ireland, the Employment Equality Acts 2000–2015 prohibit discrimination on grounds of gender in relation to hiring and promoting staff; the Equal Status Acts 2000–2015 ban discrimination under nine grounds; the Universities Acts 1997–2021, the Regional Technical College Acts 1994–1999 and the Institute of Technology Act 2006 require higher education institutions to implement equality policies. The Higher Education Authority Acts 1971–2020 gave the Higher Education Authority (HEA) the legislative responsibility to promote equality in HE settings and the Irish Human Rights Equality Commission Act 2014 requires public bodies (including universities) to integrate a human rights and equality assessment into their strategic planning processes and outcomes. In Northern Ireland, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998), the Fair Employment and Treatment Order (1998) and Amendment Regulations (2003) outlaw discrimination on similar grounds and adherence to these legislative measures are monitored by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

Besides legal considerations, there are emotional, moral, economic and philosophical reasons to ensure that EDI is recognised and adhered to and there is substantial research to show that diversity brings many advantages to an organisation – increased profitability and creativity, stronger governance and better problem-solving abilities. ‘Employees with diverse backgrounds bring to bear their own perspectives, ideas and experiences, helping to create organisations that are resilient, and effective and which outperform organisations that do not invest in diversity.’<sup>3</sup> Quality and excellence depend on securing and supporting the widest pool of talent. Diversity is not a challenge to quality, and equality and excellence can and must co-exist. There is a growing conviction that EDI must be embedded in institutional strategies, national policies and sectoral actions.

EDI has increasingly become part of the strategic planning of HEIs throughout Europe for reasons ranging from social responsibilities, legal obligations, recruitment strategies to embedded values.<sup>4</sup> As stated in an European Universities’ Association (EUA) report on ‘Diversity, equity and inclusion in European higher education institutions’, ‘Diverse research environments are demonstrably more creative and produce better results; diverse learning environments are likewise more stimulating than homogenous ones. Consequently, promoting diversity, equity and inclusion in Europe’s universities supports institutional growth and capacity building to serve better the needs of European society.’<sup>5</sup> A vision for higher education in Europe in the coming decades articulated by the EUA states:

Diversity and social cohesion are important components of sustainable development. Universities will provide a scientific mindset and opportunities to people from different backgrounds and reflect the diversity of society. Access to higher education will be equitable and open to all who qualify. Universities will be equipped to welcome students and staff from all backgrounds. Through this, universities will play an important role in addressing social disparities that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis. This will be a crucial element in Europe’s recovery. Universities and their missions will widely benefit from equity and inclusion, and it is therefore in their core interest to promote these values in society.<sup>6</sup>

A 2019 position paper published by LERU expresses a similar opinion<sup>7</sup> while in Ireland this view is also echoed by the Irish Universities Association (IUA).<sup>8</sup>

2 Equality Challenge Unit 2010 Anti-discrimination law in Northern Ireland: an overview for the higher education sector. London. Equality Challenge Unit.

3 World Economic Forum 2019 The business case for diversity in the workplace is now overwhelming. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/04/business-case-for-diversity-in-the-workplace/>

4 European University Association 2019 Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in European Higher Education Institutions. Brussels. European University Association. [https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/web\\_diversity%20equity%20and%20inclusion%20in%20european%20higher%20education%20institutions.pdf](https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/web_diversity%20equity%20and%20inclusion%20in%20european%20higher%20education%20institutions.pdf)

5 *Ibid*, p. 5

6 European University Association 2021 Universities without walls: a vision for 2030. Brussels. European University Association <https://www.eua.eu/resources/publications/957:universities-without-walls-%E2%80%93-eua%E2%80%99s-vision-for-europe%E2%80%99s-universities-in-2030.html>

7 LERU 2019 Equality, diversity and inclusion at universities: the power of a systemic approach. p.3 <https://www.leru.org/publications/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-at-universities>

This commitment is reflected in the IUA Charter for Irish Universities (2018)<sup>9</sup> which includes increased equality and diversity as one of its six core commitments. It is also reflected in the Gender and Diversity (2018) statement of the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA).<sup>10</sup>

### Consultation

In preparing this position paper, the EDI subgroup in the Royal Irish Academy HE Futures Taskforce<sup>11</sup> consulted widely with a range of HE stakeholders and organisations, including undergraduate and postgraduate students; research, academic and administrative staff; and organisations representing diverse and marginalised groups. In response to a call issued in January 2021 by the Taskforce, more than 70 written submissions were received, most of which commented on EDI issues. In addition, a series of roundtable discussions, with more than 65 participants, were held by the EDI subgroup in May and June, in which issues relating to students, staff and data collection were addressed. Members of the subgroup also engaged in bilateral meetings with a wide range of stakeholders.

It is clear that much has been achieved in recent years in the area of EDI in HE. The HEA and the DFHERIS are currently engaged in a consultation process on the development of the next National Access Plan (for students) that will run from 2022 to 2026. We are also cognisant of the work of the HEA EDI Centre for Excellence on staff issues and by Athena SWAN on updating its charter and application frameworks for institutional and departmental awards (June 2021).

The main issues arising from these consultations have been grouped under three headings – Data collection and monitoring; Students; and Staff.

## 3. DATA COLLECTION AND MONITORING

Data collection and monitoring are essential in informing policy on EDI and in measuring progress. Data on EDI are collected in order to understand the diverse make-up of educational institutions and to monitor trends over time. Systematic data collection and monitoring can help better understand and map inequalities in HE and identify where change and targeted policy decisions are necessary. Throughout Europe, HEIs collect data for transparency; accountability and external reporting purposes; to identify disadvantaged/less-represented people; to identify different needs of diverse groups; to raise awareness about specific activities; and to measure performance and impact of activities towards EDI.<sup>12</sup>

Stark differences exist in the collection of HE EDI data across the island of Ireland. In Northern Ireland, as a result of reporting requirements under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act and Article 55 of the Fair Employment Treatment Order (FETO), detailed, extensive data are collected on the religious beliefs, age, marital status, sexual orientations and disabilities of HE staff. Annual reports and three-year reviews must be compiled by universities. The UK has developed an extensive data monitoring system to better understand the representation of staff and students in HE/FE and data collection and monitoring are co-ordinated by HESA (<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/>).

In Ireland, the HEA's Centre for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (formerly named the Centre for Excellence in Gender Equality) (<https://hea.ie/policy/gender/>) is responsible for collecting and publishing gender data on staff in HEIs. The remit of this unit has recently been expanded and it is now also collating data on race. A different section of the HEA, the Statistics Unit, is responsible for collecting, analysing and disseminating student and graduate data from all HEA-funded institutions annually (<https://hea.ie/statistics/>). This unit uses Deprivation Index Scores (DIS) to provide data for a socio-economic analysis of students.

8 Irish Universities Association, 'Equality, diversity and inclusion', available online at: <https://www.iua.ie/ourwork/diversity-equality/> (accessed 11 August 2021).

9 Irish Universities Association 2018 Ireland's Future Talent: A Charter for Irish Universities. Dublin. Irish Universities Association.

10 Technological Higher Education Association 2018 Gender and Diversity Statement. Dublin. Technological Higher Education Association

11 Five subgroups were formed in the HE Futures Taskforce addressing several aspects central to HE.

12 European University Association 2019 Diversity, equity and inclusion in European higher education institutions. Brussels. European University Association. p. 34  
[https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/web\\_diversity%20equity%20and%20inclusion%20in%20european%20higher%20education%20institutions.pdf](https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/web_diversity%20equity%20and%20inclusion%20in%20european%20higher%20education%20institutions.pdf)

Major research funders such as Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and the Irish Research Council (IRC) monitor and collect data on the gender breakdown of awardees and applicants to funding schemes. The IRC has in 2021 developed new and inclusive gender identifiers for use in its multiple schemes.<sup>13</sup> In Ireland, HEIs gather employee data at the point of recruitment (varying from items 5–9 of the grounds for discrimination list), while the collection of EDI data for students is fragmented across multiple formats and institutional groups. The HEA has a statutory responsibility to promote the attainment of equality of opportunity in HE with key guidance provided by the Report of the Expert Group on Gender Equality (June 2016) and the Department of Education's Gender Action Plan 2018–2020 (currently being updated). While data on gender are now collected and reported, data on other forms of diversity are not widely or consistently captured. In May 2020 the Athena SWAN Ireland Intersectionality Working Group produced a statement to explain the rationale and the complexities of collecting ethnicity data.<sup>14</sup> In December 2020 the HEA conducted a national survey of HEI staff to develop a picture of race equality across the Irish HE sector and in 2021 HEIs will return staff ethnicity data to the HEA. Ethnicity data are currently gathered through voluntary submission of information and surveys.

In the heads of new HEA legislation published by the Irish government in 2021, provision has been made under head 49 (supply of personal information) that HEIs will provide the following information to the HEA if requested (and subject to the Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018):

- (a) Personal information relating to a student attending the designated institution of higher education or funded body including name, address, date of birth, student number, PPSN data, Eircode, SUSI grant code, CAO data, details of educational history, details of ethnicity, disability and socio-economic status;
- (b) Personal data of a staff member of the designated institution of higher education or funded body, including PPSN, salary bands of staff, gender breakdown of staff, disability information, ethnicity and;
- (c) Other personal information as may be specified by the Minister by Order in consultation with An tÚdarás.<sup>15</sup>

This proposed legislation on the collection of data will be extremely important in improving mechanisms for data collection at a national level and it will also allow for the collection of intersectional data.

The Athena SWAN charter has resulted in much greater attention to data collection and statistics and these form a central part of any applications for Gold, Silver or Bronze status. The HEA issued a statement on the Athena SWAN charter in Ireland (July 2019), revising the requirements for Athena SWAN certification and eligibility for research funding. In the UK, the resourcing of data has been driven by the need to measure EDI in research evaluation, in teaching quality and enhancement and in access programmes. Data is required in Ireland to demonstrate compliance with Athena SWAN and to make returns to the HEA.

## Issues and challenges

The main challenges for EDI data collection and monitoring can be grouped under the following headings:

**Uneven data capture** across the nine grounds for discrimination: While data on gender have been increasingly gathered in recent years, there are limited data on disability; race and ethnicity; socio-economic status; sexual orientation and in relation to the Traveller community. No data is collected on linguistic diversity. Recent efforts by the HEA to gather more data on race and ethnicity have been hampered by poor response rates and limited self-disclosure.

**Fragmentation of systems:** There is no universal overview of data capture in Ireland and consequently there is much fragmentation and many discrepancies in data collection. The absence of a standardised/universal system poses challenges for HEIs and inhibits efforts at comparisons and benchmarking. When each dataset is individual rather than aggregated, the system itself becomes disjointed and it is very hard to make policy recommendations and to track progress. There is also an absence of co-ordinated longitudinal educational data across the various educational phases.

<sup>13</sup> Irish Research Council, The Irish Research Council expands its gender categories to be more inclusive, available online at: <https://research.ie/what-we-do/loveirishresearch/blog/the-irish-research-council-expands-its-gender-categories-to-be-more-inclusive/> (accessed 11 August 2021)

<sup>14</sup> Athena Swan Ireland 2020 Statement by the national Athena SWAN Ireland intersectionality working group on the use of ethnicity categories in Irish higher education. Dublin. Athena Swan Ireland.

<sup>15</sup> Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science 2021 General Scheme of the Higher Education Authority Bill 2021. Dublin. Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

**Intersectional data:** There is an absence of integrated, intersectional national-level data for HE in Ireland. Different datasets need to be combined in order to create a fuller understanding of the student/staff experience. The National Access Plan can use data from sources such as Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), CAO, Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), but the lack of intersectionality of these sources mitigates against a co-ordinated framework for policy and intervention. There is a need for an intersectional approach to fully combine different characteristics across student and staff data cohorts.

**Systems and definitions:** There is no sophisticated central management information system for data collection for HE in Ireland. The definitions around categories of data can also be problematic and are not easily resolved at a local level. Appropriate HE technology infrastructure with reporting timelines are not currently in place. HEIs find themselves in a reactive position to requirements laid down by the HEA and need to allocate necessary systems and resources. Current systems allow for data collection at staff appointment and student registration but there is no system in place to gather data during career/educational pathways. The Employee Self Service (ESS) system for staff can be adapted but only with voluntary disclosure. The collection of data on the socio-economic status of students is gathered using a DIS which relates to a geographical area rather than an individual. The use of a geographical, rather than individualised model for creating socio-economic statistics for HEIs<sup>16</sup> is contested and does not take account the disadvantage of students on full SUSI grants coming from outside of disadvantaged areas or groupings.

**Trust and transparency:** Building confidence and trust in data collection is a big challenge; trust needs to be developed in the importance of collecting data and in how it will be used. There are legacy issues surrounding reporting personal characteristics such as sexuality and disability. Clarity on who holds the data and the purpose for its collection is also necessary. A feedback loop relating to survey requests is not always completed. Consequently staff and students may not value and appreciate the importance of engaging with this form of data collection. Trust and transparency are fundamental requirements for people to feel confident that data capture will not negatively impact upon their individual experiences or development within the HEI.

**GDPR and legislation regarding data collection:** National bodies and HEIs must gather and process data in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018 and the Data Protection Act 2018. In the current framework, it can be difficult for two different branches of government to share data. DFHERIS needs to have its own legislation to enable data sharing and the combination of five or more datasets including the student record system (held by HEA); SOLAS (student learner support system, to see transitions between FE and HE); post primary and primary pupils data system; and SUSI. Linking these would give much richer knowledge of student populations, but current legislation inhibits advanced data capture and sharing.

**Linguistic diversity:** Linguistic diversity does not feature in data collection or EDI policies in Ireland. Discrimination can often occur because of people's linguistic background, and linguistic aspects such as accent, competence and difference can lead to conscious or unconscious exclusion processes. As has been observed by scholars, language can in effect be the gateway or proxy for other forms of discrimination where social or racial factors are inferred through language.<sup>17</sup> Policy makers in Ireland do not know the linguistic backgrounds of students and staff in HEIs, and EDI strategies make no reference to linguistic diversity. Though the Central Statistics Office (CSO) now tracks language profiles in Ireland, and linguistic diversity is enshrined in Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, it is strikingly absent in HEI policies and data collection.

**Limitations of data:** Although data are important, inclusion relates to lived experience and goes beyond data and statistics. It is important to ascertain the person-centred outcome behind the data and the quality metric that is used to capture this. The richness of the lived experiences of students and staff is very significant and needs to be captured as part of all EDI initiatives.

16 Higher Education Authority 2019. A spatial & socio-economic profile of higher education institutions in Ireland: using census small area deprivation index scores derived from student home address data, academic year 2017/18. Dublin. Higher Education Authority

17 O'Connor, A. 2021. Linguistic diversity in an inclusive World. Galway. Cois Coirbe  
<https://impact.nuigalway.ie/news/linguistic-diversity-in-an-inclusive-world/>

Across Europe, institutions use qualitative data such as success stories, role models and case studies to highlight the impact of EDI initiatives at an individual level. As an EUA report noted, 'This may be particularly important and useful when adopting measures for people who do not necessarily belong to an underrepresented group but who are still disadvantaged, vulnerable and/or may need specific support or a change in institutional culture and attitudes (e.g., people with caring responsibilities, people identifying as LGBT+). In these cases, the goal is not necessarily to increase the total number or share within the university community, but to ensure that the environment is welcoming and avoid discrimination.'<sup>18</sup> Certain elements of EDI resist measurability and can be hard to capture, such as institutional cultural change. Quantitative data help set targets but qualitative approaches are also needed to address wider cultural issues and barriers to equality and to build robust action plans. Data can therefore give a baseline for improvement, but must be followed by qualitative, real-life interventions.

## Recommendations

- **A centralised and standardised approach to data collection** is necessary to allow for intersectionality, benchmarking and longitudinal approaches. A uniform system would enable joined-up analysis of educational pathways and outcomes. Despite our having multiple datasets, they are not linked up and the lack of a co-ordinated approach hinders efforts at improving EDI across the Irish HE sector. Furthermore, agreed national categories for data collection would be extremely beneficial. A centralised system, bringing together expertise to agree a list of what is collected in terms of benchmarking, would be more efficient. The same basic data should be collected in Ireland and Northern Ireland. A clear societal/community understanding of why these data would be held and to what ends they would be used could be communicated by a centralised system. Finally, with centralised data collection, a strong voice can be made for necessary legislative adjustments to enable comprehensive data collection across multiple and intersecting datasets.
- **Universal campaigns around surveys** and data to build trust and transparency are necessary. A single co-ordinated EDI survey a year is preferable to multiple local and national requests for information. A feedback loop around such surveys needs to be created so that people know what happens to the data and how they are used.
- Data that are not currently gathered, especially, for example, **linguistic data**, should be included in future EDI data collection, monitoring a policy development.
- Policy decisions need to be made using appropriate and comprehensive EDI data. Where it becomes obvious that a particular characteristic is under-represented in a discipline, employment sector, etc., then action can be initiated to determine why and remedy it. Current gaps need to be eliminated and data collected on all possible grounds for discrimination. A **robust and comprehensive system** will allow for tailored supports and interventions.

## 4. EDI AND STUDENTS

The vision of the National Access Plan (2015–2021)<sup>19</sup> in Ireland was to ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing HE at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. In December 2020 the Minister for Higher and Further Education, Research, Innovation and Science stated that it is his ambition to ensure third level education is accessible to everyone, regardless of age, race, geography or gender.<sup>20</sup> In April 2021, while our work was being undertaken, the Department of Further and Higher Education (DFHERIS) and the HEA launched a consultation process inviting submissions on the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education for the period 2022 to 2026. This resulted in action during the summer months by the HEA and DFHERIS, removing what had been long-standing barriers to access by some minority groups, in particular refugees, asylum seekers and some students with special educational needs.<sup>21</sup> Some of the submissions made to this EDI group were made before these barriers were removed.

<sup>18</sup> European University Association 2019 Diversity, equity and inclusion in European higher education institutions. Brussels. European University Association. p. 36 [https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/web\\_diversity%20equity%20and%20inclusion%20in%20european%20higher%20education%20institutions.pdf](https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/web_diversity%20equity%20and%20inclusion%20in%20european%20higher%20education%20institutions.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> The National Access Plan is currently being reviewed and revised.

<sup>20</sup> Minister Simon Harris's statement, December 2020, added: 'To do that we need accurate data and evidence.'

<sup>21</sup> For example, on September 12 2021 Minister Harris announced that the additional resources necessary to enable a student with disabilities to attend a private higher education college would be made available. Previously such additional supports were available only to students attending publicly-funded institutions.

There are currently about 236,000 students in HEIs in Ireland – 53% are female and 47% are male.<sup>22</sup> Participation in higher education in Ireland is among the highest in the OECD.<sup>23</sup> The 2016 census showed that 60% of young people in the population have at least a minimum of Level 8 (honours degree level) qualification. However, some specific categories continue to be under-represented. These include young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds: Irish Travellers;<sup>24</sup> persons with a disability; and lone parents, only 18% of whom had a higher education qualification.<sup>25</sup> There are particular categories of young people with multiple disadvantages whose participation rates in HE are particularly low or unknown, e.g. refugees and asylum seekers; young people in direct provision; and people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The number of mature students in Irish HEIs (i.e. those aged 23 years and over) is also low by international standards. In 2010/11 over 16% of first-time HE students were mature students. However, this proportion fell to just over 10% in 2018/19.<sup>26</sup>

In 2019/2020, 62,500 Northern Ireland students were enrolled at UK HEIs. Of the 62,500 Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled at UK HEIs, 73.6% (45,980) were enrolled at Northern Ireland HEIs (including 6.8% studying locally at the Open University).<sup>27</sup> 58% were female and 42% male. About 12% self-reported as having a disability. In terms of ethnicity, 80% were white, 5% were either black, Indian, Pakistani, Chinese or other Asian, 1% were of mixed race, and in the case of the remaining 15% their ethnicity was unknown. There were a total of ten Irish Travellers enrolled in HE in Northern Ireland.<sup>28</sup> In Northern Ireland, 40% of the young population are graduates compared to 60% in Ireland.<sup>29</sup> The low percentage of males in Northern Ireland HEIs from lower socio-economic groups is a matter of concern.<sup>30</sup> Funding and policy decisions in relation to HE are a matter for the Northern Ireland Department for the Economy (DfE). The DfE controls the number of undergraduates at Queen's University Belfast (QUB), Ulster University (UU) and those from outside the UK. The DfE sets a cap on the maximum aggregate numbers of students (MaSN) at both universities based on financial calculations. It is estimated that over 5,000 A level students from Northern Ireland attend university in either England, Wales or Scotland and about two-thirds of these students never return to Northern Ireland – representing a loss to the economy and to society. The issue is more nuanced than these figures suggest given 'that the number of Northern Ireland students who applied only to, and are accepted at, institutions in other parts of the UK ('Determined Leavers') is much higher than the number of Northern Ireland students who have a firm NI choice but who ultimately accept an offer in UK ('Reluctant Leavers'). These figures would suggest that there are more important factors motivating students to leave Northern Ireland.'<sup>31</sup>

In September 2012 'Access to Success' for widening participation in HE in Northern Ireland was launched. This strategy aims to facilitate and increase the participation of under-represented groups in HE, in particular students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with learning difficulties and disabilities. Under this strategy, all HEIs in Northern Ireland are required to prepare Widening Access and Participation Plans (WAPPS) annually and to publish them on their websites. WAPPS provide a summary of the institution's widening participation strategy, observations of the institution's achievements against regional benchmarks and details of anticipated progress towards the institution's own targets. HE in Northern Ireland is delivered principally through the universities (QUB, UU and the Open University) and university colleges (St Mary's, Stranmillis, CAFRE etc.). The six FE colleges also deliver a broad range of HE courses, including foundation degree courses, which are attended by almost 20% of all students enrolled on HE courses in Northern Ireland.<sup>32</sup>

22 Higher Education Authority 2018/19 student demographics, all HEA-funded HEIs. Available online at: <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/enrolments/student-demographics-2018-19/> (accessed 11 August 2021). 'Total enrolments in higher education have increased 12.6% between 2014/15 and 2019/20 – up from circa 209,000 to circa 236,000.' See <https://hea.ie/statistics/>

23 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2019 Education at a glance 2019: OECD indicators. Paris. OECD Publishing.

24 The total number of Irish Travellers in HE in Ireland in 2015 was only 35 and had increased four years later to 61, below the target of 80 in 2019 which had been set in the National Access Plan.

25 Central Statistics Office, Census 2016 Reports, available online at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/census/census2016reports/> (accessed 11 August 2021)

26 There is a direct correlation between overall national unemployment levels and HE participation by mature students.

27 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, Enrolments at UK higher education institutions: Northern Ireland analysis 2019/20, available at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/HEI-enrolments-bulletin-2019-20.pdf> (accessed 1 October 2021)

28 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, Higher education statistical fact sheet 4, available at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/he-statistical-factsheet-4-enrolments-at-HEI-by-equality-2019-20.pdf> (accessed 1 October 2021)

29 Department for the Economy, Higher education statistical fact sheets, available at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/higher-education-statistical-fact-sheets> (accessed 1 October 2021)

30 In July 2020 the Minister for Education in Northern Ireland announced the appointment of an expert panel to tackle educational underachievement in Northern Ireland. The panel, chaired by Dr Noel Purdy of Stranmillis University College, published its report entitled 'A fair start' in May 2021.

31 HE Futures Taskforce position paper: Re-imagining research and innovation in Ireland and Northern Ireland. See Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland. Minister's response from a question on HE migration to Great Britain (Gordon Lyons MLA, Minister) 16 July 2021.

32 Department for the Economy 2019 Northern Ireland Higher Education Strategy: Issue 5. Belfast. Department for the Economy

## Issues and challenges

### Financial barriers

During the consultation process, it was pointed out that the cost of attending HE in Ireland can be prohibitive for some students – both those who are eligible and those above the threshold for the SUSI grant. It can also be prohibitive for those who wish to attend HE on a part-time basis as SUSI grants have not been available for part-time students.

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) has consistently called for the removal of the capitation fee of €3,000 per annum which they state is the highest fee for HE in the EU. The USI has also pointed out that financial support available under the SUSI grant has not kept pace with inflation and that it is no longer adequate to cover the costs of attending HE, and that it is not available for part-time students. The high cost of accommodation for students living away from home can be a major barrier; especially in bigger cities where accommodation costs can be prohibitive. Finance can also be a barrier for those just above the grant limit whose families cannot or will not support them financially; mature students; and lone parents from geographically remote areas. Some submissions commented negatively on what they regarded as the undue bureaucracy associated with accessing grants through the SUSI system and asked that there should be more assistance available for students applying for the grant.

### Students with a disability

Although an increased number of students with disabilities have registered with support services in HE in the past ten years, a significant number are still reluctant to disclose their disability or to seek additional support because of fear of stigmatisation. For example, a survey of students with autism carried out in Dublin City University (DCU) in 2016 found that more than 50% had not disclosed their diagnosis to the disability and learning support service (DLSS), and even fewer (just over 25%) had disclosed their diagnosis to academic staff.<sup>33</sup> Responding to the concerns of students with autism identified in the survey, DCU set out to implement eight principles underpinning an autism-friendly university and in 2018 DCU was recognised by AslAm<sup>34</sup> as Ireland's first autism-friendly university. Other universities have also introduced autism-friendly initiatives.<sup>35</sup>

Key barriers for students with a disability are financial and attitudinal, and include difficulty in meeting the costs of HE, accessing suitable housing and accessing the various supports for which students with a disability are eligible. In addition to being eligible for SUSI grants, students with a disability may also be eligible for Personal Assistant (PA) hours through the HSE and for an academic PA. Submissions to this subgroup highlighted frustration in having to apply and provide the same information and details to a number of different service and grant providers. These submissions pointed out the need for a constant and seamless flow of constructive consultation and communication with disabled students and a culture that encourages students to speak up about issues.

### Refugees and asylum seekers

Until 2015, refugees and asylum seekers were not treated as EU students and were not eligible for SUSI grants unless they had been at school in Ireland for at least three years and had completed the Leaving Certificate. HE tuition costs for this group were extremely high as they were categorised for fee purposes as 'international students', for whom HE fees can be up to three times greater than fees for EU students.<sup>36</sup> This meant that HE fees for asylum seekers and refugees could be between €9,750 to over €50,000 per annum depending on the field of study. In 2015 a limited scheme was introduced whereby 'eligible applicants' in the protection system became eligible for some funding. In October 2020, it was confirmed that the rules would be relaxed and the scheme placed on a longer-term footing. Under the new scheme applicants will not have to have attended three academic years in the Irish school system nor have to have obtained the Leaving Certificate, but they will have to have been in the 'protection or leave to remain process' for three years. This is a welcome development and removes what was a significant barrier for this category of students.

33 Living with autism as a university student at Dublin City University: developing an autism friendly university <https://www.dcu.ie/autism-friendly>

34 AslAm is Ireland's national autism charity. AslAm is working to create a society in which every autistic person is empowered to reach their own personal potential and fully participate in society.

35 See for example, UCC's Autism Friendly University Initiative: <https://www.ucc.ie/en/autismfriendly/>

36 HEIs in Ireland have discretion in setting fees for international students.

University of Sanctuary Ireland (UoSI) is an Irish initiative to encourage and celebrate the good practice of universities, colleges and other education institutes welcoming refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants into their university communities and fostering a culture of welcome and inclusion for all those seeking sanctuary. Across the island of Ireland, many universities and colleges, public and private, have pledged to support those newcomers seeking sanctuary in Ireland. Currently DCU, University of Limerick (UL), University College Cork (UCC), University College Dublin (UCD), National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), Maynooth University (MU) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD) have received the University of Sanctuary Award, as has Athlone Institute of Technology. Many other colleges across the island are working on obtaining the title.

### **Postgraduate students**

Postgraduate students, north and south, face specific challenges. These vary depending on whether the students are enrolled on a taught or research master's programme or are funded or non-funded doctoral students. Limited grants are available for some master's programmes but the cost and loss of earnings associated with full-time attendance at such programmes can be a barrier for students from less advantaged backgrounds. In the Arts and Social Sciences, many (if not most) doctoral students are self-funding and are not eligible for funding, either institutional or otherwise. In STEMM subjects, doctoral students are likely to be funded or involved in research projects – funded either from institutional or national sources. Funding may be available from the IRC, SFI, the Health Research Board (HRB) or from a private philanthropic organisation. For students who have access to a funded doctoral programme, the amount and conditions of funding vary, depending on the source.

While many postgraduate students will become the researchers and academics of the future, in Ireland about 70% of doctoral graduates do not ultimately enter academic life but play an important role in a variety of other positions and professions. During the consultation process, the variation in the funding amounts and conditions for research students was questioned. It was pointed out that some funded PhD students are not entitled to paid maternity or sick leave. This inequity impacts especially on less advantaged students who have no access to any other means of funding. It was argued that all funded research students should be treated equally in terms of entitlements, including sick and maternity leave, irrespective of funder, discipline or institution.

The disparity in eligibility for funding for postgraduate studies in HEIs north and south was also highlighted. For example, students from Northern Ireland are eligible for IRC Government of Ireland scholarships as there are no residency requirements for these, whereas students from the south must satisfy three years' residency in the UK to qualify for a postgraduate studentship (covering fees and maintenance) in Northern Ireland.<sup>37</sup> It was reported that very few Irish students were successful in receiving funding for postgraduate courses in Northern Ireland in recent years. It is hoped that the decision of the Irish government to set up a north-south research fund of €40 million, and their agreement that Northern Irish students will be eligible to participate in Erasmus+ will help to alleviate this situation. Difficulties relating to recognition and transfer of credits and qualifications between north and south were also raised.

International students drew attention to the very high fees that are charged for some programmes and the inadequate support they receive in some HEIs. While the USI has been vocal in its support for postgraduate and undergraduate students, a number of other self-organised groups, such as the Postgraduate Workers' Alliance, the International Students for Change and the non-EU Students' Society, have been set up in response to the concerns of international students.

### **Limited entry routes and lack of flexibility**

In Northern Ireland access to HE is and has been available for many years through a variety of routes, especially through FE courses. Part-time study is also common in Northern Irish universities (especially in the Open University) and HEIs receive funding for part-time and full-time students on a pro-rata basis. Academic credits can be accumulated relatively seamlessly between FE and HE in Northern Ireland.

In Ireland, while in recent years an increasing number of places are reserved in HEIs for applicants from further education and training (FET) courses, some submissions made the point that the numbers of such places are limited, can be difficult to access and are not available on all HE courses, especially high-demand professional courses. There was general agreement

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<sup>37</sup> Department for the Economy 2020 Postgraduate studentships terms and conditions academic year 2020/2021. Belfast. Department for the Economy

that more and better progression routes are required from FE to HE. Greater flexibility in access and provision was called for so that learners can engage with learning throughout their lives in the way that is appropriate for them at the time. This would break down barriers and improve the overall experience. Requests were also made for more clarity about the recognition of prior learning in accessing HEIs. The overarching message was that the current system in Ireland is unduly rigid and needs to be more responsive to student needs.

There were many requests for more support for part-time students. The lack of funding and flexibility militates against those who are unable to access full-time courses either because of family, geographical or financial reasons. This impacts mature students, lone parents, those with a disability and those with caring responsibilities.

### Teaching and learning

A number of submissions highlighted the importance of an inclusive approach to curriculum, in terms of design, content and pedagogy. The authors of this paper are aware that inclusive pedagogies have been encouraged for many years<sup>38</sup> and are used by lecturers and teachers at all levels of education. Many submissions suggested an approach referred to as 'Universal Design for Learning' (UDL) which is based on the principles of universal design that are used in architecture, space planning and product development. While students, especially those with disabilities and special educational needs, face a variety of barriers that they must overcome to fully engage in a lesson, UDL addresses physical, emotional, behavioural, neurological and cultural issues that impact education by promoting equity and inclusion.

Different views were expressed about online learning, with some submissions highlighting its advantages and others pointing out its challenges. Experience during the pandemic when campuses were closed to students showed that most HEIs, north and south, responded with alacrity to the new and unprecedented situation, and teaching continued online for almost all students. While this brought benefits to some, others were disadvantaged for various reasons, e.g. lack of internet connectivity, lack of the necessary equipment, the demands of child-minding while schools and creches were also closed, and overcrowded home conditions for students who were already disadvantaged, e.g. members of the Traveller community, students in direct provision and students in shared and overcrowded housing.

### Recommendations

**Multiple pathways:** There are an increasing number of access and transition pathways available for HE students, north and south. These pathways must have a long-term strategy with implementation or action plans on how to achieve them at a national and institutional level and must be coupled with supports that move with the student through the system. A credit recognition and accumulation system facilitated through hybrid, blended and on-campus learning, with greater availability of joint qualifications across learning environments and between north and south is the way forward. There should be pathways through apprenticeships and employment with lifelong opportunities for updating and reskilling. Such pathways should include a system of mutual recognition of educational qualifications and credits from other jurisdictions, recognising that HE can be accessed at all stages of life and career; not just directly after second level education. Learners will have multiple access and exit points.

**Flexibility of provision:** The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the capacity and flexibility that the HE/FE community can achieve when required. With many programmes of study capable of being delivered online or in a mixed mode, the doors are opened to a much wider range of students. Those who are not able to be on site for full-time courses, because of dependents, part or full-time jobs, disabilities, geographical location etc., can still engage in learning and add extra value to their other responsibilities. New mixed models of delivery can open new opportunities, especially if partnered with mutual recognition of credits. However, these changes will require that infrastructures in society such as broadband, IT literacy etc. are in place or ever more deprivations will occur.

**A student-centred approach to curriculum planning and delivery:** HEIs north and south should provide a student-centred system underpinned by principles of human rights. The student of the future should enjoy an experience which has flexibility,

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38 See for example, Hyland, Á. and McCarthy, M. 2009 Multiple intelligences in Ireland, in J. Chen, S. Moran, and H. Gardner (eds) Multiple intelligences around the world. California. Jossey-Bass

accessibility, voice and choice in its design and delivery, one that is underpinned by Universal Design for Learning. Inclusivity should not be solely the responsibility of the Access Office but should be a whole-institution responsibility.

**Student information and support:** A co-ordinated and streamlined system is required whereby a student can access information, application support and resources in a 'one-stop-shop' – not just at entry level but throughout their HE years.

**Funding:** There is a need for better and more flexible funding for HEIs and for individual students with equal recognition for funding purposes of part-time and full-time programmes and for undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

**Students with a disability:** Barriers preventing access to and full engagement in HE by students with a disability must be removed. Institutions should focus on building solutions into the mainstream and re-designing provision for all while addressing individual accommodations.

**Postgraduate students:** Financial barriers to participation in postgraduate studies by socio-economically disadvantaged students should be removed. Where doctoral students are employed as researchers in funded research projects, their salary should not be below the minimum living income in the city in which they are based. Appropriate training and supports should be available for all doctoral students. There should be harmonisation of funding conditions between the various postgraduate funding organisations.

**Cross-border access:** Barriers to undergraduate and postgraduate students from Ireland seeking to study in universities in Northern Ireland and vice-versa should be removed. This would include harmonisation of funding and recognition of credits.

## 5. EDI AND STAFF

Under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 public bodies including universities are required to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons from different racial groups, sexual orientations, genders etc. These duties include protective measures – not just the elimination of discrimination (Equality Commission Northern Ireland – Section 75). There are over 24,000 people employed in HEIs in Ireland<sup>39</sup> and the HEA has a statutory responsibility to promote the attainment of equality of opportunity in HE.

The area of gender inequality has received much attention in recent years – driven by government initiatives and by Athena SWAN. A national review of gender equality in Irish universities in 2016 made a number of recommendations for Irish HEIs, including a requirement for each HEI to have a gender equality plan and to monitor the implementation of this plan on an annual basis. In 2018 the then Minister for Higher Education introduced a Senior Academic Leadership Initiative (SALI) under which professorships targeted specifically at women were made available in disciplinary areas where they were under-represented.<sup>40</sup> In 2017 a Centre for Excellence in Gender Equality was set up in the HEA and in 2020 the remit of the centre was extended to include all aspects of EDI.

QUB was an early leader in gender equality. The Queen's Gender Initiative was established in 2000. QUB now holds a Silver Athena SWAN institutional award and fourteen school awards (three Gold, six Silver and five Bronze). UU received a Bronze Institutional SWAN award in 2012, two schools have obtained Silver awards and nine schools have Bronze awards. Athena SWAN has been very important on the island of Ireland in highlighting EDI issues, in providing a framework for assessment of EDI progress, and in suggesting improvements and areas for change. Although initially very focused on gender, this has now broadened with the new charter.

The broadening of focus in EDI from gender to wider considerations including race, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation has gathered pace over the last five years. In December 2020, the HEA collected data on a once-off basis on staff ethnicity

<sup>39</sup> Higher Education Authority 2019 Key facts and figures: higher education 2017/18. Dublin. Higher Education Authority.

<sup>40</sup> The SALI initiative has had a mixed welcome from the academic community. While it is too early yet to gauge the impact of such initiatives, it is clear that without them, inequalities will remain long into the future.

and they hope to publish an analysis of these data shortly.

This information is already available in Northern Ireland. In May 2020 the National Athena SWAN Ireland Intersectionality Working Group on the Use of Ethnicity Categories in Irish Higher Education issued a statement on the matter. They said:

We understand the collection of staff and student ethnicity data to be central to the implementation of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, deriving from section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014. Under this act, all public HEIs must undertake assessment and monitoring, and have policies and plans to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of staff, students and the wider public that are served by the work of HEIs.<sup>41</sup>

The statement highlighted the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity inequalities internationally. It also pointed out that there are limitations and ethical dilemmas involved in asking people to identify with a particular category for the purposes of equality monitoring and drew attention to the work of Ireland's CSO on the recent revision of ethnicity categories for census 2021 (which will be carried out next year). In Northern Ireland there is a preference for using the BAME categorisation which is common across UK HE systems.

Across Europe, multiple activities and measures have been put in place to ensure EDI for university staff. These include (in order of greatest use): awareness raising among university communities; accessible infrastructure; training for teaching staff on inclusive teaching methods; codes of conduct; language courses; measures for staff with caring responsibilities; intercultural communication training; tailored support/personal coaching; positive action; anti-bias training; and positive discrimination.<sup>42</sup> Various combinations of these approaches have been used in HEIs in Ireland, north and south, but despite progress and initiatives in recent years, many issues and challenges still remain.

## Issues and challenges

### Institutional cultures

Staff feel frustrated when EDI is siloed into separate committees and is not seen to permeate the institutional culture. It is not sufficient to merely include aspirational statements in institutional strategies, the values of equality and inclusion must be applied and must be visible in the actions of the institutions, otherwise EDI can be regarded as tokenism. Institutions must demonstrate co-ordinated and consistent action in relation to EDI, with all aspects of institutional activities looked at from an EDI perspective. This includes policies, strategies, structures, HR activities etc. As Ireland contemplates 'building back better and more inclusively' after the pandemic, action needs to be taken to bridge the gap between aspiration and action in relation to equality.<sup>43</sup>

### Governance and leadership

A majority of staff in senior leadership positions in both universities and institutes of technology in the south are white men. While there have been some improvements in the proportion of women in leadership positions in recent years, in 2019 there were no female university presidents and only two of the nine heads of IoTs were women. In the past year three universities have appointed female presidents. In Northern Ireland, the Vice-chancellors of both QUB and UU are men. Women are also under-represented on governance structures in HEIs in Ireland although the situation has improved in recent years.

Female professional, management and support staff in universities have been under-represented at senior level, but there has been some improvement in recent years. While 30% of posts with a salary of over €106,000 per annum were held by women in the three-year period 2016–2018, the proportion in 2019 was 38%. The imbalance is more stark in IoTs where only 24% of staff in posts over €106,000 per annum were women.

41 Athena Swan Ireland 2020 Statement by the National Athena SWAN Ireland Intersectionality Working Group on the Use of Ethnicity Categories in Irish Higher Education. Dublin. Athena Swan Ireland

42 European University Association 2019 Diversity, equity and inclusion in European higher education Institutions. Brussels. European University Association, p. 30

43 From a speech by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney on 15 July 2021 when Ireland signed an International Compact on Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action at the Generation Equality Forum.

HEIs have the potential to be leaders in EDI as they are very often hubs of diversity in their local community. Governance and leadership arrangements are key to creating and maintaining an inclusive culture. EDI should be a prominent institutional goal and decision-makers should bear in mind how their decisions might affect different minorities within the community. EDI training and accountability mechanisms should be provided for all leadership positions. Bottom-up and top-down approaches are important and while good leadership is essential there is much to be gained by listening to and collaborating with the grassroots and with passionate people at all levels. HEIs are centres of creativity and innovation with significant potential to generate and lead change – not merely to respond to externally imposed targets.

The commitment and support of institutional leadership for furthering the EDI agenda is consistently seen as a key factor in the success of EDI initiatives in HEIs throughout Europe.<sup>44</sup> Along with developing strategy, institutional leadership is responsible for allocating resources and creating structures which enable progress and change. As noted in a LERU report from 2019, university leaders who take time to engage with EDI evidence will be better equipped to identify effective interventions, send powerful messages to the university community and consequently build trust in their leadership and the credibility of EDI programmes for change.<sup>45</sup>

### Gender and academia

In the past, women were in a significant minority in senior positions in HE in Ireland, north and south. While there have been improvements in recent years, inequalities still exist. This under-representation of women in senior academic positions is not unique to Ireland and is similar to the overall pattern in HEIs in the EU.

Recent gender pay gaps analyses have examined whether women are represented evenly in salary terms across organisations, and these have demonstrated that gender pay gaps continue to exist in HEIs. For example, in NUIG in 2019, the mean gap for academic staff was 21.3%; in the UK in that year, the figure was 15.1%.<sup>46</sup> The reasons for the existence of gender pay gaps include discrimination against women in the workplace, discrimination in pay systems and interrupted careers. The now mandatory reporting on gender pay gaps in Ireland (July 2021) will provide data on differences in mean pay and will demonstrate if progress in equality is in fact being made in HEIs.

The most recent HEA report in 2020 on Progress on Gender Equality in Irish HEIs (2016–2019) noted that all HEIs have institutional gender action plans in place. However, the 'flexible cascade model' and gender quotas as regards the professoriate (which were recommended in the 2016 National Review) have been implemented in only some HEIs. Moreover, at the time the Progress Report was published, most of the 24 HEIs had not yet appointed a Vice-president for EDI.

In Northern Ireland, women account for 44% of all academic staff in QUB and UU. The most recent figures available (2018) show that 23% of professors in QUB are women (up from 11% in 2000) and 34% of professors in UU.

**Professional, management and support (PMS) staff** as a cohort face specific issues and challenges. The vast majority of PMS staff are women (at entry level up to 80% of PMS staff are women). However, at more senior level the breakdown is more balanced, meaning that men are proportionally much more successful in progressing and in obtaining senior PMS posts. Gender pay gap statistics are very insightful in capturing the inequalities for PMS staff in the HE system. Furthermore, although not tracked statistically, anecdotally it is clear that there is very little diversity in this cohort of staff. Positive discrimination/affirmative action is necessary to allow access and progression of women and minoritised groups in these roles.

Reflecting the historical origins of the charter which aimed to advance the careers of women in STEMM, the Athena SWAN process up to now has been focused predominately on academic and research staff. When the entry level application asked about PMS staff it was mostly in the context of family-related leave, flexible working and organisational culture.

44 European University Association 2019 Diversity, equity and inclusion in European higher education Institutions. Brussels: European University Association, p. 31

45 LERU 2019 Equality, diversity and inclusion at universities: the power of a systemic approach <https://www.leru.org/publications/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-at-universities>

46 Universities and Colleges Employers Association, Examining the gender pay gap in HE, available at: <https://www.ucea.ac.uk/library/infographics/gender-pay/> (accessed 1 October 2021)

Significantly, the new charter framework for Ireland requires gender-disaggregated data, and associated actions, on key career transition points, career development and equal pay for PMS staff. This follows the introduction of an interim process to facilitate more consideration of PMS cohorts in 2020.

Particular EDI-related issues emerge for PMS staff in the HE sector. Pathways for internal promotion are more limited and less frequent than academic promotional processes, and high levels of vertical segregation means that female PMS staff are over-represented in the lowest paid grades and often in student-facing support roles involving a high degree of pastoral work. The use of performance appraisal is patchy across the sector. Furthermore, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, these staff had considerably less flexibility built into their contracts to work off-campus/remotely compared to academic and research staff. On the other hand, Athena SWAN assessments regularly show that PMS staff are more inclined to avail of family leave policies and flexible working arrangements.

### **Race/ethnicity**

In Northern Ireland data is available on race/ethnicity of university staff. In QUB, 12% of academic and research staff are black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) – 15% of male staff and 8% of female staff. This compares to 2% BAME people in the population as a whole. In UU, about 7% of the academic staff are of BAME backgrounds.

In Ireland, anecdotal evidence would suggest that staff in universities do not reflect the diversity of broader society, nor of the student cohort with whom they interact. In general, HEIs do not know how many of their staff are from marginalised or disenfranchised backgrounds, e.g. ethnic minorities or those of a lower socio-economic status. Some minority groups are represented in such low numbers that individuals are easily identifiable in surveys. Some data may be available on the number of staff with disabilities but not all staff may wish to disclose this information. While official data on ethnicity of staff is not available, it would appear that there are very few men and women of colour and of ethnic minorities in academic posts in Irish HEIs.

### **Recruitment and progression – barriers and pathways**

Recruitment, progression and promotion are significant events in any workplace and HR procedures and processes surrounding these events must be equal, fair and respectful. Recruitment processes should be as open and transparent as possible and be genuinely merit-based. This includes measures such as briefing selection committees about bias pitfalls, deciding on clear selection criteria at the outset, letting external observers monitor the selection process and involving external evaluators.

### **Curriculum**

Curriculum reform in HE can assist in enhancing inclusivity. The point was made in a number of submissions that decolonising the curriculum is important to ensure that different perspectives are heard and valued. The issue of inclusive delivery of curriculum (referred to in the Student section of this paper) is also important. This subgroup is aware that some HEIs have introduced a Universal Design for Learning approach to designing and delivering the curriculum and have provided support and training for staff to help them to be responsive to different learning styles.

### **Athena SWAN**

While Athena SWAN has raised awareness and provides a very useful toolkit for analysis of EDI in an institution,<sup>47</sup> it is also a time-consuming exercise for the staff of an institution/school/discipline. This is often not taken into account by institutional leaders and much of the work required to complete an application is undertaken on a voluntary/additional work basis by staff. Institutions should record the extent of voluntary input into this and other EDI-related activities in order to capture the time and effort spent on EDI documentation, data and initiatives.

### **Early career researchers (ECRs)**

The number of early career researchers has grown significantly in Ireland in recent decades, especially in STEM disciplines where public and private research funding has increased significantly. This is a diverse category, consisting of postdoctoral students and ECRs who often play significant and sometimes leadership roles on funded research projects. ECRs are broadly, but not exclusively, defined here as researchers at postdoctoral level (two–eight years research experience post PhD or PhD

47 Drew, E. 2021 Navigating uncharted waters: anchoring Athena SWAN into Irish HEIs. *Journal of Gender Studies* <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1923463>

equivalent) working in universities or other independent research organisations (including institutes of technology and industry) who are normally without a permanent position; much of what we say is also applicable to those in the middle stage of a career, where in some disciplines it is all too common to depend on short-term contracts and where EDI issues are highly relevant to progression and promotion, not least for women. A particular sub-issue is the effect of COVID-19 on those with carer responsibilities. A recent EU COST Action stated:

While doctoral and postdoctoral researchers constitute a fast-growing workforce, their working conditions have become increasingly precarious and their career prospects uncertain. Those processes tend to exacerbate and create new forms of gendered inequalities for Early Career Investigators (ECIs), first and foremost women – that have been magnified by the COVID-19 crisis. Those inequalities are also reinforced by disparities within academia linked to other social determinants, such as origin, socioeconomic status, sexuality or ability.<sup>48</sup>

The research culture of our universities and institutes is key to delivering Ireland's prosperity and wellbeing. But there is a widespread feeling that we are limiting the access, inclusion and career opportunities of researchers of different backgrounds and trajectories and thus holding ourselves back from realising the full potential of the research workforce.

To maintain excellence, we need to ensure that a stable funding environment is provided. The current model of employment contracts for researchers, especially at the ECR stage, fails to do enough to avoid losing research excellence and wasting the investment made in it. We believe it should be a priority for government to lead on the creation of policies that enable truly diverse, inclusive and sustainable career pathways for researchers.

COVID-19 has brought to the fore many issues of EDI in relation to those, especially female staff, whose working lives have been disrupted due to caring. Identifying ways to compensate such colleagues for lost time would form a good start to a joined-up policy of promoting Ireland's people of talent.

In general Ireland as an island must do more to establish fairer pathways for researchers who need special support for whatever reason. This is not just a matter of adapting facilities and finding extra resources for those researchers who need physical support. Flexible contracts for any who require reduced hours or need career breaks at certain points should be thought of as providing parallel progression routes for our human capital rather than as special circumstances that are granted.

There is a need to reform the current system of evaluating research and career progression, and ultimately how academic research careers are assessed. A proper appreciation of human and knowledge capital in the research and innovation space will open up new ways of pursuing better frontier science and new ways of innovating in the products and services that are powered by it.

The 'Career Development and Employment Framework' by the Irish Universities Association about terms and conditions is a welcome development. This work now needs to be set in a national framework, compatible with good practice elsewhere, of non-discriminatory and inclusive pathways, with clearly set out duties, responsibilities and expectations for researchers that are agreed between researchers themselves; their institutions and senior staff; and their funders. Such a concordat<sup>49</sup> needs to have teeth in order to end those practices in parts of our research culture that inhibit individual careers, discourage under-represented groups in any discipline and fail to make the national investment in careers that our nation needs to go to the next level.

### **Funders and impact**

Research funders are key drivers of behaviours and cultures in the HE sector and can impact attitudes towards EDI. Measures such as the need for institutions to have Athena SWAN Bronze awards in order to apply for funding, and bullying and harassment policies send clear messages on the importance of EDI issues to the sector at large. In recent years, funders have begun to

48 European Cooperation in Science and Technology, CA20137 – Making early career investigators' voices heard for gender equality, available online at: <https://www.cost.eu/cost-action/making-early-career-investigators-voices-heard-for-gender-equality/> (accessed 11 August 2021)

49 Vitae 2019 The concordat to support the career development of researchers. Cambridge. Vitae

analyse the distribution of their funding across lines of gender and internationalisation. However, no targeted campaigns have yet been launched by funders to take positive action to change historic inequalities in the funding infrastructure. Funding diversity across multiple institutions is also important and funders need to state how they are going to reach excellent people in the widest possible type of institution. Equally important are serious reviews of the equality of funding panels; the way funding calls are framed; attention to the structure of the information they ask for including EDI information; and evaluation of the project not the person. The communication of this work by funders needs to also be part of their EDI strategies where stories are told to show that funding is being allocated in a fair and diverse manner.

## Recommendations

1. There is a need for **intervention, for affirmative action, minimum numbers, and targeted initiatives** to ensure that diversity is achieved sooner rather than later. Structured opportunities are needed to help the diversification of staff and to address areas where under-representation occurs.
2. An **inclusive institutional culture** should be at the heart of all EDI initiatives, with a clear link between values and decisions and actions. Emphasis should be placed on embedding of the value of respect. **Governance and leadership** are key to making this happen and therefore all appointments to managerial and leadership positions need **EDI awareness, experience and a track record as key recruitment and progression criteria**.
3. For **ECRs, a national agreement** is needed, centred on their needs, whatever their background and characteristics, with a commitment to EDI, fair research culture and integrity for people and projects. Ideally this would involve an independent commission of academics/academic stakeholders, business people, third sector groups and organisations like the Irish Research Staff Association. In the design of this national agreement, consultation, evidence/data collection and international best practice should be central, leading to a ten-year vision of what research in Ireland will be and how researchers will be treated, in order to make Ireland the island of talent and equal opportunity. A research culture that is fair, encourages creativity and supports excellence will attract the best and most diverse talent.
4. In all EDI initiatives and Athena SWAN submissions, HEIs should use a framework which is inclusive of **PMS** alongside academic and research staff. Regular internal promotional processes and appraisals for PMS grades are necessary and all HEIs should actively target vertical segregation among PMS staff, where women are over-represented in the lowest paid grades and men in the highest paid grades. Positive discrimination/affirmative action should be used to recruit under-represented groups to PMS grades. Finally, flexible and remote working for PMS staff should be retained when the COVID-19 pandemic ends.
5. **Training and education** in EDI should be obligatory for all staff and students. A sectoral approach to training in EDI should be taken to avoid duplication (e.g. EDI in HE eLearning programmes). EDI courses should be embedded in induction courses for all staff and students and also as part of CPD.
6. **Governance and Management** – A number of HEIs have appointed a Vice-president for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. These Vice-presidents are members of the Executive Management Teams of their HEIs and are in a position to ensure that EDI issues are addressed at governance and management level. Consideration should be given to making such appointments in all HEIs on the island, overcoming the structural and financial obstacles currently blocking their implementation.

## 6. CONCLUSION

EDI in HE in Ireland and Northern Ireland has been to varying degrees fragmented and reactive rather than proactive, and these characteristics are symptomatic of the absence of a co-ordinated approach. To address these issues, there is an urgent need for an overarching EDI strategy in HE across Ireland. It has been pointed out that in the HE sector in Europe, 'Efforts have not been sufficiently synergistic in tackling the common barriers faced by all under-represented groups, including women, ethnic or cultural minorities, LGBTQ+, disabled or first-generation members of the university community.'<sup>50</sup> Single, short-term interventions are unlikely to be effective without an interconnected and system-wide framework, which can encompass intersectionality and the individual educational journey. Disjointed approaches can be wasteful of resources and decrease impact.

A co-ordinated EDI strategy would eliminate discrepancies in the relative focus on gender, race, language, ethnicity, disability, LGBTQ+ issues etc. It would empower HEIs to move away from reactive initiatives and would allow planning for the short, medium and long term. A harmonised approach would also enable a holistic framework for EDI, which considers the entire educational journey of the individual, rather than merely the segmented phases.

There are currently various committees operating in the EDI sector (e.g. Athena SWAN Committee; IUA EDI Group; HEA National Committee for EDI). While these groups currently carry out very valuable work, they generally consist mainly of VPs for EDI from HEIs and, as such, are not inclusive of independent, external voices. We therefore recommend that an EDI Advisory Council be created which would consist of an independent group of experts, practitioners, NGO representatives and internal and external stakeholders. It is not intended for this group to duplicate existing structures and its remit would be advisory in nature. Its independence and the diversity of stakeholders involved would add to its legitimacy. The advisory council would strengthen the dialogue at system level between universities, policy makers, funders, public authorities and stakeholder organisations active on behalf of under-represented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.<sup>51</sup> Its work would ensure that measures would be fit for purpose for the next decades and for the diverse society that emerges across the island of Ireland. The council would be able to embrace a holistic system-level approach, rather than looking at HEIs in isolation. The group recognises that for political and legislative reasons, developments may not proceed at the same pace in both jurisdictions and that an all-island EDI Advisory Council or councils (one for each jurisdiction) might be the preferred option, with an advisory function to the Irish government, the Northern Ireland Executive and HEIs.

As the EUA identified in 2019, there are multiple ways in which EDI can be progressed in HEIs including awareness raising; staff training; exchange of experiences and good practices with other HEIs; anti-discrimination policy and complaint procedures; specific targeted projects; research on the topic of EDI issues; collaboration with stakeholders; collaboration with other education institutions; and development of a code of conduct.<sup>52</sup> Many of these initiatives have already been put in place in Ireland but application is not universal. In order for the successful development and implementation of an EDI strategy in Ireland, HEIs need external supports which contribute funding for EDI efforts, staff training initiatives, grants for disadvantaged groups, external project funding and regulatory support.

EDI is currently at a pivotal moment as structures set up for gender equality expand to encompass broader EDI areas. As this happens, the structures that guide this process need to be embedded, resourced and strengthened. A comprehensive approach to addressing EDI in HE in Ireland will address inclusion and enhanced representation of all under-represented groups, will aim at the entire academic community of staff and students together, and will make research, teaching and all aspects of the HE experience more inclusive.<sup>53</sup> This group therefore recommends that an EDI strategy should be framed as a charter (combining current targets and initiatives – gender plans, consent framework, Athena SWAN, University of Sanctuary etc.) and that an EDI Advisory Council be established to set targets, make recommendations and monitor progress.

50 LERU 2019 Equality, diversity and inclusion at universities: the power of a systemic approach, p. 9  
<https://www.leru.org/publications/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-at-universities>

51 As recommended by European University Association 2019 Diversity, equity and inclusion in European higher education institutions. Brussels. European University Association, p.44

52 European University Association 2019 Diversity, equity and inclusion in European higher education institutions. Brussels. European University Association, pp. 40–1  
[https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/web\\_diversity%20equity%20and%20inclusion%20in%20european%20higher%20education%20institutions.pdf](https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/web_diversity%20equity%20and%20inclusion%20in%20european%20higher%20education%20institutions.pdf)

53 LERU 2019 Equality, diversity and inclusion at universities: the power of a systemic approach  
<https://www.leru.org/publications/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-at-universities>

## APPENDIX

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***The opinions expressed in this discussion paper are those of the HE Futures EDI subgroup and do not necessarily represent those of the Royal Irish Academy.***

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