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# **A CONSULTATION ON A REGIONAL STRATEGY FOR WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**



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Minister for Employment and Learning

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## FOREWORD



### Widening Participation in Higher Education

Higher education institutions exist to enrich our knowledge and understanding of the world. In doing so, they add significant value to the social, economic, cultural and educational capital of Northern Ireland. They help to raise our collective aspirations and as Northern Ireland strives to develop as an internationally competitive, knowledge-based

economy, they help to develop the higher level skills necessary to support that growth.

To achieve the very highest standards, our higher education institutions must have access to the very best pools of talent. At the same time, it is my firm belief that talented individuals must be given every opportunity to benefit from higher education that is right for them, irrespective of their personal background.

Widening participation in higher education by students from those groups which are currently under-represented, in particular, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those with disabilities and learning difficulties, is one of the Department's key strategic goals. As a result of our current initiatives, Northern Ireland already has a very good record of participation in higher education with participation rates among young people at almost 50%, and almost 42% of participants coming from the Socio-Economic Groups 4-7.

I am committed to developing a new approach to widening participation in Northern Ireland based on a future vision of the sector in which the people who are **MOST ABLE** but **LEAST LIKELY** to participate are given every encouragement and support to achieve the necessary qualifications to apply to, and to benefit from, the higher education that is right for them. This new

regional strategic approach is being developed to protect the successes to date and to enable the sector to meet the challenges it will face in the future.

In March 2010, the Department established a Higher Education Widening Participation Regional Strategy Group and four expert working groups, comprised of relevant experts from the education, public and private sectors, and other government departments, to consider the issues involved and to begin to outline a new approach. I would like to express my personal thanks to all of the representatives from the universities, further education colleges, student union bodies, post-primary schools, government departments, the Higher Education Authority, Dublin and the Higher Education Funding Council for England, as well as, local community groups, disabled groups and individuals for their contributions to the development of this consultation paper.

Working together we can ensure that Northern Ireland has the high level skills and future leaders it needs to fulfil its ambitions. I hope that you will make the commitment to become fully involved in this consultation process by giving us your views on the proposals outlined in this document and play your part in developing a regional strategy for widening participation in higher education.

**Danny Kennedy MLA**  
**Minister for Employment and Learning**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 The background**

Northern Ireland has an enviable record in widening participation to higher education (HE). At almost 50%, Northern Ireland now has the highest participation rate from young people of any area of the United Kingdom (UK) and it outperforms the other regions in increased access to HE for students from lower socio-economic groups. 2008-09 data show that 41.7% of Northern Ireland's young full-time first degree entrants were from Socio-Economic Classifications 4-7, compared with only 32.4% in England and 28.2% in Scotland.

However, there remain some stubborn pockets of under-representation within certain sections of the population. Evidence shows that factors including socio-economic circumstances, gender, community background and disability can have an impact on educational participation. For example, the 2001 Census showed that over 45% of the Northern Ireland population came from the lowest Socio-Economic Classifications (SEC Groups 5-7), yet just 27% of the student population come from these groups.

Research studies show that among the advantages graduates derive from HE are better jobs and higher pay. Graduates are expected to command substantially higher salaries in the labour market. From April to June 2010, the average gross weekly earnings of a graduate were 87% higher than that of a non-graduate. On average, Northern Ireland graduates earn £13,000 per year more than non graduates.

There is also a wide range of social and personal benefits. Graduates are less likely to smoke, are less obese, have a higher sense of well being and a lower rate of suicide. They are also more likely to hold more tolerant attitudes towards other races and social groups and are more likely to be involved in their communities through voluntary activities.

However, as well as being socially unacceptable that too few people from disadvantaged backgrounds realise their full potential, it is also economically wasteful at a time when global competition requires the full participation of the workforce.

Widening Participation is vital for achieving economic competitiveness as well as social justice. A recent report by Oxford Economics<sup>1</sup> noted that higher skills levels are associated with higher productivity, higher wage levels and higher employment rates. The report also determined that the Northern Ireland economy will have an increasing need for people with higher level skills (levels 4-8) over the next 10 years and that higher level employment opportunities would be more biased towards degree level qualifications.

Social barriers to educational attainment and to HE participation entail a serious loss of talent in a modern economy. So, in order to achieve the growth in people with high level skills which will help the region to compete at a world class level, government clearly needs to reach out to groups which have not traditionally benefitted from HE.

However, the challenge to develop a highly skilled workforce is not just about providing young graduates with the skills needed. It is estimated that around 80% of the 2020 workforce has already completed compulsory education<sup>2</sup>, therefore a major focus has to be on the upskilling of the existing workforce. Employers need to be encouraged to see the benefit of developing and upskilling existing experienced employees and the future provision of HE needs to become more flexible in delivery to accommodate the diverse learning needs of the mature student.

## **1.2 The development of the strategy**

In March 2010, the Department for Employment and Learning established a Higher Education Widening Participation Regional Strategy Group and four expert working groups, comprising relevant experts from the education, public

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<sup>1</sup> Forecasting Future Skills Needs in Northern Ireland. Oxford Economics, June 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Success through Skills 2. Department for Employment and Learning, June 2010.

and private sectors, to help to develop an integrated strategy for the region. (Full details of the membership of the Strategy Group and the expert working groups are included in Appendix A)

The role of the Widening Participation Regional Strategy Group was to advise and make recommendations on matters affecting Widening Participation in Higher Education in Northern Ireland and to assist with the development of an integrated regional strategy and action plan. The four expert working groups addressed the following key themes:

- Targets
- Raising Aspiration and Attainment
- Enhancing Recruitment and Selection
- Improving Retention and Progression

### **1.3 The development process**

The Strategy Group, the expert working groups, and the Department for Employment and Learning Widening Participation Branch staff, took evidence from a wide range of sources including representatives from the universities, Further Education colleges, student union bodies (NUS/USI), non-selective post-primary schools, community groups, Department of Education (DE), Department for Social Development (DSD), Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), the Higher Education Authority, Dublin, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), local community groups, as well as groups representing people with disabilities and other interested individuals.

In addition, the Strategy Group held a stakeholder pre-consultation public event at the Tullyglass Hotel, Ballymena in May 2010 to ensure that as many views as possible were considered in the early stages of the development of the strategy. In April 2010, the Department commissioned FGS McClure Watters to undertake a review of the existing DEL financial support initiatives designed to encourage Widening Participation in Higher Education.



This document reflects the findings and conclusions of the Strategy Group. Section 2 provides an overview of widening participation and the progress made to date. It provides information on current activities and funding and highlights some key challenges for the future.

Section 3 offers a future vision for widening participation. The subsequent sections examine the key components that determine successful participation in HE and seek comments on how Northern Ireland might give effect to the vision for participation by improving and enhancing the reach of the institutions to all of those who have the capacity to benefit from HE.

The challenge will be to sustain the achievements made in recent years and to create an environment where the last elements of educational disadvantage are eliminated from society. The responses to this consultation will feed into the development of an integrated Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education to be published in 2011.

#### **1.4 Availability and responses**

This consultation is available online on the Department's website ([www.delni.gov.uk](http://www.delni.gov.uk)). It runs for 13 weeks from 7 March 2011 to 3 June 2011 and applies to Northern Ireland. Information on how to respond can also be found on the Department's website. Correspondents are asked to submit their views as early as possible during this period to allow as much time as possible for consideration.

A number of proposals have been identified in relation to this consultation. These proposals are contained in Annex A. A response questionnaire can be downloaded from the Department's website.

If a printed copy of the consultation document or the questionnaire is required, they can be requested from Deborah Williams at the contact details provided in this section. Requests for this paper in different formats and languages will also be considered.

The Expert Group reports can also be requested from Deborah Williams at the contact details provided in this section.

All responses not submitted electronically must be made in writing and be attributable so that there is an objective record of the views expressed. Your name, address and organisation name, if applicable, should be clearly stated. Responses should be submitted before the closing date of 3 June 2011. We cannot accept responses by telephone.

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## **1.5 Freedom of Information**

### Confidentiality

The Department will publish a summary of responses following completion of the consultation process. Your response, and all other responses to the consultation, may be disclosed on request. The Department can only refuse to disclose information in exceptional circumstances. Any automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will be taken to apply only to the information in your response for which confidentiality has been specifically requested. Before you submit your response, please read the paragraph below on the confidentiality of consultations and they will provide you with guidance on the legal position regarding any information given by you in response to this consultation. The Department will handle any personal data you provide appropriately in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

The Freedom of Information Act gives the public a right of access to any information held by a public authority, namely, the Department in this case. The right of access to information includes information provided in response to a consultation. The Department cannot automatically consider as confidential, any information supplied to it in response to a consultation. However, the Department does have the responsibility to decide whether any information about your identity, should be made public or treated as confidential.

## **2. WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This section provides an overview of widening participation and the growth of HE in Northern Ireland. It describes the actions taken over the last few years and outlines the challenges to be faced in the future.

### **2.2 Background**

At its heart, widening participation in HE is an issue of social justice. However, there are other compelling reasons why widening participation in HE is critical for Northern Ireland. Firstly, there is the need for greater social inclusion; too many in our society continue to experience disadvantage and exclusion. Secondly, there are the benefits which graduates as individuals, and society generally, can derive from HE. Thirdly, there is Northern Ireland's need for a highly skilled workforce.

#### **2.2.1 Social inclusion**

Success in school up to age 16 has long been regarded as a key factor in explaining rates of social mobility. However, despite the advances in overall participation in HE, the Milburn Report<sup>3</sup> last year noted that social mobility into professional careers has slowed in recent years. The report gave two examples to illustrate the disequilibrium:

*"...the typical doctor or lawyer of the future will today be growing up in a family that is better off than five in six families in the UK";*

and,

*"... the typical journalist or accountant of the future will today be growing up in a family that is better off than three in four families in the UK..."*.

The Milburn report also made it clear why entry to the professions, and the educational opportunities that provide access to them, is the key to a new wave of social mobility in the years ahead. Widening participation in HE represents a great opportunity as well as a great challenge. On average, one

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<sup>3</sup> Unleashing Aspiration, The Panel on fair Access to the Professions, The Cabinet Office, July 2009.

in three jobs today is professional, (in London over half the workforce is already employed in professional or managerial jobs), and that figure is set to increase significantly as the economy become more service-oriented and professionalised.

If the perception is allowed to grow in some communities that entry to HE and the professions is “for others”, it will have a damaging effect on aspiration and attainment and lead potentially to a growing disenchantment and sense of alienation within those communities.

### **2.3 What is higher education?**

Higher education embraces a span of qualifications from Certificates of Higher Education through to degrees and PhDs (levels 4 – 8)<sup>4</sup>. It is important to note that higher education is more than the three or four year primary degree; it encompasses all qualifications beyond Level 4, including intermediate qualification levels in which Northern Ireland has recognised skills shortages. The Northern Ireland HE sector, therefore, comprises all providers who deliver these qualifications.

### **2.4 Higher education in Northern Ireland**

In 1963 there were 25,000 18 year olds in Northern Ireland and of these, just 1,600 (6.4%) had gained two A level passes before leaving school (the minimum standard for university entrance). Of that number, 75% (1,200) went forward to HE<sup>5</sup>.

The same report concluded that by 1980 about 12% of the relevant age group would leave school with a standard of attainment at least as high as the minimum university entrance requirement. The report went on to suggest that, *“it may well be that a figure approaching 20 per cent will be reached towards the end of the century”*. The NI Age Participation Index<sup>6</sup> for the 2008/09 academic year was 48.2%.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/fheq/ewni/default.asp>

<sup>5</sup> Lockwood Report “Higher Education in Northern Ireland”, 1965.

<sup>6</sup> See Paragraph 2.5.1

### 2.4.1 The higher education institutions

The Lockwood Report of 1965 arguably laid the foundations of the modern HE systems in Northern Ireland but the region has a proud tradition of third level education stretching back over 150 years. Founded in 1845, **Queen's University** first opened its doors in 1849. **St. Mary's University College**, a college of Queen's University was established in 1985, but can directly trace its history to 1900 and the founding of St Mary's Teaching College.

**Stranmillis University College**, also a college of Queen's, was founded in 1922 to provide state-funded teacher education in Northern Ireland. The **University of Ulster** was created in 1984 by the merger of the *New University of Ulster* established in 1968 in Coleraine and the *Ulster Polytechnic*, established in 1971 at Jordanstown. In 2008/09 there were 48,240 students enrolled at these institutions.

The **Open University** was established in the 1960s and was founded on the belief that communications technology could bring high quality degree-level learning to people who had not had the opportunity to attend campus universities. In 2008/09 4,220 Northern Ireland students were enrolled on part-time courses at the Open University.

### 2.4.2 Higher education in further education (HE in FE)

HE in FE is the delivery of courses of higher education through the further education sector. In 1997, the Dearing Report<sup>7</sup> recommended growth in full-time higher education in FE colleges, particularly at sub-degree level. In March 2006, the FE White Paper<sup>8</sup> recommended that HE delivered in FE should have a strong occupational and employment purpose and that the main area of expansion for HE in FE should be in Foundation Degrees (FDs).

The regional colleges now deliver the vast majority of intermediate level HE provision including Higher National Diplomas and Foundation Degrees.

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<sup>7</sup> Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, *Higher Education in the Learning Society*, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances. DfES, March 2006.

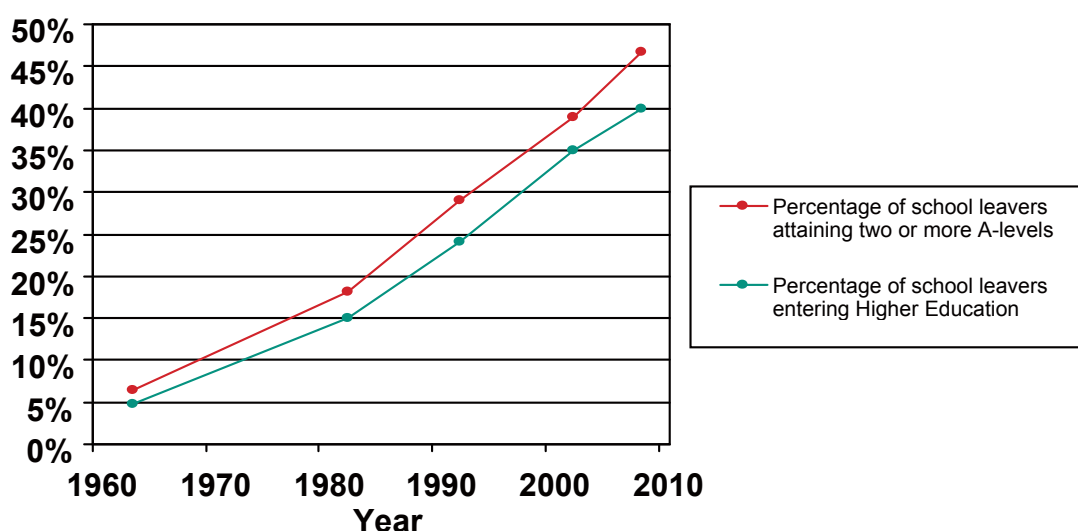
Intermediate level HE is essential to the future development of the economy, as there is good evidence to suggest that the current skills gaps are most acute at a level that is represented by HE qualifications below degree level, particularly the two-year work-focused provision. HE in FE, and in particular Foundation Degrees, offer progression opportunities from apprenticeship programmes to intermediate higher education courses through the provision of more flexible part-time HE provision targeted at people already in the workforce. However, this will require employers to recognise and support widening participation in HE to further up-skill their workforce.

In 2008/09, total enrolments for HE in FE were 10,281 (3,848 FT students and 6,433 PT students), representing around 18% of the total HE enrolments in Northern Ireland.

## 2.5 Growth in participation in higher education

The Lockwood projections of 1965 were broadly correct to 1980 but did not foresee the expansion of HE in the subsequent decades. Figure 1 shows the actual level of A Level achievement, and rates of progression to HE, of school leavers between 1963 and 2009<sup>9</sup>.

**Figure 1: SCHOOL LEAVER ATTAINMENT OF TWO OR MORE A-LEVELS AND SUBSEQUENT UPTAKE OF A PLACE IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

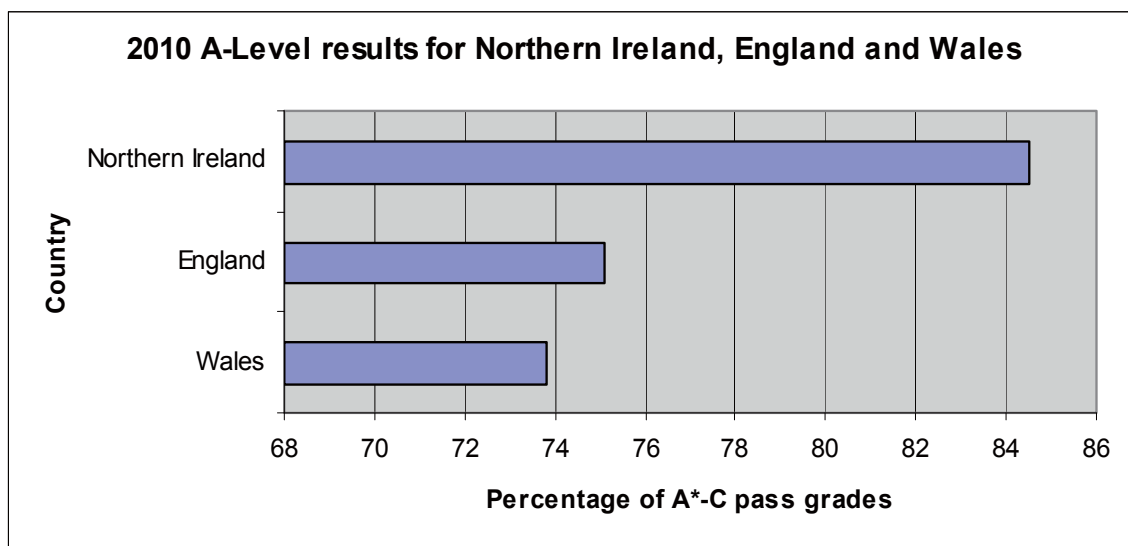


<sup>9</sup> Sources: Lockwood Report 1965 & Department of Education - Compendium of Northern Ireland Education Statistics, 1977/78 – 2008/09.

In 1981, 18.2% of school leavers achieved two A Levels or more and 15% progressed to courses at third level education. However, by 2008/09 the figures were 50.6% achieving two A Levels or more with 42.9% progressing to HE.

The educational profile of a country is an increasingly significant determinant of its economic competitiveness and consequently all developed countries are actively seeking to improve the education and skills profile of their working age populations. In the context of A Level results, Northern Ireland compares favourably with competitor regions in Great Britain.

Figure 2



Source: Joint Council for Qualifications. Note: Data for Scotland are not available on a comparative basis.

### 2.5.1 Age Participation Index

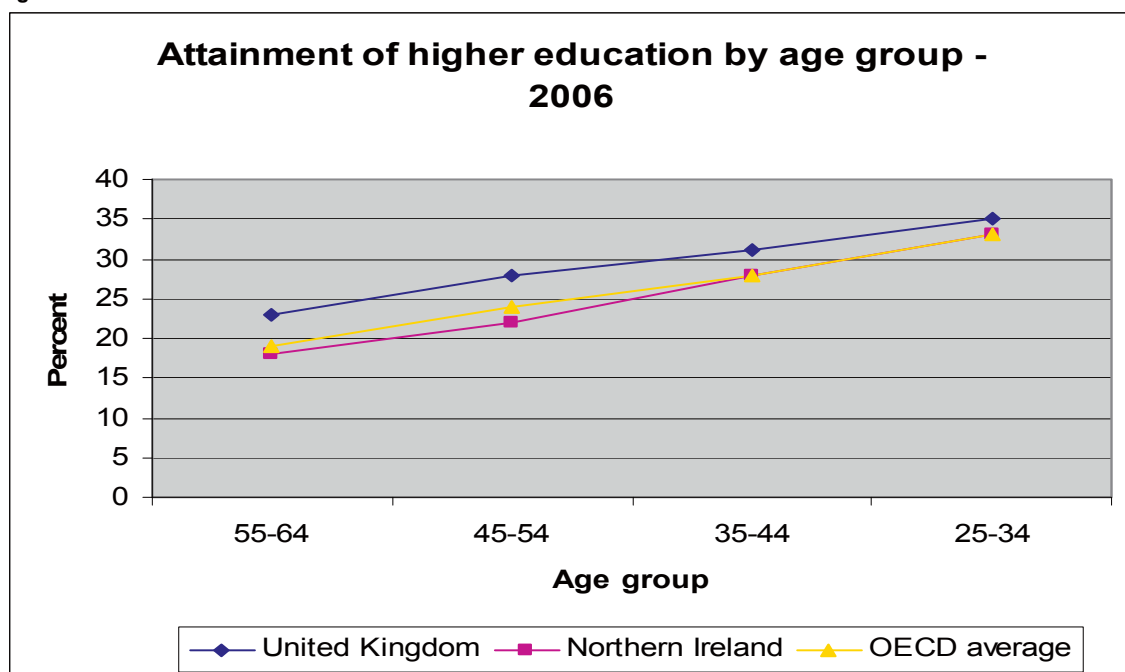
Since 1985<sup>10</sup> the overall participation in HE has been expressed through the Age Participation Index (API). The API is a measure widely used to demonstrate changes in participation of young people in HE over time. More precisely it is defined as the number of NI-domiciled young entrants (aged under 21) to full-time undergraduate HE (in the UK or Republic of Ireland) as a percentage of the 18 year-old population of Northern Ireland.

<sup>10</sup> In 1985, the first year of the API was used overall participation in higher education (as expressed through the API) was 19.7%.



There is no single common measure of HE participation across the UK. 2000/01 was the last year England calculated the API, as it now uses the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) which is a more wide ranging measure and includes part-time and students up to the age of 30. Northern Ireland and Scotland at present continue to calculate the API, although the methodologies used are slightly different. The Northern Ireland API at 48.2% in 2008/09 is much higher than the Scotland API (43.0% in 2008/09), and also the more-wide ranging HEIPR used in England (45.5% in 2008/09). Wales does not currently calculate an age related participation rate.

Figure 3



Sources: United Kingdom and Northern Ireland data from *Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment (DETI)* and OECD data from *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)*.

Figure 3 highlights the upward trend in international higher educational attainment. Overall patterns for attainment in HE in Northern Ireland are broadly similar to international comparisons, with a relatively poorer performance among older age cohorts but an improving picture at younger age ranges.

In terms of higher level qualifications within the workforce, Northern Ireland is broadly average within the United Kingdom, (excluding the impact of the

South East), with 29% of people qualified at Level 4 or above. In Europe, Northern Ireland ranks ahead of both Germany and France, but the Republic of Ireland has considerably more graduates in employment with 34% qualified at Degree or Post-Graduate level. However, in global terms many countries perform more strongly than Northern Ireland, with Canada, the US and Finland being notably high.

Table 1

Higher Level Qualifications in the workforce		
Country or region	Sub-degree, Degree, Post Graduate persons employed (2007, 3-year moving average.)	UK = 100
Canada	46%	145
London	44%	137
United States	39%	123
Scotland	36%	113
Finland	35%	109
Republic of Ireland	34%	106
South East England	33%	104
UK	32%	100
UK (excl London and SE)	30%	93
Northern Ireland	29%	92
Wales	28%	90
Yorkshire	26%	83
France	25%	78
Germany	25%	77

Source: Forecasting Future Skill Needs in Northern Ireland, Oxford Economics. July 2009

## 2.6 The policy context and rationale for Widening Participation

The broad policy context for Widening Participation in the United Kingdom can be traced to the Robbins Report of 1963, which rejected the concept of “...a *limited pool of ability...*” and argued that HE could combat social disadvantage. Over thirty years later the Dearing Report built on this idea and laid the foundation for today’s impetus to widen participation when it noted that, although overall participation in HE had increased significantly, there were still some groups that remained under-represented. Specifically there

were large differences in the participation rates of advantaged and disadvantaged socio-economic groups.

The UK government's response to the Dearing report came in 1998 with the Green Paper ***“Higher Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – Response to the Dearing Report”***. The document highlighted the government's main priorities, recognising widening participation as one of their main goals and the need to actively promote the ‘inclusion’ of previously under-represented groups, such as ethnic minorities, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and low participation neighbourhoods. The paper also encouraged HE institutions to be more responsive to the needs of the economy.

### **2.6.1 What is Widening Participation?**

Widening Participation can be something of a portmanteau concept and has been subject to a wide variety of interpretations, and misinterpretations, over the last few years. At its simplest the Department's view is that higher education should be accessible to all those who are able to benefit from it.

However, although understanding of the principles involved is much better than it was ten years ago, there remain some determinedly persistent myths about Widening Participation. Therefore, it may be helpful in tackling those myths to outline what Widening Participation is ***not*** about; at least not to the extent that has often been claimed.

Widening Participation is not about encouraging applications from, nor securing university places for, under-qualified candidates. “Dumbing Down” is probably the most persistent and pernicious of the misinformed criticisms of Widening Participation. Neither is it about lowering educational standards; rather it is about raising the aspirations and educational attainment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and students with learning difficulties and disabilities who might not otherwise have considered HE as an option. It is aimed at ensuring that academic ability is recognised, nurtured and developed and that the social or personal background of the learner is not a barrier.

Educational standards must not be compromised but innovative and modern approaches must be adopted to recognise non-traditional entry routes.

Widening Participation is not about consistently perverse decisions on admission by HE institutions. For the most part, university applications procedures strive to achieve genuine balance and admissions staff work hard to maintain neutrality and fairness. However, the increasing numbers of qualified candidates and the proliferation of qualifications add their own pressures year on year. In a major review of widening participation Stephen Gorard<sup>11</sup> found that current university systems have improved rather than further undermined distributional fairness in student intake. However, future systems will need to recognise that equal qualification at entry does not necessarily equate to equal effort in the past, nor indeed potential talent in the future.

Nor is Widening Participation about well-qualified students from disadvantaged backgrounds making consistently poorer choices with regard to higher education than their more advantaged counterparts. Some may make poorer choices but it is much more likely that disadvantaged students faced more restrictive choices in their secondary level education due to the type and location of the institution they attended.

Widening Participation is not solely about gaining entry into HE but must apply at each stage of the student's educational journey and, given the evidence of unbalanced participation in the professions, Widening Participation must also address equal access to all courses within HE.

Finally, Widening Participation is not about increasing the number of students on full-time degree level courses in Northern Ireland. In the past, the iron law seemed to be that for HE to be fairer it had to be allowed to expand. However, with significant demographic change in the falling numbers of 18 year-olds

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<sup>11</sup> Review of Widening Participation Research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education. Stephen Gorard et al. HEFCE: Bristol, 2006.

and increasing competing pressures for government funding, significant expansion of the traditional degree provision seems unlikely.

The number of full-time undergraduate places in each university and in the regional colleges in Northern Ireland is subject to a cap. This cap is known as the Maximum Student Number (MaSN) and was introduced in 1994 in order to constrain public expenditure. However, as the undergraduate demographic decreases there are a number of options with regard to the future of MaSN that are actively being considered within the wider consultation on a new Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland. Depending on the outcomes of that consultation, Widening Participation may mean increased participation overall but not necessarily through the 'traditional' full-time three or four year Bachelors Degree route.

## **2.7 Widening Participation in Northern Ireland**

Widening Participation in HE is a key priority for the Department for Employment and Learning and for the HE institutions in Northern Ireland. Since 2000, the Department has been addressing the Widening Participation agenda in Northern Ireland through a number of policy initiatives and a range of specific funding mechanisms. In academic year 2009/10 the Department provided total funding of approximately £2.5m to widen participation in HE.

### **2.7.1 Policy initiatives**

#### Widening Participation strategies

Since 2000, the Department has encouraged Northern Ireland's HE institutions to produce their own Widening Participation strategies and has supported their implementation with an increase in the block grant (see WP Premium funding below). The universities and colleges produce Widening Participation strategies and action plans which detail their activities and widening access targets, which include not just entry targets but also retention and employability targets. Over the last ten years the institutions have embedded widening participation activities much more strongly within their overall strategy planning and implementation.

### Access Agreements

In 2006, government introduced new HE tuition fee arrangements. This included a provision that any institution that decided to raise its full-time undergraduate tuition fees above the standard level was required to have an Access Agreement in place which would outline its provision of student support, including bursaries and outreach activities. The philosophy behind Access Agreements was that the introduction of higher fees should not have a detrimental effect on widening participation and that institutions are explicitly committed to increasing participation of under-represented groups.

### Widening Participation Annual Strategic Assessments

Commencing in December 2009, the Department asked the HE institutions to submit an annual Widening Participation Strategic Assessments to review critically their progress to date and to determine their future priorities. The Strategic Assessments and the Access Agreements are complementary while having clearly distinct roles.

#### **2.7.2 Funded initiatives**

The Department has also implemented a range of specific funding mechanisms to support widening participation in HE. These include premium funding which is paid to the universities and project funding for specific pre-recruitment outreach activities.

### Widening Participation premium funding

The Department for Employment and Learning premium funding is intended to support the embedding of widening participation in the HE institutions. This funding helps to support the range of initiatives and activities outlined within the university's Widening Participation strategy. The premium funding is added to core teaching funds to recognise the additional costs associated with recruiting and supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds and with supporting students with learning difficulties and disabilities.

The Department for Employment and Learning provides the universities with two types of premium funding through their annual grant letters of offer:

- **Widening Participation Premium** - this is paid to HE institutions in recognition of the additional costs of recruiting and retaining students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This funding stream recognises that there are extra costs involved, for example in relation to on-course support. The premium is paid on the basis of the number of students enrolled from disadvantaged backgrounds and amounted to £1.4 million in 2008/09.
- **Widening Access Premium** – this is paid to HE institutions for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. The institutions use this funding to provide specialist equipment and/or specific support for such students. The level of Widening Access Disability premium allocated to the HE institutions is based on the number of full-time undergraduate students in receipt of Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) and amounted to just over £342,000 in 2008/09.

#### Widening Participation project funding

The Department also provides special project funding to allow the universities to make access to HE available to under-represented groups, and to develop partnerships with schools with traditionally low levels of participation in HE.

#### *University of Ulster – Step-Up Programme*

Step-Up is a science-based programme of academic and vocational activities delivered by schools in conjunction with the University of Ulster, industry and government. The aim of the programme is to encourage participation in HE by disadvantaged students who have low attainment levels and relatively low expectations, and who previously might not have considered HE as an educational option.

The partner organisations collaborate to teach the twelve unit GCE Applied Science qualification, which is equivalent to two A-Levels. Pupils are given access to University facilities such as laboratories, computers and the libraries. Pupils are also required to undertake within their own schools, an additional A-Level or GCE Applied six unit award. The participants join the

programme at age 16, having been identified previously (normally at age 14) through engagement activity in schools and the local community.

Step-Up is targeted at schools in areas of social and economic disadvantage and is designed to increase participation rates in HE from lower socio-economic groups (NS-SEC 5–7). The programme has been operational at the University's Magee Campus since 2000, targeting disadvantaged pupils from nine non-selective post-primary schools in the North West.

Following the success of Step-Up at Magee, the initiative was extended to the University's Jordanstown campus in September 2006. The Belfast programme is one of the key projects in the Department for Social Development Renewing Communities Action Plan to tackle disadvantage at individual, family and community levels in specifically targeted communities across Northern Ireland.

Step-Up has succeeded in its aim of targeting disadvantaged pupils and has had a significant positive effect on the academic performance, self-esteem and motivation of the pupils<sup>12</sup>. Up to 2009, eight cohorts of participants had successfully completed the programme at Magee with two cohorts having completed in Belfast. 648 pupils (93%) had progressed directly into university in Northern Ireland and Great Britain, many to high demand courses such as Optometry, Physiotherapy, Forensic Sciences, and Molecular Biosciences. In 2010 Step-Up maintained its high achievement rate with a 98% pass rate in Belfast, 99% in Londonderry, with 78% and 87% respectively achieving A-C grades.

The success of the programme is even more exceptional when compared to previous GCSE performance/GCE grade predictions and actual grades obtained. The analysis reveals an outstanding improvement in performance. All pupils, without exception, achieved at least one grade higher than predicted with over 70% achieving two grades higher than predicted. In 2009

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<sup>12</sup> Review of Widening Participation Funded Initiatives Report. FGS McClure Watters. Department for Employment and Learning, October 2010.



Step-Up was one of just six programmes to be shortlisted for a Times Higher Education Award in the Widening Participation Initiative of the Year category.

The programme consists of tutoring of students both in the school and the University, a four day residential Summer School, enhanced university induction; and mentoring support and guidance to students during their university course. The Department provided funding of almost £500,000 for the Belfast and Magee Step-Up programmes in 2008/09.

### *Queen's University Belfast - Discovering Queen's Programme*

Discovering Queen's programme was introduced in the 1999-2000 academic year. The programme is aimed at introducing potential students from disadvantaged backgrounds to HE through a range of activities connected with the university. It includes certified learning which allows students to enter a degree programme of their choice with other than the normal A Level requirements.

Discovering Queen's aims to stimulate demand for HE from under-represented groups; to raise awareness and aspirations of the targeted groups; to improve attainments and progression rates; and to effectively tackle the marginalisation and exclusion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The targeted group are pupils in non-selective post-primary schools who have experienced disadvantage of opportunity, in particular pupils who: have no family experience of HE; have limited family income; are a member of an ethnic minority group or whose progress has been limited by adverse personal circumstances for example, divorce / disability / bereavement.

Activities include:

- in primary schools, school visits, ambassadors / role models, web based resources and campus workshops;
- in non-selective post-primary schools, academic enrichment programmes, "Insight to HE" workshops, thematic university taster

days, UCAS application master classes and personal effectiveness, interview skills and financial literacy workshops;

- in FE colleges, “Insight to HE” workshops, and Taster Days;
- with students with disabilities, a fun family day at QUB and an event to promote awareness of available student support;
- with adult returners, “Insight to HE” workshops, and university taster days for Access Course students.

In academic year 2008/09 3,636 participants attended 51 separate Discovering Queen’s events. This represents an increase of 8% on the previous year. The Department provided funding of £235,000 to support Discovering Queen’s in 2008/09.

## **2.8 Progress toward equality of access**

Over the last decade the Department has pursued twin objectives in HE of promoting excellence and widening participation. It has steadily increased funding to the HE institutions, taking account of a growing student population and inflationary pressures. In financial year 1998/99, Northern Ireland’s two universities received a total of £111.9m in institutional core block funding. For the financial year 2009/10, the universities received a total of £201.2m, representing an increase of 80%. To encourage the continued development of HE in FE, Department for Employment and Learning funding has also risen by 25% in the last five years from £20 million in 2006/07 to over £25 million in 2009/10.

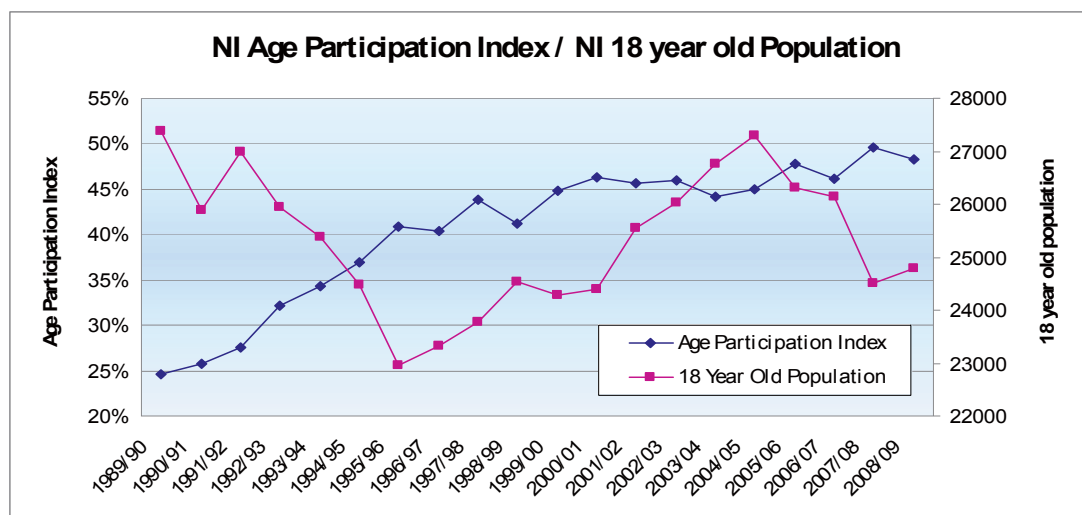
It should also be noted that the overall percentage of Department for Employment and Learning funding of HE institutions in Northern Ireland (42.6%) is higher than comparative figures for Great Britain (England 35.5%, Wales 38.4% and Scotland 41.5%).

### **2.8.1 Participation rates in higher education**

As noted earlier, participation rates have risen dramatically. The graph overleaf (Figure 4) shows that overall participation from the 18 year old

population has risen from 24.6% in 1989/90 to 48.2% in 2008/09; including growth in student numbers in years when the numbers of young people in the population actually reduced.

Figure 4



Northern Ireland's overall participation rates for young people are now the highest in the United Kingdom. In the 2008/09 academic year, almost half of Northern Ireland's young people entered HE<sup>13</sup>; which is nearly double the participation rate of 1990.

Northern Ireland also continues to outperform the rest of the UK in increasing access to HE from students in lower SEC groups. In academic year 2008/09, 41.7% of young full-time first degree entrants were from SEC groups 4 – 7, well above the UK average of 32.3%.

Table 2

% Participation rates in higher education: SEC classification 4-7						
	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09 <sup>14</sup>
UK	28.6	28.2	29.3	29.8	29.5	32.3
England	28.2	27.9	29.1	29.8	29.4	32.4
Wales	29.5	28.4	29.0	30.1	30.4	32.5
Scotland	26.9	26.7	27.3	25.9	26.3	28.2
NI	42.4	41.2	41.0	41.7	40.6	41.7

<sup>13</sup> 48.2% as measured by the Age Participation Index

<sup>14</sup> Note: Due to a change in question by UCAS the 2008/09 figures for the percentage of entrants from NS-SEC classifications cannot be directly compared with previous years.

### **2.8.2 Building on progress – continuing challenges**

Comparing the educational profile of today's young people with that of their grandparents shows a remarkable transformation of the region's higher skills base. Among the older generation, most would not have progressed beyond the equivalent of GCSE, if they got that far; while today almost half will achieve the equivalent of three A Level passes and almost one-third have university degrees.

As demonstrated above, the determined efforts of the last decade to widen participation in HE have been very successful and no comments or recommendations in this document should in any way be seen to take away from the enormous contribution that Northern Ireland's universities and colleges make to improving the life chances of so many people across our society.

Nevertheless there are substantial discrepancies in the extent to which young people from different socio-economic backgrounds and from different neighbourhoods currently participate in HE. Sizable sections of the community are still not realising their proper opportunity to achieve their full potential and to contribute as much as they could to the collective good of society.

Northern Ireland will need to have an even more highly skilled workforce by 2020. However, it is clear that current skills targets cannot be met from the existing young graduate output and that situation is likely to be exacerbated by the expected demographic changes. Since almost 80% of the Northern Ireland workforce has already completed full-time education, it is inevitable that participation must increase for mature students and adult returners.

Future social cohesion and international economic success will require the efforts of all of our people. To deny opportunities to talented people simply because their personal circumstances or social background has created disadvantage is unacceptable.

Evidence suggests that when HE candidates with the necessary talent and attainment are included in the applicant pool they are treated fairly. In the same way, once admitted to HE similarly qualified students from disadvantaged backgrounds do at least as well as their more affluent peers. Therefore our collective efforts must be focussed on ensuring that the people who are **MOST ABLE** but **LEAST LIKELY** to participate are given every encouragement and support to achieve the necessary qualifications to apply to, and to benefit from, the higher education that is right for them, irrespective of their personal or social background.

### **Consultation questions**

1. Has the importance of widening participation in HE been reflected accurately in this consultative document?
2. What priority should Government attach to widening participation in HE?

### **3. A VISION FOR WIDENING PARTICIPATION**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This section outlines a vision for widening participation in higher education over the next 10 years. It takes account of the Executive's goals for the development of the economy and the improvements in the lives of citizens.

#### **3.2 The Executive's goal**

Widening participation in higher education by students from groups which are currently under-represented, in particular students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with learning difficulties and disabilities, is a key goal of the Northern Ireland Executive. This goal is reflected in the **Northern Ireland Programme for Government 2008 – 2011** Public Service Agreement (PSA) 3, which tasks the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning to, "...make progress, year on year, towards fair access to higher education".

In addition, widening participation in higher education will support the achievement of a number of other associated PSA objectives which cut across several Departmental boundaries.

#### **3.3 The aim**

The Department wishes to take forward the development and implementation of a Northern Ireland integrated regional strategy to widen participation in HE by students from disadvantaged backgrounds and from groups which are under-represented in HE. For the strategy to be effective, it will require the commitment, both in funding and input, from the Department for Employment and Learning as lead department, DE, DETI, DSD, DHSSPS and other stakeholders including the universities, the university colleges and the six regional further education colleges.

The Department's view is that any appropriately qualified individual in Northern Ireland should be able to gain access to higher education that is right for them, irrespective of their personal or social background or location of

study. Learners should be able to progress to a level which fulfils their potential and to get proper recognition and respect for their achievements from employers, educationalists and the wider community.

### **3.4 2020 Vision**

The future vision is that in the year 2020, Northern Ireland will be internationally recognised as a region where participation in higher education is accessible to all citizens based on academic potential and regardless of social background.

In our vision of 2020, a regional awareness campaign, beginning with familiarisation programmes for pupils in primary schools, ensures that the costs and benefits of higher education are readily understood and all pupils can identify the relevance of higher education to their own lives. Educational attainment among pupils at post-primary level is among the highest in Europe with 70% achieving five GCSE passes at A\* – C grades, including English and Maths. Timely careers advice ensures that pupils are well prepared for the examination subject choices that will be required for entry to appropriate HE programmes. Students also receive advice and guidance, based on accurate labour market intelligence, on the most appropriate options for mode and location of study to achieve their ambitions.

In 2020, application to higher education is facilitated through admission processes that consider both academic performance and, in the case of students from targeted widening participation cohorts, relevant contextual data to create an even playing field for selection. Recruitment procedures, agreed at regional level, take more account of the circumstances in which student entry qualifications have been achieved and recognise that equality of qualifications does not necessarily reflect equality of effort or potential.

In 2020, the better preparation of potential students prior to entry to higher education has significantly improved Northern Ireland's student retention rates, in the critical first year of study, to be among the best in the UK. Students are better prepared for the demands of higher education and are

more likely to be in the right courses. Post entry support systems, for those considered vulnerable to drop out, mean that Northern Ireland's HE institutions also have among the highest HE qualification achievement and graduation rates as benchmarked against their comparator institutions in Great Britain.

In 2020, there are strong links between universities and employers. Higher education is entrepreneurial, innovative, encourages the growth of small businesses and provides strong, coherent services and support for businesses of all sizes. Intermediate and higher level skills in the workforce have been significantly improved through the development of relevant professional and technical modular qualifications, taken mostly on a part-time basis. Appropriate student funding systems are in place to support part-time study by the adult learner.

### **3.5 Way forward**

Achieving this vision of seamless progress to and through higher education will be challenging but much has already been achieved in widening participation in Northern Ireland. The subsequent sections of this document provide an assessment of the current issues and explore some options to build on the current successes in widening participation in higher education.

#### **Consultation questions**

3. How appropriate is the vision outlined?
4. To what extent will the vision need to be further developed to meet the needs of Northern Ireland?



## **4. TARGETING**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In the past three decades participation in HE has increased steadily – indeed overall participation from young people in HE in Northern Ireland is much greater than in other regions of the UK. However, ironically, the more successful the education systems become, the greater the gap between those who stay on the ladder of educational attainment and those who drop off. There continues to be significant groups in our community which are under-represented in HE.

This section examines the current participation rates of the existing target groups and explores a number of limitations of the existing information systems, in terms of targeting to focus resources on individuals with the greatest need.

### **4.2 Target groups**

A key task for the Regional Strategy for Widening Participation must be to accurately identify those who are most at risk of being unfairly excluded. The HEFCE Good Practice Guide<sup>15</sup> stresses that in an environment of finite resources, it is essential to target these resources to where they will have the greatest effect and impact.

The WP Targets expert working group commissioned a full data analysis of a wide range of sub-sets in recent populations of entrants to HE in order to form the core of future targets groups. The data analysed included: Socio-economic Classifications (SEC); Areas of Deprivation; Gender; Religion; Disabilities; Ethnicity; Age; Care Leavers; First in Family and Travellers.

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<sup>15</sup> Higher Education Outreach – Targeting Disadvantaged Learners. HEFCE, 2007.

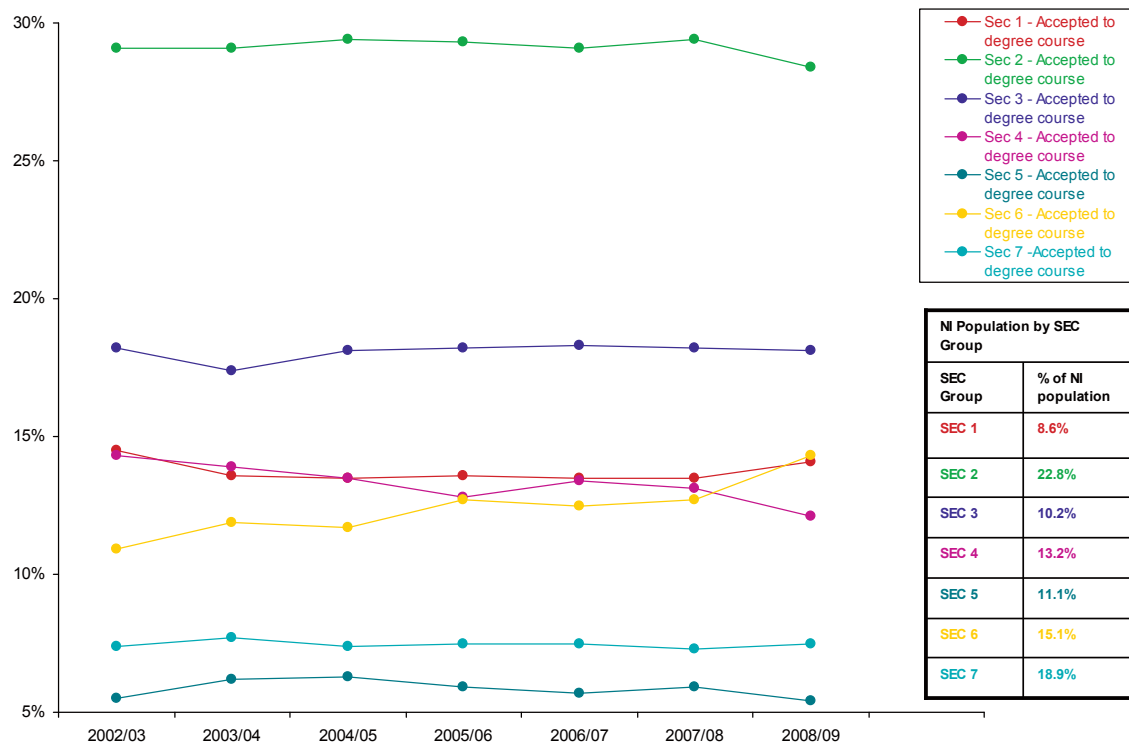
### 4.3 Socio-Economic Classifications (Sec)

The socio-economic background of students is normally classified using a seven category-code called the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC). The categories are:

1. higher managerial and professional occupations
2. lower managerial and professional occupations
3. intermediate occupations
4. small employers and own account workers
5. lower supervisory and technical occupations
6. semi-routine occupations
7. routine occupations

The NS - SEC was first used by UCAS in 2002/03. The figure below represents the proportion of Northern Ireland domiciled UCAS accepted applicants to UK institutions in each of the seven groups in the period 2002/03 – 2008/09, compared to the NI population at the 2001 Census.

**Figure 5** – Proportion of NI domiciled accepted applicants to full-time undergraduate courses at UK institutions through UCAS in each SEC group 2002/03 – 2008/09



The following points should be noted:

- SEC groups 1-3 are over-represented in HE – the proportions of those entering HE from SEC groups 1-3 are consistently (and in some instances significantly) higher than the proportion of the population in each of these groups.
- SEC group 4 proportion is 13.3% (average participation over the seven years) - approximately the same as that group's proportion of the population (13.2%).
- SEC groups 5 and 7 are under-represented in HE - the proportions of those entering HE are consistently, and sometimes significantly, lower than the proportion of the population in each of these groups.
- SEC group 6 is under-represented but in the period 2002/03 – 2008/09 the proportion entering HE from SEC group 6 increased from 10.9% to 14.3%.

## **SEC 5-7**

As noted earlier, Northern Ireland has the highest proportion of people from SEC groups 4-7 in HE in the United Kingdom. However, when SEC group 4 is excluded from the “lower-SEC” definition, the percentage of Northern Ireland students coming from lower SEC groups drops quite substantially, from over 41% to about 27%. The 2001 Census indicates that SEC groups 5–7 make up 45% of the general population.

## **Effect of tuition fees on lower SEC group participation**

Concern was expressed that the introduction of higher Variable Deferred Tuition Fees in 2006 would impact adversely on the numbers of people from disadvantaged backgrounds who would apply for and enter HE in Northern Ireland.

A report<sup>16</sup> commissioned by the Department considered UCAS and HESA data for the period 2003/04 to 2008/09 (i.e. three pre-fee years and three post-fee years). The report concluded that, in absolute terms, the number of

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<sup>16</sup> The Effect of Variable Tuition Fees on Higher Education Participation in Northern Ireland. Alessandra Faggian University of Southampton.

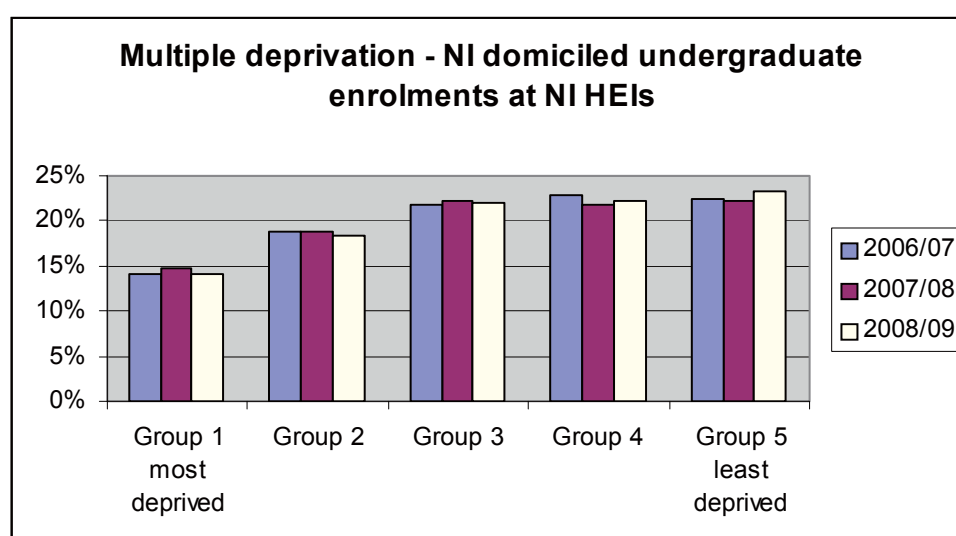
students from SEC groups 4-7 entering HE had dropped in the year after the introduction of fees for both domiciled and educated Northern Ireland students. However, a comparison with the overall number of full-time undergraduates entering HE shows that the trend of students coming from SEC 4–7 parallels the general participation trends of the whole population, indicating that the number of students belonging to SEC 4–7 did not disproportionately decline during the period.

Based on the data presented previously, the expert working group concluded that SEC groups 5–7 were under-represented in HE, but that SEC group 4 should not be considered as under-represented.

#### 4.4 Deprivation – Low participation neighbourhoods

The universities tend to attract a higher proportion of undergraduate enrolments from those areas which are least economically deprived in Northern Ireland. In fact, over the last three years (as shown in the graph below) the proportions of NI domiciled undergraduates at NI HE institutions from the 20% least deprived/most affluent areas has increased from around 22% to 23%, while the proportions from those living in the quintile of most deprived areas remained static over this time period, at 14%.

Figure 6



Ideally, if there was to be completely equitable participation from each of the quintiles then the numbers of people participating from within each area should equal 20%. It is clear that people from the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland are under-represented at the HE institutions.

In contrast, there would appear to be a more equitable balance in participation in higher education in FE colleges. In 2008/09, 20% of enrolments in HE in FE were from the 20% most deprived areas of Northern Ireland compared to 18.6% from the 20% least deprived areas. Over the last three years the proportions from these groups has remained fairly static. These figures suggest that those from the most deprived areas in NI are fairly represented in HE in FE.

#### **4.5 Gender**

In the 2001 Census, males accounted for just under half (49%) of the Northern Ireland population. However, in 2008/09, 59% of all NI domiciled undergraduates enrolled at UK HE institutions were female. Part-time courses showed a slightly higher female balance at 61% of the overall total. Males fared slightly better in HE in FE where they made up 46% of the total (up from 43% in 06/07) but were still significantly below the female proportion of 54%.

Over the last few decades, female educational attainment rates have improved dramatically to a point where girls significantly outperform boys in post-primary level education. At third level, female students now represent almost two-thirds of the student population in Northern Ireland. Proportions are slightly higher for NI *educated* students than NI *domiciled*, suggesting that females are generally less inclined to leave NI to study elsewhere.

The expert working group concluded that there was a bias toward female participation and that males were under-represented in HE.

#### **4.6 Religion**

The DE School Leavers Survey for 2009 indicated that the religious break down for all school leavers was, 50% Catholic, 41% Protestant and 9% Other.

Each year approximately 9,500 Northern Ireland school leavers enrol in first year undergraduate programmes in HE institutions throughout the United Kingdom. Over the last few years the breakdown of those entering HE institutions has averaged around 52% from the Catholic community, 39% from the Protestant community, and a balance of 9% other. These proportions are broadly similar for those undergraduates at the NI HE institutions.

**Table 3**

NI School leavers who entered institutions of HE in NI and GB by religion of pupil 2009						
	NI		GB		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Protestant	2588	35.8	1112	43.6	3760	37.7
Catholic	4172	57.6	1098	43.0	5369	53.8
Other	135	1.9	92	3.6	231	2.3
Non Christian	13	0.2	17	0.7	32	0.3
No religion	330	4.6	232	9.1	593	5.9
	7238	100.0	2551	100.0	9985	100.0

Source: School Leavers Survey

### Students studying outside of Northern Ireland

The total numbers of school leavers from Protestant and Catholic communities leaving to study in Great Britain are broadly similar – 1,137 Protestant and 1,105 Catholic in 2006-07; and 1,142 Protestant and 1,060 Catholic in 2007-08.

Data are not available from DE for those school leavers who go to the Republic of Ireland. However, information provided by the Higher Education Authority shows that in 2008/09 there were 1,025 NI domiciled students enrolled on HE courses at ROI institutions across all years of study, which is a decrease of 3% from the 2007/08 figure of 1,060. However, no breakdown is available by religious composition.

### Protestant Males

The expert group noted that young Protestant boys were less likely to participate in HE, but more likely to participate in FE, than their Catholic

counterparts<sup>17</sup>. This trend is compounded when linked with SEC grouping and with areas of deprivation/low participation. As noted earlier there is considerable under-representation in HE of students from areas of disadvantage but this is particularly marked in terms of male students from the controlled sector, mainly in Belfast, and from areas that are more than 75% Protestant in terms of community background<sup>18</sup>.

The expert working group concluded that overall Protestant and Catholic participation in HE was broadly in line with the wider community representation at school leaving age, but was out of balance with the 2001 Census which recorded 46% of population as Protestant. In particular the subgroup noted an under-representation of young Protestant males from lower socio-economic groups and from lower participation neighbourhoods.

#### **4.7 Disability**

There is a lack of good quality information on people with disabilities in Northern Ireland. There is no comprehensive register of people with disabilities and, consequently, it is very difficult to be definitive on the specific numbers of people with disabilities at the population level. According to the 2001 Census of the Population, 20% of the population have a limiting long term illness but a further breakdown by age shows that younger cohorts have lower limiting long term illness. However, caution is needed when comparing with HE participation analysis given different, and competing, definitions of disability including the conflict between the medical and social models.

The medical model is most often used in data collection where disability is broadly defined as “any long-standing disability, illness or infirmity that limits the respondent’s activities in any way”. However, the alternative Social Model looks at the impact of the surrounding environment in which a person lives and how this affects their ability to carry out everyday activities.

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<sup>17</sup> Educational Migration and Non-return in Northern Ireland. R McQuaid and E Hollywood, Employment Research Institute, Napier University, Edinburgh. Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, May 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Every Child an Equal Child - An Equality Commission Statement on Key Inequalities in Education and a Strategy for Intervention, November 2008.

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, which was developed and endorsed by the World Health Organisation, has defined disability in terms of the interaction between the individual and the environment.

“A person is not considered as having a disability just because they have a health condition but instead it is how the interaction between this condition and the environment limits or prevents the individual from taking part in society that creates a disability.”

The Northern Ireland Survey of Activity Limitation and Disabilities report<sup>19</sup> was published in 2007 and found that in 2006/07, 18% of all people living in private households in Northern Ireland had some degree of disability. The prevalence rate for adults was 21% and 6% for children.

#### Prevalence of disability by age

The prevalence of disability amongst adults varies significantly with age, ranging from a low of 5% among young adults aged 16 – 25; to over 60% among those aged 75 and over, and over 67% for the very elderly. For both males and females the prevalence of disability increases with age.

Table 4

Prevalence of disability by age			
Age	Total Population	Male	Female
16 – 25	5%	6%	4%
26 – 44	11%	9%	13%
45 – 59	23%	21%	24%
60 – 74	41%	38%	44%
75+	60%	57%	62%

Source: NISRA

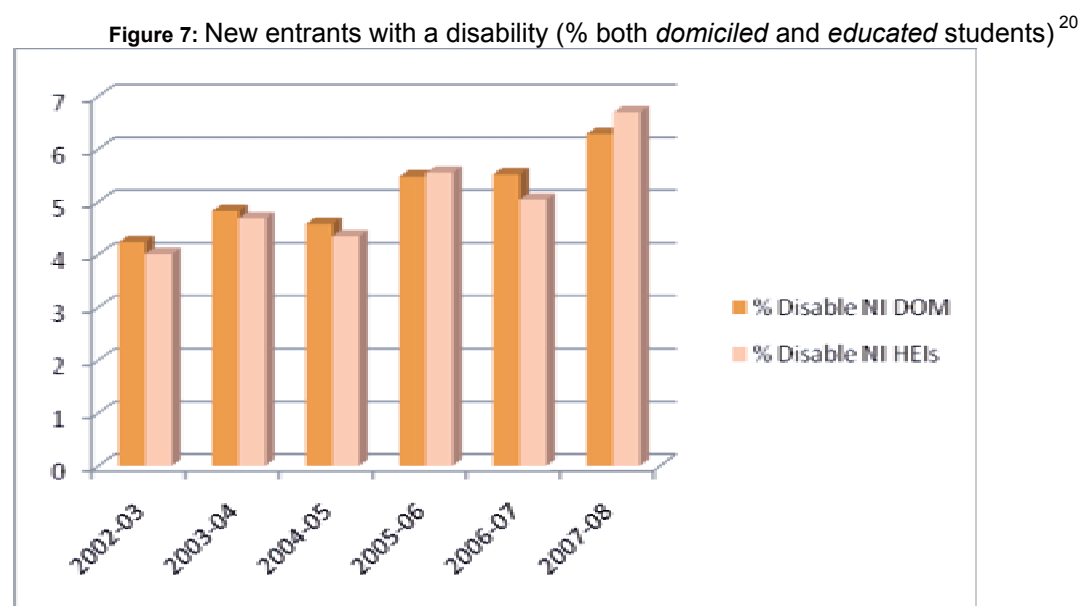
<sup>19</sup> The Prevalence of Disability and Activity Limitations amongst adults and children living in private households in Northern Ireland. NISRA, July 2007.



The incidence of multiple disabilities is not as pronounced amongst young people as it is with older people but learning and intellectual disabilities are among the highest categories of disability among the younger age groups.

#### Proportion of students with a disability in HE

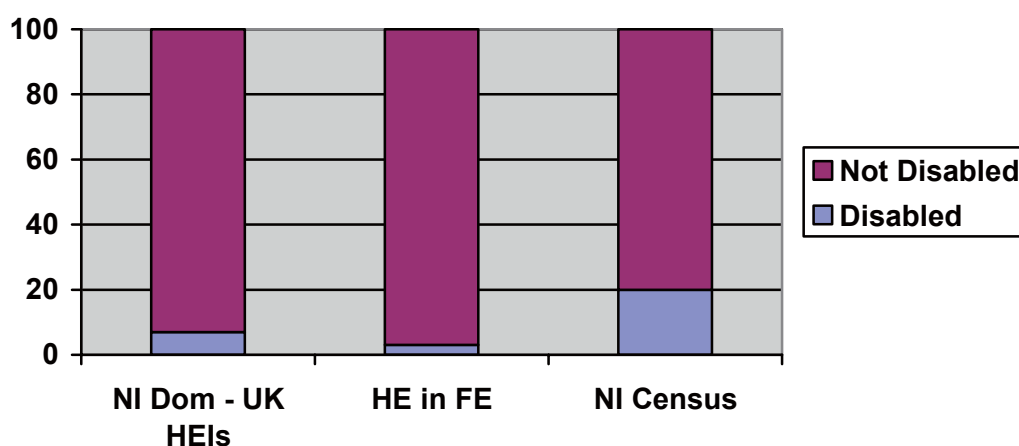
As the figure below demonstrates, the percentage of HE students with a disability has been increasing over the last few years. These figures are collated from those students who have self declared a disability, but there is considerable anecdotal evidence that many students are reluctant to self declare. Therefore it is unclear whether this is due to an increase in the number of disabled students in HE as opposed to an increase in the number declaring a disability.



In 2008/09, 7% of Northern Ireland domiciled undergraduates to UK HE institutions self-reported a disability, indicating no change since 2006/07. However, only 3% of HE in FE enrolments self-reported a disability in 2008/09, which is a slight increase on the 2% recorded in 2006/07.

<sup>20</sup> The Effect of Variable Tuition Fees on Higher Education Participation in Northern Ireland. Alessandra Faggian University of Southampton Source: HESA data

Figure 8: Enrolments (2008/09) and NI population (2001) by disability



Although it is difficult to conclude from the statistics outlined above that young people with a disability are under-represented in HE; evidence from the Northern Ireland Labour Force survey indicates that disabled people continue to be particularly disadvantaged in terms of education, with 42% of disabled people of working age people having no qualifications compared with only 16% of the population without a disability. The Northern Ireland Survey of Activity Limitation and Disabilities report found that disabled people were also missing out on lifelong learning opportunities with 55% not undertaking any course of study, either full or part-time, since leaving school.

A recent report from the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister<sup>21</sup> welcomed the progress in improving the transition processes for young people with a disability. However, it noted that more needed to be done for progression routes from school to HE. In addition to the difficulties associated with transition, disabled young people can often face negative attitudes which can result in exclusion and low expectations in terms of educational attainment. Negative experiences during school years, coupled with a lack of assistive devices, can be powerful barriers to participation in HE.

<sup>21</sup> Report of the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on Disability. OFMDFM, 2010.

In light of this, it is crucial that young people with a disability are afforded the best possible opportunities in terms of education and transition. It is vital that the necessary supports are put in place to ensure that young people aged 14 – 25 can access the full range of educational services.

#### **4.8 Ethnicity**

98% of all NI domiciled undergraduates in UK HE institutions were classified as 'White' in 2008/09, which represented a marginal decrease from 99% in 2006/07. According to the 2001 Census of Population, 99% of population was 'White'.

Of the almost 53,000 Northern Ireland domiciled undergraduate students enrolled in HE institutions across the UK in 2008/09, the second largest recorded ethnic grouping, with a total of 280 students, was "mixed race". This was closely followed by Chinese students at 210, and Indian students at 105.

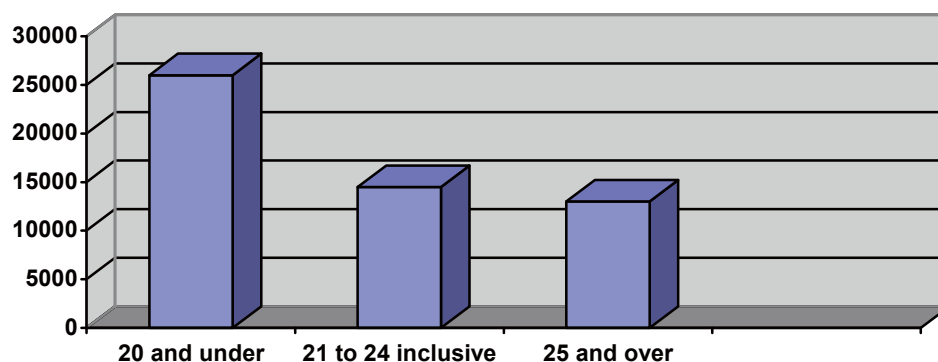
The expert working group noted that the numbers of students from ethnic minorities was very small compared to most other parts of the UK but concluded that the proportion of enrolments from ethnic minority communities were broadly in line with the wider community profile.

The group also sought commentary from university and college representatives on any related issues pertaining to participation by ethnic minorities. Evidence suggested that, in general, there were no particular difficulties associated with existing Northern Ireland domiciled students but noted that "English as a second language" could become an issue in future years with recent migrants from Eastern European States.

#### **4.9 Age**

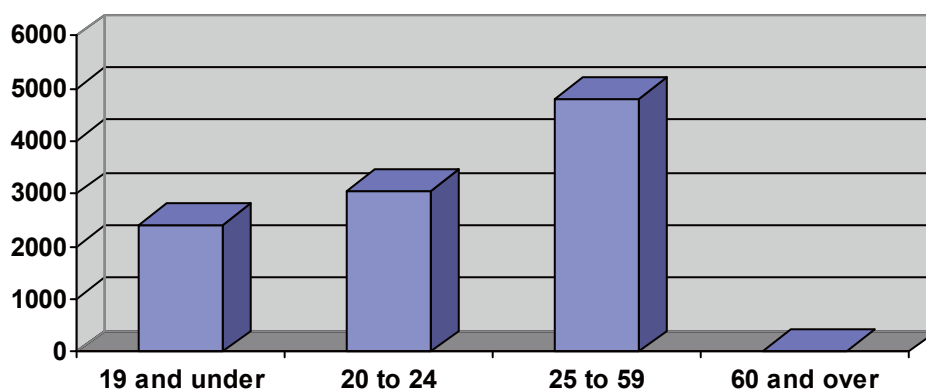
There is a clear bias towards young people in HE with 76% of the total undergraduate enrolments aged under 25 years old. The balance is somewhat more even in HE in FE with 47% of enrolments aged 25 and over. In fact, the percentage of students in HE in FE aged 25-59 years matches very closely the 46% total for that age group in the 2001 Census.

Figure 9 NI dom undergraduate enrolments at UK HE institutions by age - 08/09



Part-time study is particularly favoured by those over 25 years old, who make up only 7% of full-time undergraduates but over 78% of the part-time undergraduate population.

Figure 10 HE in FE enrolments by age - 08/09



The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2008-based population projections show that the age profile of the Northern Ireland population will gradually become older.

As outlined earlier, the age profile of those from Northern Ireland at the UK institutions is relatively young with the majority entering HE at the age of 18. In 2008, there was estimated to be 25,000 18 year olds in Northern Ireland. This number was projected to rise to 26,000 by 2010 and thereafter there would be a gradual decrease of 12% to 22,000 within the 18 year old

population in 2022. However, research also shows<sup>22</sup> that university is increasingly being seen as something that adults would or could consider in the future and therefore the age profile of those in HE could change.

The expert working group noted the bias toward younger age participation and identified that, given the declining younger age population, a focus on adult learners would be necessary to meet the future skills needs of the NI economy.

#### **4.10 Care leavers**

The Department does not collect data on the numbers of “cared-for” children entering HE. The Report of the Leaving and After Care Population Census 2008<sup>23</sup> offers some of the best statistical information on those young people leaving care in Northern Ireland.

The findings were based on analysis of Census Data gathered from the five Health and Social Care Trusts on care leavers aged 16 – 21 years old. There were a total of 1,234 care leavers at 30<sup>th</sup> September 2008. Gender was almost evenly split at 50:50. Belfast had the highest number of care leavers at 347 young people but there was a generally even spread of young people leaving care across the region.

Almost 80% of the young people were in employment, education or training; 21% were unemployed. 9% were registered as having a disability. Only 62 care leavers were in higher education representing a mere 8% of the total grouping.

With participation rates in HE around 50% for the wider population of young people, care leavers are clearly under-represented in higher education in Northern Ireland.

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<sup>22</sup> University is not just for young people: Working adults’ perceptions of and orientation to higher education’ E. Pollard, P. Bates, W. Hunt and A. Bellis, August 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Statistics about the Wellbeing of Young People Leaving Care, DHSSPS, September 2008.

#### **4.11 First in family**

The Department does not hold statistics for those who are the first in their family to attend HE. There is international research evidence (see Chapter 6 – Improving Retention and Progression) that those who are “first-in-family” to attend HE are at a disadvantage in terms of home support and guidance compared to those whose parents or older siblings have direct first hand experience of HE and can pass on advice and guidance.

#### **4.12 Travellers**

Figures indicate that there were 20 members of the Travelling community participating in HE in 2008/09. The issue of Traveller participation is multi-faceted and difficult to determine with precision. Many Traveller children still do not complete second-level education; overall literacy levels remain low among members of the community; there are wider issues of marginalisation experienced by Travellers in education and the living circumstances of the students make accurate data gathering problematic.

#### **4.13 Limitations of existing information/data**

The Department for Employment and Learning holds a range of statistical data in relation to HE participation at the UK and Northern Ireland level.

These include data on:

- NI domiciled enrolments to UK HE institutions;
- Enrolments at the Northern Ireland HE institutes; and
- HE in FE at NI FE colleges.

Within these broad categories there is a range of sub-categories including participation by: Region of Study; SEC grouping; Multiple Deprivation Measure; Age; Disability; Ethnicity; Gender; Religion; Dependents; and Mode of Study. These data provide much of the evidence base for future policy making with regard to higher education.

However, the Department for Employment and Learning is reliant on a number of complimentary sources for some of its information. Most of the information on HE enrolments at UK HE institutions is gathered at UK level by

HESA and incorporates UCAS admission data. This poses a number of difficulties. For full-time undergraduate courses, information on student SEC is collected by UCAS. However, the response to this field is optional and consequently many students choose not to provide this information, thus reducing the value of the data gathered on SEC background. It is difficult to be sure if data fluctuations from year to year are due to genuine changing trends or to greater, or lesser, numbers of students providing the information.

Information on disability is similarly compromised as much of the data is based on student self-reporting. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence to suggest that disabled students are loathe to disclose a disability on entry but may be more willing to make their condition known as they become more comfortable with their institution.

Department for Employment and Learning statistics can also be vulnerable to changes in how the data is collected, collated and reported by a third party agency. For example, a recent decision by UCAS to stop publishing information on SEC groups in favour of a post-code based measure of neighbourhood participation known as POLAR, has resulted in the Department being unable to report progress against a key PSA target in a consistent fashion.

These inconsistencies constitute a significant weakness in relation to evidence based policy making with regard to equality of access and widening participation. It is vital that reliable and consistent information is available to all stakeholders to clearly identify successful initiatives and to accurately measure progress year on year. Success will require a clear focus on what works and the development of a spirit of cooperation between partners in government, education and wider stakeholders, based on a set of common, agreed measurements and a robust set of evaluation principles and guidelines.

## **Longitudinal research**

The expert working group sounded a note of caution with regard to the changing nature of disadvantage within potential target groups, pointing out that today's minority group could be tomorrow's mainstream. It also stressed the importance of having access to appropriate long-term trend data to inform the identification of groups at risk but also, in the longer run, to support the delivery partners in relation to the monitoring and evaluation of the Widening Participation Strategy. Detailed examination of trends in educational attainment within the population across time would ensure that timely interventions could be put in place to meet changing circumstances and would facilitate the necessary refocusing of initiatives to take account of contemporary conditions.

The Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study (NILS) is a large-scale, representative data linkage study consisting of approximately 500,000 people (28% of the Northern Ireland population) and is an innovative research resource which allows for the exploration of changing individual and area-based health, demographic and socio-economic characteristics. The survey tracks the major life events of its cohort by using information from a variety of sources against the baseline of the 2001 general Census returns. Information is available on the NILS cohort that covers a wide spectrum of attributes including; age, gender, marital status, socio-economic grouping, religion/community background, geographical location, health status, familial education tradition and disability.

Using information available on educational attainment outcomes by NILS cohort attributes, it should be possible to establish a baseline profile of qualification levels attained by 2001 and to track subsequent movements among multiple sub-groups. If tracked by Super Output Area<sup>24</sup> it should be possible to identify, with considerable accuracy, under-represented population

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<sup>24</sup> Super Output Areas (SOAs) are a set of geographies developed after the 2001 census. The aim was to produce a set of areas of consistent size, whose boundaries would not change (unlike electoral wards). They are areas with similar social characteristics and at their lowest unit level they typically contain a population of around 1500.



groups in relation to HE participation and to examine subsequent behaviour to 2010 of the population sub-groups of interest.

#### **4.14 Future targeting for Widening Participation interventions**

The Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), in outlining its focus for research work in this area, defined the target cohorts for Widening Participation study as;

*“People from socially disadvantaged families and/or deprived geographical areas, including deprived, remote, rural and coastal areas of from families with no prior experience of HE. Widening Participation is also concerned with diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, disability and social backgrounds in particular HE disciplines, modes and institutions. It can also include access and participation across the ages extending the concept and of learning across the life course, and in relation to family responsibilities, particularly by gender and maturity.”*

From a policy maker’s point of view, it does not omit much. However, it does serve to illustrate very effectively that Widening Participation is not just about targeting minorities. The equation of (socio-economic background) x (gender) x (ethnicity) x (age) x (location) x (disability) x (family background) and their combined effects on an individual’s educational chances is a very complex one.

In Northern Ireland, target groups for Widening Participation have historically been defined by cohort, including SEC groups 4-7, disabled persons and people with learning difficulties, first-in-family, cared-for children, etc. There are a number of difficulties inherent in this approach. To begin with, the combined sum of people falling into each of these groups could make up about 70% of the total Northern Ireland population, which makes something of a mockery of the term, “to target”.

Secondly, to use broad groupings as a method of targeting can give rise to ecological fallacy ie, a statistical error where the characteristics of a known group are ascribed to each and every individual member of that group. For example, if a village has an average household income of £40,000 no

judgement can be made regarding any individual's income as the area could be made up of two separate housing estates, one with an average annual income of £20,000 and the other more affluent estate with an average income of £60,000. So, just as having a medical condition does not in itself constitute a disability until there is an assessment of how it restricts one's ability to perform in the environment; simply to belong to, say, SEC group 7 does not, by itself, indicate a disadvantage when seeking entry to HE. It is only when belonging to one of the under-represented groups identified above imposes restrictions on the individual that disadvantage is realised.

Finally, there is an imperative to distinguish the multi-faceted nature of disadvantage and to recognise people as individuals. Membership of one disadvantaged group rarely confers a disadvantage of itself. However, when combined with other indicators of disadvantage the cumulative effects can eventually pose insurmountable obstacles for the individual. There has been growing recognition of the multiplier effect of disadvantage and, increasingly, the highly selective universities have been exploring the use of "*contextual data*" in the application process to try to counter inequities.

Contextual data can be used as part of a holistic decision making process when considering applications to HE from an increasingly diverse application pool. At its simplest, contextual data is a method of recognising the personal circumstances of an individual applicant. It includes consideration of additional personal details such as SEC grouping, receipt of Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), applicant postcode linked to low participation areas, disrupted schooling, school-attended performance at GCSE and a range of other hard and soft data. The Targets expert working group noted the work of the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) in Great Britain to identify the most appropriate and universally acceptable identification metrics to be employed and recommended the development of a similar system in Northern Ireland. (This recommendation is explored in greater depth in the Recruitment and Selection section).

#### **4.15 Conclusions**

The Targets expert working group recommended that the following criteria should be considered for determining persons currently at risk of under-representation in HE and should form the basis for inclusion of groups/individuals in the targeted Widening Participation support initiatives outlined in subsequent sections:

- SEC Groups 5 – 7
- disability (physical, sensory or learning)
- low participation neighbourhoods (areas of high deprivation)
- young Protestant males (from areas of high deprivation)
- adult returners, particularly work-based learners

The above criteria are not intended to exclude other categories of persons at risk of disadvantage in terms of participation in HE but to recognise the comparatively small numbers in other groups. In most cases a definition of “at risk” should be based on multiple disadvantages and should include an assessment of individual needs.

The expert working group also advised that the targeting of groups/individuals for inclusion in Widening Participation support measures should be an iterative process that recognises the changing circumstances of the individual as he/she progresses through the student/learner cycle.

The basis for inclusion could be interpreted quite widely in the beginning and should narrow as the journey progresses. For example, there would be a bias towards a group approach to support at the Aspiration and Attainment stages, but that would become ever more refined through the stages to be focussed on individuals in the later stages of Retention and Progression.

#### **4.16 Proposals for consideration**

Based on the analysis and evidence in this section, the following is proposed for consideration within the Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education.

- The Department for Employment and Learning, working in conjunction with the Department of Education and the HE institutions, should develop appropriate mechanisms to efficiently gather comprehensive and reliable data pertaining to access to, and participation in, higher education.
- The Department should engage with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) to develop a longitudinal study of educational attainment by identifiable sub-groups since 2001.
- The Department for Employment and Learning, working in conjunction with the Department of Education, the HE institutions and relevant stakeholders, should determine and agree a set of parameters for the identification of Widening Participation cohorts and individuals at each stage of the student/learner experience based on multiple disadvantages and including an assessment of individual needs.

With these proposals in mind, we would welcome your response to the following questions.

### **Consultation questions**

5. How can HE institutions, government, the school sector and other stakeholders work together to identify better under-representation in HE?
6. How can we improve coverage of data which is poorly responded to or address the issue of self-declaration for some data such as disability?
7. How should the strategy identify better and address the needs of the individual with multiple disadvantages to obtain access to higher education that is right for them?

## 5. RAISING ASPIRATION AND ATTAINMENT

### 5.1 Introduction

This section sets out the current policy and practices in raising aspirations and attainment in schools and explores how that might be improved in the future.

### 5.2 Barriers

The recent Harris Report<sup>25</sup> concluded that,

“...by far the biggest single group lost to higher education, at least at this stage of their lives, consists of those who leave education entirely at the age of 16.”

Currently, talented young people from disadvantaged groups (the **most able: least likely** group) who could apply to HE are disproportionately not doing so. Some are, of course, making entirely rational decisions to follow a different path in an apprenticeship or other form of training or further education. However, many will have made less informed decisions to pursue a path in HE due to a range of real or perceived personal barriers. HE is not something that they view as being relevant to their lives but is meant for “others”. Their family may have had no previous experience of HE or, worse still, the previous family experience may be negative, creating a bias *against* higher education.

The barriers to participation in HE exist at the policy, institutional and personal level. They can be characterised as dispositional (relating to attitudes and self perceptions about oneself as a learner), situational (arising from personal circumstances), informational (reflecting a lack of relevant information, advice and guidance) and financial barriers (real and perceived).

Of course, it may be argued that now is not the time to be encouraging more people to apply to enter HE, pointing out the existing surfeit of qualified candidates and a lack of resources to expand the current provision; a situation that is likely to last for at least the next few years. However, education is not a

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<sup>25</sup> What more can be done to widen access to highly selective universities? A Report from Sir Martin Harris, Director of Fair Access, April 2010.

short term matter and the raising of a country's intermediate and higher level skills base cannot be measured in weeks, months or even individual years. Nor should the focus be exclusively on full-time undergraduate provision. The up-skilling of the existing workforce through flexible part-time higher education provision is also a priority. The Strategy to Widen Participation in HE must look beyond the confines of the current economic downturn and lay the foundations for future economic and social progress.

### **5.3 Raising aspirations**

The key to increasing the numbers of qualified applicants to HE, from the widest possible range of social and educational backgrounds, is to raise aspiration levels as early as possible in a young person's educational journey. Initiatives to raise aspiration and attainment will have the additional benefit of supporting the Department's strategy to address the particular needs of those young people who have disengaged from the economy and society as a whole; namely those who are not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).

To be successful in achieving higher level qualifications, people need to possess a number of characteristics. These include: the aspiration to improve their educational level; confidence in their ability to do so; and the drive and determination to succeed in higher education. An individual's aspirations, and their ability to realise those aspirations, are usually determined at a very early stage in their life.

#### Department of Education initiatives

***Revised curriculum and Entitlement Framework*** – a revised curriculum is now in place in all grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland and is specifically designed to help young people develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes that they will need to do well in life and at work. At its centre is a focus on developing the core skills of Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT. Its flexibility also provides teachers with much greater freedom to introduce topics that can interest and inspire young people; and to make

connections between areas of learning in a way that can make learning more relevant.

At the critical age of 14, when young people start to make important choices, the Entitlement Framework is the counter balance to the reduced core of the Key Stage 4 curriculum, ensuring that, wherever they go to school, young people have access to a much broader, better balanced and more coherent range of subject choices, supported by high quality careers education, information, advice and guidance. By 2013, every young person will have access to at least 24 subjects at the age of 14 and 27 subjects in post-16 provision in schools. At each stage, at least a third of the courses on offer must be general (or academic) in nature and another third must be applied.

***Every School a Good School – a policy for school improvement*** is the overarching Department of Education policy for raising standards and tackling underachievement. Self-evaluation leading to sustained self-improvement is at the heart of the school improvement policy. The policy aims to embed the characteristics of a good school in all schools, so that every child receives a good education and can fulfil his or her potential.

The policy sets out ambitious targets to increase the proportion of school leavers achieving five or more GCSEs (or equivalent) at A\*-C including English (and for those learning through the medium of Irish, Gaeilge) and Mathematics. DE aims to see a particular increase in the proportion of school leavers from disadvantaged backgrounds achieving at this level.

Evidence suggests that young people who are encouraged and supported to do well are more likely to achieve highly. The policy, therefore, stresses the importance of having high expectations for all young people and of tackling the barriers to learning that they may face.

The **Extended Schools Programme** aims to improve educational outcomes and life chances for young people from disadvantaged areas. The programme supports pupils through the provision of services and close

partnership working with families and communities, helping to re-engage parents with education and raise aspirations of the community as a whole, which should in turn raise aspirations and achievement amongst young people.

The Department of Education is also working to pilot Full Service provision in the Boys and Girls Model Schools in North Belfast and through a Full Service Community Network in Ballymurphy. The Full Service School is a fully extended school offering substantial additional programmes and activities for pupils and the local community. Full Service programmes seek to enhance life chances for young people by supporting educational attainment through addressing the needs of the children, their families and the local communities.

**The Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion** aims to ensure that children and young people who have special educational needs are encouraged and supported to reach their full potential. A key element of the review involves building the capacity of mainstream schools to better support the wide range of special educational needs that they now encounter.

Capacity building within the school workforce to engage with young people across the range of barriers to learning is a major tenet of all Department of Education policies, including to improve the engagement and educational outcomes of Traveller children and young people, and of looked after children, and to ensure that newcomer children have the language skills to participate in the curriculum. Programmes are also in place to support school-aged mothers and carers.

#### HE institution outreach programmes

All of Northern Ireland's HE institutions are engaged in outreach programmes to non-selecting schools and local communities as part of their own Widening Participation Strategies. These programmes are principally focused on raising aspirations and encouraging young people to engage with learning usually with a view to encouraging applications from under-represented groups.



Outreach programmes start by raising aspirations in general, gradually tailoring support specific to the needs of Widening Participation target groups.

They include a wide range of activities including:

- summer schools;
- masterclasses;
- student mentoring and ambassador schemes;
- coordination of university - school visits;
- outreach work with adults; and
- workforce development activities with employers/SSCs.

### *Primary schools*

All practitioners involved in Widening Participation recognise that targeted activity must take place at an early age, and some of the most successful interventions in raising aspirations take place within primary schools. Northern Ireland universities and colleges deliver a range of outreach activities to primary school pupils.

#### **Example 1 – Widening Participation in primary schools**

##### **Queen’s University – Professor Fluffy Programme**

The Professor Fluffy programme is a licensed teaching system developed by the University of Liverpool and delivered in primary schools to help raise aspirations to higher education. Professor Fluffy is based around a cartoon character and includes a comprehensive activity programme that introduces the vocabulary of FE and HE to children at a level that they can understand and in a manner to which they can relate. It has a focus on STEM subject areas as well as modern languages.

##### **University of Ulster – Sparking the Imagination**

Sparking the Imagination is an action research project which aims to explore and contribute to improving levels of self-esteem in young children in primary schools in inner Belfast. By hosting story telling, music and drama events at the University of Ulster campuses it provides both an introduction to university and a backdrop against which pupils, parents and teachers can celebrate success.

There is considerable evidence that the earlier that a child is introduced to the concept of higher education the more likely they are to consider participation as a real possibility for themselves. In all circumstances, that introduction needs to take place before the end of year 9, after which subject study options

are selected that may have profound impacts not only on their educational attainment at 16, but also on the range of choices available to them afterwards.

### *Non-selective post-primary schools*

Within their own institutional Widening Participation strategies, Northern Ireland's universities and colleges have a wide range of programmes that provide opportunities for non-selective post-primary school pupils to build their knowledge of the prospects offered by higher education and to make effective, informed decisions about their future.

## **Example 2 – Widening Participation in non-selective post-primary schools**

### **Queen's University – Taster Days**

Taster days for pupils from Years 11, 12 and 13 give participants a greater understanding of university life, the application process, new subjects and options available and potential careers.

### **University of Ulster – uni4u Initiative**

The uni4u initiative engages with young people in the “most able – least likely” category who are self selecting to not apply to higher education. The university has established strong links with a number of schools and voluntary organisations such as the Cedar Foundation.

### **University Colleges – Non-Selective Post-Primary School Partnerships**

Both Stranmillis and St Mary's work in close partnership with non-selective post-primary schools in low participation neighbourhoods to work in an effective and sustained way to increase applications from those schools.

### **UCAS Masterclasses**

The HE institutions work to facilitate entry to higher education via UCAS masterclasses and information sessions. Practical advice is offered by the universities' admissions services including advice on what should be included within personal statements.

### **Advice and guidance**

The availability of good advice and guidance is critical to successful participation in HE. Too often young people apply for particular courses at university without having taken the requisite exams while in second level education, due to a lack of advice on their subject choices and the qualifications required for entry to certain courses and institutions. For

example, the science based requirements of many university courses are not understood fully and the double award science system can make it difficult for students to get the qualifications and range of knowledge necessary for certain degree programmes.

The National Student Forum in 2008 made a number of recommendations to Government, including the need to develop a “first port of call” information, advice and guidance portal for students and to professionalise and introduce best practice in the pre-entry advice provided to students by universities and colleges.

We know that young people are more likely to succeed at school and reach their full potential when they can access courses which interest and excite them and meet their careers aspirations. Through the Entitlement Framework, pupils will have access to a more broad, balanced and economically relevant range of courses with coherent pathways from which to progress into further or higher education or employment.

As the curriculum offer changes as a result of the Entitlement Framework and the introduction of the Qualifications and Credit Framework there will be an increased access to a greater number of courses, both general and applied. There will also be a greater need for careers education, information, advice and guidance and clear articulation of the different pathways open to young people as they progress through the education system. There will be a seamless range of options available to young people and, through appropriate and earlier careers education, information, advice and guidance, young people will be enabled to navigate their way through the extended options available and make the right choices.

***Preparing for Success - The Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy and Implementation Plan*** was formally launched by the Minister of Education and the Minister for Employment and Learning in January 2009. The strategy aims to develop effective career decision-makers, leading to increased and appropriate participation in education,

training and employment. This is an all-age strategy which has been developed around five key themes: improving careers education; improving access to careers information; improving the provision of careers advice and guidance; improving quality and improving professional development. The implementation plan sets out the key actions and milestones in relation to each of these themes.

### Financial costs and benefits

One other area where better advice is critical is the relative costs and benefits of HE. Students from backgrounds where HE is less understood and valued, are less likely to appreciate the probable personal benefits that may be accrued on successful completion of a course of higher education. Benefits such as, higher wages, greater job satisfaction and the wider social benefits discussed earlier.

This is particularly true given the ongoing confusion about the relative costs of HE. Many individuals in disadvantaged communities, particularly boys, do not readily see the advantages to be gained from a personal investment in HE and, with a lack of role models, they may opt for an intuitively better option of a routine occupation coupled with the avoidance of student debt.

Although the 'Effect of Variable Tuition Fees' report indicated that the introduction of fees had done little to deter applications to HE, it is clear that more needs to be done to publicise the full range of financial supports that are available to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### Community outreach

Educational disadvantage is multi-faceted, both in its causes and in its consequences. It arises primarily from the dichotomy of experiences from the school and non-school environment of the individual and the extent to which the culture and values of the community are reflected in the school.

Conversely, it reflects the extent to which the educational aims and objectives of the school are valued in the host community. Educational systems function in the context of disadvantages experienced by individuals and communities.

It is vital that the HE institutions reach out to communities to change perceptions and project a more inclusive atmosphere that attracts more learners from low participation neighbourhoods.

### **Example 3. – Frank Buttle Trust**

The Frank Buttle Trust is a grant awarding body for care leavers and in the course of its work has developed an accreditation framework leading to a quality mark for good practice in dealing with care leavers in higher education. The accreditation process calls on organisations to specifically identify and monitor effectively the progress of students from a care background. Pastoral care arrangements and student support facilities should also be in place to assist students from a care background.

The Department encourages all HE institutions to seek FBT accreditation. The University of Ulster has been proactive in its efforts and has achieved accredited status. Measures in its plan of action to help care leavers include allowing them to remain in student halls over the summer vacation period and the introduction of a £500 per student bursary programme (funded from the additional support fund from the Department for Employment and Learning).

Queens University Belfast has indicated that it is actively working towards FBT accreditation.

### **Individuals with disability**

The definition of disability most commonly adopted in HE is that provided by the Association of Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) which is based on the principles of the social model:

“A student is disabled if he or she requires a facility which is not part of the mainstream provision of the college concerned, to enable participation to the full extent of his or her capabilities, and without which he or she would be educationally disadvantaged in comparison with peers.”

There is often a limited belief among teachers, and some parents, that children with congenital disabilities will aspire to HE and FE<sup>26</sup>. There are also significant differences between those with congenital disabilities and those who acquire their disability during or after entry to HE. More needs to be done to raise the aspirations and attainment levels among those with a disability.

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<sup>26</sup> Disabled Students and Higher Education. Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2009.

The UK disability policy is focused on independent living with the objective that, by 2025, all disabled people in the UK will be living independently with informed choice about how, where, and with whom they live. To achieve this, the focus will be on “personalisation”, a model whereby each service or programme is customised to meet specific and identified need. In translating this to education, personalisation will lead to control and choice lying in the hands of the disabled person rather than in the hands of the system. HE could contribute to this aim through:

- targeted outreach programmes aimed at raising aspirations amongst young people with disabilities both in mainstream and special schools;
- opportunities for people with disabilities who do aspire to higher education to take part in sample courses through summer schools in order to equip them with a better understanding of university life and to give them an opportunity to meet academic staff and other students who have made the transition to university;
- the HE institutions working in collaboration with the voluntary sector organisations to ensure that their clients have knowledge of the courses and support available at university and have the opportunity to meet students and staff.

#### Adult returners / work based learners

While the term HE generally refers to post-secondary education, as indicated earlier it is, in essence, any formal education that takes place at level 4 or above. This can include accredited career training, continuing or adult education. HE is increasingly necessary in employment.

#### **Example 4. – UNISON / Open University**

In a unique learning model UNISON, the Open University and the Health and Social Care Trusts have supported participation in HE among public sector workers helping hundreds of staff to access the Open University “Understanding Health & Social Care” module to improve standards of care and progression opportunities. In addition over one hundred classroom assistants have engaged in modules of Early Years courses. The partnership was named WP Initiative of the Year at the Times Higher Education Awards in November 2010.

Securing a higher education qualification makes jobs easier to find and promotions easier to acquire. In addition to the career and financial prospects, a higher education qualification often results in a greater level of job satisfaction for employees. If Northern Ireland is to develop the highly skilled workforce necessary to compete in the global economy of the future, it will also be important to raise the aspirations of those already in the workplace to acquire new and higher level skills through renewed participation in HE.

#### **5.4 Raising attainment**

Even with high aspirations, the single most important factor<sup>27</sup> in determining the probability that a person will progress into HE is the strength of the student's qualifications gained in second-level education. Despite Northern Ireland's successes in good educational results at the top end of GCSE performances across the United Kingdom and the notable growth in HE, there remains a very long tail of underachievement in both primary and post-primary level education.

The academic aspirations and attainment levels of individuals are closely correlated with their social background and the school that they attended. The difference in educational attainment between socio-economic groups is well documented and it is clear that socio-economic backgrounds remain the greatest predictor of academic success and failure, and also of future location in the labour market.

This is the case in Northern Ireland where consistently pupils from the poorest electoral wards have significantly lower educational attainment levels than pupils from the most affluent electoral wards<sup>28</sup>. Children entitled to free school meals are only about half as likely to get five or more GCSEs, including English and Mathematics at A\*-C, as other children.

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<sup>27</sup> Applications, Offers and Admissions to Research Led Universities: Research paper #5. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills/The Sutton Trust, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Selective Secondary Education and Staying-On. Northern Ireland Economic Research Council, Belfast, 1999.

The link between educational attainment and social background is already evident at the age of 22 months<sup>29</sup> and widens through the school experience. Bright children from poorer backgrounds who are outperforming their peers from more affluent families at age 5, will have fallen behind by the age of 7 years. The attainment gap continues to widen from primary to post-primary level education. Two-thirds of pupils receiving free school meals who were among the top performers at age 11 were not in that group by age 16 and most do not go on to higher education<sup>30</sup>. As noted earlier, only 27% of the participants in higher education in Northern Ireland come from the lowest three SEC groups, but over 61% come from the top three SEC classifications.

### GCSE Results

In 2009, 75% of Northern Ireland GCSE entries were awarded at an A\*-C grade. However, in the same year only 58% of school leavers achieved five or more GCSE's at grade A\*-C, including English and Mathematics. In other words, 9,682 young people left post-primary school without the first level of qualifications needed to progress to higher education.

While the number of schools where fewer than 40% of pupils obtain five or more GCSEs at A\*-C has reduced significantly in recent years, there are still too many young people finishing their twelve years of compulsory schooling without reaching this level of attainment. There is a significant gap in achievement between the most and least economically and socially disadvantaged. For example, when the 58% of young people leaving school with at least five GCSEs A\*-C, including English and Maths, is examined it is clear that those not eligible for free school meals perform much better than those from low income families (who are entitled to receive free school meals) – 64% compared to 30%.

Closer examination reveals that non-selective post-primary school attainment is not evenly distributed across the community in Northern Ireland. There are

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<sup>29</sup> Pre-school educational inequality – British children in the 1970 cohort. L Feinstein, London School of Economics, 1998.

<sup>30</sup> Report to the National Council for Educational Excellence. Sutton Trust, 2008.



very significant differences between the Controlled sector and the Maintained schools, and between schools in rural and urban locations. It is very difficult to account fully for this difference in performance, but it is clear that factors such as historical employment prospects, community cohesion and involvement with the schools, population migration to the suburbs and the availability of local role models have all played their part. However, the stark conclusion to be drawn from the table below is that all young people with Free School Meals Entitlement have a much lower prospect of entering higher education than their more affluent counterparts, and boys are particularly badly affected.

Table 5.

<b>Social and sectoral variations in performance 2008/09</b>						
Non-selective post-primary /	% Five or more GCSEs at A*-C Pupils not entitled to Free School Meals		% Five or more GCSEs at A*-C Pupils with Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME)		% FSME entering higher education	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Urban controlled	39.3	49.4	16.3	27.5	3.4	6.6
Urban maintained	49.1	67.3	31.9	45.2	11.5	15.3
Rural controlled	50.6	67.3	25.2	31.7	3.4	9.9
Rural maintained	51.9	78.3	32.8	53.4	11.3	24.2

Source: Department of Education 2011 – School Leavers Survey

### A Level Results

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who do progress beyond GCSE are, unfortunately, also likely to attain lower grades in their A levels than their more advantaged peers with similar underlying ability. More advantaged students account for a disproportionately high percentage of the top grades at A level.

In 2008/09 the average tariff score for first year, first degree enrolments at Northern Ireland's HE institutions was 321 points. However, for applicants from the top three SEC classifications the average score was between 320 and 350 points, while the average tariff score for students from the lowest

three groups was between 299 and 303. There is a clear correlation between SEC grouping and tariff score with the top three SEC groups scoring 350, 331 and 323 points respectively.

Table 6.

<b>First year, first degree enrolments at Northern Ireland HEI's by SEC group and average tariff scores 2008-09</b>	
<b>SEC groups</b>	<b>Average Tariff</b>
Higher managerial and professional occupations	350
Lower managerial and professional occupations	331
Intermediate occupations	323
Small employers and own account workers	308
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	303
Semi-routine occupations	299
Routine occupations	303
<b>Total</b>	<b>321</b>

Source: HESA

#### Department of Education – raising standards and closing the gap

Department of Education has a particular focus on raising standards in literacy and numeracy, as these skills are fundamental to access current and future learning and to a young person's life chances. A revised literacy and numeracy strategy, which aims to raise standards for all and to close the gaps in achievement between the highest and lowest achievers and the most and least disadvantaged young people, will be published in early 2011.

The introduction of the Entitlement Framework offering greater breadth and balance in the courses and pathways available to young people is a key contributor to the overall goal of raising standards within all post-primary schools. In particular, the resulting partnership arrangements between the regional FE colleges and schools in delivering a range of vocational courses has helped to increase attainment levels within the schools sector.

#### Additional learning opportunities

It is clear that the most significant factors in raising attainment are predominantly issues for schools to resolve. Nevertheless, the universities and colleges currently make very important contributions to support the

schools in their efforts to raise attainment through their outreach programmes, school/college links and additional learning opportunities.

The universities and colleges deliver programmes that work directly with pupils and students in non-selective post-primary schools in order to support attainment. Initiatives include a range of curriculum-based workshops and academic enrichment programmes to empower students with the knowledge, skills and confidence to succeed in higher education. The aim is to assist potential applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds to maximise their potential.

#### **Example 5 – Additional learning**

##### **University of Ulster – Step-up**

Step-Up is an interventionist programme that provides new learning opportunities for young people in science equivalent to two A levels. The programme has had considerable success with 99% of pupils having obtained the GCE Double Award Applied Science qualification, with almost 75% having obtained a double A or B grade. This is all the more remarkable as the programme targets schools with among the lowest levels of attainment in science and higher education participation.

##### **Queen's University – Tutoring in Schools**

Tutoring in Schools places undergraduate students in a primary, non-selective post-primary or special needs school for a period of half a day for 10 weeks to work alongside pupils to help improve their academic performance. In addition to their practical assistance, the university students act as positive role models and make a valuable contribution to local community life.

##### **University Colleges – Easter Revision Schools**

Both university colleges offer a range of support aimed at increasing educational attainment in targeted schools including student mentoring and ambassador programmes. The two-day Easter Revision Schools target both English and Mathematics and aims to assist students to obtain at least one grade higher than their predicted grades at GCSE. In addition, St Mary's offers specific A level revision seminars which attracted over 300 learners last year.

All of the HE institutions in Northern Ireland offer Summer School opportunities for potential new students. Queen's University promotes a Year 13 summer school, in conjunction with its Head Start programme, which offers a range of seminars and workshops on Citizenship, Transferable Skills,

Learning for Life and Personal Effectiveness. The University of Ulster has teamed up with Seagate Technologies to run a one-week summer school in computing and electronics aimed at 14 to 16 year olds. 50 pupils attended the school last summer and all completed the Introduction to Computer Studies Advanced Module earning 10 credit points at A level.

## **5.5 Conclusions**

The programmes operated by the Northern Ireland HE institutions have proved very successful in increasing applications and participation by under-represented groups. However, although intended to be complementary, there is evidence that the outreach elements of the Queen's, University of Ulster and the university colleges' programmes sometimes overlap; targeting the same schools and occasionally allowing gaps in coverage, particularly in more rural areas<sup>31</sup>.

At a more general level, outreach activities have been criticised as being too focused on recruitment to specific institutions rather than promoting access to HE more widely. This is important because while these activities are designed to widen participation they are, in most cases, also designed to strengthen and support the recruitment of all students.

On the one hand this makes perfectly good sense. In the same way that many of the adjustments made to systems and physical environments to accommodate people with a disability ultimately benefitted all of society, so too if the embedding of widening participation activities in institutions' marketing strategies promotes accessibility of HE and provides additional ways to demonstrate ability, then the link with recruitment should be welcomed not criticised.

On the other hand, there is considerable evidence that if the targeting for widening participation support is too wide then it can divert resource to where it is not needed and may actually increase the inequality that it is designed to

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<sup>31</sup> Review of Widening Participation Funded Initiatives Report. FGS McClure Watters. Department for Employment and Learning, October 2010.

combat. The potential inclusion of non-target participants also makes evaluation of initiatives very difficult. To target resources for maximum impact the focus should be kept firmly on the “**most able : least likely**”.

By most measures, Northern Ireland has had the most successful widening participation outcomes in the United Kingdom over the last few years. Representation from most target groups is better in Northern Ireland and widening participation activities and programmes are now fully embedded in the HE institutions’ corporate strategies. However, there remain stubborn pockets of disadvantage that will require a more focused approach to defeat.

The experience gained over the last 10 years of widening participation in both Ireland and Great Britain is that sustained actions, delivered over a number of years and co-ordinated so that they do not duplicate the efforts of other institutions or organisations have a much greater impact than isolated and unco-ordinated interventions.

#### Regional collaboration

Since 2008, Aimhigher Area Partnerships have been established on a regional basis in Great Britain to help achieve greater collaboration between HE institutions on co-ordinated activities to widen participation. Partnerships play a major brokerage and co-ordinating role in their area and across their region in the delivery of complementary programmes of widening participation activities. It enables the co-ordination of approaches and the pooling of experience, ideas and knowledge to help learners learn about and be motivated to progress to higher education. Some of these partnerships can be quite large, for example Aimhigher in the South West of England includes 14 HE institutions, 33 FE colleges, 15 Local Authorities, 6 Learning and Skills Councils and 10 Learning Partnerships.

Among the benefits of collaboration in the development of a regional approach to raising aspirations are the enhanced opportunities to:

- establish a clear target group and purpose for the scheme;

- collect better data and mechanisms for sharing the data for research and evaluation;
- monitor performance in evaluating the success of the scheme; and
- provide clear information to participants on the eligibility rules and benefits of the scheme.

### Improving educational attainment

A recent report<sup>32</sup> into participation in England concluded that there is a clear connection between the 30% increase in students entering higher education from disadvantaged backgrounds over the last five year period and the overall improvement in GCSE attainment.

In Northern Ireland it would seem reasonable to conclude that if 58% of school leavers are obtaining the basic qualifications necessary for future entry to HE, (ie, five or more GCSE A\*-C including English and Mathematics), and c.50% of young people are currently participating in HE, then only an increase in attainment at post-primary level education can make a sea-change contribution to widening participation in HE.

Department of Education is putting in place a range of policies aimed at enabling every young person to fulfil her or his full potential at each stage of their development by tackling underachievement, promoting equality and raising educational standards. These policies will support and prepare young people to participate in HE by promoting high aspirations and achievement along with the requisite aptitudes/attitudes that will better equip learners to opt for, and be able to remain in, HE. They are supported with challenging targets for attainment for 2020 that would see significant improvements in the number of young people, particularly those from low income backgrounds, achieving five good GCSEs, including English (and Gaeilge for those educated through the medium of Irish) and Mathematics.

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<sup>32</sup> Trends in Young Participation in Higher Education: core results for England. HEFCE, 2010.

The “Extended Schools” programme may provide a cost-effective way of providing additional support to learners by providing supplementary or complementary schooling with added teaching and other support made available at evenings or weekends. Greater collaboration between schools may provide opportunities for a full range of curricular choices and for all pupils to benefit from effective collaborative arrangements for science or other specialist subject areas. It is important that funding for these arrangements is closely targeted at those living in deprived neighbourhoods whose route to HE is the most difficult.

Outreach activities linked to additional learning specifically redress the generational cycle of educational underachievement and social disadvantage by providing enhanced learning opportunities and progression routes to HE for young people from both under-represented communities and across the socio-economic groups 5-7.

The success of Step-Up provides just one example of how new innovative approaches might be adopted to raise pupil attainment in difficult academic subjects in schools with existing low participation rates in HE.

## **5.6 Proposals for consideration**

Based on the analysis and evidence in this section, the following is proposed for consideration within the Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education.

- There should be a single aspiration raising programme for Northern Ireland closely focused on the identified target groups. The programme should be co-ordinated to avoid duplication of efforts; wide and general at primary school level but much more focused at secondary level and targeted at students from at least year 9, before GCSE choices.

- Department of Education should consider if it should extend the school performance measurement to include progression of (former) pupils to HE at 18+.
- Funding should be made available, on a competitive basis to encourage the development of additional regional programmes to raise attainment levels and aimed at reaching a greater number of applicants from within target groups.

With these proposals in mind, we would welcome your response to the following questions.

### **Consultation questions**

8. How can aspirations to attend HE be raised among groups and communities that are currently under-represented?
9. How can pupil progression rates to HE be improved across low participation schools in Northern Ireland?
10. Are there any additional gaps in student attainment that should be addressed by the Widening Participation Strategy?



## **6. ENHANCING RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This section examines the changes in educational systems and the growth in different types of qualifications being presented for admission to higher education. It explores how existing recruitment and selection procedures might be enhanced to provide a more comprehensive consideration of an individual applicant's potential to benefit from HE.

### **6.2 Changing qualifications**

Today decisions concerning recruitment and selection for HE in Northern Ireland cannot simply be made through debate of the status quo. Until relatively recently, determining the criteria for who should be given a place on an HE course consisted of consideration of the currency of formal academic and/or vocational qualifications, in the context of a system of education that had changed little in living memory.

However, the structure of the educational system is changing and the pace of that change has accelerated considerably over the past decade. For example, today's school leavers may have been educated in a Specialist School, in an Extended School, or in more than one school/FE college through a local Learning Area Partnership framework. Prospective students are therefore more likely to approach HE with a variety of different experiences of education.

Regardless of the school attended, pupils within Northern Ireland will all soon have followed the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum which aims to ensure that,

“...what our children are taught is fit for purpose, not just for today, but for the world as it will be when they leave education ... one that better prepares them for life and work in the 21st century”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The Revised Curriculum, Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2007.

The Revised Curriculum reflects a new understanding of the learning process; it is more flexible and therefore is adaptable to meet the demands of different learners. Above all else, it places an increased emphasis on the development of the core skills of Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT, as a foundation for lifelong learning. Subjects are replaced by 'Areas of Learning' which are broader and more encompassing than the traditional notion of a subject. These areas are not intended to exist in isolation. Knowledge, skills and competences developed in one Learning Area are transferable to other areas of the curriculum. This blurring of the edges may increase the relevance of the school curriculum to future needs, but it also impacts on selection choices.

Decisions taken about how best to select students will need to take account of the major changes taking place in schools. In making choices concerning recruitment and selection it is essential to recognise that amongst potential students there will likely emerge a greater degree of diversity and strengths as a result of a broader system of education. While future students may not present themselves with a set of common qualifications, their prior experience of education should not be overlooked as an indicator of preparedness for a HE course.

In addressing the potential solutions for enhancing recruitment of the target groups, the Enhancing Recruitment and Selection expert working group took account of exemplars of good practice which had been undertaken in Great Britain and Ireland. The following sections will draw out the parameters for enhancement of recruitment activities for the target groups under consideration.

### **6.3 Recruitment**

#### **Extended outreach schemes**

The previous chapter outlined the various outreach programmes that exist in the HE institutions in Northern Ireland and their implicit links to the recruitment programmes of the institutions. In Great Britain, some institutions offer "Extended Outreach" schemes which explicitly link their programmes to clear

access routes for disadvantaged students. For example, on successful completion of a programme a student may be guaranteed to have their application considered or be offered an interview or, in some cases, be guaranteed the offer of a place at the institution.

Such programmes are now being developed on a collaborative basis across several universities. Newcastle University is currently piloting “Realising Opportunities”, which brings together 13 research-intensive universities in a linked programme to enhance the recruitment of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Successful completion of this programme will ensure that the student’s application is given additional consideration and may result in an alternative offer from one or more of the participating universities.

#### Individuals with disability

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Code of Practice on Disability recommends, as a minimum to ensure fair recruitment and selection of candidates with disability, that HE institutions should ensure that university prospectuses and applications are readily available in accessible formats; that selection interviews are located in an accessible venue and that any reasonable adjustments are readily available.

Applicants with disabilities who disclose their disability should be provided with an opportunity to meet disability support staff and staff from the subject disciplines that they are interested in pursuing. Institutions should also consider alternative entry routes which allow disabled students to demonstrate that they meet the entry requirements.

Induction, welcome and orientation events should be inclusive of the needs of disabled students. There should be appropriate monitoring of the student’s support package during each stage of the student life cycle to identify and resolve issues, thus enhancing progression and retention of people with disabilities.

### Alternative entry routes: Access programmes

A most effective mechanism for recruiting learners from a range of widening participation cohorts is through the provision of programmes specifically designed to support the student in reaching an appropriate level of academic attainment. Among the most common and well-established of these are Access courses which target those who lack traditional A level qualifications and who have been out of the full-time educational system for some time.

The courses are designed to support and encourage students through a route which combines the study of academic disciplines with focused training in the skills necessary for both HE and employment. The involvement of both university and college staff ensures a smooth transition from FE to HE for adults who are frequently from lower socio-economic backgrounds, or those who have experienced other disadvantages. Direct progression for those demonstrating appropriate academic ability is facilitated by the engagement of university admissions departments.

The specific arrangements between HE and FE encourage partnership between these sectors and ensure that students are prepared for study at the appropriate level. Such investment in the pre-entry stage, with a proven record of success, could be extended to other cohorts with adaptations made to suit their particular needs. For example, one cohort for whom this pathway has been explored is the 16-19 year old students who have demonstrated some academic potential but who would not ordinarily progress to HE.

By drawing on and developing the experience and good practice of the traditional Access mode, an alternative access route could be developed to meet the needs and the admission requirements for entry to university. Such programmes could include modules on skills, employability and personal development. As with the established model, students who reach an agreed standard at the end of the two-year course could be offered a university place. There is also merit in considering a pre-access programme for adult returners to support their progression from Level 2/3 qualifications into HE entry routes.

This could be supported by the inclusion of access courses in the new Qualifications Credit Framework.

#### Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL)

APEL provides an alternative entry route into a range of qualifications. In Scotland, the Recognition of Prior Learning provides opportunities for the accreditation of learning across the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. This is supported by the RPL toolkit for learning and training providers, employers, human resources personnel and learners. In England, the QAA Guidelines on APEL (2004) established 16 principles of good practice. In Northern Ireland, a regional college and university APEL Scheme was piloted for entry to part-time Foundation Degrees in 2010. This approach is unique in that it is the first, collaborative, regionally agreed system. This system could well become a model for regional developments in other parts of the UK.

#### Foundation Degrees

The introduction of Foundation Degrees within the past few years has opened up new articulation routes into HE. Foundation Degrees are intended to be intermediate, work-related HE qualifications, designed in collaboration with employers and delivered in FE colleges in partnership with HE institutions. Although Foundation Degrees are recognised as higher education Level 5 qualifications in their own right, they also offer the opportunity for articulation to specified related Bachelors Degrees.

However, Foundation Degrees have not yet been recognised or embraced by either employers or students as widely as they should. There exists a major challenge to increase public awareness of Foundation Degrees generally and specifically among the target audiences of students and employers. The Department is taking forward a range of actions to raise the profile and increase the number of students enrolling on Foundation Degrees.

The recent pilot introduction of APEL as an alternative entry route to Foundation Degrees in Northern Ireland offers the possibility of promoting

participation in HE to a wider group of individuals other than the 18 year old holding A levels and entering a full-time undergraduate programme.

### Adult learners and work-based learning

Wider and fairer access to higher education is not just a social imperative but also an economic one. As already mentioned, around 80% of the Northern Ireland workforce of 2020 has already left compulsory education. Unleashing the talent and expertise of this workforce means that HE institutions must be more innovative in their provision and conscious of learner requirements. Such innovation must consider alternative forms of progression including advanced apprenticeships, Foundation Degrees and other professional and technical HE programmes within a credit based flexible framework.

The successful development of HE will hinge on providing opportunities for different types of people to study in a wider range of ways than in the past. Such opportunities must reflect the demands from employers and learners requiring a greater diversity of models of learning. In addition, the provision must be attractive not just regarding pace, place and price but also the usefulness or marketability of the acquired qualification in an economically focussed and competitive job market.

The publication of new research - FutureTrack: Part-Time Students<sup>34</sup> argues that the qualifications which part-time students undertake are more diverse than full-time. While 89% of full-time students study for a first degree, only 36% of part-time students do so. The balance of the group undertakes a wide range of qualifications and a significant proportion come from lower socio-economic groups.

### Qualifications Credit Framework

The Northern Ireland Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme (VQRP) is part of a major cross-UK programme of reform of the vocational qualification system. It has been in operation since late 2005 and is now firmly into the

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<sup>34</sup> FutureTrack: Part-time Students in Higher Education. Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU) 2010.

implementation phase. The broad aim of the programme is to increase the relevance, value and flexibility of vocational qualifications by involving employers in the development and planning process, and through the establishment of a credit-based qualifications system.

An essential tool in this reform is the QCF, the new framework for vocational qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Each qualification in the QCF is made up of units which can be combined under specified rules to contribute to the award of the qualification. Learners build up their units at their own pace and put them towards a full qualification.

Work has begun to explore the links between QCF qualifications and HE, including the significance for learners seeking entry to HE with QCF credits and qualifications. The opportunity for transferring credit between the QCF and HE has already been the subject of some studies in England.

The clarity of unitisation provided by the QCF will make it easier to recognise achievement and validate vocational qualifications for entry to higher education programmes. The opportunities for HE institutions to recognise QCF qualifications for entry to HE programmes, if realised, will widen the routes to HE from sources such as FE colleges and Private Training Providers as research shows that those applying from these routes are more likely to be from a disadvantaged background.

#### **6.4 Enhancing selection**

As early as 2004, the Schwartz Report<sup>35</sup> on Fair Admissions to HE commented,

“The evidence suggests that equal examination grades do not necessarily represent equal potential. In the UK, young people from skilled manual, partly skilled or unskilled family backgrounds are less likely to achieve high grades in A level examinations than those from professional, intermediate or skilled non-manual backgrounds”.

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<sup>35</sup> Fair Admissions to Higher Education. Prof Steven Schwarz. DfES, 2004.

The impact of social and economic disadvantage on attainment levels lies at the heart of some interventionist approaches which are under discussion across the sector.

#### The use of contextual information in admissions

The Schwartz Report concluded that the evidence gathered in the review supported the belief that the admissions process across the UK was generally fair, but admitted that, *inter alia*, there was variation in admissions processes across the sector and unevenness in the treatment of the increasing diversity of applicants, qualifications and pathways into HE.

Following Schwartz, a number of developments were put into place including the establishment of the Delivery Partnership and Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) bodies. In 2004, Schwartz advocated the use of consideration of contextual factors, as well as formal qualifications, in view of, “...the variation in learners’ opportunities and circumstances”.

SPA’s work on the use of contextual data is currently feeding into the Realising Opportunities project mentioned earlier. SPA is advocating actively the use of contextual data in the admissions process in the interests of transparency and fairness in the admissions process.

Contextual data can be defined in two ways: hard data which is supplied through government agencies which can provide reliable tracking mechanisms across schools and colleges; and, soft data, supplied by the applicant in their application process. SPA hopes to make progress to ensure that central hard data on qualifications, student performance and socio-economic background may be supplied reliably and made available through the UCAS admissions process. However, much additional work needs to be undertaken in this area to ensure consistency in the basket of data made available to HE institutions. Nonetheless, this is a significant area for attention in addressing ways of enhancing selection processes to assist widening participation in HE.



The Targets expert working group also considered the wider use of contextual data to target more closely widening participation support to disadvantaged and under-represented groups. They examined a number of potential options to take the challenges of different social and personal contexts into account when considering applications to HE, but without lowering academic thresholds for entry.

#### Higher Education Access Route (HEAR)

In the Republic of Ireland, the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) is a college and university admissions scheme which offers places at reduced points to school leavers who have the ability to benefit from and succeed in higher education and who come from socio-economic groups in Irish society that are under-represented in third level education. Each college or university taking part in the HEAR scheme has set aside a quota of places on a reduced points basis for students entering through the scheme. This quota is different for each third level institution. As well as receiving a reduced points place, HEAR students may also receive a variety of academic, personal and social supports while studying at third level. Each college and university decides what support it can offer depending on its policies, practices and the resources available to it. When applying for the HEAR scheme, applicants must:

- provide satisfactory evidence of socio-economic circumstances;
- meet the minimum entry (matriculation) and subject requirements of the participating college or university; and
- compete for one of the quota places based on actual Leaving Certificate results.

#### Disability Access Route to Education (DARE)

The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) in the Republic of Ireland operates as a supplementary admissions scheme for school leavers with disabilities enabling application through the Central Admissions Office, the ROI equivalent of UCAS, on a reduced points basis. The programme operates on very similar lines to the HEAR scheme but requires the applicant to provide

evidence confirming that the disability has had a significant impact on educational performance.

## **6.5 Conclusions**

Entry is directly linked to attainment and educational attainment itself is heavily linked to social background. Therefore to combat the effects of social and other disadvantage requires a concerted and co-ordinated effort to promote inclusivity in HE. Institutions extend specific recruitment campaigns among under-represented groups through greater linkages with “target” schools to widen the pipeline for entry. Links with schools and Area Learning Communities help to raise aspirations for entry to higher education among communities where participation is not already common. School attainment must be raised with the specific intent to reduce the current inequity between those with advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Even if all of these measures are successful it will be sometime before their effects will be felt. In the meantime more specific actions may be required that will help to ensure that students from equal-potential groups have that potential recognised in the admissions system.

One option may be to devise and develop a system that recognises that an equal examination grade may not always equate to equal effort and that might reflect the additional effort expended in a supplementary points system to enhance UCAS points tariff. In addition to the normal UCAS points system, applicants could be assessed based on a personal statement of academic impact (supported by the school) and, potentially, other relevant data.

In the same way, a supplementary programme for school leavers with disabilities or specific learning difficulties might facilitate additional consideration of applications based on a personal statement of academic impact of the disability, an academic reference, and evidence of disability confirmed by a relevant medical practitioner

Universities are autonomous bodies and have a responsibility in law to set their own admissions criteria. Nevertheless, agreement to participate in a regional system that recognised disadvantage in selection might permit the admissions process to proceed with at least a fuller consideration of the future potential of the candidate. In line with stakeholders' views at the pre-consultation phase the proposal **would not be a quota scheme nor should applicants be guaranteed places**. Application through such a programme might assist an applicant in getting into the pool of eligible candidates but the decision on who to admit would remain the responsibility of the admissions officers for the relevant course, but based on a holistic assessment of the individual applicant.

## **6.6 Proposals for consideration**

Based on the analysis and evidence in this section, the following is proposed for consideration within the Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education.

- There should be a regional standard model for Access Courses across all Northern Ireland's HE institutions with agreed entry standards and output levels, and linked to the Qualifications Credit Framework.
- Admission processes to HE could be supplemented through an application system that considers both academic performance and relevant contextual data to help to create an even playing field for selection.
- A feasibility study should be undertaken to determine the potential for, and outworking of, regional programmes for disadvantage and disability application routes for higher education in Northern Ireland.

With these proposals in mind, we would welcome your response to the following questions.

### **Consultation questions**

11. How should the established mechanisms for recruitment to HE be developed further to maximise fairness in selection?
12. How could the use of contextual data be adopted in a Northern Ireland context?
13. How could the development of a regional system of enhanced application routes for disadvantage and disability increase “fairness” in participation in HE in Northern Ireland?
14. How might the cap on student numbers (MaSN) be modified to promote widening participation?

## **7. IMPROVING STUDENT RETENTION AND PROGRESSION**

### **7.1 Introduction**

A National Audit Office report<sup>36</sup> in 2007 suggested that there is a balance to be struck between widening participation while improving retention, because students from different backgrounds will need different support structures to complete their courses successfully. This would appear to be confirmed by the Northern Ireland experience of having both the highest participation rates and lowest student retention rates in higher education in the UK.

The recent Review of Widening Participation Funded Initiatives<sup>37</sup> confirmed that in 2007/08, Northern Ireland had the lowest level of full-time first degree entrants who completed their courses and qualified at the same HE institution (87.7% vs 88.6% for the UK); the lowest level of those who transferred to another HE Institution to complete their education (2.1% vs 2.8% for UK); and the highest levels of non-continuation after the first year of HE (10.2% vs 8.6% for the UK).

This section examines international research on the reasons for student drop-out and explores examples of best practice that might have relevance to Northern Ireland. The section also investigates the factors that might help with early identification of local students at risk of non-completion.

### **7.2 Barriers to completion**

No one single reason has been found which explains why students drop-out of higher education. However, it is believed that various personal, social and academic factors interact to cause student drop-out. International research suggests that the reasons for dropping out of higher education can be categorised into two distinct groups, those that pre-date HE entry and those that occur after entry to HE.

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<sup>36</sup> Staying the Course: the retention of students in higher education. National Audit Office, July 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Review of Widening Participation Funded Initiatives Report. FGS McClure Watters. Department for Employment and Learning, October 2010.

### **7.2.1 Pre-entry factors influencing student retention and progression**

#### **Parental education**

HE institutions in Northern Ireland do not routinely collect information on the educational history of students' parents. Therefore, it is not possible to quantify the impact of parental education on student outcomes. However, there is much research, mostly conducted in the USA, that indicates that the higher the level of parental education, the more likely it is that students will complete a higher education programme of study successfully

Researchers have speculated about the reasons why parental educational experience may have such a big impact on student non-completion rates. The most prevalent explanations appear to centre on the level of academic and social support. Parents who have attended university may be more likely to discuss university options and educational expectations with their children<sup>38</sup>. It is also suggested that a lack of parental experience in education may lead to a lack of encouragement and support for HE in that household<sup>39</sup>.

#### **Academic preparedness**

The statistical data from Northern Ireland indicates that the higher a student's qualification on entry to HE, the higher the likelihood of completion of their chosen course. For example, in 2007/08 almost 18% of students who achieved between 101-160 UCAS Tariff Points (roughly equivalent to GCE Grades EEE ) dropped out of HE programmes, compared to 12% who achieved 261-290 UCAS Tariff Points (GCE Grades BBC), and only 4% who achieved 351-380 UCAS Tariff Points (GCE Grades AAA).

However, some caution should be exercised in interpreting these figures. Students with the highest qualifications on entry may be easier to retain simply because teaching methods and strategies in HE are more closely

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<sup>38</sup> Blue-Collar Scholars?: Mediators and Moderators of University Attrition in First-Generation College Students. Julia A. Martinez; Kenneth J. Sher; Jennifer L. Krull. Journal of College Student Development, Volume 50, Number 1, January/February 2009, pp. 87-103 (Article)

<sup>39</sup> Are the Factors Affecting Dropout Behavior Related to Initial Enrollment Intensity for College Undergraduates? Stratton, Leslie S; O'Toole, Dennis M; and Wetzel, James N. Research in Higher Education, Vol. 48, No. 4 (June 2007): 453-485

aligned with traditional A-levels than with other forms of qualification. Students from non-selective post-primary schools, and mature students, are more likely to enter HE with a mix of non-traditional qualifications and are typically less likely to achieve the highest UCAS tariff points.

#### Educational aspirations and family support

Research also suggests that aspirations and family support are critical to student success. It appears that students perform better and are more likely to succeed when their families affirm their choices and encourage them to stay the course. This is especially important for populations who are under-represented<sup>40</sup>. An appropriate amount of parental involvement and support can help to offset, to a degree, the negative impacts of poverty<sup>41</sup>.

#### Access to accurate careers information

Information on HE needs to be readily accessible, accurate and lead to realistic student expectations. Student retention is promoted by ensuring compatibility between the student's expectations of the course and institution and his or her actual experience. It is important that contact with students prior to entry provides a realistic description of the student experience. HE institutions have a responsibility to ensure that recruitment staff, careers advisers, community education providers and teachers who offer careers advice in schools have access to up-to-date, accurate and relevant information.

### **7.2.2 Post-entry factors that influence student retention and progression**

Extensive national and international research over the past three decades indicates that many of the post entry explanations provided by non-traditional students for dropping out of higher education are largely attributable to a lack of social and academic integration. The body of research indicates that

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<sup>40</sup> Preparing for College: Nine Elements of Effective Outreach. W. Tierney, Z. Corwin & J. Colyar (pp, 13-28). Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Engaging Latino families for student success: How parent education can reshape parents' sense of place in the education of their children. Chrispeels, J. H., & Rivero, E. (2001). *Peabody Journal of Education*, 76(2), 119–169.

students from working class backgrounds, minority ethnic communities and mature students often can feel out of place in the university environment and find it difficult to involve themselves in student activities. The importance of a positive first-year experience in HE cannot be underestimated in building confidence, positivity and commitment to a 'new way of life'.

### **Institutions: Strategic approach**

There are a number of initiatives that institutions can undertake that appear to mitigate the impact of social and academic isolation and serve to improve retention and progression among non-traditional students.

#### **Strategic commitment**

Strong senior management commitment can drive institutions to improve the quality of the student experience and improve retention and progression rates. Institutions with an established reputation for retaining students tend to place a high strategic priority on retention, and communicate this effectively to academic and support staff.

Activities to recruit and retain students, particularly from non-traditional backgrounds, must be integral to the institution rather than be seen as an add-on to core activities. HE institutions need to emphasise to staff that teaching and assessment practices must respond to the changing needs of students.

#### **Curriculum development**

The course and its delivery should assist students' transition from their previous educational experience to HE by recognising that, increasingly, students come with a range and variety of intake qualifications and have experience of different teaching methods. Transitional curricula and assessment methods should be considered to support students to adapt their study habits to HE. In addition, students need to be supported to develop appropriate study skills; the most effective way to do so is to integrate the development of these skills within the curriculum.



### Staff development

The available evidence suggests that retention rates are best in institutions that require those with responsibility for course delivery to strive to adopt best practice, in teaching and assessment methods, to meet the needs of students. In addition, retention is better in institutions where staff recognise that the provision of appropriate support and guidance to students is an essential and core aspect of their job.

### **Institutions: Operational approach**

#### Mentoring

Extensive research indicates that students who are involved in mentoring programmes are more likely to continue with their studies than their counterparts who do not participate in such programmes. The role of the mentor can be central to the integration and academic success of the student. In the best mentoring programmes the mentor offers academic (career advice, information, problem solving etc) and pastoral (social and emotional support – counselling and listening) support to the student.

#### Induction

The positive effects associated with involvement in student induction or orientation programmes have been well documented. Students who take part in institutional orientation or induction programmes are less likely to drop-out than those who do not. The most successful induction programmes appear to have much in common in that: they seek to introduce students to the HE institution as an academic community; the academic framework in which they will learn; the staff who will deliver the course and assess their performance; and the individual member of staff who has responsibility for advising them on both academic and pastoral matters.

#### Attendance monitoring

Students who start to miss lectures and tutorials can fall behind and put at risk their chances of completing their course. Retention is generally better in institutions which monitor the attendance of their students and where

academic staff follow up non-attendance as part of their normal responsibilities. Contacting absent students to enquire into their circumstances, stressing the importance of attendance and, where appropriate, signposting to the support that is available are all measures proven to help reduce absenteeism and improve student retention. Where there is non-attendance the underlying causes need to be dealt with and mechanisms put in place to identify teaching sessions that are not challenging, rewarding and enjoyable for students.

#### Personal academic tutors

Research indicates that effective personal tutoring is an important factor in the retention and success of non-traditional students. Many institutions provide additional academic support through personal tutoring systems, with students allocated to staff who provide pastoral and academic support. Effective academic support helps to equip an increasingly diverse student body with the skills necessary to succeed in HE.

#### Pre-entry and post-entry courses

Some institutions offer non-traditional students the opportunity to attend pre-entry transitional courses with the emphasis on improving or supplementing subject specific and general transferable skills. A number of institutions also provide learning support opportunities for students to improve their academic skills once they have started their course. These opportunities typically take the form of elective modules (which count towards the final degree), learning or subject specific drop-in centres, small group tutorials and summer schools for examination revision. Both pre and post-entry 'interventions' appear to be highly successful in improving retention and completion rates among non-traditional students.

#### Student support services

Institutions with student services that are effective, proactive and have good links with the rest of the institution tend to be good at retaining students. The 'one-stop shop' approach to student support appears to be highly effective in increasing access to and improving the quality of student services.

### Use of bursaries and incentives

Research on bursary schemes suggests that they may improve retention as they help to reduce levels of debt and ease transition into HE. In addition, they can also serve to reinforce the student's perception of the institution's commitment to them. Some institutions already use the timing of the award of bursaries and scholarship to encourage students to engage more fully in their studies and to reward progression.

Many students rely on part-time work to ease financial pressures and the student unions in a number of institutions play a role in offering 'job shops' which only advertise positions with appropriate pay, hours and terms and conditions.

### Philanthropic bursaries

The Aisling Bursary Programme is a local innovative approach to encouraging students from disadvantaged backgrounds in West Belfast to consider higher education as an option. Aisling Bursaries are granted to students who experience financial barriers to participating in HE and FE to help them defray their education costs and thereby achieve their ambitions in terms of securing education qualifications.

The bursaries are generated from donations from local small and medium-sized enterprises and larger Belfast firms, as well as from private individuals. Since the bursaries were launched in May 2000, almost £400k of private sector funds has been allocated to 460 higher and further education students. The Belfast Media Group (Andersonstown News) is a key sponsor of the Bursary Programme.

## **7.3 Improving retention in Northern Ireland**

In 2007, the Department commissioned an analysis of how the probability of a first year student proceeding to the second year of his or her studies is influenced by personal characteristics and circumstances. The resulting

report<sup>42</sup> indicated that the Northern Ireland domiciled “student type” studying at the University of Ulster with the highest survival rate was a female, Protestant student from a professional background taking a social work or health-related course (typical survival rate of 96.1%). Those students with the lowest survival rate were male, Catholic students from an unskilled or semi-skilled background, who were studying engineering (typical survival rate of 65.2%).

### **Identification of those at risk of non-progression**

In considering the available statistical data the Retention and Progression Expert Group identified a number of demographic characteristics that appear to be closely associated with higher rates of non-completion in HE institutions in Northern Ireland.

#### **Gender**

There is a clear gender difference with around 13% of males dropping out of courses compared to females (8.9%) across Northern Ireland institutions. This is quite significant as male participation in HE is also lower than female participation. The simple message is that fewer males participate in HE, but when they do, they are also less likely to complete than females. However, it is worth noting that a small number of Northern Ireland sample based studies, (based on actual completion rates data rather than predicted outcomes), have indicated that more females than males drop-out at years 3 – 4. In the absence of more robust data it is difficult to make any definitive assessment as to whether females are at significantly greater risk of drop-out beyond year one of their HE studies.

#### **Disability**

The limited data available indicates that those with a disability who participate in HE are less likely to complete than those without a disability. Information obtained through a number of small scale studies, based on actual completion

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<sup>42</sup> Staying the Course: An econometric analysis of the characteristics most associated with student attrition beyond the first year of higher education. M Bailey and V K Borooah, January 2007.

rates data rather than predicted outcomes, indicates that the likelihood of non-completion increases with the year of the course.

### Age

Inspection of the available data appears to indicate that the age of the student on entry to HE significantly influences their chances of completing higher education courses. The drop-out rate among those aged 20 years or under (who make up 82% of the total full-time undergraduate new entrants to local HE institutions) in 2007/08 was 9.6% compared to 13.5% for those aged 21-24 and 14.4% for those aged 25 and over.

### Socio-economic classification

The statistical information clearly indicates that those from the lowest socio-economic groups are not only less likely to participate in higher education but when they do they are also less likely to complete. In particular those from socio-economic groups 5-7 have the highest non-completion rate of any social grouping in Northern Ireland. Examination of the participation rates by HE institutions in Northern Ireland by institution shows a very high correlation between higher levels of participation of SEC groups 5–7 and higher drop-out rates at that institution. The data available indicated that of all the demographic characteristics socio-economic classification is the greatest predictor of non-completion.

### Religion

From the statistics available it appears that there is a marked difference in the completion rates for Catholics and Protestants. While Catholics are more likely to participate in HE they are also more likely to drop-out than Protestants. However, some caution should be exercised in interpreting the figures as the drop-out rates may be closely associated with the profile of the participant. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that the drop-out rate for Catholics is higher because a greater proportion come from socio-economic groups 5-7 (who are more likely to be 'non-completers') while among the Protestant community those who participate in HE are more likely to come from socio-economic groups 1-4 (most likely to be 'completers'). Unfortunately

it is not possible to test these assertions as data is not routinely collected on retention and progression rates by socio-economic classification or religion, although, the aforementioned research by Borooah and Bailey is useful within this context.

#### **7.4 Conclusions**

There would appear to be a number of factors that contribute to student non-completion of HE courses but there is also a correlation between widening participation and the increase in non-completion rates in HE institutions.

Increased student drop out is a problem at an international level and the phenomenon has been subject to a considerable amount of academic research. While no definitive root cause has been uncovered it would appear that many of the pre-recruitment widening participation initiatives outlined and recommended earlier in this report can significantly mitigate against a premature withdrawal from a course of study. Early family involvement, access to accurate and timely advice and guidance and increased academic preparedness through HE institute outreach and compact programmes can all make a significant difference to the student's chances of ultimate success in HE.

Post-selection, institutions with a strategic focus on student retention coupled with flexibility in teaching methods and continuous staff development have consistently the highest retention rates. Retention strategies that focus on providing individual support to students at risk (such as, student mentoring, attendance monitoring and personal tutors) offer the best opportunities to identify problems at an early stage and to input support before the student concludes that dropping out is their only remaining option.

Northern Ireland has the highest levels of student drop out in the United Kingdom, however, even within the local statistics there are wide variations across different groups of students. The Retention and Progression expert group identified a number of demographic characteristics that appear to be

closely associated with higher rates of non-completion in HE institutions in Northern Ireland that could be used as a basis for an indicator of individual students that may be at risk of non-completion.

## **7.5 Proposals for consideration**

Based on the analysis and evidence in this section, the following is proposed for consideration within the Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education.

- Institutions should review their approach to teaching, learning and assessment in light of the changing pattern of students' backgrounds, the content and standards of qualifications and the methods and context in which they are taught.
- HE institutions should place a high strategic priority on the retention and progression of non-traditional students, and communicate this effectively to academic and support staff.
- HE institutions should introduce compulsory attendance recording for all students in receipt of any form of widening participation support.
- Government to consider a requirement for HE institutions to invest a minimum set proportion of student income fees to be invested in widening participation support and outreach activities.
- Private sector philanthropic bursary programmes should be developed at community level across Northern Ireland.
- Mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that accurate retention and progression data is collected across the various categories of the student population by year of attendance.

- Retention initiatives or interventions, at an institutional or regional level, should be based on multiple disadvantage and should include an assessment of individual needs.

With these proposals in mind, we would welcome your response to the following questions.

**Consultation questions**

15. How can students be better encouraged, incentivised and supported to improve retention rates?
16. How should retention interventions, at an institutional or regional level, take account of multiple disadvantage and include an assessment of individual needs?
17. Should recording of attendance be compulsory for students in receipt of bursaries or any other form of widening participation support?
18. Should HE institutions be required to invest a set proportion of student fees in widening participation activities?



## **8. TARGETS**

The Department continues to promote and encourage best practice in evaluating and monitoring widening participation in HE in Northern Ireland.

Local universities and colleges continue to be encouraged to evaluate and report on progress through their individual annual Widening Participation Strategic Assessments. New approaches to measuring success are being developed across the sector and many of these will have methodology that could be applied across all HE institutions. For the best economic reasons, universities will always seek to ensure that their outreach and other widening participation activities are cost effective, and that will be increasingly true in the changing economic climate.

As noted earlier, HE institutions are autonomous bodies and are legally responsible for setting their own entrance criteria and defending their own admissions decisions. However, to increase transparency and public awareness, universities should be further encouraged to set and report on their own widening participation targets, not only in respect of their applications pool but also on their actual performance in admissions.

The Regional Widening Participation Strategy will seek to develop the vision for participation in higher education to 2020 and will establish a series of practical actions to be taken forward in three year sequences. However, this is a consultation rather than an implementation document, so the setting of firm targets will not be appropriate until the responses to this stage of the process have been fully considered.

### **8.1 Proposals for consideration**

Based on the analysis and evidence in this section, the following is proposed for consideration within the Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education.

- Information on how well universities have met their own widening participation targets should be published by the Department for Employment and Learning on an annual basis.

With this proposal in mind, we would welcome your response to the following question.

**Consultation question**

19. What would be appropriate targets for widening participation at a regional level?

## **9. Conclusions**

Participation rates in Northern Ireland have grown exponentially over the last two decades and, at c.50%, the region now has the highest participation rate of any area of the UK.

Widening participation in HE has also been a considerable success story in Northern Ireland over the last ten years. The region leads the way in the UK on many important measures of equality in participation. Moreover, increased participation has been across the board and has included all groups within society.

Nevertheless, there remain some stubborn pockets of inequality and under-representation within some sections of the population. People from the SEC groups 5–7; those with disabilities, physical, mental and learning; young males, particularly young Protestant males from low participation areas; people from areas of multiple deprivation; and older learners, specifically learners in employment are not participating in HE to the potential detriment of themselves, society and the economy. However, it must be remembered that disadvantage is multi-faceted and that these groups are not homogeneous. It is, therefore, essential that the solutions developed to support participation in higher education are tailored to the individual rather than the group.

Much has been done to counter this under-represented and the principles and practices of widening participation are now firmly embedded in the institutional strategies of Northern Ireland's HE providers. However, final eradication of the last pockets of inequality will require more focussed targeting of initiatives.

It is recognised that the Northern Ireland HE institutions target flows of students from across the UK, Europe and internationally and this plurality and diversity on the part of the institutions in reaching beyond the borders of Northern Ireland is vitally important. At the same time the Northern Ireland universities in particular have done well in reaching out to schools with less of a history of pupil progression to higher education. Aspiration begins with

information and there is evidence that good, timely information and guidance, or the lack of it, can have a profound affect on a young person's progression options. Effective professional information, advice and guidance leads to more rational choices that are less influenced by family and friends.

Although it could be argued that it is not their role, the universities have also made very significant and direct contributions to raising pupil attainment levels through their outreach programmes and the schools are very grateful for that support. All of this work contributes to the institutions own recruitment activities and should continue. However, in order to maximise the effects with the remaining under-represented groups there must be greater levels of collaboration in a regional programme to raise awareness of the benefits of higher education and to provide specific interventions with the newly identified target groups.

Raising educational attainment at post-primary levels is critical to ensuring the widest possible pool of applicants to higher education from across the entire spectrum of society. While this is most properly a matter for the schools and the Department of Education, the HE institutions and other education providers can play a valuable role. The University of Ulster's Step-Up is an exemplar programme and has won national acclaim for its work. It may therefore be appropriate to invest in other such programmes, particularly based around subject areas that continue to show uneven participation rates.

Participation begins with recruitment and it will be essential for the institutions to maintain, and increase where possible, their linkages with low participation groups both in school and in wider society. Admission systems in Northern Ireland have been demonstrated to be scrupulously fair in their operation but research indicates that they may have unconscious bias in their structure and application due to inequalities in the secondary level educational system itself. Institutions should avail themselves of every opportunity to consider all relevant information pertaining to an applicant and that may necessitate the use of contextual data to combat the inbuilt inequalities encountered by the disadvantaged and under-represented groups in society.

Widening Participation extends beyond recruitment and selection and covers the entire student journey to graduation and progression to the world of work. The difficulties post recruitment and selection are different from those that went before and often affect a very different cohort of student. Nevertheless careful targeting of students at risk and the provision of appropriate support is vital to reducing the currently unacceptable levels of drop-out of students from higher education courses in Northern Ireland. While recognising certain demographic patterns may help to identify those at risk of non-completion, it will be important to focus on an assessment of individual needs based on multiple disadvantages.

The development of the Widening Participation Strategy is being conducted in tandem with the development of the Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland. In common with the Higher Education Strategy the timeframe for the Widening Participation Strategy should be considered as up to 2020 but, with practical actions to be taken forward in three or four year sequences matched to the public expenditure timeframes. The setting of appropriate targets for the first three years of the plan will be determined following receipt of responses to this consultation.

## **APPENDIX A**

# **A summary of proposals and questions**

## **WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **Consultation questions**

1. Has the importance of widening participation in HE been reflected accurately in this consultation document?
2. What priority should Government attach to widening participation in HE?

## **A VISION FOR WIDENING PARTICIPATION**

### **Consultation questions**

3. How appropriate is the vision outlined?
4. To what extent will the vision need to be further developed to meet the needs of Northern Ireland?

## **TARGETING**

### **Proposals for Consideration**

- The Department for Employment and Learning, working in conjunction with the Department of Education and the HE institutions, should develop appropriate mechanisms to efficiently gather comprehensive and reliable data pertaining to access to, and participation in, HE.
- The Department should engage with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency to develop a longitudinal study of educational attainment by identifiable sub-groups.
- The Department for Employment and Learning, working in conjunction with DE, the HE institutions and relevant stakeholders, should determine and agree a set of parameters for the identification of Widening Participation cohorts and individuals at each stage of the

student/learner experience based on multiple disadvantages and including an assessment of individual needs.

### **Consultation questions**

5. How can HE institutions, government, the school sector and other stakeholders work together to better identify under-representation in HE?
6. How can we improve coverage of data poorly responded to or address the issue of self-declaration for some data such as disability?
7. How should the strategy better identify and address the needs of the individual with multiple disadvantages to obtain access to HE that is right for them?

## **RAISING ASPIRATION AND ATTAINMENT**

### **Proposals for consideration**

- There should be a single aspiration raising programme for Northern Ireland closely focused on the identified target groups. The programme should be co-ordinated to avoid duplication of efforts; wide and general at primary school level but much more focused at secondary level; and targeted at students from at least year 9, before GCSE choices.
- The Department of Education should consider if it should extend the school performance measurement to include progression of (former) pupils to higher education at 18+.
- Funding should be made available, on a competitive basis, to encourage the development of additional regional programmes to raise attainment levels aimed at reaching a greater number of applicants from within target groups.

### **Consultation questions**

8. How can aspirations to attend HE be raised among groups and communities that are currently under-represented?
9. How can pupil progression rates to HE be improved across low participation schools in Northern Ireland?
10. Are there any additional gaps in student attainment that should be addressed by the Widening Participation Strategy?

## **ENHANCING RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION**

### **Proposals for consideration**

- There should be a regional standard model for Access Courses across all Northern Ireland's HE institutions with agreed entry standards and output levels, linked to the Qualifications Credit Framework.
- Admission processes to HE could be supplemented through an application system that considers both academic performance and relevant contextual data to help to create an even playing field for selection.
- A feasibility study should be undertaken to determine the potential for, and outworking of, regional programmes for disadvantaged and disability application routes for HE in Northern Ireland.

### **Consultation questions**

11. How should the established mechanisms for recruitment to HE be developed further to maximise fairness in selection?
12. How could the use of contextual data be adopted in a Northern Ireland context?



13. How could the development of a regional system of enhanced application routes for disadvantage and disability increase “fairness” of participation in HE in Northern Ireland?
14. How might the cap on student numbers (MaSN) be modified to promote widening participation?

## **IMPROVING STUDENT RETENTION AND PROGRESSION**

### **Proposals for consideration**

- Institutions should to review their approach to teaching, learning and assessment in light of the changing pattern of students’ backgrounds, the content and standards of qualifications and the methods and context in which they are taught.
- HE institutions should place a high strategic priority on the retention and progression of non-traditional students, and communicate this effectively to academic and support staff.
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18. Should HE institutions be required to invest a set proportion of student fees in widening participation activities?

## **TARGETS**

### **Proposals for consideration**

- Information on how well universities have met their own widening participation targets should be published by the Department for Employment and Learning on an annual basis

### **Consultation question**

19. What would be appropriate targets for widening participation at a regional level?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Membership of the Widening Participation Strategy Group**

Fergus Devitt - Chair	Department for Employment and Learning
Brian Doran	Southern Regional College
Wilma Fee	Queen's University
Deirdre Gillespie	Education & Training Inspectorate
Katrina Godfrey	Department of Education
Lex Hayes	Glengormley High School
Brian Henry	Lifelong Learning UK
Sarah Howls	Higher Education Funding Council for England
Heather Laird	Open University
Wendy Lecky	Department for Employment and Learning
Denise McAlister	University of Ulster
Tony McKibben	Department for Social Development
Kieran Mannion	Department for Employment and Learning
Damien O'Kane	University of Ulster
John Storan	Director, Action on Access
Diane Taylor	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Mary-Liz Trant	National Office for Equity of Access
Mike Thompson	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Monica Wilson	Disability Action

### **Membership of the Expert Group on Targets**

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Philip Rodgers	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Diane Taylor	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

### **Membership of the Expert Group on Raising Aspirations and Attainment**

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### **Membership of the Expert Group on Enhancing Recruitment and Selection**

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### **Membership of the Expert Group on Improving Retention and Progression**

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