WRC Social and Economic Consultants

Third Level Access
Measure 9 of the EHRDOP
Implemented by Department of Education and Science

WIDER EQUALITY MEASURE STUDY

Supported by

Equality Studies Unit, Measure 33A of the EHRDOP

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1. Introduction

In the context of the Employment and Human Resources Development Operational Programme 2000-2006 (EHRDOP), the Equality Authority is implementing Measure 33a: Technical Assistance - Equality Studies Unit (ESU). The ESU is mandated to examine labour market inequalities and their implications for labour market policy. Its focus is exclusion and discrimination in the labour market as covered by equality legislation and for four groups named in the EHRDOP (i.e., older workers, people with disabilities, minority ethnic groups in particular refugees, and, members of the Traveller community). These four groups are also the reference groups for the Wider Equal Opportunities Principle (WEOP). The WEOP is concerned with understanding, monitoring and supporting the participation of people from the four groups covered by the principle in the measures of the EHRDOP. Following on from the mid-term review of the EHRDOP, 10 measures are now required to identify and report on the actions they are taking to apply the WEOP (see Annex 1 for a list of measures).

In this capacity the Equality Authority is implementing a rolling programme of Measure Studies. These studies seek to identify and promote changes required in the planning, design and delivery of the measures comprising the EHRDOP to enhance their capacity to promote equality and accommodate diversity. In order to accomplish this, measure studies are designed to a standard that challenges.

Measure studies draw on the analysis developed in the ESU publication *Accommodating Diversity in Labour Market Programmes*. Specifically the programme of measure studies seeks:

•   To support new learning on the promotion of equality and the accommodation of diversity in labour market measures. It achieves this by seeking out good practice while also examining gaps, deficiencies and other issues;

•   Through the manner in which it is implemented, to build the capacity of implementing agencies to identify and engage in actions to effectively promote equality and accommodate diversity; and,

•   To agree recommendations for priority actions for promoting equality and accommodating diversity in the measures examined and in the broader work of the implementing agencies.

In seeking to support a process of change the measure studies require the full engagement of those responsible for the design and delivery of the measure concerned. To this end, the measure studies are undertaken in a way that achieves ownership of the process by the relevant implementing agency. The measure studies are, therefore, pursued on the basis of a partnership approach between the Equality Authority and the organisation responsible for the measure. Within the partnership:

•   The Equality Authority leads in relation to standards for the study. Terms of reference need to be established and then agreed within the partnership. These must ensure measure studies are challenging, stimulate change and extract learning.

- The Equality Authority leads in relation to quality control for the measure study. In particular, ensuring the terms of reference are applied and convening a meeting of the partnership to discuss the action plan arising out of the measure study.

- The organisation(s) responsible for the measure leads in relation to implementation of the measure study. The final outputs of the study are subject to the decision of the implementing agency. This includes actions to enhance the capacity of the measure to promote equality and accommodate diversity. The study is therefore owned by the organisation(s).

- The Equality Authority will lead in relation to assessing the progress made in implementing agreed recommendations.

- The Equality Authority will lead in relation to dissemination of learning, in particular through the framework of the EHRDOP. This will require electronic publication of the studies, development of synthesis reports that draw from a number of measure studies, and other activities.

This report presents the findings of the measure study of the Third Level Access (TLA) Measure. As presented in its revised Programme Complement, the overall aim of TLA is "to facilitate and improve access to the labour market by promoting participation of students with disabilities, students from disadvantaged backgrounds and mature 'second chance' students in third level and Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses." Operationally, TLA consists of a number of funds / grants that are designed to provide support to disadvantaged and mature second chance students: specifically the Student Assistance Fund, the Fund for Students with Disabilities, provision for the Payment of Special (Top-Up) Maintenance Grants to Disadvantaged Students, and the Millennium Partnership Fund[1]. These supports exist beyond and in addition to the means-tested maintenance grants that are available to the general student population. Total planned expenditure over the duration of the Operational Programme was €129.07 million representing 0.91% of the total OP planned expenditure although original forecast was revised downwards to €100.36 million following the mid-term review. All of this planned expenditure relates to various grant payments to students.

Third Level Access (TLA) is one of 22 measures comprising the Employability Pillar of the EHRDOP. The overall priority of all Employability measures is *with helping and actively encouraging people to be, or to become, employable* (EHRDOP, p. 66). Together with four other Employability measures, the TLA measure speaks to a specific sub-priority, namely "promoting social inclusion", which as stated in the EHRDOP *is aimed at assisting a range of already disadvantaged or excluded groups to access the labour market* (EHRDOP, p. 67).

TLA is also one of ten measures prioritised for greater integration of the WEOP. As a result, the measure managers are now required to identify and report on the actions taken to address the concerns of the WEOP. There are a number of ways in which the WEOP is of relevance to the operation of this measure. First, all persons covered by the WEOP are represented among the income-based eligible population of this measure (i.e. parents of students earning less than certain threshold amounts). All four groups are explicitly referenced as targets of the measure in its revised Programme Complement and one of the funding sources targets people with disabilities exclusively. Given the documented educational inequality experienced by persons from three of the four groups eligible to participate in the measure (people with disabilities, Travellers and older people) and the likely greater concentration of this inequality among individuals whose parents are in the lower socio-economic groupings, the measure is particularly relevant to combating

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[1] The National Access Office assumed responsibility for these funds in 2004.

the labour market inequality experienced by educationally disadvantaged persons from the four groups.

In its revised Programme Complement one of the key actions identified to strengthen its engagement with the WEOP is that the National Access Office "has as a key goal... the production of a framework of policies and initiatives for implementation in conjunction with the higher education institutions and with particular reference to the specific target groups (covered by the WEOP)." This commitment signals the importance of placing the operations of TLA within the "framework of policies and initiatives" operating in the area of promoting equity of access to third level education while at the same time recognising that TLA is a relatively small but important instrument of access policy in relation to third level education in Ireland. For example, for the academic year 2004/2005, the total funding available under the Student Assistance Fund (one of the four funds operated under TLA) was €5.5 million whereas the funding available under the General Maintenance Grants was approximately €181 million. In that regard, the measure must be understood within the overall context of access policies and the current development of these by the National Access Office and third level institutions. That context is outlined in Section 3 of this measure study report.

2. Methodology

The methodology employed for this measure study largely involves desk-based research and review of documentation as well as face-to-face interviews with representatives of organisations that play a key role in the delivery and direction of third level education as a whole. Interviews were also conducted with representatives of advocacy groups representing some of the groups covered under the WEOP.

Unlike the majority of the Measures funded under the EHRDOP, the TLA Measure involves no educational or training content, nor does it involve teachers or trainers. It is, simply, constituted on the basis of various grants (described below) that are made available to third level students.

The methodology for the Measure Study of the Third Level Access measure involved:

•   Collecting and reviewing programme level documentation including the Programme Complement, reports to the Monitoring Committee as well as implementation procedures (e.g., roles and responsibilities of various organisations / personnel);

•   Collecting and reviewing previous studies / reports relating to third level access;

•   Obtaining and analysing data on programme participants with particular reference to the four groups covered by the Wider Equal Opportunities Principle (WEOP) - older people, people with disabilities, members of minority ethnic groups and members of the Traveller community;

•   Reviewing data collection and programme monitoring procedures;

•   Obtaining and reviewing documentation on policies, practices and initiatives in the area of equality and promoting diversity; and,

•   Meeting with personnel responsible for programme delivery to discuss the above and related issues concerning third level access from an equality perspective (see Annex 2 for list of interviewees).

3.   The Context for the Third Level Access Measure

3.1   The Current Scope and Significance of Third Level Education

The very substantial and steady increase in the number of places at third level over the last 20 years is one of the most remarkable developments in modern Irish education. Between 1980 and 2001 the number of full-time enrolments at third level rose from 40,613 to 123,477. This expansion of third-level places and participation has been one of the critical cornerstones of Ireland's overall national economic strategy and it is broadly acknowledged that Ireland's ability to sustain current levels of national economic competitiveness in the emerging 'global knowledge-based economy' is critically dependent on an increased output of students at graduate and postgraduate levels.

In the academic year 2002/03, 129,283 individuals were enrolled as full-time students (133,887 in 2003/04) and 34,680 were enrolled on a part-time basis in the 34 higher level education institutions aided by the Department of Education (16 IoTs, 10 HEA Institutions, 3 Other Aided Colleges and 5 Teacher Training / Home Economics Colleges). In addition there are a number of private colleges providing third level courses.

In *Education at a Glance, OECD Education Indicators (2005)* Ireland is ranked against other countries in terms of rates of graduation at various levels within the third level framework. In that regard Ireland is ranked:

* 2nd out of 17 countries regarding graduation at Diploma/Certificate level;
* 8th out of 21 countries regarding graduation at Primary Degree level; and
* 13th out of 27 regarding graduation at Advanced Research Degree.

The general trajectory of the employment growth, and particularly employment policy, in Ireland is now characterised in terms of moving toward a high-skills, knowledge-based economy (e.g., FÁS, 2005). Not only is economic and employment growth predicated, in part, on a steady supply of well-qualified workers but, increasingly, access to employment itself will require the possession of post-leaving certificate qualifications and the possession of vocational skills relevant to expanding sectors (see *'Skills Needs in the Irish Economy: The Role of Migration'*, a report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs - Forfás, 2005).

Budget 2005 provided €1.2 billion for the third level sector prompting the Minister for Education (Press Release, 7th December, 2005) to remark that the allocation marks the recognition by government of the "central importance of higher education in delivering knowledge and providing the skills that will be essential to our competitive future." In a speech (16th December 2005) to launch *Progressing the Action Plan: Funding to achieve equity of access to higher education (HEA, 2005)*, the Minister noted the importance of access to third level for all groups and stressed the importance of the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF), which will be used by the Department and the HEA to promote aspects of policy in relation to third level education, including access. The Minister stated that higher education institutions need to place equality of access and retention at the mainstream of their organisational priorities and that all obstacles to access must be removed through the effective mainstreaming of the access agenda.

### 3.2   Third Level Education and the Groups Covered under the WEOP

Although the data available in relation to the beneficiaries under the TLA measure are not, as yet, sufficiently detailed or developed to specifically determine the extent to which members of the groups benefit under the measure (see Section 6 below for detail), official data regarding

educational attainment amongst the population as a whole and amongst specific groups indicates that people from within three of the groups covered under the WEOP have not, historically, benefited from third level education and are, in turn, unlikely to have significantly benefited under third level access measures over time. Figure 3.1 below provides detail regarding the percentage of people with third level qualifications within the population as a whole and within three of the four groups represented under the WEOP – data are not available regarding members of minority ethnic groups. The level of inequality experienced by members of the Traveller community is particularly apparent (2.1% with third level qualifications against 26% in the population as a whole).

The data evidences the fact that Travellers barely register at third level in the education system, largely because they have left the first and second level systems so early and have derived no significant educational outcomes that will allow them to compete for places at third level. Furthermore, Travellers tend not to benefit from mainstream second chance education and are typically provided for within segregated settings. Other Measure Studies undertaken in this series (e.g. Measure Study of Specific Skills Training) demonstrate the very limited extent to which Travellers participate in mainstream further education and training as a whole. Specifically in relation to participation at third level, the Irish Travellers Movement estimates that there were 28 Travellers at third level in the last academic year.

About half of people with disabilities aged over 15 years possess no formal second level qualifications. Census 2002 shows that 27% of young people aged 15 to 19 years with a disability were no longer in education compared to 19% of young people without a disability in the same age range. Moreover, data from the same source show that among young people with disabilities early school-leaving is most prevalent among young people with physical disabilities. A recent

Figure 3.1: Percentage of People with Third Level Qualifications in the Population Aged 15+, among Older People (50+), People with Disabilities and Travellers
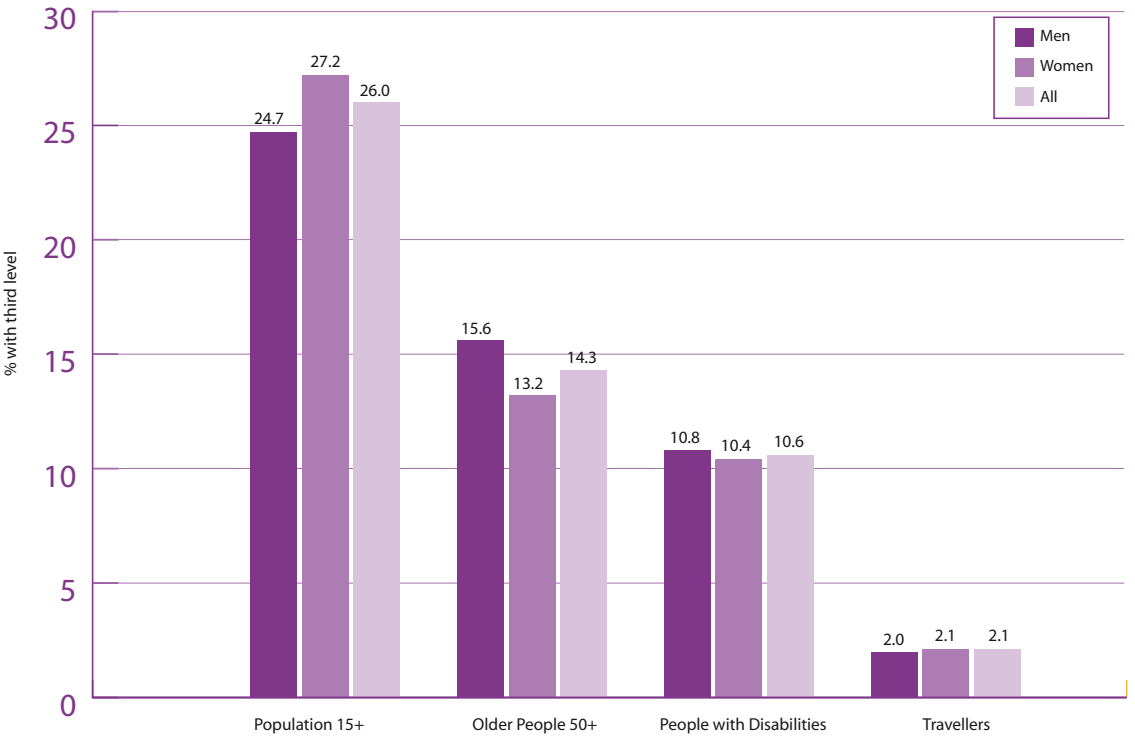
briefing note from the NDA titled *Early School Leaving and Disability – A Lifetime of Disadvantage* notes that: more than 20% of young people with a physical disability leave school by age 15 as do 16% of young people with an intellectual disability and 13% with a vision or hearing impairment (the legal school leaving age is 16 years). More than 20% of adults with disabilities have not even attained Junior Certificate level (against 4% of the general population). About one third of people with disabilities aged 15 to 19 have left education completely. Furthermore, despite an increase in participation by people with disabilities in third level education (from approximately 450 in 1994 to an estimated [AHEAD] 1,800 students in 2004), this latter figure corresponds to an estimated 1.3% of all students in third level institutions.

3.3   Third Level Access Measure in the Context of Third Level Education

Supporting Equity in Higher Education (Department of Education and Science, 2003) reviews the issue of access to third level from the perspective of improving access, equity and social justice and based on "the lack of success of the free fees initiative [in achieving] these goals" (p. 18). The report acknowledges that "inequities earlier in the educational system contribute to the under-representation of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds entering third level" (p. 2) but stresses the need, notwithstanding that fact, for direct measures to support people from disadvantaged backgrounds in accessing third level education, locating this as priority in social policy as expressed through the NDP, the NAPS, National Children's Strategy, successive national partnership agreements but also in terms of economic policy and competitiveness.

However, despite education reforms, "the expansion of educational opportunities has resulted in much greater gender equality in educational attainment but large disparities remain in terms of the socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and racial background of learners" (p. 7). The report notes that: (i) where those from lower socio-economic groups do attend third level, they are more likely to attend the Institutes of Technology where the incidence of non-completion is highest (more than twice that found at the Universities); and, (ii) that social inequality in participation rates is most pronounced in the more prestigious sectors and courses of study.

The review (*Supporting Equity in Higher Education, ibid.*) concludes that young people from lower socio-economic families "face cultural, educational and financial barriers to participation in higher education" (p. 24) and that, as part of the drive to increase participation and enhance derived outcomes from the education system there is a need for targeted financial support accompanied by clear and accessible information on entitlements.

The TLA measure operates in the context of this ongoing debate concerning access. As is apparent in the *Supporting Equity in Higher Education (ibid.)* and other literature and views referred to in this report, the predominant emphasis in the access debate and in the operations of the TLA is on socio-economic disadvantage and not on WEOP or broader equality issues. This phenomenon is referred to and discussed later in the measure review. It is also important to note that the TLA measure is a relatively minor part of the system in monetary value and scale. For example:

• Total annual public expenditure on third level education rose from just under €400 million in 1991 to just over €1,400 million in 2002;

• Within the €382m. (27% of total) allocated for student supports in 2002, €22m. (6%) was allocated to targeted supports under the third level access fund;[2]

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[2] For perspective, it is useful to note that the targeted access funding for 2002 represented c.1.6% of all third level expenditure. It is also useful to note, from a socio-economic perspective, that it is estimated that about 20% of the 'free' fees allocation goes to households with declared incomes in excess of €70,000 per annum.

The relative scale of the TLA measure in the context of the overall funds available for student support is demonstrated in Table 3.1 below:

Table 3.1: Funds and Beneficiaries under General Grants Schemes compared with Funds and Beneficiaries under TLA

Scheme	Year	Cost	Beneficiaries
General Grants and Beneficiaries			
General Maintenance Grants (Higher Education Grant, VEC Scholarship Scheme, Third Level Maintenance Grants Scheme for Trainees	2005	€181 m.	48,000
BTEA	2004	€44 m	7,308 (of whom 4,285 in higher ed.)
Strategic Initiatives Scheme (11 Universities)	2005	€7.7 m	N/a
TLA Grants and Beneficiaries			
Top-up Grant	2003-04	N/a[3]	11,500 (of whom 9,000 in higher ed.)
Student Assistance Fund	2004-05	€5.5 m	11,000 (beneficiary nos. for 2003-4)
Fund for Students with Disabilities	2004-05	€6.3 m	1,696
Promotion of Access and Retention (13 IoTs, DIT and other Colleges)	2005	c.€1.3 m[4]	N/a
Millennium Partnership Fund	2005	€1.89 m	57 commun. groups and partnerships (about 3,750 students 2003-04)

3.4   Conclusion

Third level education plays an important role in Irish society and is perceived to be a key contributor to ongoing economic and employment growth. Access to third level education increasingly dictates access to employment, particularly quality employment, making the issue of access to and support and retention in third level all the more important. *Supporting Equity in Higher Education (2003)* concludes that the broadening of access to third-level education is necessary, not solely on grounds of equity and social justice but also in order to maintain and improve on national economic competitiveness.

TLA plays a part in the broader context of policies and initiatives to support equity of access to third level education and must be understood as such. It sits at the end of a system that must be negotiated prior to it being of potential relevance to individuals (i.e. one has to be successful in gaining access to third level to avail of the grants in question). The official statistics suggest that the funds and supports provided by TLA are being accessed to a very limited extent by at least three of the four groups covered under the WEOP (again noting the unavailability of data in relation to members of minority ethnic groups). This suggests that one of the key challenges

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[3] For the academic year 2005-6, the amount awarded ranges from €935 (adjacent rate) to €2,335 (non-adjacent) rate
[4] IoTs are instructed to allocate €10.16 of their capitation fee per student to support access activities and this amounts to about €525,000 each year.

facing the access agenda is a broadening of its parameters in operational terms to include not just persons experiencing socio-economic disadvantage but also persons experiencing educational inequality associated with the grounds covered by the WEOP. In that regard it is useful to note, as referenced below, that the broad policy thrust by the Department of Education and Science and the HEA is towards a wider equal opportunities focus as evidenced through, for example, the establishment of the National Access Office and the Strategic Innovation Fund both of which are elaborated on in Section 7 below.

4. Implementation

4.1 Roles and Organisational Structure

The key player in terms of activity and management is the recently established National Access Office, which is located at the Higher Education Authority. However, there are organisations and institutions operating at levels both above and below the National Access Office and these will be identified and considered where relevant in this measure study. Representatives from key organisations at the various levels have been interviewed over the course of the fieldwork for this measure study as have representatives from 'flanking' organisations such as the Further Education and Training Awards Council.

Level 1

The **Department of Education and Science** has policy responsibility for education in Ireland. The principal functions of the Department are outlined in its Mission Statement ("to provide high-quality education, which will enable individuals to achieve their full potential and to participate fully as members of society and contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development"). As stated in its high level goals the Department is responsible for the promotion of equity and inclusion, quality outcomes and lifelong learning. The Department also has a direct management relationship with the Institutes of Technology although it is planned, subject to legislation, to pass this function onto a 'to be established' higher education co-ordination body (an elaboration of the current Higher Education Authority).

Under the heading *Equality and Diversity* in the Department's Customer Charter (2004-2007), the Department lists the following;

- We aim to ensure equality of access to our services, accommodating those covered by the nine grounds identified in equality legislation.
- We provide access to our services for people with disabilities.
- We have wheelchair access to our public offices.
- If you have particular requirements regarding access to our offices, please telephone in advance of your visit and a member of staff will meet you and assist you in every way possible.
- We will provide information in formats such as Braille or large print on request.
- We will ensure that our website complies with disability access requirements.

The Management Advisory Committee of the Department is made up of the Secretary General, five Assistant Secretaries (Heads of Division), the Chief Inspector and a Director of Strategic Policy. TLA is managed in the Social Inclusion / Special Education (2) section of the Further and Adult Education Division of the Department. Other sections covered within that Division include:

- International Relations;
- North / South Co-operation;
- Youth Affairs;
- Student Support; and
- Young Offender Centres.

Level 2

The **Higher Education Authority** (HEA) is the statutory planning and development body for higher education and research in Ireland. The HEA has wide advisory powers throughout the whole of the third-level education sector and is the funding authority for the universities and a number of designated higher education institutions. Among its principal functions is the promotion of the attainment of equality of opportunity in higher education and democratisation of the structure of higher education. Among its additional responsibilities under the Universities Act, 1997, the HEA is responsible for university equal opportunities and their implementation.

Its Mission Statement is:

• To foster the development of a higher education sector which is **accessible to all** potential students and which is **recognised internationally** for the **high quality of teaching, learning and research** and which has the capacity to address the changing needs and challenges in our society.

Under the headings *Equality and Diversity* and *Physical Access* in its first formal Customer Charter (2005), the HEA commits to the following:

Equality / Diversity
• The Higher Education Authority will ensure that the rights established under equality legislation are reflected both in terms of service delivery and reviews of policy.
• The Authority will through its National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education work with the universities and designated institutions to identify and work to eliminate barriers to access to higher education.
• The Authority will continue to be an equal opportunities employer.
• The Authority will seek to ensure that staff are fully aware of its commitment to equality and diversity and ensure that its Dignity at Work Policy is adhered to in respect of all staff.

Physical Access
• The Authority will provide clean, accessible public offices that ensure privacy, comply with occupational and safety standards and facilitate access for people with disabilities and other specific needs.
• The Authority will continue to work with staff to ensure that office facilities meet their requirements.

Level 3[5]

The **National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education** (National Access Office) operates under the aegis of the HEA (it is part of the HEA Executive) and, as such, it shares the HEA's commitments to equality and diversity as outlined above. The National Access Office is responsible for promoting, facilitating and monitoring a coordinated and strategic approach to addressing the under-representation by the identified groups in further and third level education. The National Access Office was set up in August 2003 and now has responsibility for managing three of the four programmes comprising TLA (i.e., Fund for Students with Disabilities, Student Assistance Fund and the Millennium Partnership Fund) as well as the access and progression element of the HEA's targeted initiative scheme (these initiatives include actions to assist persons from all of the four groups covered by the WEOP).

[5] Level 3 is a 'false' level in that the National Access Office is an inherent part of the HEA (Level 2). The distinction at Level 3 merely reflects the very particular focus of the National Access Office within the framework of the HEA.

Since its establishment the National Access Office has published a significant amount of material concerning access to third level education and has effected procedural and other change for the benefit of recipients of support under the various grant schemes. For example, in 2004/05 the National Access Office achieved its objective in realising more timely notification of allocations under the **Student Assistance Fund** and this enabled the institutions to effectively support students most in need in accessing and participating in higher education from the outset of the academic year. Students received a first instalment in September/October 2005, a distinct improvement on previous years when first instalments issued during December.

The National Access Office is itself supported under the EHRDOP and has a key role in respect of the groups covered by the WEOP. The National Access Office has a range of responsibilities including a responsibility to: (i) provide advice to the Minister for Education and Science in respect of policy to widen access to higher education; and, (ii) monitoring the implementation of actions to secure equity of access to higher education.

There are seven permanent members of staff at the National Access Office one of whom has specific responsibility for the review and management of TLA.

Level 4
In the management of funding, the National Access Office interacts with the **Universities and the Institutes of Technology (IoTs), the Vocational Education Committees and Area Development Management**. The primary players in terms of the concerns of the TLA are the Universities and the IoTs. These operate with different levels and types of resources. The Universities typically have greater resources than the IoTs and a different set of relationships with the HEA itself. More detail in this regard is provided below.

Each of the Institutes as well as the constituent colleges of the Universities have their own equality policies. All of them are also subject to the quality assurance provisions of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC).

Level 5
Within the colleges and institutes themselves there are **Access Officers** and, depending on available resources, **Access Offices**. The extent of the remit of the officers and offices varies from college to college depending on available resources which, as noted above, tend to favour the Universities.

4.2   Equality Policies and Practices
As noted above, there is a wide range of organisations and individuals involved at various levels in the roll out and administration of TLA. The key organisation at the heart of the access agenda with policy and management responsibilities is the National Access Office. It has a particularly significant role to play in realising equality of access, participation and outcome within the third level sector through, for example:

• Data collection;
• Targeting of resources; and
• Influencing change in behaviour within the third level sector regarding equality of access, participation and derived outcome through the application of resources (e.g. use of the strategic innovation fund).

The National Access Office's Action Plan for 2005-2007 (*Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland*) contains targets in respect of people with disabilities and mature students (a sub-set of whom are older people). Work on identifying targets in respect of members of the Traveller community and minority ethnic groups is planned mirroring the targets set in the McNamara report, *Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland*. Currently available targets are set out in the table below:

Table 4.1: Targets for 2006 Adopted by the National Access Office in Respect of Students with a Disability and Mature Students against 1998 Baseline

	1998 Baseline	2006 Target
Students with a Disability – New Entrants	0.9	1.8
Mature Students (Full-time) – New Entrants	4.5	10.0
Mature Students (Part-time and Full-time Combined)	22.0	30.0

With particular reference to the WEOP, the revised TLA Programme Complement notes that a key objective of the TLA fund:

"Is to promote and facilitate increased participation by those who are socio-economically disadvantaged, members of the Traveller community and ethnic minorities (sic.), those with disabilities and mature students. The **National Access Office** has as a key goal the evaluation of the existing measures and the production of a framework of policies and initiatives for implementation in conjunction with the higher education institutions and with particular reference to the specific target groups."

Under the *Actions* heading of the revised Programme Complement the Access Office commits itself to:

• establishing a national framework of policies and initiatives to widen access and to ensure that widening access is central to the mission and agenda of the higher education institutions;
• promoting and facilitating new and expanded routes of access to higher education particularly from the further education, training and community education sectors;
• reviewing the effectiveness and efficiency of existing funding programmes with a view to ensuring more coherent and co-ordinated funding arrangements in the future particularly to address identified gaps in funding for and/or targeted interventions in favour of under-represented groups;
• putting measures in place to provide more comprehensive information to the target groups on funding processes and the available resources;
• gender proofing all measures while allowing for the need/merit basis on which funds are allocated. Particular attention will be given to wider equality groups of students with disabilities, mature students, refugees and travellers.

Equality Matters in Data Collection Procedures

The effective monitoring of the role and effectiveness of TLA in relation to the WEOP clearly requires the gathering of meaningful data. The National Access Office is aware of inherited limitations in that regard and the HEA / National Access Office is currently developing a student record system that will establish a databank to provide key information in relation to the student population. That system is still under development and, as yet, we are unaware of the headings under which data will be collected and the extent to which data collected in relation to the student

population will provide information that enhances understanding of access and participation at third level from a grounds-based equality perspective. As it stands, the HEA annual survey captures data relating to sex, age, course of study, past academic achievements, nationality and socio-economic background although it should be noted that not all institutions capture data in relation to socio-economic background of students.

Currently, the reports to the Monitoring Committee of the EHRDOP, show that data for the Student Assistance Fund are reported by gender, region and college / institution being attended by participating students. Data on the implementation of the Fund for Students with a Disability is provided on the number of persons assisted and the type of disability they are experiencing. Interestingly, inasmuch as detailed data is collected regarding students with a disability in attendance at third level (as against those in receipt of a grant under the Fund for Students with a Disability) it is collected by the voluntary, advocacy organisation: AHEAD. Very limited data on the Payment of Special Rates of Maintenance Grant to Disadvantaged Students are provided (just numbers benefiting) and no data are provided on the beneficiaries of the Millennium Partnership Fund for Disadvantage although Pobal does provide quarterly reports to the National Access Office.

As a result of the Measure Review process that occurred in 2004, changes were made in relation to indicators and targets for mature students (those over 23 years) and students with disabilities; however, no targets are set for members of the Traveller community or members of minority ethnic groups. Since then a framework for the collection of data in relation to under-represented groups has issued to the third level institutions from the National Access Office.

In relation to the OP it should be noted however that data is collected and reported on for the indicators agreed with the CSF/NDP Evaluation Unit for the TLA Measure and progress reports are updated for each of the monitoring committee meetings.

5. The Third Level Access Measure

5.1   The Student Grants System

There is a wide range of schemes providing support to those attending third level education in a full-time capacity (grants are not payable in respect of attendance at part-time and evening courses) and the grants available under TLA are *in addition* to the 'general' grants as briefly described below: that is, in order to be considered for the grants available under TLA (other than the Fund for People with Disabilities which is related to cost of disability issues and not the socio-economic status / declared income of students and/or their parents) students will, by definition, have qualified for one or other of the grants presented below:

Brief Description of the General Schemes

The general student grants schemes are briefly described in Box 5.1 below. Grants are not paid in respect of attendance at part-time and evening courses. However, tax relief at the standard rate of tax is available for tuition fees paid in respect of students attending part-time courses approved for tax relief. Tax relief is also available on approved full-time and part-time postgraduate study since the 2000/2001 academic year.

Box 5.1: General Grants Available to the Student Population

The **Higher Education Grants Scheme** covers full-time undergraduate courses of not less than two years duration pursued in the university/IOT Sector or at a third-level institution, which is maintained or assisted by recurrent grants from public funds in Ireland and other E.U. Member States (with certain exceptions). The Scheme also covers approved full-time postgraduate courses of at least one years duration pursued in colleges/institutes approved for the purposes of the Scheme. (Grant assistance is not paid in respect of postgraduate study outside of Ireland).

The **Third Level Maintenance Grants Scheme** for Trainees covers two year National Certificate and three-year National Diploma courses pursued in the Institutes of Technology (IOT's).

Vocational Education Committees' Scholarship Scheme generally caters for students who hold a National Certificate or National Diploma (gained from attendance at courses covered under the Third Level Grants Scheme for Trainees) and are progressing to approved degree courses in third level Institutions, including Universities. It also caters for students pursuing degree courses in Institutes of Technology, students pursuing Higher National Diploma courses in Northern Ireland, students progressing to approved degree courses in Northern Ireland, students progressing to approved degree courses in third-level Institutions in other EU member States and students pursuing post-graduate courses in Ireland.

The Maintenance Grants Scheme for Students attending European Social Fund-Aided Post Leaving Certificate Courses **(PLC Scheme)** covers approved Post Leaving Certificate courses of at least one-year duration run in approved PLC Centres throughout the country.

Eligibility for General Grant Schemes

Generally speaking, students who are entering approved courses for the first time[6] are eligible for grants where they satisfy the relevant conditions based on:

Age - typically must be at least 17 years of age on commencement of the course or, in the case of the PLC Scheme, at least 15 years. Mature students are defined as those who are at least 23 years of age on 1st January in the year he/she starts to study or returns to study.

Residency - the candidate's parents or guardians, or, in the case of an independent mature candidate, the candidate herself/himself, must have been ordinarily resident in the administrative area of the County Council/Corporation/VEC from 1st October, of the previous year although this requirement can be waived in exceptional circumstances.

Nationality – candidates must be EU nationals or have Official Refugee Status or have been granted Humanitarian Leave to Remain in the State.

To qualify for a grant, students must also satisfy a means test based on reckonable income which is the gross income of both the parents/guardians and the student for the tax year immediately preceding the academic year. Where parents/guardians are separated or divorced the income to be taken into account is that of the parent/guardian with whom the student resides.

Where a candidate is eligible to be assessed as a mature candidate, s/he will be assessed as a "mature candidate dependent on parents" or an "independent mature candidate". A mature candidate dependent on parents means a mature candidate who was resident with his/her parents/guardians from 1 October in the year prior to entering an approved course. In this case the student will be assessed with reference to both their own and their parents gross income.

An independent mature candidate means a mature candidate who was not resident with his/her parents/ guardians from 1 October in the year prior to applying for the grant. In this case the student will be assessed with reference to his/her own income together with any income earned by his/her partner/spouse (if applicable).

The rates at which Maintenance Grants are paid are outlined below:

Table 5.1: Maintenance Grants Payable 2006/07

Rates	Non-Adjacent Rate €	Adjacent Rate €
Full Maintenance	3,110	1,245
Part maintenance (75%)	2,335	935
Part maintenance (50%)	1,555	625
Part maintenance (25%)	780	310

The top-up grants available under TLA are available to qualifying students in addition to the general grants described above.

5.2   Description of the TLA Measure

Third Level Access (TLA) is one of 22 measures comprising the Employability Pillar of the EHRDOP. The overall priority of all Employability measures is *with helping and actively encouraging people to be, or to become, employable* (EHRDOP, p. 66). Within this overall priority, each of the measures comprising the Employability Pillar of the EHRDOP is associated with one of three specific objectives: (i) mobilising labour supply; (ii) adopting a preventative approach to unemployment; and, (iii) promoting social inclusion. TLA is one of five measures in the Employability Pillar of the EHRDOP designed to contribute to the third of these objectives. As stated in the EHRDOP: *the promotion of Social Inclusion is aimed at assisting a range of already disadvantaged or excluded groups to access the labour market* (EHRDOP, p. 67).

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[6] Previous academic qualifications are taken into account so that only the first degree course to be taken by any one candidate will be subsidised.

General Information and Targeting - TLA Measure

As presented in the revised Programme Complement the overall aim of TLA is *to facilitate and improve access to the labour market by promoting participation of students with disabilities, students from disadvantaged backgrounds and mature 'second chance' students in third level and Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses.* The revised Measure Description explicitly mentions the four groups covered under the WEOP noting that it is "necessary to promote the participation of students with disabilities, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those from the Traveller community, ethnic minorities (sic.) and mature "second chance" students, in third-level and PLC courses." Available funding will be used to:

- meet the specific needs of students with disabilities, in terms of equipment and additional support services;
- provide financial support to disadvantaged students by way of additional support, to the existing maintenance grants scheme;
- promote and assist outreach initiatives currently undertaken by Area Partnerships and colleges which involve links with post-primary schools, in disadvantaged areas;
- expand the provision of particular services such as counselling and mentoring services, to meet the needs of non-traditional students.

Supports Available

Box 5.2 presents the range of supports available under Third Level Access. Since the establishment of the National Access Office the administration of the various supports has been rationalised. The National Access Office now manages three of the funds available (Student Assistance Fund, Fund for People with Disabilities and Millennium Partnership Fund) although the student interface with the funds is at a local level as described in Box 5.2 below. The supports available under TLA exist beyond and in addition to the standard means-tested maintenance grants.

Box 5.2: Programmes Comprising Third Level Access

Student Assistance Fund: This provides for financial assistance to disadvantaged students needing additional supports (i.e., over and above maintenance grants) to enable them fully benefit from third level education. It is allocated on a per capita basis to each higher education institution and it is administered by Access Officers within these institutions. The National Access Office took over responsibility for managing the Student Assistance Fund from the Department of Education and Science in 2004. The fund is administered by the individual colleges and applications for assistance are made at the level of the college. The fund is not available to PLC students.

The Department of Education and Science's website notes that "the objective of this Fund is to assist students in a sensitive and compassionate manner who might otherwise, because of financial reasons, suffer hardship or be unable to continue their third-level studies. Assistance with such items as books, transport, rent and childcare has been made available in certain instances in the past and can be considered within the Fund. There may also be students who do not come within the scope of the third level student support schemes, such as those who are aged under 23, not financially supported by their parents and who face particular financial difficulties. It is not envisaged that support be limited to students on a once-off basis as there may be students who will require continuing financial assistance over a period of time as a result of circumstances such as family breakdown, bereavement, accidents, health problems or domestic arrangements."

Fund for Students with Disabilities: This provides funds for the purchase of assistive technologies and other supports to enable students with disabilities fully benefit from third level education. It is administered by Access Officers in higher education institutions and, as in the case of the Student Assistance Fund, the National Access Office assumed responsibility for its management in 2004. The fund can support:

1. Assistance: provision of personal assistants, sign language interpreters, note-takers
2. Services: transport, photocopying, additional tuition
3. Equipment: computers with specialised software, tape recorders, readers

Applications must be made by the individual student through his/her college or PLC. Applications must be accompanied by a recent comprehensive assessment on the nature and extent of the disability and a professional recommendation on the equipment most appropriate for the student's needs.

Payment of Special (Top-UP) Maintenance Grants to Disadvantaged Students: This is a top-up grant to students qualifying for the Higher and Further Education Grants Scheme who can qualify on the basis of their own means (in the case of mature students) or on the basis of the income of their parent(s) / guardian income. The grant was introduced in 2000/01 with a view to tackling under-representation by disadvantaged students. Eligibility is determined by reference to a lower income threshold that applies to the general maintenance scheme grant.

The Comhairle website currently notes that applicants must qualify for the ordinary maintenance grant for the academic year 2005/2006 and total reckonable income in the tax year January to December 2004 must not exceed 15,626 euro net of Child Dependant Allowances and standard exclusions.

For students, including mature students, who are assessed on parent(s) / guardian income, their parent(s) / guardian must, on 31 December 2004, have been:

a. Claiming long-term social welfare payments; or
b. Claiming Family Income Supplement; or
c. Participating in designated programmes (e.g., FÁS training programme)

For students assessed on their own income, on 31 December 2004, the student must have been receiving an eligible (long-term) social welfare payment (including long-term Unemployment Assistance), or Family Income Supplement or participating in a designated programme.

What is referred to as the adjacent rate of maintenance grant (€935) is payable where the student lives 15 miles or less from the college he/she plans to attend. The non-adjacent rate (€2,335) applies to qualifying students living more than 15 miles from college.

Applications for the Top-up grant are made through the relevant local authority.

Millennium Partnership Fund: Under this element of TLA funds are provided to Area Based Partnership Companies and Community Groups to assist disadvantaged students residing within their areas to access third level and to continue supporting them while in college. The National Access Office assumed overall responsibility for the fund in 2004, though for the academic year 2004-2005. Pobal (formerly ADM) is managing the implementation of the fund. Applications are made directly to individual Partnership Companies or Community Groups supported by Pobal.

Publicity and Information

The grants available under TLA are advertised and/or put before potential beneficiaries through a range of means that include websites (e.g. D/E&S, HEA, Comhairle and the various colleges) and other routes including the offices, as appropriate, of local authorities, Access Offices, VECs and Area Based Partnership Companies. Other means are also used to provide information regarding access to potential users. For example, in April 2005 the National Access Office launched a DVD entitled *Opportunities for All* that was issued to over 700 schools and community groups throughout the country. In addition, the Department of Education and Science circulates an information leaflet on entitlements to all CAO applicants.

6. The Participation of Groups Covered by the WEOP in the TLA Measure

6.1 Attendance at Third Level

Statistics provided on the website of the Department of Education and Science show that, for the academic year 2003/04, there were[7]:

- 77,491 people registered as full-time third level students under the auspices of the HEA (i.e.. Universities) of whom 13,562 (17.6%) were aged 25 and over. A further 13,420 people were enrolled on a part-time basis.
- 52,992 were registered as full-time third level students within the Institutes of Technology and of whom 5,335 (10%) were aged 25 and over. A further 17,531 people were enrolled on a part-time basis.

There were 17,454 new entrants to aided HEA institutions in 2003/04 of whom 10,381 (59%) were female. In the same period there were 17,287 new entrants at the Institutes of Technology of whom 7,895 (47%) were female.

6.2 Beneficiaries under TLA

A table presented in the latest report to the Monitoring Committee of the EHRDOP on the WEOP horizontal principle in respect of TLA (Spring Monitoring Committee, 2005) shows the numbers benefiting under the measure and progress against established indicators for the academic year 2003/04. The table is reproduced as Table 6.1 below.

Table 6.1: Beneficiaries of Grants Available under TLA Measured Against Baseline

Indicator	Baseline Position as indicated below	Latest Position as indicated below
No. of students benefiting from Student Assistance Fund	1,828 male, 2281 female (2000/2001 figures)	3,482 male, 7,107 female (2003/2004 figures)
No. of Students benefiting from Fund for Students with Disabilities	250 male, 261 female (2000/2001 figures)	772 male, 727 female (2003/2004 figures) 895 male 844 female (2004/2005 provisional data)
No of students benefiting from the Special Rate of maintenance grant (Top-up)	2,316 * (does not include arrears paid in subsequent academic years – may be higher – breakdown by gender n/a)	4,097 male, 7,432 female (2003/2004 figures)
No of students benefiting from the Millennium Fund	664 male, 1083 female (2001/2002)	1,356 male, 2,403 female (2003/2004)
No of mature students in receipt of a special rate of maintenance grant		Data being collated
No of mature students in receipt of a special rate of maintenance grant		Data being collated

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[7] Between them, the HEA Institutions and the IoTs accounted for 130,483 registered students in the academic year 2003/04 (i.e. 91% of all full-time third level enrolments i.e. 133,887).

The data demonstrate that relative to their representation amongst the student population as a whole (53.7% in 2003/04), women benefit in almost all cases to a significantly greater extent than men (e.g. 67% of Student Assistance Fund beneficiaries are women as are 64% of the beneficiaries of the Special Rate of Maintenance Grant). As is also evident from the data presented in Table 6.1, the measure is performing well based on established indicators (i.e. against baseline figures) although it is notable that the original and revised programme complements are very weak on targets. Inasmuch as targets are set they apply to the Fund for Students with Disabilities and in that instance the overall target for 2006 of 1,495 beneficiaries is already exceeded based on the outturn for 2003/04 (i.e., 1,499 beneficiaries).

The most significant items reported to the most recent meeting of the Monitoring Committee for the EHRDOP (October 2005) from the perspective of this study inform us that there has been a:

- 374% increase (from 316 to 1,499) in the take up of the Fund for Students with Disabilities between the baseline year (1999/00) and 2003/04; and a
- 12% increase in mature student take up of the higher education grant (a mature student is defined as any beneficiary over 23 years of age).

The monitoring report also notes, however, that the Department of Education and Science envisages a target of 9,000 for the numbers of students in receipt of the special rate of maintenance by 2006/2007 whereas this target has already been exceeded with over 11,500 in receipt of this rate in 2003/2004 and an estimated 12,500 in receipt of 'top-up' in 2004.

6.3 Participation in TLA by Groups Covered by the WEOP

In a footnote to the physical indicators table of the report to the most recent Monitoring Committee the National Access Office's Action Plan (2005-2007) is referenced. The *National Plan 2005 – 2007 for Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education* (December 2004) was drawn up by the National Access Office with the assistance of an advisory group (that included the Equality Authority) and in consultation with a range of education and social partners. One of the key issues addressed is how to increase access and participation in higher education by learners from schools and communities in disadvantaged areas. In that regard those who are socio-economically disadvantaged are referenced as are those from the Traveller community, students with disabilities and mature students.

The footnote to the physical indicators table also notes that the plan involves an ongoing review of existing programmes and targets with a view to addressing the relative paucity of data. When the review is completed, "indicators and targets will be considered". It is also noted that improvement in data collection is an important action point in the plan that has been prioritised by the National Access Office. In that regard the National Access Office will set both national and institutional targets for participation in higher education by socio-economically disadvantaged students, members of Traveller community and minority ethnic groups, mature students and students with a disability. The National Access Office will also ensure that data needed to monitor such targets is collected by providers.

The action group did not set targets for access to higher education by members of the Traveller community or members of minority ethnic groups. The National Access Office intends to agree mechanisms for gathering this data as a matter of urgency and set quantitative and qualitative access targets for these groups to the end of 2007.

6.4   Other Developments

Certain other developments of note regarding TLA are reported in the progress report on TLA as presented to the October 2005 Monitoring Committee and covering the period January to June 2005:

* The National Access Office assumed responsibility for the management of the **Fund for Students with Disabilities** in February 2004 and since then introduced various improvements. For example, the renewals process for 2004/5 incorporated developments such as formalising timescales for key stages of the process; the introduction of a shorter renewal form, a group application form, and a formal appeals form. Institutions were sent notification of students approved under the renewal process in August 2004, with payment of funds in September 2004. This early notification and payment allowed Disability/Access Officers to arrange supports for returning students at the start of the academic year.

* The first time application process for 2004/05 in respect of the **Fund for Students with Disabilities**[8] also incorporated new developments including: use of an independent panel to assist the National Access Office in the assessment of applications; off-site assessment of first time applications. Institutions were sent notification of students approved under the first time application process in December 2004. A formal appeals process for first time applications was also introduced. Clear reasons are given for any application not approved, with reference to the guidelines where appropriate. Any application can be resubmitted with further documentation, or if the institution feels the original application was sufficient they can submit an Appeal Form on the Student's behalf.

6.5   Conclusion

The major emphasis in much of the reporting on TLA to date is on socio-economic grounds that may, or may not, be inclusive of at least some of the groups covered under the WEOP. We know from national level statistics produced by the CSO that Travellers, people with disabilities and older people are far less qualified than the general population and it is probably safe to assume, therefore, and in the absence of specific data or evidence of significant change, that Travellers (the Irish Travellers Movement estimate that there were 28 Travellers at third level in the last academic year) and older people are not benefiting in any proportionate manner from the range of funds available. At present, the system does not provide data that enables us to determine exactly who is benefiting under the various schemes other than by way of basic identifiers such as age and sex and the status of beneficiaries' parents. We know that people with disabilities are benefiting, by definition, under the Fund for People with Disabilities although we do not know if these students are considered to be otherwise disadvantaged. We are also aware that, despite an increase in participation by people with disabilities in third level education (from approximately 450 in 1994 to an estimated [AHEAD] 1,800 students in 2004), this latter figure corresponds to an estimated 1.3% of all students in third level institutions.

Moreover, we do not know from data provided to the Monitoring Committee what types of disabilities are in question for the students supported although the National Access Office has informed us that such data is available although it is unreported. Recent research undertaken by AHEAD in respect of students with disabilities attending the Institutes of Technology found that 32% were asthma sufferers, 30% were people with specific learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia) and almost 9% were people with physical disabilities.

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[8] A total allocation of €3.812m was expended on the Fund for Students with Disabilities in the academic year 2003-04. A total of 1,499 students, through both individual and group applications, benefited from the Fund in the academic year 2003-04. A provision of over €3.7m has been provided under the fund for 2004/2005. Provisional data in respect of the numbers of recipients under the 2004/2005 fund shows that 1,789 individuals are benefiting from the 2004 fund.

Because it is not possible to analyse the information provided to the Monitoring Committee beyond its face value, it provides almost no basis for a grounds-based understanding of equality although it clearly has resonance from the perspective of broad socio-economic equality. So, while it is positive to note from that broad perspective that various grants have been increased and that payments and approvals have speeded up, we know that it is still highly likely that Travellers and older people are benefiting to a very small extent (if at all) and that only a small minority of people with very specific types of disabilities are benefiting. We have no data to allow analysis of the extent of the derived benefit to individuals from minority ethnic groups. In that regard the National Access Office is to undertake a new initiative as part of the implementation of its National Action Plan to establish mechanisms for the gathering of data on the ethnic background of entrants to higher education.

The WEOP report to the Spring Monitoring Committee of the EHRDOP 2005 notes that "a key deficit in relation to the wider equality agenda is the absence of reliable data particularly in relation to the participation in further and higher education by, in particular, the Traveller community and ethnic minorities (sic.). The remedying of this deficit is a priority for both the National Access Office and the Department of Education and Science." In that regard the WEOP report indicates that a number of developments will address this deficit including a new **student records database** for the sector as a whole that is being tested by the HEA.

The WEOP report notes that the National Access Office commenced a review of existing funding programmes for access that involves an analysis of quantitative and qualitative data for each of the funding programmes for 2002-2004 as well as meetings and interviews with key stakeholders. The report also notes that the identified goals and action points in the National Action Plan will be advanced as resources permit. These will include:

• Development of promotional material to support the rationale of equity of access to higher education and improving information and guidance on routes of access and available funding;
• Evaluation of current access and progression routes to higher education programmes to seek to reduce the obstacles to participation by the key target groups;
• Setting targets and timetables for expanded and new routes of access through the national framework of qualifications;
• Assisting in the introduction of initiatives on teaching development, in-service and qualifications for higher education teachers/lecturers, with particular reference to equality awareness
• Ensuring that national and institutional budgets are equality-proofed

Finally, the National Access Office also plans to undertake an initiative aimed at establishing linkages between all schools and communities in disadvantaged regions and at least one higher education institution so that socio-economically disadvantaged learners, members of the Traveller community, minority ethnic groups, students with a disability and mature students have more readily accessible opportunities to progress to higher education.

7. Third Level Access – Views on the Measure and Related Issues

7.1 Interviews Conducted

During the fieldwork for this measure study we met and consulted with a range of stakeholders to obtain their views on the operation of TLA, its effectiveness in terms of accommodating diversity and promoting equality of participation and outcome, and the actions they saw as needed to improve its operations and effectiveness. We met with representatives of:

- Department of Education and Science
- Higher Education Authority
- National Access Office
- Directors, Institutes of Technology
- FETAC
- AHEAD
- Irish Travellers Movement
- The Equality Authority

7.2 Key Issues and Trends Emerging from the Interviews

Interviewees provided useful reference material as well as perspectives on the question of access to third level education for under-represented groups. Overall, the major concern amongst interviewees (as in the literature concerning access to third level) was with the issue of access from a socio-economic perspective with a certain degree of emphasis on the issue of access for people with disabilities - access for older people, Travellers and members of minority ethnic groups, although a policy priority, does not attract as much specific attention. However, it was evident that there is a growing realisation of the need to build diversity amongst the third level student population and of the need for third level institutions to adapt in order to accommodate diversity. Advocacy organisations such as AHEAD, Age Action and the Irish Travellers Movement are clearly focused on the issue of access from the point of view of their constituent groups and are intent on incremental change over the medium term. AHEAD has undertaken a number of HEA sponsored studies of the population of people with disabilities at third level and has been involved in various initiatives with a view to promoting access and support for people with disabilities at third level. The Irish Traveller Movement is broadly involved with issues concerning Traveller education and has provided a short paper (see Annex 3) on some of the issues arising as well as some of the promising trends and initiatives underway.

The key general issues identified or commented upon by those interviewed for this study include the following that relate to the measure in various respects although not necessarily to broader equal opportunities concerns.

In relation to grants and schemes under the TLA, interviewees noted the success achieved by the Department of Education and Science (D/ES) in negotiating a demand-led (rather than budget limited) format for the Top-up Grant and this resulted in c. €14 million annually ring-fenced for the other schemes operating under the TLA measure whereas the demand for the Top-up grant had previously been eating into the overall budget available within the measure.

The success in increasing both the amounts of grant made available to beneficiaries as well as the increase in the number of beneficiaries under the various schemes was also favourably commented on as was the improvement in the general management of the relevant grants since the National Access Office took on that management function.

The National Access Office noted however that TLA grants formed a relatively minor part of the overall access agenda which is focused on institutional and cultural change amongst third level providers over the medium term (i.e., between 2006 and 2013). In that regard a number of interviewees referred to the delicacy with which issues had to be negotiated with the third level sector and with the Universities in particular as they closely guarded their independence.

The unequal treatment of the Institutes of Technology compared to the treatment of the Universities regarding support for access services was also a common theme to the interviews. This disparity in treatment, interviewees claimed, is evident in the significantly lesser amount of funding made available to Institutes for access purposes (Universities share c. €8 million annually as against c. €500,000 shared amongst the Institutes). The Institutes also note that any income they generate, unlike the case of the Universities, is netted off against grants receivable from the Department thereby limiting the innovative capacity of the sector, including its capacity to provide for more elaborate access services.

All interviewees referenced the potential for change in access outcomes for marginalised and lower socio-economic groups associated with the introduction of incentivised funding (see reference to Strategic Innovation Fund in Box 5.2 below), which will act as means to encourage third level providers to respond to policy priorities such as access. The HEA in particular expects a more coherent and strategic approach by the third level sector in relation to key policy issues such as access and in that regard looks forward to associating performance on key strategic issues with reward in the way of funding.

All interviewees noted the different 'counting' systems that are currently in play across the higher education sector and welcomed the development of a new database system by the HEA to allow for a richer analysis of the third level student population.

For the future, the HEA and National Access Office want to move away from targeted, ring-fenced schemes that are treated as 'add-ons'. Instead they want to see mainstream access policies and practices within the third level sector. The D/ES reinforced the need for this more integrated approach noting that as the make-up of the third level population changes there will be a need for significant support for students if drop-out is to be avoided. In that regard interviewees referenced the down the line impact of the Education for Persons with Disability Act and the likelihood that it will result in increased numbers of people with disabilities presenting at third level in the future.

Interviewees generally agree that the third level sector needs to interact to a much greater extent with the external environment (e.g. going out into communities, introducing more school children to college, providing local delivery mechanisms etc.) in order to build demand amongst atypical groups. The potential for the new and innovative access routes associated with the work of the NQAI, FETAC and HETAC featured in that regard.

Other issues referenced over the course of the interviews include the modularisation of third courses and the opportunities this opened up for the participation of various groups. However, most interviewees were of the view that modularisation will not be an effective means of attracting and retaining atypical third level students in the absence of a level playing pitch regarding fees for part-time students i.e. part-time students are required to pay fees without grant aid whereas the fees for full-time students. Related to this, some interviewees referenced the fact that the loss of grants due to failing an exam acts against atypical students even where the subject failed is only one relatively minor module (say failing French as part of an Engineering Degree). The suggestion made by some of those interviewed was that in such cases, the student should be allowed to progress to the next year of study with relevant grants and supports and to make up the failed module during that year.

7.3 Developments and Innovations

Over the course of the interviews and literature review conducted for this Measure Study, we have been made aware of a range of developments and innovations that are ongoing that have the potential to significantly impact on access to third level. Some of the change is structural in nature and has involved the setting up of the National Access Office and will involve the establishment of an organisation that will assume responsibility for the universities and the Institutes of Technology (the Universities currently operate under the auspices of the HEA and the IoTs currently report directly into the Department of Education and Science).

The Department of Education and Science also informed is that it has requested that the National Access Office prepare a paper on a Rights Based approach to supporting students with disabilities, comparing it with the budget-based approach that currently pertains. The Department has also requested the National Access Office to profile students and the types of funding available (e.g. top up, book allowance, Back to Education, Secondary Benefits etc.) with a view to gaining a "joined-up" over-view of the combination of grants availed of by individual students and it is reviewing the mainstream grant system where eligibility is assessed on the basis of parental income up to 23 years of age unless the individual can prove 'estrangement' from his/her parents

Other developments are summarised in Box 5.2 below:

Box 5.2: Developments and Innovations

1. The **Strategic Innovation Fund** announced in Budget 2005 includes among its reform objectives enhancing access to higher education. The Minister has said in her press release following the announcement of funding in the budget that higher education institutions need to place equality of access and retention at the mainstream of their organisational priorities, that equality of access needs to be moved from the periphery into a central position in planning and processes.

2. Measure 29b under the EHRDOP supports what is referred to as the **Quality Assurance Framework** referring to the setting up of the **National Qualifications Framework** and related changes consequent on the 1999 Qualifications Act. The overall objective of the Measure as described in the Programme Complement is to provide for a national qualifications framework to **promote and facilitate access / transfer / progression for trainees**, in the further and higher education and training system.

The establishment of a National Qualifications Framework is critical to the delivery of a high quality and efficient market-led range of programmes in the context of promoting and facilitating lifelong learning. However, the establishment of the authority and the framework also has the potential to radically alter the education and training landscape and to challenge the traditional hegemony of the Leaving Certificate in terms of access to third level. In so doing, the new arrangements should prove to be of significant benefit to 'atypical' students and learners and to individuals and groups (including Travellers, older people, people with disabilities and members of minority ethnic groups) who have not derived commensurate benefit from the standard education, examination and accreditation system.

The work of HETAC but more particularly **FETAC** (in the first instance) will be critical to the access and equality agendas. Equality related issues are built into the Quality Assurance architecture and associated mechanisms and processes (e.g. validation of awards). The quality assurance architecture and processes have a **critical role to play in realising equitable**

outcomes from further education and training and from third level education. For example, in its Strategic Plan (p.7) FETAC notes that it must "promote enhanced access to learning and opportunities for progression and ensure that all modes of learning are valued and recognised" and that access, transfer and progression are high priorities.

3. **Legislation**, including the new Equality legislation and the Education for Persons with Disabilities Act (2004) will also force change over time. The Minister of Education sees this latter Act as establishing "unequivocally that the special education needs of children must be a matter of legal right." The Act envisages that the National Council for Special Education will maintain a register of all students deemed to have special needs from the age of three to eighteen. Each registered student is to have an individual education plan (IEP), which will set out the individual's educational needs, the special education and related support services to be provided and individual goals to be achieved over a period of twelve months. The IEP will be regularly reviewed. If the Act is successful in addressing the educational disadvantage experienced by people with disabilities it will, in and of itself, have a significant impact on the employment of people with disabilities in Ireland although the results of change are unlikely to be evident for some time.

4. There are many other innovative developments underway that have the potential to inform policy and practice regarding access from an equality perspective. Some of these include:

a. *Quest for Learning* website, which is a joint initiative of the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD), the Dublin Institute of Technology and others. It provides a virtual support network for students, providing valuable tips on how to manage and maximise their learning systems. It also supports academic staff in both raising awareness of disability issues, as well as guidelines on how to create an accessible curriculum which ensures the teaching and learning strategy is fully inclusive of the needs of students with a disability.

b. On 16th December 2005 the Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science launched an innovative new course which has been developed between two Dublin Further Education colleges and DCU. The **FETAC accredited Certificate in Education and Training** offers students who are registered in both Whitehall and Dun Laoghaire Further Education Colleges the opportunity to study two modules on the first year of the DCU Bachelor of Education programme. The course is designed (i) as a route of access to the DCU undergraduate degree in Education and Training and (ii) as a broad route of entry to all of higher education. It will also stand as a FETAC accredited further education award in its own right, designed to meet the training needs of classroom assistants or the needs of adult and continuing professional education trainers.

c. The **LEAP project** is funded under the EQUAL Community Initiative and it aims to develop access routes into legal training that will result in more representation of non-typical communities in the legal profession and to create diversity in the legal profession and empower the target communities, including members of the Travelling community. The objectives of LEAP include: to ensure equity of access to legal training for under represented communities; to change the perception of the relevance of the law in the targeted communities; to ensure quality legal advice and representation is available within the targeted communities that meet the particular needs of the community; to ensure that legal developments are influenced by the diverse interests within Irish Society particularly those that are presently most excluded; to develop an innovative approach to equity of access to higher education that, if successful, could provide a new model that can be replicated alongside existing access programmes.

d. In early 2006 the **National Access Office** issued an invitation to tender to all Area Based Partnership Companies and Pobal-supported Community Groups to undertake work to explore how best to develop a **whole community approach to equity of access** for under-represented groups in higher education. The Office will support one rural and one urban based group to undertake this work with a budget of up to €100,000 per annum for each project over three years.

7.4   Conclusion

As is evident from the range of issues raised by those interviewed, this is a period of significant change within the third level sector. The issue of participation by members of the Traveller Community and members of minority ethnic groups did not feature to a great extent in the interviews with key actors within the system as most are primarily focused on issues that relate to socio-economic disadvantage and are conscious that access to third level by these groups is particularly marginal due to the fact that children from amongst these groups tend not to derive commensurate outcomes from the first and second level systems and are therefore not, in general, in a position to compete for a third level place.

The bigger picture from an institutional perspective over the next few years will see the establishment of a new umbrella body for the third level sector and it will, possibly, have implications for the manner in which Universities and the IoTs are treated (the disparity in treatment is one of the key motifs that arises in discussion of the sector). The new Strategic Funding model also has implications for the distribution of resources and the realisation of policy.

On the positive front, interviewees welcomed the establishment of the National Access Office and commented on its capacity to maintain a clear focus to date although, as commented on elsewhere, the understanding of and discourse concerning access typically refers to socio-economic disadvantage and, to some extent, disability. The potential of the new qualifications system to open new access routes was commented on by most of those interviewed.

In short, the wider equal opportunities principle, other than from a disability perspective, did not emerge as a priority from the interviews conducted. This would appear to be because the extent of the change that is occurring or planned for at third level and reflects the relatively marginal impact of the issue (WEOP) from a policy perspective given the changing context. It may also be to do with the fact that very few individuals from the groups in question actually attend third level education and the fact that there is a lack of precise data in that regard which might otherwise give rise to debate and, possibly, public/policy attention.

# 8.	Conclusions and Recommendations

## 8.1	Introduction

As evidenced by the material presented in this report, third level education is a national priority from a social and economic perspective. Access to education in general and to third level education in particular is also a national priority.

Traditionally the issue of access has been understood, almost exclusively, from a socio-economic perspective. This is understandable given the long-established policy goal to address inequalities of access on socio-economic grounds. Reflecting that goal, available data regarding third level access and participation are primarily socio-economically based and permit limited ground based equality analysis. The concern with socio-economic inequality also reflects the recent opening up and expansion of the third level sector that is attributable to a range of factors including, for example, the introduction of 'free fees' in the mid 1990s and the introduction of the top-up grants allowing access for larger numbers of people.

The Third Level Access measure - as technically delimited - is a relatively minor part of the access picture both in financial terms and in terms of policy. It has limited scope in relation to institutional change, cultural change and other structural and systemic change that may be required in order to further 'democratise' education at third level: however, the funds available under the measure provide critical support to individual students. Table 8.1 places TLA in context and in comparison to the general grants and supports that are available to those qualifying as earlier described amongst third level student population. As earlier noted, TLA grants are available only to those already in the system and therefore the recipients of these grants will already be in receipt of at least some of the general grants (except in the case of the Fund for Students with Disabilities where disability rather than socio-economic status is the determining factor).

Since the inception of the National Access Office and its assumption of management responsibilities in relation to most of the funds available under TLA, the administration of the funds has been streamlined and institutional consideration of the issue of access has taken on greater coherence. This newly focused consideration of access issues has also taken the broader equality grounds into account. In that regard, it is notable that all of the recent documentation concerning access to third level education includes reference to a more comprehensive understanding of equality and diversity that explicitly refers to building diversity among the third level student population and to promoting access and higher levels of representation for Travellers, people with disabilities, members of minority ethnic groups and older people.

## 8.2	Issues for Consideration

At this time, access to third level is not a realistic proposition for the majority of Traveller children or children with disabilities because they continue to derive very poor outcomes from the mainstream first and second level education systems that is evidenced, for example, through particularly high rates of early school leaving. Older people are also unlikely to attend third level education for a variety of reasons: for example, the fact that all part-time students are currently required to pay fees and that the Irish third level system is culturally and otherwise geared to deal, almost exclusively, with entrants from second level education.

However, over the coming years it is likely that this situation will change as a result of legislation and its consequences (e.g. Education for People with Disabilities Act), in-school initiatives that support children and their parents in continued participation at second level, demographic trends etc. Recent and ongoing developments that see the Department of Education and Science adopting an increasingly policy-focused rather than operational role vis-à-vis third level education should also result in change as the delivery system is incentivised (e.g. Strategic Innovation Fund) and otherwise persuaded to respond more readily to national policy priorities such as access, equality and social inclusion agendas.

The key challenge from an equality perspective will be to maintain a broad equality focus while the 'equality demand' builds. A strong access infrastructure is gradually being put in place and access is being 'mainstreamed' within the processes, planning and operations of third level delivery. It would be unfortunate if the activity and change that ensues as a result of the evident policy and funding pressure is predominantly reflective of the more traditional socio-economic understanding of access only. In our view it would be a more effective and pro-active pursuit of policy if the system response took into account a more comprehensive understanding of equality and diversity from the outset that could, once established, act as a driver of change and a mechanism to build demand. Even during the process of development, that emphasis could send an important signal to under-represented groups.

In our view it is important to build in the equality perspective from the outset. One example provided to us by AHEAD over the course of the study serves to elucidate. AHEAD referenced the fact that University College Cork put in place and advertised supports for students with dyslexia and, as a result, began to attract large numbers of people who might not otherwise have applied for a place at the college. If the college had simply waited for the students to self-present and reactively responded, it simply would not have attracted the same numbers.

Building a comprehensive concept of equality into thinking and system / institutional reform will probably require more work and effort from the outset but the front-loading of the effort will be likely to pay down the line dividends in terms of realising policy aspirations. The comprehensive approach adopted by FETAC in its work serves as a useful benchmark for the National Access Office and other stakeholders. In that regard, the Equality Authority has noted that its interaction with the National Access Office has been particularly positive to date.

8.3   Conclusions and Recommendations

The system that delivers TLA has undergone significant change over the course of the EHRDOP as have certain aspects of the funds themselves. Notable changes and developments include, for example:

*   negotiation of demand-led status for the Top-up grant;
*   significant increases in the rate of the grants;
*   establishment of the National Access Office; and.
*   streamlining of grant payment system.

The system has improved and, by definition, is meeting the financial needs of its target groups inasmuch as they present at third level. From a wider equal opportunities perspective we are aware, however, that key target groups are significantly under-represented at third level. The broader challenge is to build demand and representation of these groups over time with a view to fully democratizing education at this level.

The third level sector is undergoing a period of significant change. The role of the National Access Office will be critical in terms of the roll out of the access agenda within the wider change that is underway. Specifically, in relation to TLA, the Office has streamlined the flow of funding / grants to recipients and this injection of efficiency will clearly assist grant recipients, including students with disabilities and others. The extent to which in the future, Travellers, older people, members of minority ethnic communities and people with disabilities access the funds that are available under TLA as well as other supports will be a marker of the success of the overall access, retention and progression type policies within education across first, second and third levels. We are aware (though not precisely aware due to the lack of data) that very few people from amongst those groups attend third level and the extent to which increased participation is achieved by such groups in the future will be an indication of the depth of change that has been fostered and managed within the third level system notwithstanding the significant successes that have been achieved in broadening participation at third level more generally.

The National Access Office has also published a range of documentation that clearly adopts a broad equality focus. However, its initial priority is to create the conditions that will achieve greater access from a socio-economic perspective. This is an understandable priority given that it is the 'majority' issue and given the relatively small numbers of people transferring to third level from 'atypical' groups. However, as above, it will be important for the National Access Office to build in and maintain a broader equality focus into its ongoing work on an ongoing basis although it is acknowledged that the National Access Office may find it more difficult to access funding to address issues relating to specific groups, such as Travellers, older people and minority ethnic groups, than it would in accessing funding for the more generally targeted access issues.

In order to **advance a comprehensive definition of equality of access** there is a range of possible actions that can be taken. Our recommendations in that regard are[9]:

A. National Access Office – Information and Access Routes

In line with commitments made in the Programme Complement, the National Access Office should report to the Monitoring Committee with specific reference to the extent to which:

- it has promoted and facilitated new and expanded routes of access to higher education particularly from the further education, training and community education sectors; and,

- it has put measures in place to provide more comprehensive information to the target groups on funding processes and the available resources.

B. Data

The HEA / National Access Office should expedite the development of the new Student Record System and should build into that process direct consultation with the Equality Authority and key advocacy groups concerning the type of data to be collected on the third level student population.

The National Access Office's Action Plan (2005-2007) involves an ongoing review of existing programmes and targets with a view to addressing the relative paucity of data. When the review is completed, the Office will develop appropriate indicators and targets. The National Access Office will set both national and institutional targets for participation in higher education by socio-economically disadvantaged students, students from the Traveller community and minority ethnic communities, mature students and students with a disability. However, in the absence of

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[9] Since the initial drafting of this report, the National Access Office has commissioned / undertaken work that will address some if not all of the issues raised at recommendations D, E and G below. The results of the work undertaken are due for publication in late 2006.

agreement on the data set and data analysis, this will no be possible. As it stands, the commitment is to agree mechanisms for gathering data in relation to Travellers, members of minority ethnic groups and others and to then set quantitative and qualitative access targets for these groups to the end of 2007.

C.   Follow-up on the Wider Equal Opportunities Principle Report to the Monitoring Committee

The Wider Equal Opportunities Report to the Monitoring Committee for the EHRDOP notes that goals and action points in the National Access Office's National Action Plan will be advanced as resources permit. The National Access Office should update the Monitoring Committee in relation to these goals and action points, which include:

- development of promotional material to support the rationale of equity of access to higher education and improving information and guidance on routes of access and available funding;
- evaluation of current access and progression routes to higher education programmes that seek to reduce the obstacles to participation by the key target groups;
- setting targets and timetables for expanded and new routes of access through the national framework of qualifications;
- assisting in the introduction of initiatives on teaching development, in-service and qualifications for higher education teachers/lecturers, with particular reference to building capacity to secure equality of access and outcomes;
- ensuring that national and institutional budgets are equality-proofed;
- development of an Initiative towards the establishment of linkages between all schools and communities in disadvantaged areas and at least one higher education institution so that socio-economically disadvantaged learners, members of the Traveller community and minority ethnic communities, students with a disability and mature students have more readily accessible opportunities to progress to higher education (steps taken by the National Access Office in that regard are referenced above).

D.   Typology of Support Services

There is currently no comprehensive list or typology of available access and support services across the third level sector. It would be useful if such a listing was developed itemising the types and range of supports available within each institution and highlighting any particular areas of excellence. Such a list could have the effect of:

a) highlighting good practice and innovation and could act as a mechanism to encourage interaction and collaboration between third level institutions.
b) highlighting the disparity in services between the Institutes of Technology and the Universities (as discussed above); and,
c) alerting prospective students to available supports and the most appropriate colleges for them from that perspective.

E.   Typology of Innovative Actions

There is currently no comprehensive listing of innovative actions and programmes that colleges are engaged in at local or national level (e.g. regarding outreach, community links, open days, engagement with advocacy groups etc). It would be useful to develop such a listing with a particular emphasis on good practice taking into account a comprehensive perspective on equality.

F.   Conference

In order to signal ongoing engagement with a **comprehensive definition of equality** and

to explore the range of its implications for the education system, it would be useful for the Department of Education and Science to sponsor a Conference event that sought to explore the issues regarding building a diverse 'education-going' population at all levels of the education system (first, second and third levels) and examining how to ensure equality of outcomes for all.

G.   Comparative Analysis of Approaches

In order to establish the relative merits of the approaches to access adopted by the Universities, the National Access Office should commission or undertake a comparative analysis of approaches. This could compare, for example, the results achieved by colleges that adopt a predominantly outreach approach with those that rely on in-house mechanisms and/or the results achieved by colleges that actively advertise and promote particular services and supports with those that use more passive approaches etc.

H.   Modularisation and Fees

In line with international best practice and recommendations made by the OECD and others, the move towards a modularized system is ongoing. Part of the rationale for modularization is to make provision more accessible and more amenable to prospective students (i.e., the system can flex to the work, caring and other commitments of the learner as well as to different study and learning styles). Modularisation can be of particular assistance to part-time and periodic / episodic students and it allows students to build up credits that can accumulate towards an award and/or recognition over time.

As such, the move towards modularisation as recommended by the OECD was intended to promote access for part-time, older and other atypical learners. However, unlike full-time students, part-time students have to pay fees and, based on the literature and views expressed in interviews conducted for this measure study, this appears to act as a disincentive that will devalue part of the core purpose of moving towards a modularized system.

National and international commentators appear to agree that the levying of fees for part-time tuition is inequitable in the context of 'free' fees for fulltime students. Others argue that it is counterproductive to stated policy in areas such as lifelong learning and in terms of the promotion of the knowledge society.

Taking the various considerations into account we would recommend a move towards 'free' fees for part-time students, possibly on a targeted and means tested basis in the first instance.

I.   Resourcing the Institutes of Technology to Support Access

The evidence would seem to suggest that the Institutes of Technology are treated less well than the university sector regarding their capacity to support access for students that require support. There appears to be no particular reason for this other than tradition and, of course, financial considerations from a national budgetary perspective. However, the unequal treatment of the Institutes runs counter to other aspects of education and broad social policy and would seem to devalue the Department's commitment achieving equality in education: that is, it is difficult to conceive of an argument to support a case for treating individuals from exactly the same background differently in one institution as against another and expect them to derive similar outcomes.

The system in the Universities appears to be working and the suggestion here is not to take from one to give to the other; instead, it is recommended that the situation be reviewed in order to introduce an equitable funding regime that supports and promotes access in line with policy pronouncements.

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The 10 Measures of EHRDOP to which the WEOP Specifically Applies

Measure	Implementing Department	Implementing Agency
M3 Active Measure for the LTU and Socially Excluded	DETE	FÁS (with elements contracted to local bodies (e.g., in relation to implementing CE)
M4 Early Education	DES	St. Patrick's and DIT (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
M9 Third Level Access	DES	HEA, Institutes of Technology, VECs
M11B Early School Leavers – Youthreach and Travellers	DES	VECs (in respect of out of school centres and Senior Traveller Training Centres
M12B Sectoral Entry Training – Tourism	DAST	Fáilte Ireland
M13 Skills Training for the Unemployed and Redundant	DETE	FÁS
M15 Employment Support Services	DSFA	DSFA (Employment Support Service Unit with the DSFA)
M21 Lifelong Learning – Back to Education Initiative	DES	VECs, Non-VEC Schools, Community Groups
28B Training of Trainers	DETE	FÁS
32B Training Infrastructure	DETE	FÁS

Annex 2

List of Organisations Consulted

1.   Department of Education and Science

2.   Higher Education Authority

3.   National Access Office

4.   Directors, Institutes of Technology

5.   FETAC

6.   AHEAD

7.   Irish Travellers Movement

8.   The Equality Authority

Annex 3

Traveller Participation in Third-Level Education
Irish Traveller Movement

Historically, few Travellers have participated in higher education. In September, 2004 it was estimated that there were 28 Travellers enrolled in higher education. Most Travellers who participate do so under the scheme for mature disadvantaged students, some progress directly from post-primary education. In assessing Traveller participation in higher education, one of the difficulties is that there is no system in place to collect data on the number of actual Travellers participating in higher education.

However, some information can be gleaned from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) census 2002, which included a self ethnic identification for Travellers for the first time. According to the 2002 Census, of 13,680 Irish Travellers aged 15 years and over, only 197 recorded that they had completed a third level qualification (1.4%). This compares to 21% of the general population, but this should also be seen in the context of Central Statistics Office (CSO) data which shows that only 2% of Travellers have completed senior cycle at second level, compared to 23% of the general population for all age groups. For Travellers not to remain invisible to policymakers, accurate data must be gathered.

In 1999, the Higher Education Authority invited higher education institutions to develop initiatives targeting individuals from under-represented groups; Travellers are included in these access initiatives.

Under the HEA proposals and funding, three separate streams have been undertaken to facilitate Traveller participation in higher education. These include:

- Work with Travellers through primary and post-primary education
- Participation programmes
- Research

Work with the Travellers at Primary and Post- Primary

Many Travellers leave mainstream education before completion of the Leaving Certificate, therefore access programmes often seek to make links at primary and post-primary level. A schools programme in University College Cork has established links between the university and ten regional schools with significant numbers of young Travellers. Homework support groups, parenting courses, cultural awareness initiatives, and an induction programme for transfer from primary to post-primary schools are offered, with all activities organised and delivered by the schools. University College Cork has had a number of mature Traveller students and was recently involved in an initiative with the Irish Traveller Movement to produce a video *"Moving On – Travellers and Third Level Education"* (2004) promoting third level education amongst Travellers.

Since 2003 Dublin City University (DCU) Access Service has been working in partnership with the VTS on the development and delivery of a programme targeted at students and parents in both primary and post-primary schools in the North Dublin area. It is aimed at improving retention and increasing awareness of educational opportunities. Several activities focus on broadening

access for members of the Traveller community. A Traveller programme begins in fifth class and is continued throughout post-primary. This initiative is aimed at raising awareness of educational opportunities, campus familiarity, role model creation and parental involvement in the student educational decisions. In addition, an open day was held in the university for Traveller women; 97 attended. Traveller parent days were organised in 2004 and 2005. (See example 2)

Trinity College is developing a programme promoting education opportunities and choices for fifth and sixth class pupils and parents from the Traveller community. The initiative, in partnership with the VTS, will include a series of on-campus workshops for parents.

Participation of Travellers in Higher Education

NUI Maynooth has had a relatively high number of Travellers undertake studies in the Department of Applied Social Studies. Sixteen Travellers have completed a full undergraduate level programme and of these three have gone on to full degree courses. One Traveller student has just been called to the Bar. NUI Maynooth has achieved participation through its outreach programmes and through the specific support mechanisms it has in place for Traveller students including Traveller specific tutorials. Its focus to date has been on programmes that dovetail with potential Traveller involvement in youth and community work in their own communities.

In University College Dublin, eight members of a Traveller women's group completed a certificate in equality studies in 2003.

The Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) in Mary Immaculate College has developed multimedia resources to support teachers, parents and pupils including distance-learning materials for the Traveller community. Some members of the Traveller community have undertaken the After School Support Educational Training (ASSET) programme which assists adults in educational work with children. Two hundred and five children from the Traveller and the refugee communities are currently attending after-school clubs run by ASSET-accredited facilitators. Twelve Traveller women completed the ASSET course in 2003–4 in an outreach centre in County Tipperary.

A women's group and a men's group participate in a Traveller access programme in the University of Limerick assisting completion of the Leaving Certificate for some. Some of these women students are due to progress to degree programmes.

In the NUI, Galway, a community education initiative provides introductory development programmes, accredited courses and advisory support services on an outreach basis. Participation is particularly encouraged from members of the Traveller community and other marginalised groups. In 2004, thirteen Travellers participated in these programmes and a further two have progressed to full-time undergraduate studies in the university.

Research

Along with HEA publications on interculturalism and access programmes, there also has been some research on Traveller access to Third level education

- A national forum on access for Travellers in university education was hosted by NUI Maynooth in 2003, and proceedings from this forum are due to be published shortly. At Mary Immaculate College, the Learner Support Unit completed a needs analysis of Travellers and 'non-national' learners in third level education as part of its 'Moving On' project. In conjunction with a Limerick Traveller Development Group and Mary Immaculate College four Traveller women were trained to research Limerick Traveller children's experiences of primary school. They published a book *Whiddin to the Guaras – Talking to Our Own* in 2005. Dublin City University is researching existing student participation from all minorities and aims to develop stronger links with representatives from minority groups and statutory agencies working in the area.

- In April 2005 *Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland – The Case of Travellers* was published. The HEA funded Mary Immaculate College, Limerick to research and publish this report. This report outlines a number of recommendations for achieving equity of access to higher education and for developing a best practice model of academic support for Travellers.

While there are challenges remaining at primary and post-primary level, there are also challenges for higher education which must be prioritised. One of the themes that have been aired repeatedly, in both the discussions and submissions, is the need to have Traveller role models. Having Travellers employed within the education system as teachers as well as in other professions, such as doctors, barristers, etc. would be the best way to allay the doubts that Traveller parents and learners of all ages may have about the value of education. The positive steps being taken to increase the level of successful participation of Travellers in higher education, not solely for the benefit of those individual Travellers, but also in order to send a clear message to the whole community that education can be of benefit, are very important.

THE EQUALITY AUTHORITY
AN tÚDARÁS COMHIONANNAIS

NDP
NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND

2006