HEA

Higher Education Authority
An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas

PART-TIME AND FLEXIBLE HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND

Policy, practice and recommendations for the future

October 2012

Contents

Executive Summary

Now, more than at any point in our recent history, there is a compelling economic and social case for new initiatives to raise levels of education and skills among adults in the wider population in Ireland. National and international evidence consistently shows the link between levels of educational attainment among adults and opportunities for employment, as well the likely risk of unemployment. 14.7% of the 2.09 million people in the labour force in Ireland (or 309,000 individuals) are currently unemployed (CSO, June 2012, p.4). Those with lower levels of qualifications are most at risk: 27% of people educated to lower secondary level or below, compared to 7% of higher education graduates (CSO, June 2012, table S9a). The wider social and economic impact, and costs of access and opportunity in the labour market are also important factors noted in research and practice. Consequences for societies include increased levels of social welfare dependency, higher levels of crime and deterioration in levels of mental and physical health (Pyne, 2011, p.20). There are also longer-term implications for the future education and well-being of the 21% of Irish young people age 17 and under living in unemployed households (CSO, 2011, p.7).

In 2012, as part of the implementation of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013 and the HEA's contribution to implementation of the National Skills Strategy to 2020, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) has engaged in a process of research and consultation on current policy and practice for part-time higher education and training. This document presents the outcome of that work. An overview of national policy for part-time higher education is set out, as well as data on current levels of higher education participation and attainment, and the economic and social case for continuing to raise these. In addition, the document provides information on strengths and examples of good practice in part-time provision and support in publicly-funded higher education institutions in Ireland, as well as identifying a range of challenges to equal participation in higher education regardless of mode or duration. These strengths and challenges are drawn from the most up-to-date, available evaluation research and data, including surveys of students. They also reflect the information and advice provided through 33 responses from higher education institutions and other partners as part of the research and consultation process for this document.

The final section of the document makes nine recommendations for the future. The first recommendation is overarching: it is proposed that implementation of the other eight recommendations will combine to achieve the overall goal – seamless, equality-based provision of higher education in Ireland, regardless of mode or duration of study.

1. By 2016, full equality of provision and support will have been achieved in higher education for all learners, regardless of time, place or pace of study. A range of indicators will be developed to measure achievement of this goal, with a review of progress before the end of 2014.

2. Colleges of higher education review and further develop their policies and systems to ensure that all participating students have equal access to the highest quality of teaching and learning, services and pastoral supports.

3. An accessible, co-ordinated applications system(s) is developed for all students in higher education.

4. Guidance is established as an integral, comprehensively accessible element of the higher education experience for all students.

5. Proposals are developed to provide targeted financial support for under-represented students who wish to participate in higher education on a part-time/flexible basis.

6. As part of development of the HEA funding model, equal access funding is adapted to support the entry and participation of all participating students in higher education.

7. Specific proposals are developed to ensure people with disabilities can participate equally in higher education, regardless of mode or duration of study.

8. Data collection and evaluation systems are further developed to strengthen the evidence-base on background and routes of entry of part-time students.

9. New national and local targets are set for part-time/flexible learning.

The recommendations will be implemented by the HEA in partnership with other education agencies, and in liaison with the Department of Education and Skills. Progress updates will be presented to the Board of the HEA at 6-monthly intervals.

Introduction and Overview of Process

The purpose of this document is to set out a policy framework for the development of part-time/flexible learning in Irish higher education. It is intended that this framework will support implementation of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013, the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 and the HEA's contribution to implementation of the National Skills Strategy to 2020.

The National Strategy for Higher Education recommends that if Ireland is to raise levels of lifelong learning and higher education attainment, more is needed in terms of increased flexibility and innovation, broader routes of access and a model of funding that supports all students equally, regardless of mode or duration of study. It also envisages a higher education system that is more responsive to demands from communities and employers for up-skilling and continuing professional development (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, pp.17 and 21).

Process and Methodology
In preparing this document, the National Access Office of the HEA consulted with a range of stakeholders with experience of part-time and flexibly-delivered higher education in Ireland. It is also based on evidence gathered from students through the Springboard and Eurostudent surveys, feedback from members of the National Access Office advisory group and submissions to the National Strategy. A consultation document was circulated in May 2012 to all publicly-funded and private higher education institutions as well as other stakeholders, including government departments and other agencies, student representative bodies, employer/enterprise groups and representatives. Thirty-three written submissions were made in response to the consultation document between May and September 2012 (see Appendix 1). In addition, a range of verbal feedback, advice and information was provided following presentations and discussion of the document at meetings of the advisory group of the National Access Office, the HEA Taskforce on the National Strategy, as part of a HEA consultation forum in the Aviva Stadium, Dublin, on 25 May 2012, and with the Department of Education and Skills. The process resulted in a strong engagement with the issues raised, which fed into the final version of the document and the recommendations for the future.

1 Section One of the document provides an overview of national policy for part-time education, current participation in higher education, and the economic and social case for continuing to raise levels of education and skills in the wider adult population. Ireland's performance relative to other countries is also referenced.

2 Section Two examines the strengths and challenges in the Irish model of part-time provision and support. This is based on current research and range of survey material and data, including that gathered by the HEA Student Record System, the Eurostudent Survey and through the Springboard online data system. The quantitative evidence in this section has also been cross-referenced with feedback received as part of the consultation process.

3 Section Three of the document makes nine recommendations to advise future policy and provision for students participating on a part-time/flexible basis in Irish higher education.

1   Context – Ireland

One of main goals of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (HEA, 2008) is to progress the lifelong learning agenda in Ireland through the expansion of part-time/flexible courses and measures to address the student support implications of lifelong learning. Part-time and flexible learning opportunities are essential to increasing access to higher education by adults who need to combine study with work or caring responsibilities (Fleming T. *et al*, 2010, p.13). It is also necessary to support those who have become unemployed and who may need to develop new qualifications and skills while remaining available for work. Among adults in employment, the need to change career and/or attain new skills for areas where there are sustainable employment opportunities is also contributing to the increasing demand for part-time education. Many employers encourage up-skilling, retraining and part-time learning among employees. Flexibility is an important element for students as full-time participation and the more traditional, on-campus provision may not always be possible depending on individuals' circumstances.

The increase in the number of flexible learning and blended learning courses in Irish higher education institutions is providing more opportunities for participation. A growing number of courses are also available through open and distance learning. In 2008, when the National Access Plan was published, just 7% of all undergraduates (full-time and part-time) in HEA institutions were participating on part-time courses and a target was set to increase this to 12.5% by 2010. Data gathered for the mid-term review of the National Access Plan showed that participation in part-time higher education did grow from 2008 on. The mid-term (2010) target of 12.5% was exceeded, with over 14% of all undergraduate students in HEA institutions participating on a part-time basis in 2009-2010. The definition of part-time used for this target includes students (other than full-time) who are attending part-time courses extending over a full academic year and leading to an academic award, as well as 'occasional' students taking courses/modules not leading directly to an award. It did not include students on open, distance and e-learning courses. As more comprehensive data are now being gathered, further analysis of students on these courses in 2010-2011 is included in this document (see **Tables 1** and **2**).

A target has been set to increase flexible/part-time provision to 17% of undergraduate entrants by 2013. However, in feedback to the HEA consultation paper one senior academic suggests that this target is 'by comparison with the best nations a modest goal', suggesting that it needs to be 35% at least. Others comment that national and institutional data and targets for part-time education should be based on more precise and standardised definitions. In addition, it is recommended that these targets should show how part-time provision is supporting progress on both the access and up-skilling agendas:

It is important to clearly differentiate between part-time first-time learners, part-time learners holding a third level qualification, and part-time learners who experience a disadvantage. These distinctions, together with labour market needs, will shape the type of provisions that should be offered and the nature of financial supports required.

The above suggestions will advise work on the ongoing development of systems of data collection and the setting of new national targets.

The progress made so far on the current national targets has likely been due to three factors in particular. First, there has been sustained emphasis for over a decade in national and European policy on the importance of increasing lifelong learning and flexibility of provision. In Ireland, work has included a White Paper on Adult Education (2000), the Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education (2001) as well as two National Access Plans (2005-2007 and 2008-2013). At EU level the policy agenda has been led by the Lisbon Strategy (2000) objectives of raising economic growth, competitiveness and social inclusion in the European economic area. Key elements include programmes and targets (for 2010 and 2020) to raise adult participation in lifelong learning (in particular among the low-skilled) and to increase levels of tertiary attainment.

Secondly, in Ireland, targeted funding has been available to implement policy, including through the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) allocated by the HEA. Examples of innovation supported by SIF include development of policy and practice on recognition of prior learning through the Education in Employment (EINE) consortia of nine higher education institutions; work-based learning through the Roadmap for Employment-Academic Partnership (REAP) project; and the Bluebrick (www.bluebrick.ie) flexible learning portal which facilitates learners in searching and applying online for a range of part-time/flexible courses and modules in the fourteen institutes of technology in Ireland and three participating universities.

The development of full- and part-time provision is also being supported by the recurrent grant allocated each year by the HEA to institutions. This funding is based on the number of full- and part-time students in each institution, and data on student credits is used to inform the recurrent grant allocation model (RGAM). Systematic information is being gathered through the HEA Student Records System (SRS) on the number of credits taken by each individual student and in the future funding for all full- and part-time courses will be based on this data. This objective is welcomed, with one respondent to the consultation paper stating:

It is time to start thinking of doing away finally with the idea of full-time and part-time…then we will have only 'students' and the question will be 'how many credits are you taking?'

A proposal to include distance education and off-campus provision as part of the HEA funding model is being considered in 2012; this is widely welcomed by respondents to the consultation phase for this paper.

A third reason for policy and progress to-date is the economic imperative to support the skills development of those working in both declining and emerging sectors and, over the past four years in particular, the educational needs of the many thousands of people who are currently unemployed in Ireland. This has led to the introduction of State-sponsored labour market activation measures, including the Springboard initiative, which, to-date, has provided almost 12,000 part-time higher education places for those who are unemployed (see **Appendix 2**). There are strong economic and social reasons for continuing to focus on raising levels of education in the wider adult population. National and international evidence consistently shows the link between educational attainment and opportunities for employment, as well as the likely risk of unemployment. The wider social and economic impact of access and opportunity in the labour market are also important factors as noted in a recent OECD issues paper:

> *The costs associated with failing to address long-term exclusion from the labour market should not be under-estimated. Whilst the costs associated with intervention can appear significant, the cost of failing to intervene will be even greater, such as welfare dependency, increased social unrest and crime, poor physical and mental health, and insecure housing.* (Pyne, 2011, p.20)

Notwithstanding the progress made, it is probably fair to say that the emphasis in higher education policy and practice in Ireland still remains on full-time provision and support, and that this is focused primarily on the school leaver cohort (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.46). **Table 1** provides an overview of part-time as compared to full-time participation in twenty-eight HEA funded institutions and eighteen other public and private higher education institutions in 2010-11.[1]

Table 1
Part-time and Full-time Enrolments 2010-2011

	Institutes of Technology	Universities/ Colleges	All HEA	Other/Private HEI's	Total
UNDERGRADUATE					
Part-time	20%	12%	16%	34%	17%
Full-time	80%	88%	84%	66%	83%
Total UG	74,401	88,028	162,429	10,084	172,513
POSTGRADUATE					
Part-time	52%	36%	39%	32%	39%
Full-time	48%	64%	61%	68%	61%
Total PG	5,696	29,936	35,632	2,172	37,804
Total	80,097	117,964	198,061	12,256	210,317

[1] This table is based on analysis of 2010-2011 student statistical returns by institutions to the HEA and DES. The methodology is aligned with that used for the target for part-time participation in National Access Plan. In response to feedback, both Tables 1 (overleaf) and Table 2 (p.20) now include 3,866 students (2,974 undergraduate) on distance and e-learning courses in HEA institutions.

These data confirm much higher levels of participation in full-time courses compared to part-time. For example, in the university sector 12% of all undergraduates participate on a part-time basis, compared to 20% in the institutes of technology. 47% of part-time undergraduates are on Level 6 and 7 courses, compared to 22% of those studying full-time. A large percentage of full-time undergraduates (77%) are on Level 8, honours degree courses. Just 6% of all students (full- and part-time) on Level 8 courses in HEA institutions participate on a part-time basis. There is a much higher proportion (34%) of students undertaking part-time undergraduate courses in eighteen other (non-HEA), publicly-funded institutions and in private colleges.[2] However, available data also indicates that the 4,100 part-time students in those eighteen institutions are a minority (9.5%) of all 43,485 part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students (HEA and other colleges).

As later analysis shows (**Table 2**, p.20), ratios of full-time compared to part-time provision vary across HEA institutions. The data do not capture 2,527 part-time students who took up a Springboard course in publicly-funded colleges during the academic year 2011-2012; these will be in the annual student statistical return for that year.[3]

A more recent analysis estimates that when these and other additional places that have come on stream are taken into account (including open and distance learning), almost 17% of all undergraduates in publicly-funded higher education institutions in 2011-2012 will be participating on a part-time basis.

Postgraduate Students

Table 1 also shows that there were almost 38,000 postgraduate students in 2010-2011. While the majority of these were participating on a full-time basis, overall there is a higher proportion (39%) of part-time participation at postgraduate level than at undergraduate level. However, a much smaller proportion (9%) of part-time compared to full-time (34%) postgraduate students are pursuing a Level 10, doctoral qualification. Some initial feedback on this document indicates that some of the issues raised may not be as relevant for part-time postgraduate students. For example, there may not be a similar demand and need for guidance and academic support among those who have already successfully navigated the higher education system, compared to students who are first-time entrants to higher education. Nor do national targets for part-time/flexible learning (such as the 17% target in the National Access Plan) include postgraduates.

However, the findings for applicants to Springboard are relevant, as this feedback was based on a survey of applicants to both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Some of the submissions received in response to the consultation paper confirm that there is a demand and need for support among part-time postgraduate students, albeit in different areas to undergraduates. Common issues

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[2] A submission by seven (HECA) private institutions to the National Strategy on Higher Education, including four of the eighteen colleges in Table 1 above, indicate that 70% of students (13,200) on courses at Levels 6 to 9 in those seven HEIs are participating on a part-time basis.
[3] A further 2,425 participants took up a Springboard course during the 2011-2012 academic year in privately-run/not for profit higher education colleges.

for both groups of students would include systems of financial support for those who are unemployed or on low incomes, access for those with disabilities and systems of support underpinning the overall part-time student experience.

Profile of Part-time Students

Evidence is also available on the profile of part-time students (HEA, 2012b, pp. 51 and 69). Some of the key distinguishing features of this group include the following:

- 92% of those entering part-time, undergraduate courses are mature students (age 23 or older), compared to 15% of full-time entrants. Similarly, 92% of entrants to Springboard courses in 2011-2012 were mature students.

- Entrants to part-time courses are drawn from a broader range of age groups compared to full-time students, who are predominantly (79%) recent school-leavers and aged 17 to 20 years of age.

- There are also distinctions between the age profile of full- and part-time mature students. 25% of full-time mature entrants are aged 23 or 24 and the majority (80%) of mature students are under 40, compared to part-time matures, 95% of whom are aged 23 to 56 years of age.

- In 2010-2011, 53% of all part-time undergraduate students were female and 47% were male. By comparison, 72% of students on Springboard courses are male, compared to 28% female.

While system-wide data are not gathered on the socio-economic background, ethnicity or disability of part-time students, recent findings for full-time mature students may be relevant:

- Mature students are more likely to have a disability (9.5%) than the wider student body (5.9%) and are three times more likely to have a physical disability or a psychological condition. (In some colleges this is higher, with one institution advising that 30% of its mature students are registered as having a disability).

- It is estimated that there are a higher proportion of mature students from skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual worker background (36% compared to 22% of students from younger age groups), in particular in the institutes of technology. However, proportions of mature entrants from non-manual worker backgrounds are broadly similar to the wider student body (11-12%).

- Mature students on Level 6 and 7 courses have higher retention rates than those on Level 8 courses.

The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013 and, more recently, findings from the CSO Quarterly National Household Survey 2011 highlight significant gaps in educational attainment among the adult population in Ireland. Both the National Access Plan and the National

Strategy for Higher Education examine the potential to increase participation and provision in view of levels of educational attainment in the wider adult population. Recent analysis by the Central Statistics Office shows that in 2011, 38% of adults aged 25-64[4] had a higher education qualification, up from 30% in 2005 (CSO, 2011, pp. 9-12). While this is a positive statistic, there are marked differences across age groups (**Figure 1**). Almost 50% of 25-34 year olds have a higher education qualification in 2011 (41% in 2005), compared to 43% of those aged 35-44 (31% in 2005), 31% aged 45-54 in 2011 (22% in 2005) and 23% of 55 to 64 year olds (17% in 2005).

Figure 1

Proportion of Each Age Group with a Higher Education Qualification in 2000, 2005 & 2011
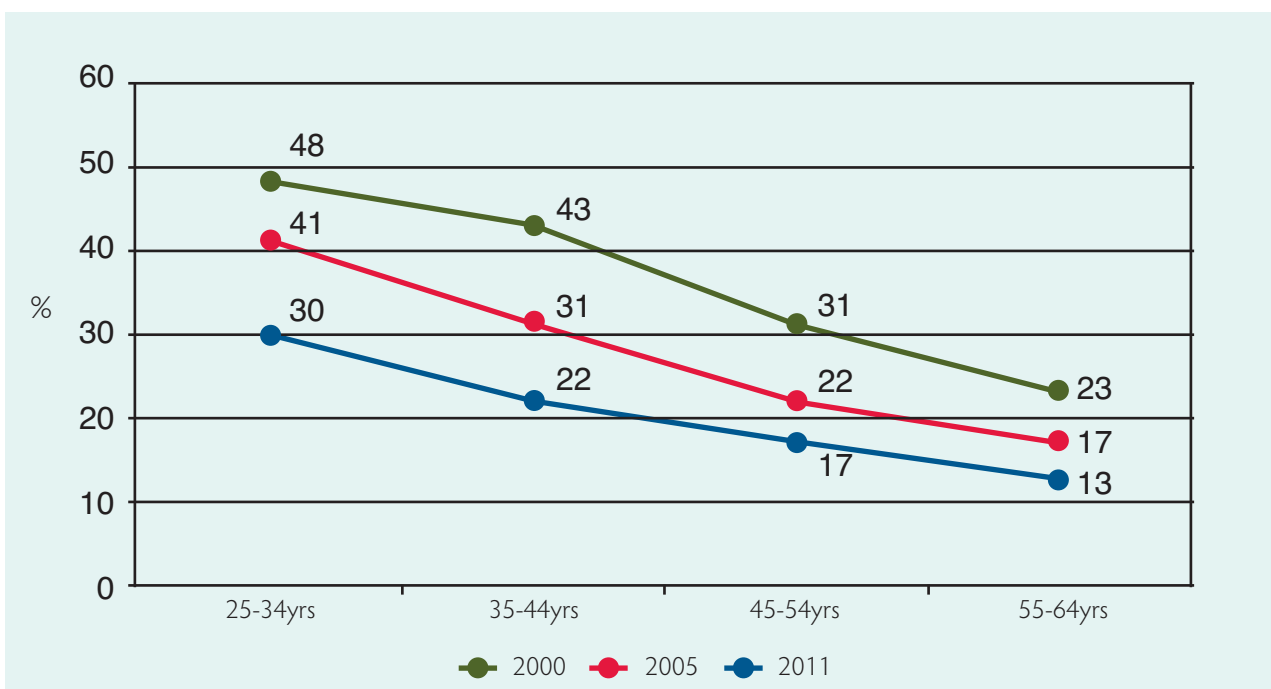

Across age groups there are also differences by level of higher education qualification attained (**Figure 2**). While 32% of 25-34 year olds have an honours degree or higher-level qualification, just 17% of those aged 45-54 are qualified to this level. Feedback received during the consultation phase for this paper suggests that national economic policy may point to a need for greater participation at level 8 and above, and this may need to be reflected in future targets, policies, and related actions.

[4] Preliminary 2011 census data indicates that there are almost 2.5 million adults aged 25-64. Based on CSO data, it is estimated that over 1.5 million of those are not higher-education qualified.

Figure 2

Highest level of education attainment among Irish adults
Age 25-64 (CSO, QNHS 2011)
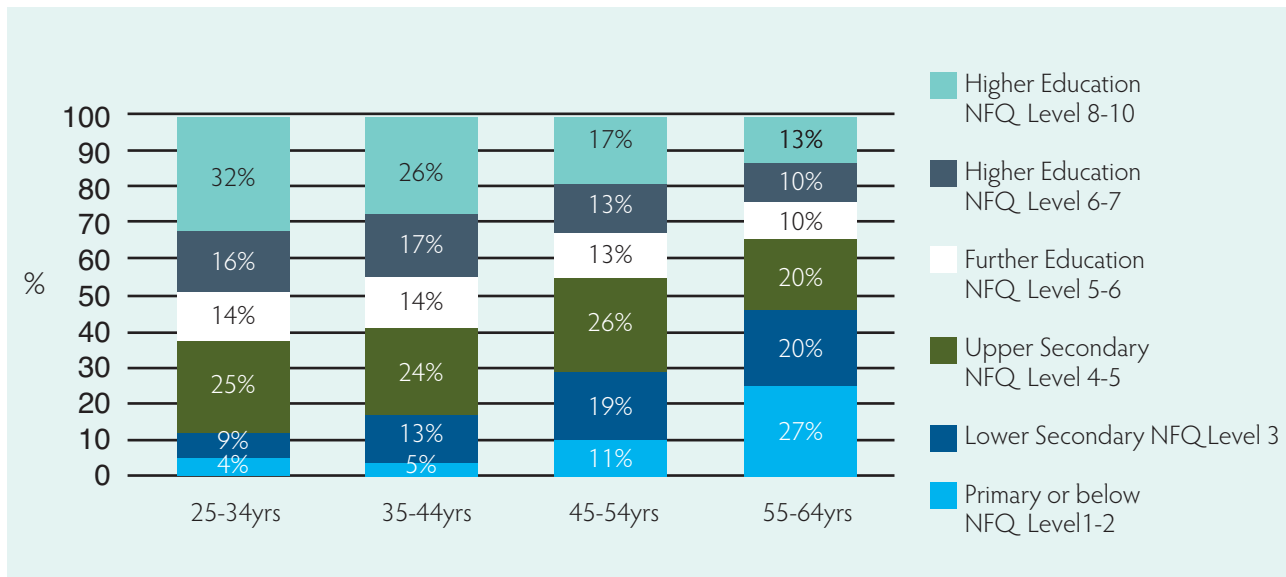
Of the 2.09 million adults in the labour force in Ireland, 309,000 or 14.7% are unemployed and 435,000 are on the live register (which also includes seasonal and part-time workers eligible for job-seeker payments). Those with lower levels of qualifications are most at risk of unemployment: 27% of those educated to lower secondary level or below, compared to 7% of higher education graduates (CSO, June 2012). Males, early school-leavers, non-Irish nationals and construction workers are particularly vulnerable, as are young adults (under 25). The largest group (55% or almost 1.2 million people) in the labour force are those aged 25-44 years, over 15% of whom are unemployed (rising to 22% among males). As Figure 2 above indicates, there is significant potential to raise levels of education in this and other groups, particularly through increased opportunities for part-time education that support individuals who wish to work (or remain available for work) while simultaneously progressing their education and skills development.

The National Skills Strategy to 2020 has set targets that by 2020, 48% of the labour force will be qualified to Levels 6-10 and 45% to Levels 4 and 5 (Forfás, 2007, p.7). To achieve this it is estimated that an additional 500,000 individuals need to progress by at least one level of qualification. The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs has reviewed progress towards the achievement of these targets. While there has been progress towards the target for Levels 6 to 10 (41% of the labour force in 2010), the proportion (40%) of those with Level 4 and 5 qualifications remains static and up-skilling those at Levels 1-3 has been described as *'the most significant challenge for the period to 2020'* (Forfás, 2012, p.18)*.*

The Expert Group also monitors where there is demand in the economy for different levels and types of education and skills. Areas of current demand include information and communications

technology (ICT); the biopharma/pharmachem industries; the green economy; international financial services; medical device; and the food and beverage sector. These areas are the focus of the Springboard labour market activation initiative that provides free part-time courses for unemployed, or previously self-employed, people with Level 5 or 6 further education awards (or equivalent), as well as those with higher education Level 6 to 9 qualifications who require additional up-skilling or re-skilling.

Ireland in Comparative Terms

There has been growth in part-time provision of higher education over the last two decades in all developed countries, supported by policies to up-skill workforces and widen participation and lifelong learning. The underlying assumption of skills policy is that 'the more training, skills and qualifications people have, the more likely they are to be in work' (Jackson and Jamieson, 2009, p.400). An additional reason for the growth of part-time higher education since the 1990s is its cost effectiveness as a means of expanding access and supporting mass participation in higher education (Tight, 1994; Scheutze and Slowey, 2002; Bennion *et al*, 2011). In addition, since 1999, the implementation of the Bologna Process in the European Union has promoted lifelong learning and flexibility of provision across EU countries, and EU and OECD data show that as levels of lifelong learning increase, part-time forms of study and student numbers have grown.

Part-time students are not a homogeneous group, however, and the motivations of those studying part-time vary for economic, personal, civic and social reasons. A common challenge in all countries has been to meet the needs of increasingly diverse groups of learners (Scheutze and Slowey, 2002; Bennion *et al*, 2011). Countries have responded to the challenges of developing part-time higher education and supporting learners in different ways, as evidenced in the evaluation literature.

Internationally, at 36%, Ireland ranks slightly above the OECD average of 30% for its proportion of adults aged 25-64 with a tertiary qualification (OECD, 2011, p.40). Looking at this figure more closely, Ireland is about half-way – eighteenth among 35 countries – for higher educational attainment among adults aged 45-64. However, for younger adults, Ireland's ranking is better, at fourth out of 35 for those aged 25-34 (**Figure 3**). Eurostat data is even more positive on Ireland's figures for younger age groups, concluding that Ireland is joint-first among EU countries for these attainment levels.

Figure 3
Higher education attainment by age group: Ireland and international context
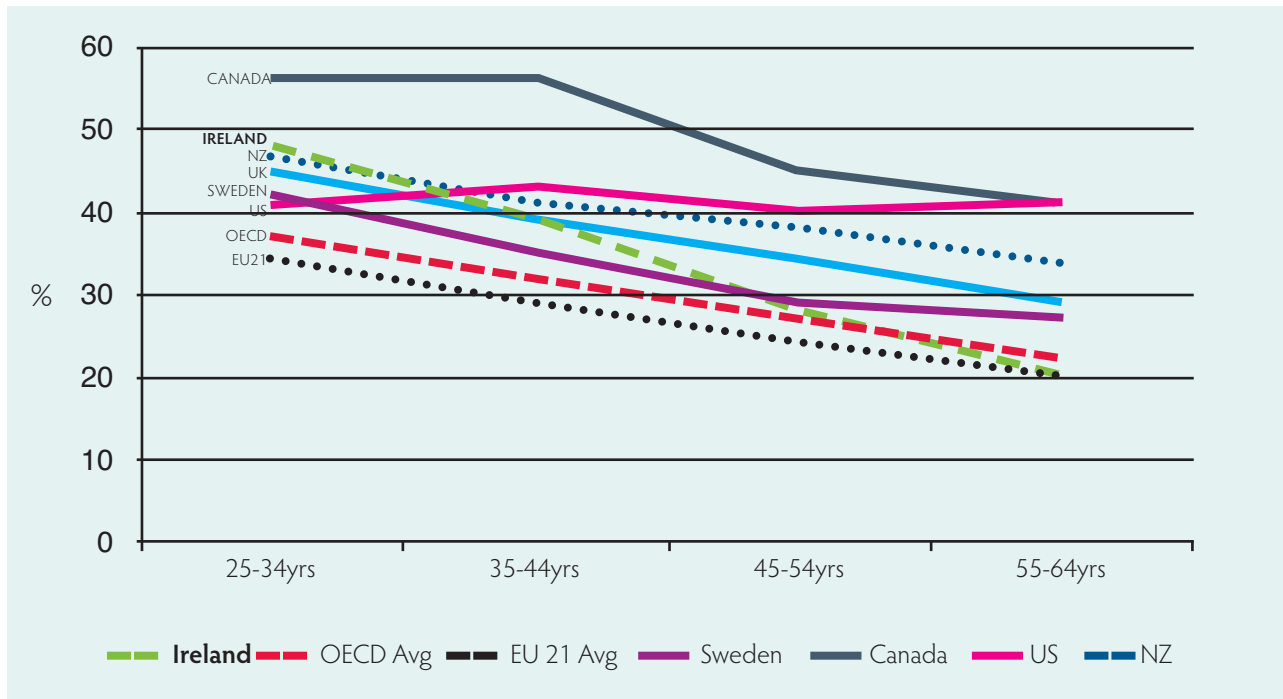
In terms of participation in part-time higher education, a comparative analysis between countries is not straightforward as a range of definitions and types of provision exist (Eurostat, 2011). The OECD also acknowledges that data are partial (OECD 2011, p.302). Some analysis has been done, however, showing that, including privately-run colleges, 32% of students in Ireland on tertiary-type B (Levels 6 and 7) courses participate on a part-time basis (OECD 2011, p.307). This is above the OECD average of 29% and the EU21 average of 25%. However, other countries have particularly high rates of participation at these levels, with the UK at 76%, Switzerland at 72%, the Netherlands at 65% and New Zealand at 61%. In tertiary type A and research courses (Levels 8-10) Ireland is at 12%, below the OECD average of 21% and the EU average of 22%. Countries leading the field at these levels are Sweden at 52%, Finland at 44%, and New Zealand at 40%.

In summary, the National Strategy for Higher Education and the National Skills Strategy has identified the need to increase participation through increased flexibility of provision. While the mid-term review of the National Access Plan shows that progress has been made, recent analysis indicates that there is still a considerable way to go on raising levels of attainment among adults, particularly those in the 40-plus age group. Information on the profile of those adults who do participate in higher education confirms the need for a framework of provision and support tailored to more mature learners, and a student group with more diverse levels of prior educational attainment and needs than the 'traditional' full-time student body of school-leavers.

2 Strengths and Challenges in Provision and Support

(i) Strengths and good examples of practice

A review of institutional reports of progress on access and lifelong learning, submissions received through the consultation process, and the Eurostudent and Springboard surveys of students outline good examples of practice and support for students participating in higher education on a part-time or flexible basis. An overview of these examples is provided below.

Proactive Policies to Increase Part-time Provision
As part of their strategic planning processes, some higher education institutions have set specific targets to increase part-time provision. For example, one college aims to double the number of students studying on a flexible, part-time basis at undergraduate degree level by 2014. Another aims to increase flexible/part-time provision to 15% of undergraduate entrants by 2012. Three others have set targets to increase part-time provision to 17% by 2013. Another reports that it exceeded its target for part-time enrolments in 2010 and that 90% of those enrolled on part-time courses are mature students. Some respondents comment, however, on the need for more challenging national and local targets, with one college indicating that it would welcome 'more challenging national goals in this area'.

Among the criteria for institutions applying to be a Technological University include a combined minimum of 30% of all students in the applicant institution will be 'lifelong learning' students enrolled on professional focused courses and industry up-skilling, including part-time, work-related courses, work-study courses and/or mature learners (HEA, 2012c). Further work on resources and targets necessary for flexible provision will form part of the strategic dialogue process between the HEA and institutions in 2012-2013.

Access to Part-time Higher Education via a Range of Routes and Application Systems
Application for some part-time courses can be made through the Central Applications Office (CAO). State-funded initiatives such as the Bluebrick learning portal have also helped streamline the application process for students seeking to enter part-time courses in the Institutes of Technology, including Springboard courses. Policy and practice on the recognition of prior learning for the purposes of admission have been strengthened through initiatives such as the Education in Employment (EINE) project. Further education awards, adult and community-based education, and higher education access and foundation courses are also supporting progression to full- and part-time courses. The most recent Eurostudent survey for 2009-2010 (HEA, 2011b) indicates that the majority of full-time students (75%) enter higher education through the Leaving Certificate route, in comparison to 39% of part-time students. The main entry method for part-time students was as a mature student (43%) or through other routes (18%) such as a FETAC qualification or access/foundation programme (HEA, 2011b, p.24).

As part of the applications and admissions process, the CAO and institutions gather systematic data on alternative routes of entry to higher education. Recently published information (IUA, 2011) indicates that in 2010, 15% (7,132) of those accepting places on full-time, undergraduate courses applied as mature students, 5% (2,360) were applicants through the FETAC further-to-higher education links scheme[5] and a further 5% on the basis of other further education qualifications. 3% of acceptors (1,518) were offered a place through the higher education access route for school-leavers from disadvantaged backgrounds or with disabilities. As there are a range of application routes for part-time courses, no similar, systematic data is available on the routes through which part-time students are applying, being offered and accepting places in higher education. Some additional information on current routes of entry was provided as part of further consultation. It is proposed that it is also sought as part of further work on the development of central application systems for both part-time and full-time higher education.

Innovative Part-time Course Provision
An analysis of data for each HEA institution (**Table 2**) shows that across the universities, colleges and institutes of technology, levels of part-time provision vary from 4% of all (full-time and part-time) undergraduates in some institutions to 40% in others. In some colleges, departments of adult, continuing and community education co-ordinate the provision of part-time certificate and diploma courses to adult learners in the wider community. These qualifications particularly target students accessing higher education for the first time and support progression to mainstream, Level 8 qualifications. In one institution, over 1,200 students participate annually in Return to Learning programmes in arts, economics and finance. There is flexible provision of degree level courses also in Arts, Business, Social Science and Agriculture and it is possible to study for these on a part-time basis.

Centres for adult and continuing education in two higher education institutions deliver up to 40 part-time courses each, in fifteen to twenty locations across two regions. These courses are tailored to local needs identified in consultation with community and employers bodies. One institution advises how delivering courses in local venues (such as public libraries) has many advantages such as reducing childcare and travel costs, creating education hubs in communities, reducing personal isolation, and fostering social and civic engagement. There is a particular focus on targeting the entry and progression of adults accessing higher education for the first time. In another college, students on these courses can select modules towards the accumulation of credit leading towards a recognised award. Over half of the students enrolled participate in a distance/blended learning mode. One smaller college has developed an Adult Learning BA designed to target the participation of adults in an urban area who do not have a previous higher education qualification. The course draws on the expertise of business and the local community as 'co-educators from the world of work'.

The flexible delivery of a number of special purpose awards has been developed by some institutions. Students on these courses may participate over eight to ten weekends one day per week. Since 1989, an Accumulation of Credits and Certification of Subjects (ACCS) scheme has

supported students in the institutes of technology in studying part-time at a pace that suits their circumstances. An ACCS student gains credit for each module they successfully complete and can accumulate accredited modules, over time, towards a full award. Fees are charged to students on a per-module basis.

Flexible Course Delivery

A number of higher education institutions have made themselves more accessible to part-time and off-campus students through increased use of learning technology and online delivery. For example, in one institution, lectures, assignments and tutorials for a degree course in mechatronics are being delivered fully online. Students are brought on-campus three times a semester to complete practical components of the course. In another institution, a centre for distance learning is targeting mature students, students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with disabilities. The objective is to increase participation by these groups through increased flexibility of provision, new forms of course delivery and adaptable learning pathways. In addition, 24 (11%) of the 220 courses available through the Springboard programme in 2012-2013 will be provided on an online and distance-learning basis.

A 2009 research paper by the HEA documents some significant advances that have been made by Irish higher education institutions in the innovative use of technology and virtual learning environments (HEA, 2009, p.5). The potential for open and distance learning to increase inclusion in higher education is noted here and in other research, particularly in the case of people who are not able to participate on a full-time or on-campus basis because of location, employment, disability or income (MacKeogh, 2007). The opportunities created by use of 'open educational resources' (teaching and learning materials that are freely available online) within the Irish higher education sector and in collaboration with international partners are highlighted. Others propose that a sector-wide strategy is now needed for delivery of online courses. Also that such a strategy would need to include guidelines on the issue of for whom and in what contexts and skills online courses should be developed.

[5] Link to information on the Further to Higher Education Links Scheme at: http://www.fetac.ie/fetac/learners/hels/hels.htm

Table 2
Share of Part-time vs. Full-time Undergraduates in Each HEA Institution

	Part-time	Full-time	Total	PT	FT
UCD	1,959	14,638	16,597	0.12	0.88
UCC	1,046	12,398	13,444	0.08	0.92
NUIG	2,639	10,282	12,921	0.20	0.80
NUIM	1,542	5,973	7,515	0.21	0.79
TCD	480	11,013	11,493	0.04	0.96
UL	993	8,476	9,469	0.10	0.90
DCU	1,348	6,508	7,856	0.17	0.83
Total	10,007	69,288	79,295	0.13	0.87
MIC	9	2,502	2,511	0.00	1.00
SPD	0	1,838	1,838	0.00	1.00
Mater Dei	208	383	591	0.35	0.65
NCAD	215	761	976	0.22	0.78
RCSI	302	1,907	2,209	0.14	0.86
St Angela's	172	436	608	0.28	0.72
Total	906	7,827	8,733	0.10	0.90
AIT	961	3,478	4,439	0.22	0.78
ITB	546	1,894	2,440	0.22	0.78
ITC	1,368	3,333	4,701	0.29	0.71
CIT	1,873	6,898	8,771	0.21	0.79
DKIT	246	4,250	4,496	0.05	0.95
DIT	2,601	10,477	13,078	0.20	0.80
IADT	96	1,965	2,061	0.05	0.95
GMIT	993	5,363	6,356	0.16	0.84
LIT	804	4,012	4,816	0.17	0.83
LYIT	354	2,479	2,833	0.12	0.88
ITS	1,119	3,770	4,889	0.23	0.77
ITTD	1,836	2,745	4,581	0.40	0.60
ITTR	273	2,369	2,642	0.10	0.90
WIT	1,152	6,131	7,283	0.16	0.84
Tipp Ins	344	671	1,015	0.34	0.66
Total	14,566	59,835	74,401	0.20	0.80
Overall Total	25,479	136,950	162,429	0.16	0.84

Community Engagement to Deliver Higher Education on a Part-time Basis

Many higher education institutions work with local stakeholders in the development and promotion of opportunities for flexible/part-time participation. This involves collaboration with employers, county enterprise boards, area partnerships and local employment services. In one college, part-time courses are promoted in co-operation with an area partnership, local authority and social welfare office. A committee of partners work to develop a collective approach to target and support adults who are unemployed or socially disadvantaged. Another college has developed an annual part-time prospectus that is circulated to all companies and other related providers (such as Fás/Solas and further education colleges) in their region. Two open evenings are held during the year where personnel meet and advise potential course applicants. One institution has collaborated with Skillnets and the local chamber of commerce in the design and delivery of a Higher Certificate in Manufacturing Technology, which uses a blended/flexible learning approach to facilitate the up-skilling and re-training of operative workers in local manufacturing enterprises.

Addressing Financial Challenges

One higher education institution has implemented a scholarship fund to assist mature part-time students who have recently become unemployed and who may be experiencing financial hardship. This scheme was introduced in 2009 and over 70 students each year receive a fees discount of 50%. There are no fees for students on Springboard courses from 2012, including students in receipt of the disability allowance payment. Some institutions also operate a system of fee remissions for a wider group of part-time students who are unemployed (IoTI, 2012, p.36). For example, participants who are on social welfare pay 50% of the normal part-time tuition fee. Employer representative groups highlight how the continuous professional development of part-time students in work is being financially supported by their employers. Available evidence would indicate that a large proportion of this support is for training by providers other than higher education institutions (IBEC, 2010, p.17; Fleming, T. *et al*, 2010, pp. 48 and 74).

Innovative Teaching and Learning Supports

One college reports that it has undertaken a review of academic student supports for diverse student groups, including those participating on a part-time basis. In tandem, a centre for adult education has piloted the provision of educational advice and academic support for part-time students. One college describes this universal approach as a core part of its mission:

> *Support and access to facilities is provided to all students, full-time and part-time, with an emphasis on mirroring the services for both groups.*

In another institution, a modular part-time degree has been developed for delivery both on-campus and on an outreach basis. This approach aims to offer students maximum flexibility; students are required to complete an introductory semester and may then opt to progress through the degree at a pace that suits them.

Summer schools and additional bridging modules are provided by some institutions to support adults who are returning to learning after a long period out of education. One college delivers 'Headstart' mathematics and academic writing initiatives for first-time mature entrants in the weeks before their course starts. Another has enhanced supports for part-time learners through provision of study skills sessions and the development of a study skills booklet in collaboration with other colleges. Staff in the lifelong learning centre of one institution provides information and support services to students on over 50 part-time professional development and lifelong learning courses.

Guidance Initiatives for Part-time Students

There is welcome for the establishment earlier this year (2012) of a help-line for applicants to part-time courses offered as part of the Springboard initiative. In feedback a college reports that it has also established its own dedicated call centre, through which support is available throughout the year for all non-CAO student enquiries. The same college also reports that it holds seven open evenings each year with additional open events at weekends. One smaller college describes how, in their institution, a team of administrative and academic staff provides supervision and guidance to each student on a part-time degree course:

> *Each student has an academic mentor who accompanies the learner throughout their college career and the approach to guidance is that it is more than just pre-entry information on course content and job prospects, it is [central to the] education experience.*

One higher education institution has established a dedicated information desk for part-time students and this is open twelve hours a day during term. Part-time students are surveyed every two years on the services and facilities available, with the findings from the surveys used to make systematic improvements to policy and practice. In another college, the office of the Department of Continuing Education is open until 8:30pm Monday-Thursday to support part-time students. In the same institution, course co-ordinators attend open evenings and registration to meet and advise potential students on how to choose the most suitable course and how to apply for recognition of prior learning (RPL). In feedback an employers' representative emphasises the need for effective communication and academic support:

> *As many part-time students and adult learners either have no experience of the higher education system, or experience dating back a number of years, there needs to be very clear promotional material, a strong induction and clear information on 'how things work'.*

Reports of Positive Student Experience

When surveyed about their experience as a part-time student, a significant majority (84%) of students on Springboard courses advised that their college has provided good or excellent support. Some comment that the level of guidance received is excellent:

> *The commitment of the college to my course is unquestionable and the help and guidance provided are exemplary.* (Springboard participant 2011-2012)

Students also describe how their level of confidence has increased through participation. The sense that this course is relevant and will have a positive outcome, particularly relating to the search for employment, is very clear.

> *I've found a significant part of the course content so far very interesting, it is new as well as challenging, and I can see how it will benefit me not only in professional life but in my personal life also.*
> (Springboard participant 2011-2012)

Students were asked about the impact of Springboard and 79% agreed that it has had a positive impact on their lives. While almost all respondents mentioned that attending college adds a significant additional financial burden, the increase in hope, self-belief and the opportunities to learn new skills and gain employment are, in general, positive:

> *The experience of returning to education has been a very positive experience from a personal development perspective I feel that I am increasing my job prospects while looking for work.* (Springboard participant 2011-2012])

Notwithstanding the good examples of practice above, issues have been identified, however, by students and those working with them on course workload, on systems of financial and other supports, and on the level and quality of pre- and post-entry guidance for students participating on a part-time/flexible basis. The next section explores these and other challenges and barriers.

(ii)   Challenges and barriers to participating in part-time higher education in Ireland

Based on evidence gathered through the Springboard and Eurostudent student surveys, feedback from the National Access Office advisory group and others, submissions to the National Strategy and in the responses on the consultation document on part-time education, a number of challenges and barriers in current systems of provision and support for part-time students have been identified as follows:

Different Treatment of Part-time Students
Many of those who responded to the HEA consultation paper confirm that part-time students are currently treated differently to those who are participating on a full-time basis. There is, however, a general consensus that this needs to change and 'a true equality' must exist between those that study full-time and part-time. One respondent urges that:

> *The categorisation of full-time and part-time learners is dropped from our vocabulary and instead we simply refer to learners.*

Another respondent advocated:

> *Our ultimate goal should be supported, accessible, flexible and relevant education without a visible part-time/full-time divide.*

As part of an evaluation of Springboard 2011, the HEA issued a survey of 21 questions to the 7,500 individuals who applied for a place on a Springboard course. There was a response rate of 40% (HEA, 2012a). Some feedback to the HEA consultation paper comments that while the Springboard data is of interest, this cohort of students and the survey results are not necessarily representative of all part-time students. In particular the distinction is drawn between those on this programme being unemployed while many of the wider group of part-time students are in employment. While this is true, pending the development of a national student survey, the Springboard survey is a valuable source of evidence as it provides the most recent insight into the experience of a significant proportion of those seeking or participating in part-time education in Ireland. It includes students from a range of age groups and employment backgrounds, participating on courses from Levels 6 to 9. While some participants have a previous higher education qualification, others do not, and are first-time entrants to higher education.

The questions in the Springboard survey addressed students' previous experience with education, the reasons for choosing to study and their experience on the course they chose. Key findings included the fact that 28% of respondents had not been in formal education for ten years or more with over 10% saying their last experience was more than twenty years ago (**Figure 4**).
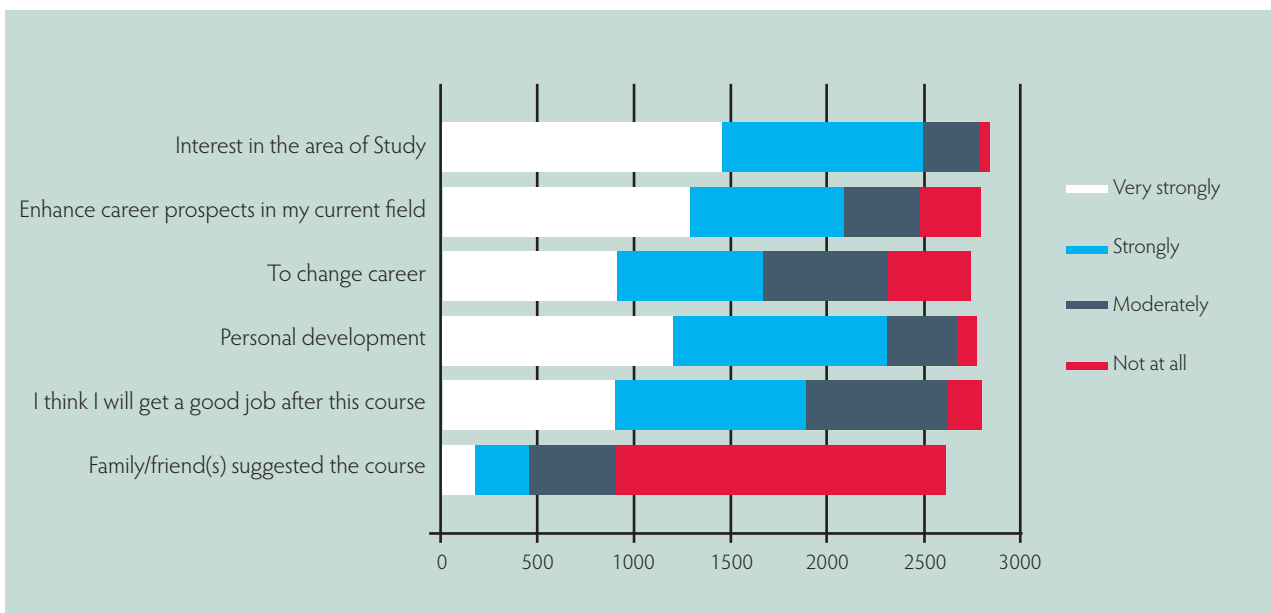
Figure 4 **Springboard Participants: Time Since Previous Education %**
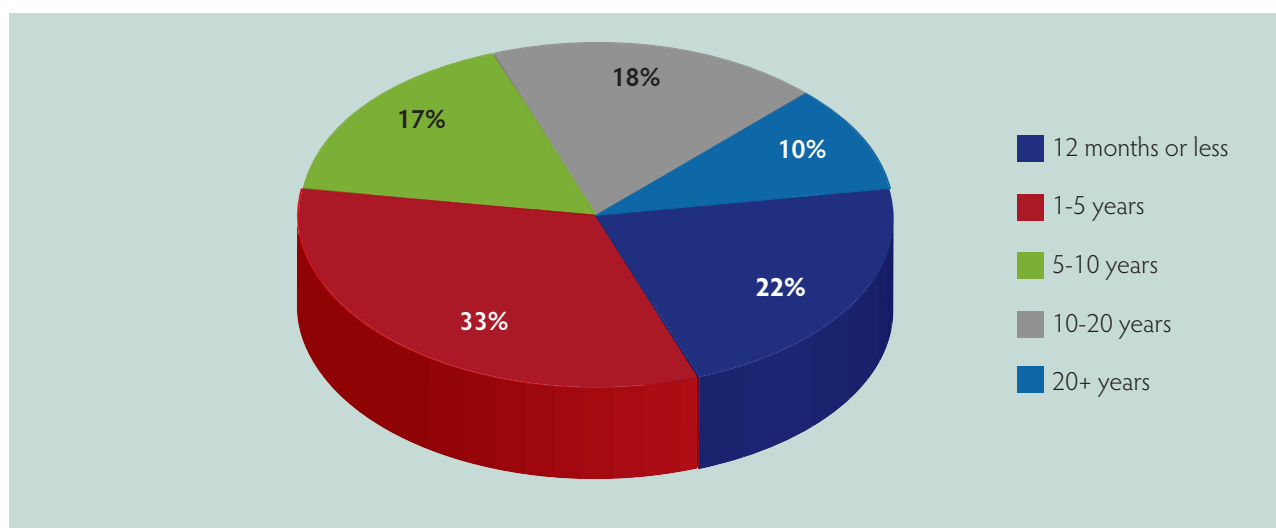
When asked why they chose their course, interest (51.3%) and career prospects (46.3%) were the most significant reasons cited (**Figure 5**).

Figure 5

Please rate the following items in terms of how strongly they prompted you to apply for a space for a place on this particular course

Almost 84% describe the support they received from colleges as excellent or quite good. Additional feedback provides more insight into the support received. For example, some comments highlight inconsistency between different personnel within the college:

> *Our two lecturers are great in giving support but there does not seem to be joined-up thinking between them, the college, Springboard and the examining body.* (Springboard participant 2011-2012)

Other respondents contrasted the full- and part-time student experience commenting that:

> *They are very nice but I get the feeling the full time students are their priority.*

> *There is practically no help from the college for part time students. Even though we are doing the same amount of work as full-time students, they get all the resources available.* (Springboard participant 2011-2012)

Gaps in Information and Guidance
The focus of students enrolled in Springboard courses is on returning to employment as quickly as possible and yet almost half of applicants to that programme did not receive any guidance in making their decision to apply for a course (**Figure 6**). Of the group which indicated that they had received no guidance, 52% did not subsequently take up a course. The majority (72%) of those who did not enrol were male and almost half had not participated in education for ten or more years (almost twice the proportion of the overall group of respondents). Less than half (43%) of

respondents applying to courses in the Dublin region indicated they received no guidance compared to 72% in the southeast. Of the overall group who indicated they received no guidance, the majority (67%) were male and a large proportion were former construction-sector workers (45%) compared to 20% of applicants generally. While some students indicate good levels of post-entry guidance, particularly around the area of careers, others are less positive and describe very little or practically no guidance from lecturers or the college.

Figure 6

Please tick which of the following services provided you with guidance on your Springboard application:
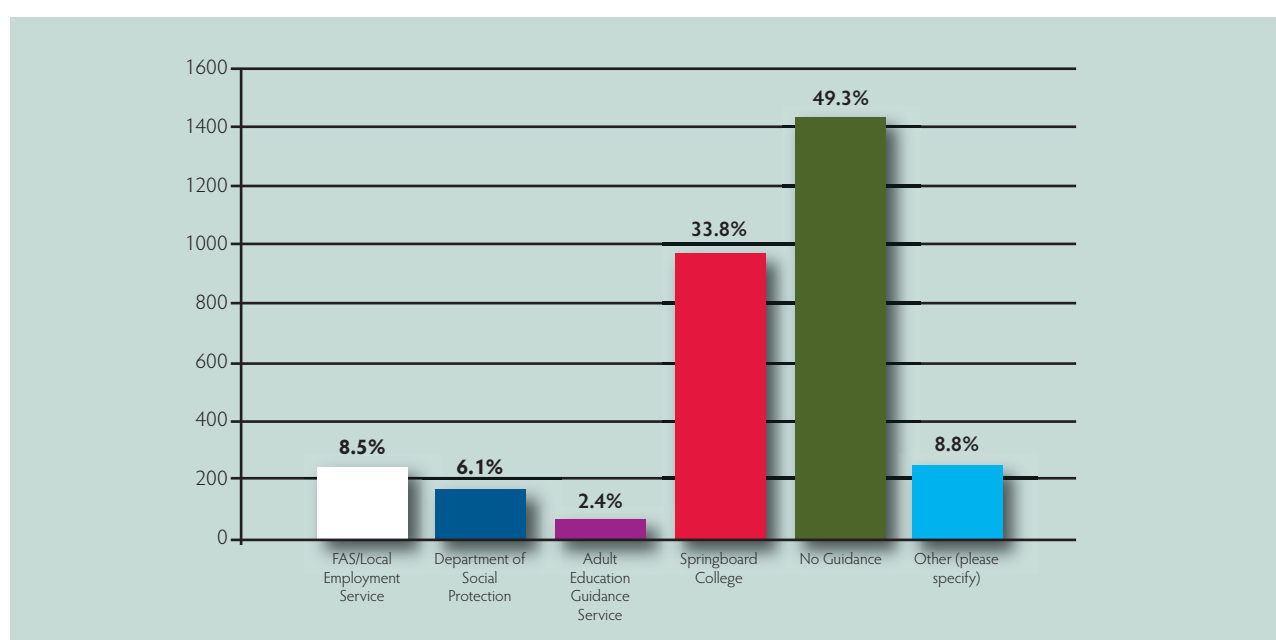
While a number of additional examples of good practice in guidance were provided in feedback (see p.22), other respondents comment on the need for significant improvements in this area. Of particular concern is how people who have not participated in education and training for a very long time are treated both initially when they take the first steps to return and the supports they need to persist if they do go through with the decision to return. Research by one institution shows that 'poor course choice' is the primary reason for first-year undergraduate students leaving college. Guidance and information on part-time higher education and training options is also relevant for learners in further education and training as many of these will consider higher education and training options. A number of further actions proposed include the establishment of an 'information stakeholder group' to co-ordinate work between different agencies dealing with people returning to education. In addition, a national free-phone help-line and associated advertising campaign are advocated.

Challenges Regarding Fees and Financial Supports

Over a decade ago, the White Paper on Adult Education (Department of Education and Skills, 2000, p.145) proposed that fees not apply to part-time undergraduate students in receipt of means-tested

social welfare or unemployment payments and who were pursuing a first-time higher education qualification. The following year the Action Group on Access to Higher Education advised that:

> *the distinction between full-time and part-time higher education is becoming increasingly blurred, and does not constitute a coherent basis for differentiated fees and student support policies.* (Department of Education and Skills, 2001, p.90)

In 2004, an OECD review of Irish higher education recommended that part-time and full-time students be treated on a similar basis in respect to fees and eligibility for maintenance grants (OECD, 2004, p.31). Almost all of the submissions received in response to the current consultation process concur that student financial support continues to be 'by far the most significant issue that needs to be tackled in terms of successfully developing flexible provision in Irish higher education'. The lack of support for many part-time students is cited as a major barrier to increasing participation in this form of education.

With the exception of a number of recent labour market activation initiatives, and support for some students from their employers, the position continues to be that all part-time higher education students in Ireland must pay fees and other costs associated with their participation. Part-time students are not eligible to apply for maintenance grants. Support from the Student Assistance Fund is widely cited as a vital aid for full-time students experiencing financial difficulties with travel and childcare costs. However, part-time students are not eligible for this source of State support. For some students this significantly reduces the feasibility of part-time as compared to full-time study in Irish institutions. It also has implications for the achievement of national and institutional targets.

While tax relief is available for those paying part-time fees at the standard rate (20%), the first €1,000 of this is disregarded for the purpose of a claim. There is also a limit of €7,000 (per academic year) on the total amount that may be claimed (for example a student paying an upfront fee of €5,000 would retrospectively get €800 in tax relief).[6] In feedback on this point, one respondent suggests exempting those from low-income families from the €1,000 disregard. Another suggests that the policy of limiting tax relief to courses that are two years or longer should be reviewed and that relief could be linked to credit values, and students who decide to take the modular approach should be encouraged to do so through new forms of tax relief.

Students who are in receipt of social welfare and who indicate they are participating on a part-time day or evening course are entitled to retain their benefits and may claim out-of-pocket expenses up to €32 per week, this is known as the part-time education option (PTEO). However, the Department of Social Protection advises that data on the number of social welfare recipients who are studying part-time is not fully comprehensive. A related issue is that students from migrant backgrounds may face additional financial constraints in the form of non-EU levels of fees.

. . . .

[6] http://www.revenue.ie/en/tax/it/leaflets/it31.html.

Difficulties around the additional financial costs of participating in a course are highlighted in the survey of Springboard applicants, especially where courses require students to purchase text books and to travel to attend college. Those in rural areas particularly stress the additional costs of travelling to courses in Dublin or larger towns. Many respondents comment that the course has a positive impact on their life but a negative impact on their finances. There was a substantial amount of commentary similar to this observation below:

> *Financially, I am worse off as I have travel costs associated with attending classes, and also have a young child, so am paying for childcare.* (Springboard participant 2011-2012)

In feedback during the consultation phase for this paper, different views emerge on what alternative model of student funding would work best. Suggestions include a system of means-tested support prioritising first-time entrants to higher education, student loans, better tax relief, broadening the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) Scheme, vouchers for part-time study and the current system of student funding referenced to individual student credit loading. Eligibility for fees and grant supports by part-time students could form part of the new student grant application/assessment system. The Student Support Act in 2011 allows for the possibility that the Minister may extend the current schemes to include students on part-time courses.[7] It is also suggested that flexibility in administrative processes of higher education institutions could include reviewing how part-time students pay fees and if this may be by standing order and in instalments. Notwithstanding whatever model is proposed, respondents to the consultation paper were in universal agreement that a new policy on financial support for part-time students needs to be developed and that that this should aim to increase flexibility in terms of how much, when and where a student chooses to study.

Narrower Range of Provision than Full-time
As well as being smaller in volume, part-time courses tend to be in a narrower range of subject areas than full-time, particularly courses in science and information technology. HEA data for 2010-2011 indicate that 9% of part-time, undergraduate courses that year were in the area of science and information compared to 15% of full-time provision. Part-time courses are more commonly on offer in social sciences, business and law (31% of part-time compared to 25% of full-time). Combined with some institutions being more active in the area of part-time provision than others (see **Table 2**, p.20), this may restrict opportunities for some learners.

In feedback received as part of the consultation process for this paper one institution advises there is need for greater support for the potential of flexible, online learning and recommends that greater support should be given to institutions wishing to develop flexible and open and distance courses. Another college observes that it may be appropriate to consider the contribution of different types of higher education institutions separately rather than aiming for a 'one size fits all' approach to targets and also to examine how colleges can work in complementary rather than identical ways. One higher education institution encourages that 'targets reflect the institution's capabilities and the particular regional and skills needs that it can address', also that 'it would be

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[7] Student Support Act 2011, section 8 (3).

important to clarify the consequences of targets not being met'. Another suggests the mapping of all part-time and flexible provision so as to identify regional/discipline gaps, and to support regional strategies and collaborations.

Two of the major Irish employer groups emphasise the need for stronger systems of collaboration and information-sharing between enterprise and higher education on the types of part-time courses needed to address skills needs. The need for more flexibility of provision outside the academic year to facilitate work-based learning and flexible work arrangements was also emphasised. An agency for the further education sector advises of the need for closer collaboration between higher education and the forthcoming Local Education and Training Boards providing further education Level 1 to 6 courses. Such collaboration would help clarify how each part of the system could avoid the risk of duplicating provision for unemployed people with Level 5 and 6 qualifications in skills areas that are in demand from employers.

Lack of Clarity in Application and Admission Processes

While there is a range of possible routes of access to higher education for part-time students (p.17 of this document), there is also a lack of clarity on application processes and entry requirements for part-time higher education courses that may deter potential students (Aontas, 2009, p.5). While there is a central application process for the majority of full-time courses and a small number of part-time courses, there is no single process for students applying for all part-time and flexible learning higher education courses that are available. Research with mature students has findings that included the following:

> The higher education system is viewed as very rigid both in terms of the manner in which a degree can be acquired (in terms of time commitments and the structure of courses) and in terms of the possibility of movement between institutions. (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011, p.10)

A stronger communication and guidance strategy is needed to guide students on how to apply for a course, the criteria for admission, including recognition of prior learning, and how credits may be transferred between providers.

The National Strategy for Higher Education states that 'increasing demand for access routes for adult learners requires greater use of recognition of prior learning to facilitate such access' (HEA, 2011c, p.9). Research by the European Commission also finds that the validation of prior learning and competencies is one of the main tools to increase participation in adult learning (European Commission, 2011b, p.39). Last year, the Expert Group on Skills Needs conducted a review of the role of recognition of prior learning in the context of the National Skills Strategy. The report of this review advises that while significant experience and practice in this area has been developed in Ireland, a more co-ordinated national approach is required. It recommends that higher education institutions increase awareness and availability of recognition of prior learning and build on current platforms of activity. It also recommends further consideration of how resources can support the development of this area of work (Forfás, 2011b, p.9). It is suggested in feedback that the

establishment of regional clusters, combined with State investment, could be a mechanism to help strengthen systems for the recognition of prior learning in Ireland.

Many of the responses to the HEA consultation paper support the development of a single, national applications system for admission to part-time higher education. Among the advantages described are that a new system would reduce the multiplicity of applications learners need to make, and support more co-ordinated work between institutions on broader routes of entry and improved systems of guidance and data collection. However, some of those providing feedback advise caution and a new system should not be a mirror of that for full-time as part-time students are likely to have less flexibility in terms of course location and timing, making selection considerably more complex. Another institution expressed its views more specifically:

> We would not recommend the full incorporation of part-time learners into a rigid admission system like the current CAO….the price would be significant loss of flexibility on the ground.

One college suggests that applications for minor and special purpose awards could be retained by each institution to retain flexibility and that further research is needed to identify the most user-friendly application procedures. The point is made also that online applications can be challenging for older learners or those who have been distant from education for some time and therefore it would be important to retain a parallel non-internet-based means of making an application.

Less Comprehensive Services and Supports for Those Participating on a Part-time Basis
The on-campus experience of part-time students is quite different to that of full-time students. Part-time students often mention the reduced or sometimes even total lack of services available. Many facilities are not available on evening and weekends when part-time students attend higher education. Student supports such as the crèche, the doctor, access and disability services, counselling and restaurant facilities are often not available. Administration services are also not open outside core office hours. One individual working with part-time students advises:

> Any of our part-time students would appreciate the opportunity to use our non-academic services. However access to careers, counselling, orientation and the mature students' support officer is not currently available, despite the introduction of the allocation of the recurrent grant to part-time learners. This is an area that requires urgent attention if we are to maximise our customer service to part-time students.

Part-time students spend less time engaging in extra-curricular activities than full-time students (HEA, 2011b, p.43). Integration into the college campus and general study body can also be difficult due to the times in which part-time students use the campus. Evidence on the profile of mature and part-time students underlines the need to consider how resources can support the extension of all student services and supports to part-time students on the same basis as full-time students from those groups. One institution advises:

For retention purposes, the mature undergraduate student…requires classroom interaction and face-to-face teaching, especially at the early/introductory stages of their lifelong learning path. Other non-academic supports are also critical if we are to continue to build our part-time student numbers.

Feedback from other higher education personnel also confirms that, despite part-time student numbers now being included in calculation of the annual recurrent grant for each HEA-funded institution, access to key student support services is often limited or unavailable for these students. One institution observes that as the student registration fee for full-time students approaches the level of fees for part-time students, all students should have the same opportunities of access, support and course offerings on an equal financial footing. It is also suggested that a national repository on best practice in supports for part-time learners could be developed as well as more sharing of information and resources between institutions on the cost and design of good practices.

Barriers to Part-time Participation for Students with Disabilities

The Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) advises that many part-time students with disabilities are not accessing services and financial supports on the same basis as their full-time peers. This potentially affects those students' legal right to equality of status and reasonable accommodations. The Disability Federation of Ireland believes that the higher education system is still not fully inclusive:

Considerable progress has been made in supporting people with disabilities…[however] exclusionary practices still exist within the higher education system. (DFI submission, p.17)

Some institutions have collective policies on ensuring part-time students have equal access to systems of needs assessment and support. However, as part-time students are not eligible for the Fund for Students with Disabilities there are challenges in meeting the costs of reasonable accommodations.

Almost all respondents agree that part-time students with disabilities should receive the same supports as their full-time counterparts but some suggest that funding and possibly regulation will be required to ensure this is the case. It is also emphasised that consultation with existing and potential part-time learners with disabilities must inform the design of any further development of a system of supports.

Evidence of Overload on Workload

An onerous curriculum and assessment structure in part-time courses is regularly cited as an issue for part-time learners in Ireland and in other countries (Darmody and Fleming, 2009, p.71). The Eurostudent survey indicates that 25% of part-time students are dissatisfied with their combined employment/study workload (HEA, 2011b, p.43). In general, students with the highest workloads in terms of hours of work and study per week have the lowest levels of satisfaction. As many students are juggling family and work commitments, the additional pressure of completing the course

requirements can put additional stress on individuals with some students describing trying to combine parenting, full-time employment and study as 'a near impossible task' (Darmody and Fleming, 2009, p.78).

In some cases, part-time students would seem to be expected to cover the same course content (e.g. 60 credits in one academic year) in less time than their full-time counterparts do. Eurostudent indicates that part-time students in Ireland spend on average 49 hours per week in study activities and work, in comparison to 45 hours for full-time students (HEA, 2011b, p.44).

While most (82%) respondents to the Springboard 2011 survey agreed that their course has measured up to their expectations, in more detailed feedback, some participants noted that while lectures were very interesting, they did find it difficult returning to a classroom environment. Students also confirm the intensity of study as one of the main difficulties faced by those participating in education on a part-time basis. Some respondents mention that while the course is part-time, participation is closer to full-time once study and assignments are included:

> *The workload is extremely intensive and trying to up-skill has been tough due to not being in full-time education for a while.*

> *The course was meant to be part-time, however, the workload is full-time.*

Many students also report that the course is more challenging than expected, and participating in the course makes the work-life balance difficult to achieve:

> *The workload and level is as demanding as anything I did as a full-time undergraduate.*

As well as flexible participation, some of those providing feedback to the consultation paper advocate more understanding of the reality that part-time and adult students have more demands on their time than many full-time students. Curriculum and assessment content, modes of delivery, and credit weightings for part-time courses need to be designed with an holistic understanding of the diverse profile of part-time student participants. Flexible systems for completion also need to be available, for example through subject deferral and multiple opportunities to sit exams and complete assignments. In addition, course information and guidance should set out the full range of options available. Another comments that 'there is a value for students to exit at stages of their choosing and for this participation to be valued in its own right not as a failure to progress'.

Drawing on institutional reports of progress, surveys of students, and feedback and advice received during the consultation phase for this paper, this section has given a summary of the main strengths and challenges in current provision and support for students participating on a flexible basis in Irish higher education. A review of information and advice on systems of student financial support, guidance, admissions and post-entry support for part-time students was included. Based on this evidence, the third, and final, section of the document makes a number of recommendations for the future.

3 Recommendations for the Future

This final section of the document presents nine recommendations to underpin future policy and provision for students participating on a part-time and flexible basis in Irish higher education from 2012 on. These recommendations are based on the review of current policy in Section One of this document, and the evidence and feedback received through the consultation process and set out in Section Two on the strengths and challenges of the current system. The aim of these recommendations is to fulfil the development goals as set out in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 as well as the objectives in the current National Access Plan and the National Skills Strategy to 2020.

The first recommendation is overarching, it is proposed that implementation of the other eight recommendations will combine to achieve the overall goal: seamless, equality-based provision of higher education in Ireland, regardless of mode or duration of study.

1 By 2016, full equality of provision and support will have been achieved in higher education for all students, regardless of time, place or pace of study. A range of indicators will be developed to measure achievement of this goal, with a review of progress before the end of 2014.

Many respondents to the HEA consultation paper confirm that part-time students are treated differently to those participating on a full-time basis. There was also consensus that this needs to change, and that a national goal should be a fully accessible, flexible and relevant higher education system for all students, without a part-time/full-time divide. Full implementation of the recommendations in this document will support the achievement of equality of provision and support for all. These include work to develop:
- Quality teaching and learning, student services and pastoral supports for all students;
- Accessible application system(s);
- Availability of guidance and information for all students;
- Targeted financial support to support student participation on a part-time/flexible basis;
- National and institutional systems of funding, data collection and targets.

2 Colleges of higher education review and further develop their policies and systems, drawing on good practice guidelines, to ensure that all students have equal access to the highest quality of teaching and learning, services and pastoral supports.

One of the difficulties reported by students participating on part-time courses is coping with onerous academic workloads and course content. Students participating on a part-time basis are often juggling study with work and/or family responsibilities and they wonder whether this reality is taken into account by personnel in colleges and academic departments who design part-time courses. Part-time students also highlight their experience of reduced or absent services and

supports in higher education; services and supports which are available to their full-time counterparts. The HEA will work with colleges of higher education to implement good practice guidelines for all students. Information gathered on the student experience in higher education by institutions and through the National Student Survey will inform further work in this area, as well as the forthcoming strategic dialogue process between the HEA and higher education institutions.

3 An accessible, co-ordinated applications system(s) is developed for all students in higher education.

There is currently a range of systems and routes which higher education applicants use to navigate application, offer and acceptance of places on the majority of full-time courses and some part-time courses. These systems include the Central Applications Office (CAO), Bluebrick, Springboard and the Postgraduate Applications Centre (PAC). Some colleges also use their own systems for part-time student applications. This multiplicity in approach makes it difficult for prospective students to find out what the opportunities are and to choose the option to best suit their own aptitudes, goals and circumstances. It is proposed that options to better co-ordinate and streamline applications and course offer systems are developed, with the distinct requirements of part-time and other students, in terms of course location and timing, incorporated into any new design.

4 Guidance is established as an integral, comprehensively delivered element of the higher education experience for all students.

There is a need for improvements in the systems of guidance and information on opportunities in further and higher education and in expert advice for individuals seeking to return to education and training. There are established systems of guidance and information on full-time higher education options for students in schools and further education. However, further work is needed to promote the availability of part-time courses and supports, in particular to adults in the wider population who are not currently engaged in education. The survey of applicants to Springboard courses indicates that almost half did not receive any guidance. Where guidance was received, this was mainly from the higher education institution/course provider. Implementation of this recommendation will require a range of agencies and services working together to develop an agreed strategy for guidance. Partners with the HEA will include the new further education and training agency Solas; Qualifications and Quality Ireland; the Department of Social Protection; local employment services; Local Education and Training Boards; Aontas; and other organisations working with people returning to education.

5 Proposals are developed to provide targeted financial support for under-represented students who wish to participate in higher education on a part-time/flexible basis.

It is estimated that less than 10% of part-time undergraduates in HEA-funded colleges currently receive support with their course fees. This estimate is based on the number of students on

Springboard courses in those institutions as a proportion of all part-time students. In the current budgetary environment it is not proposed that free tuition fees be extended to all part-time students. Estimating possible, latent demand is not straightforward. However, based on the evidence of educational attainment in the wider adult population, in particular those who are unemployed and the level of interest and applications to Springboard 2011 (almost 9,000 full or partial applications and over 300,000 unique visitors to the website), potentially there are many more students or potential students, who may be unemployed or with low incomes and who are in need of financial support in order to participate in higher education. Proposals to financially support part-time students would include exploration of current and potential sources and systems of funding, eligible student groups and systems for assessing eligibility and costs.

6   As part of development of the HEA funding model, equal access funding is adapted to support the entry and participation of all higher education students.

Core HEA access funding and other resources have supported the development of courses of pre- and post-entry support for full-time students from target groups in the National Access Plan. These include systems of guidance, admission, orientation, mentoring and learning support for students who are first-time mature entrants, from under-represented socio-economic groups or who have a disability. However, despite part-time student numbers now being included in calculation of the annual recurrent grant for each HEA-funded institution, feedback received as part of the consultation process for this document indicates that access to key student support services is often limited or unavailable for these students. As part of the review of the HEA funding model in 2012-2013, proposals will be developed to expand equal access funding and other mechanisms to further support part-time/flexible learning, including open and distance education and community-based education.

7   Specific proposals are developed to ensure people with disabilities can participate equally in higher education, regardless of mode or duration of study.

The support needs of students with disabilities in full-time higher education are identified currently through the CAO process or at the point of admission. There is an obligation on all educational institutions under the Equal Status Acts to provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities regardless of the mode of delivery of the course. The need for reasonable accommodation is assessed by the access or disability service, and the financial implications of this, in particular for high needs students, are supported through the Fund for Students with Disabilities. However, there is no similar system of identification, assessment, funding and support for students with disabilities on part-time courses, and at the same time, there is extensive literature on how, for people with disabilities, part-time education can be a much more feasible option and with better outcomes. As part of the implementation of the recommendations of the review of the Fund for Students with Disabilities, it is proposed that the National Access Office, in partnership with stakeholders and the Department of Education and

Skills, explore opportunities to enhance the provision of support to students with disabilities participating in further and higher education on a part-time basis.

8 **Data collection and evaluation systems are further developed to strengthen the evidence-base on background and routes of entry of part-time students.**

There are a number of established routes of entry for students applying to full-time higher education courses. It is less clear how routes of access, transfer and progression to part-time, higher education courses operate and how these support adults entering higher education for the first time. There is also a gap in data on participation of employees in higher education on a part-time or flexible basis, and the role of employers in supporting this cohort. These data will be gathered as part of further work on the development of the HEA student records system, a co-ordinated applications process for all students and the national surveys of students and employers.

9 **New national and local targets are set for part-time/flexible learning.**

While the 2010 review of the national access targets indicates there has been a significant increase in part-time participation, there are variations in the range of courses on offer by level, discipline and location/institution. On average 20% of undergraduates in the institutes of technology are part-time, compared to 12% in the universities and other colleges. However, in some institutions levels of part-time provision are significantly lower (c.4%) than national or sectoral averages. New targets for part-time and flexible learning will be set and discussed as part of the strategic dialogue process being introduced by the HEA. These may include targets in areas where there are defined regional or skills need. Definitions of part-time education and data will also be reviewed as part of this process and the development of new targets for access and lifelong learning from 2014 on.

Conclusion

This document provides an overview of current policy and practice for part-time higher education in Ireland and makes recommendations for the future that will be implemented by the HEA in partnership with higher education colleges and other stakeholders and in liaison with the Department of Education and Skills. Success in developing a new framework of provision and practice for part-time and flexible higher education in Ireland will result in significant progress on the objectives of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, the National Access Plan 2008-2013 and the National Skills Strategy to 2020. It will also be of great benefit to the thousands of people who will be seeking to participate in higher education on a part-time or flexible basis over the coming years.

Higher Education Authority
October 2012

Summary of Recommendations and Timetable

	Recommendation	Partners	Timetable
1	By 2016, full equality of provision and support will have been achieved for all learners in Irish higher education, regardless of time, place or pace of study. A range of indicators will be developed to measure achievement of this goal, with a review of progress before the end of 2014.	D/ES, D/SP, HEA, HEIs, Solas, QQAI, NCGE	2012-16 (Review 2014)
2	Colleges of higher education review and further develop their policies and systems, drawing on good practice guidelines, to ensure that all students have equal access to the highest quality of teaching and learning, services and pastoral supports.	HEA, HEIs	2012-13
3	An accessible, co-ordinated applications system(s) is developed for all students in higher education.	HEA, HEIs and partners	2013-14
4	Guidance is established as an integral, comprehensively delivered element of the higher education experience for all students.	D/ES, D/SP, Solas, QQAI, NCGE, HEA, HEIs	2013-14
5	Proposals are developed to provide targeted financial support for under-represented students who wish to participate in higher education on a part-time/flexible basis.	HEA, D/ES, HEIs	2013-14
6	As part of development of the HEA funding model, equal access funding is adapted to support the entry and participation of all higher education students.	HEA, HEIs	2013-15
7	Specific proposals are developed to ensure people with disabilities can participate equally in higher education, regardless of mode or duration of study.	HEA, D/ES, HEIs (DAWN, AMA), AHEAD	2012-13
8	Data collection and evaluation systems are further developed to strengthen the evidence-base on background and routes of entry of part-time students.	HEA, HEIs	2012-13
9	New national and local targets are set for part-time/flexible learning as part of the strategic dialogue process being introduced by the HEA.	HEA, HEIs	2013-14

Appendix 1

Submissions Received in Response to Consultation Paper

1.   AHEAD
2.   All Hallows
3.   AONTAS
4.   Cork Institute of Technology
5.   Disability Federation of Ireland
6.   Dublin City University
7.   Dublin Institute of Technology
8.   Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology
9.   Educational Disadvantage Centre, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra
10.   FÁS
11.   Professor Ted Fleming, National University of Ireland, Maynooth
12.   Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology
13.   Higher Education Research Centre, Dublin City University
14.   Institute of Public Administration
15.   Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown
16.   Institutes of Technology, Ireland (IOTI)
17.   Institute of Technology, Tralee
18.   Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC)
19.   Irish Small and Medium Enterprises (ISME)
20.   Letterkenny Institute of Technology
21.   Mater Dei Institute of Education
22.   Mature Students Ireland
23.   Mary Immaculate College, Limerick
24.   National College of Art Design
25.   National College of Ireland
26.   National University of Ireland, Galway
27.   National University of Ireland, Maynooth
28.   St. Angela's College, Sligo
29.   St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra
30.   Trinity College Dublin
31.   University College Dublin
32.   University of Limerick
33.   Waterford Institute of Technology

Appendix 2

Springboard 2012

The Springboard initiative is designed to support a return to employment for people who have lost their jobs because of the recession and to ensure there is a better skills match between industry needs and the supply of third level graduates. The primary objective of the programme is to help unemployed people to remain as close as possible to the labour market by accessing part-time flexible higher education and training opportunities to up-skill or re-skill in areas where sustainable employment opportunities may arise as the economy recovers. €39m is being allocated over the period 2011–2015.

The Springboard programme also aims to enhance collaboration and engagement between the enterprise sector and higher education providers in the design and delivery of higher education courses to meet demand for qualified employees in line with the objectives of the National Skills Strategy. Key areas of demand and course provision include Information & Communications Technology (ICT), International Financial Services, Medical Devices, Biopharma-Pharmachem, Cross Sectoral Enterprise/Generic Skills, Food & Beverage, and the Green Economy.

The target group is unemployed people, formerly in work or self-employed, who need up-skilling or re-skilling to remain close to the labour market. In 2012-2013 there will be 6,021 places allocated on 220 courses in 36 higher education institutions. 136 of these courses are in the fourteen institutes of technology, 41 in the seven universities and 43 delivered by private providers. 97 courses will be in the Dublin region, 63 in the South and East regions (excluding Dublin) and 60 in Border, Midlands and West regions.

Springboard Places by Higher Education Provider		
	Places Allocated	
Institute of Technology	2,760	46%
University	1191	20%
Privately-run provider	2,070	34%
Total	**6,021**	**100%**

Springboard Places by NFQ Level		
	Places Allocated	
Level 6	1,549	26%
Level 7	1,414	23%
Level 8	2,238	37%
Level 9	820	14%
Total	**6,021**	**100%**

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