

RESEARCH TITLE:

A Critical EDI Perspective on Student Engagement



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Foreword

The StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group is pleased to publish the results of five research projects analysing the qualitative data generated by the free-text response questions in StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie. The results contained within this report make up one part of this research series.

Five projects were funded by research bursaries offered by StudentSurvey.ie in October 2022. The aim of the bursary awards was to promote greater ownership and encourage wider use of the StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie data. Proposals for the analysis of the qualitative data emerging from StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie were invited from members of the research community within the participating institutions, as well as commercial data analysis companies. The projects were completed in May 2023.

Each project is an independent project undertaken by qualified and experienced researchers on behalf of StudentSurvey.ie. Each project took a unique approach. The commonalities between all five projects are that they all utilised well-grounded methodologies, offer mechanisms for replication of the analysis in future years, and are innovative and authentic.

These results are the first of their kind for StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie and we hope they are the first of many research projects involving the qualitative results of these surveys.



What are StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie?

StudentSurvey.ie (the Irish Survey of Student Engagement) is an annual national survey of student engagement among first year undergraduate, final year undergraduate and taught postgraduate students in higher education institutions in Ireland.

PGR StudentSurvey.ie (the Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students) is a biennial national survey of student engagement among Masters by Research students and PhD students in higher education institutions in Ireland.

Both surveys are designed to focus on student engagement, namely the amount of time and effort that students put into meaningful and purposeful educational activities, and the extent to which institutions provide such opportunities and encourage students to engage with them. The data collected reflect students' self-reported perceptions of their experiences.



StudentSurvey.ie (The Irish Survey of Student Engagement)

A Critical EDI Perspective on Student Engagement

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Executive Summary

This research was based on reflexive thematic analysis of responses to the two open-ended questions in the 2022 Irish Survey of Student Engagement (StudentSurvey.ie). This research specifically sought to explore responses to these two questions from an Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) perspective. Responses to these two questions for all approximately 22,700 people were examined.

It is important to note that neither of the questions asked about or alluded to EDI issues. However, a range of EDI themes and sub-themes appeared prominently in student responses.

The first theme to be identified related specifically to the struggles faced by Mature Students. This theme, the Exclusion of Mature Students, comprised six separate sub-themes. These sub-themes are detailed in Table One.

Table 1: The Exclusion of Mature Students Sub-Themes

1: Exclusion of Mature Students	1.1: Mature Student Social Inclusion 1.2: Mature Student- Improved Learning Support Required 1.3: Mature Student- Technological Supports Required 1.4: Mature Students- Increased Respect 1.5: Mature Students- Reciprocal Learning 1.6: Caring Responsibilities
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The second theme identified related to Other Age Related Concerns. This theme had three sub-themes which are listed in Table Two.

Table 2: Other Age Related Concerns Sub-Themes

2: Other Age Related Concerns	2.1: Youth Transition to College 2.2: Respect For Young People 2.3: Lecturer Age
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The third theme to emerge was Gender, which included a spectrum of concerns ranging from the dislike of being patronised, to sexual harassment and sexual assault.

The fourth theme to emerge was that of Socio-Economic Exclusion. This theme was comprised of four sub-themes that are detailed in Table Three.

Table 3: Socio-Economic Exclusion Sub-Themes

4: Socio-Economic Exclusion	4.1: Financial Obstacles 4.2: Accommodation Costs 4.3: Food Poverty/ Price Gouging 4.4: Intersectionality
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The fifth theme identified was that of Disability & Support Services. A total of seven sub-themes of this theme were identified. These are listed in Table Four.

Table 4: Disability & Support Services Sub-Themes

5: Disability & Support Services	5.1: Disability 5.2: Anxiety & Stress 5.3: Neurodiversity Supports 5.4: Learning Support- Dyslexia 5.5: Learning Supports 5.6: International Student's Assignment Support 5.7: Counselling/ Mental health Support Services
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The sixth theme to be identified was that of Diversity, Racism & Inclusion. These theme was made up of six individual themes. These sub-themes are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5: Diversity, Racism & Inclusion Sub-Themes

6: Diversity, Racism & Inclusion	6.1: Diversity 6.2: Racism 6.3: Oppression
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	6.4: Non-Native English Speakers 6.5: International Student Inclusion 6.6: Health Inclusion
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It is clear that issues of equality, diversity and inclusion are important in the context of student engagement. Many students report struggling to achieve inclusion, respect, or understanding. Particular groups impacted include mature students, women, foreign students, those with particular learning needs or mental health needs, and the more economically disadvantaged.

A range of further supports and assistance are required to support inclusion. These include financial supports, learning supports, counselling supports, accommodation supports, and a specific focus on inclusion.

It is recommended that The Irish Survey of Student Engagement commit to exploring EDI issues on an annual basis.

A Critical EDI Perspective on Student Engagement

REPORT

1. Background

Equity of access to higher education is a fundamental principle of Irish education policy and priority for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Higher Education Authority. People should have equity of access to education independent of their socioeconomic background, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, disability or other circumstances. (HEA & DFHERIS, 2022: 20)

The text above from the HEA & the DFHERIS National Access Plan is a strong and boldly worded statement. However, the on the ground realities belie such headline grabbing statements. Long-standing inequalities in the Irish education system are, unsurprisingly, not only mirrored but exacerbated in Ireland's higher education sector. This brief introduction offers a critical overview of key EDI related research in Ireland before moving on to discuss the current research.

In line with the recent Royal Irish Academy (RIA, 2021: 7) report, we agree that 'besides legal considerations, there are emotional, moral, economic and philosophical reasons to ensure that EDI is recognised and adhered to'. We would go further and suggest that, rather than being merely 'adhered to', EDI should be championed and fought for.

Our society remains critically divided, with widespread poverty, inequalities, strife, and division. Prejudice, discrimination and hate speech are prevalent. Despite decades of anti-discrimination legislation, senior positions in government, industry and the public sector remain inequitably distributed. In light of both the humanist and emancipatory visions of education one might assume that the higher education sector would be free of such issues. However, such an approach would be naïve in the extreme, as this sector may serve not only to reflect and reinforce such inequalities, but also to reproduce and strengthen them.

Connecting the Dots

At present EDI initiatives are all too often 'fragmented and reactive rather than proactive' (RIA, 2021: 5). At present EDI actions have tended to focus on individual initiatives such as gender plans, Athena SWAN, University of Sanctuary, Consent frameworks & education, and Race charters. However, as the RIA (2021) have noted there is a need for a co-ordinated overarching EDI strategy in further and higher education. Such a strategy would 'eliminate discrepancies in the relative focus on gender, religion, race, language, ethnicity, disability, LGBTQ+ issues etc'. The RIA report calls for an all-island approach on this issue. Claeys-Kulik et al. (2019: 44) writing for the European University Association (EUA) go further and call for a holistic strategy to strengthen EDI across the European higher education system.

Claeys-Kulik et al. (2019) discuss the need to move beyond common 'carrot-and-stick' approaches to more holistic, system-level approaches, involving the full spectrum of stakeholders including universities, policy makers, funding agencies, public authorities, and minority group members themselves and their representative bodies. Crucially, the EUA also outline the need to re-centre the discourse around diversity. Diversity, or a lack thereof, is often treated as problem to be solved or a challenge to be overcome, when it deserves to be recognized and treated as a 'precondition for quality and excellence' (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019:44).

Access

The latest National Access Plan (2022-2028) from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) details nine Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) across four distinct areas HEA & DFHERIS, 2022). These are outlined in Table 6.

Table 6: HEA & DFHERIS (2022) National Access Plan 2022-2028 KPIs

	Key Performance Indicators
	Flexibility Within Higher Education
1)	Participation by part-time/ flexible learners
2)	Progression from further education to higher education
	Diversity Across Programmes and Levels
3)	Postgraduate study among selected priority groups (for example, postgraduate/ mature students from disadvantaged areas, Traveller students, students with disabilities)
4)	Student diversity across selected fields of study (for example, initial teacher education, medicine)
	Access and Participation for Priority Groups
5)	Students with a disability who are supported by the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD)
6)	Students attending DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools)
7)	Students who are lone parents
	Students Success and Engagement
8)	Progression and completion among selected priority groups (for example, students and mature students from disadvantaged areas)
9)	Graduate outcomes among selected priority groups (for example, students from disadvantaged areas and those attending DEIS schools)

Associated with these nine KPIs are four targets (see Table 7).

Table 7: HEA & DFHERIS (2022) National Access Plan 2022-2028 Targets

	National Access Plan Targets 2022-2028	

	New Entrants From Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Areas	
	Current transition rate between school and higher education	42%
	Target transition rate between school and higher education	54%
	New Mature Entrants From Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Areas	
	Current % of mature new entrants from disadvantaged areas (as a % of all disadvantaged new entrants)	11%
	Target % of mature new entrants from disadvantaged areas (as a % of all disadvantaged new entrants)	20%
	New Entrants With A Disability	
	Current % of students with a disability (as a % of all new entrants)	12.4%
	Target % of students with a disability (as a % of all new entrants)	16%
	New Entrants From The Traveller Community	
	Current number of Traveller new entrants	33
	Target number of Traveller new entrants	150
	Current % of Traveller new entrants (as a % of all new entrants)	0.07%
	Target % of Traveller new entrants (as a % of all new entrants)	0.32%

Although such targets are laudable, a deeper and critical read finds them inadequate. For example, it is intensely disappointing that all the targets relate to new entrants. And the crucial issue of student success and progression does not receive a firm target.

It is equally important to note that, as Minister Simon Harris states in his foreword, this is the fourth National Access Plan for Higher Education in Ireland. As such, it is extremely problematic that baseline data is lacking for key priority groups. Table 8 outlines the groups for which there is missing baseline data in the report.

Table 8: Groups identified in the HEA & DFHERIS (2022) National Access Plan 2022-2028 for which there is a lack of baseline data

Priority Groups Without Baseline Data
Students from the Roma community
Students with intellectual disabilities

Students who have experience of the Care System
Students who are survivors of domestic violence
Students who are migrants
Students who have experience of the international protection process or who are refugees
Students from ethnic minorities
Students who have experience of the criminal justice system
Students who are carers
Students who have experience of homelessness

However, even this rather lengthy list excludes other key groups including students with limiting long-term illness, students with experience of mental health services, and students who may not fit into any of the categories above but may use a language other than English (or Irish) at home.

Former United States Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld is somewhat infamous for his statement:

there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know.

This is relevant in this context as all of the groups herein identified for which baseline data is lacking have long been known to experience disadvantages in education systems. It is therefore hard not to see the absence of such basic baseline information as anything other than the result of careful political manipulation. O'Toole (2015) has written powerfully on the role and function of unknown knows in Irish society:

The eloquence of Irish life is often an immensely skilful slalom of evasive manoeuvres. The obstacles we evade are not really secrets. They're what I've called elsewhere unknown knowns – things we know damn well but somehow manage not to know at all.

The lack of robust and comprehensive data to support EDI monitoring and initiatives has been noted in a recent All-Ireland report from the Royal Irish Academy. This discussion paper identified the need for a centralised and standardised approach to data collection to facilitate explorations of intersectionality, as well as for benchmarking purposes and longitudinal research. This report also called for legislative adjustments to support comprehensive data collection, as well as universal campaigns to support surveys and data collection. The reality that 'data matters' in relation to race, ethnicity and change in higher education is similarly addressed in a joint report by the RIA and the British Council (2020).

Athena SWAN & Gender Equality Work

Towards the end of this year (November 2023) Ireland will hold a referendum to potentially amend its constitution. Part of the focus of this referendum is the second part of Article 41. The relevant text is outlined in Table 9.

Table 9: Extract of Article 41 from the Irish Constitution

The Family
Article 41...
2
1° In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
2° The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

Given the obvious State sanctioned gender discrimination inherent in such Articles it is perhaps not a surprise that Ireland's first gender discrimination laws were only introduced after it joined the European Community in 1972 (Barry, 2015). Although

the Employment Equality Acts (1998-2015) have banned discrimination in employment, significant gender disparities in employment remain.

It is a fair assessment to say that until very recently gender equality in higher education was never taken very seriously by the Irish Government. The HEA had previously funded a Gender Equality Unit, however this was closed down in 2002. During the period 2004 to 2012 the HEA did not even produce basic gender equality data of Ireland's higher education sector (O'Connor & Irvine, 2020).

Two pivotal legal cases forced the Irish Government to finally take gender equality in the higher education system seriously. In 2014 Sheehy Skeffington and Dempsey both took cases against the National University of Ireland- Galway (NUIG) to the Equality Tribunal for gender-based discrimination (O'Connor, 2020). The University was found guilty of discrimination on both counts (Quinlivan, 2017). At the time NUIG came last in a list on gender equity among organisations examined, with just 21 percent of senior posts being held by women. A protracted legal fight in NUIG ultimately resulted in the promotion of four other female lecturers who had previously been denied (O'Brien, 2018).

In response in 2015 Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, a former European Commissioner, was appointed to head an expert group to explore gender equality in the Irish higher education system. The Expert Group report identified dramatic and systemic under-representation of women at senior levels. This was evident in both Academic and Professional, Management and Support Staff (Higher Education Authority, 2016). A Gender Equality Taskforce was then created by Mary Mitchell, Minister for Higher Education. Inertia, incremental reform, and change resulted in the launch of a Gender Action Plan (Higher Education Authority, 2018). A Centre for Excellence in Gender Equality was subsequently established in the HEA. It should be noted that in the preceding years prior to these initiatives the relative position of women in the higher education sector in Ireland had actually worsened (O'Connor & Irvine, 2020).

The latest Report of the HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions identified key recommendations across eight domains. These areas are outlined in Table 10.

Table 10: Domains of Key Recommendations for Actions to Promote Gender Equality

	Domain
1	National Requirements
2	Leadership
3	Organisational Culture
4	Teaching and Learning, Research and Quality Assurance
5	Intersectionality
6	Career Development
7	Precarity
8	Data Capture, Analysis and Reporting

The Report identified two crucial areas in the advancement of gender equality since its first review. These were Intersectionality and Precarity of Employment.

These areas are clearly vital to comprehensively addressing inequalities. However, it remains extremely difficult to explain why these rather obvious fields of investigation, target setting, and action have only come to the fore in a report dated November 2022. These issues have long been known to be central contributory factors in fostering inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989; Aziz, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Bernstein et al., 2001; Osei-Kofi, 2012; Reay, 2004; Carastathis, 2014; Courtois & O’Keefe, 2015; Ivancheva et al., 2019).

The Athena SWAN charter was launched in Ireland in 2015 and enjoys significant support from Government, the HEA and leading Irish funding agencies. Minister Simon Harris has stated that “Athena Swan is one of the most important initiatives

that we have in the higher education sector in Ireland". Assessments of the Athena SWAN initiative, it must be acknowledged, are often extremely positive. For example, Schmidt et al. (2020) have commented that 'Athena SWAN is the single most comprehensive and inclusive gender equality scheme in Europe'.

In contrast, critiques of Athena SWAN are sparse. However, a number of negative aspects of the Athena SWAN process have been identified. A leading criticism is the administrative burden it places on participating institutions (Caffrey et al., 2016), resulting in what has been termed 'submission fatigue' (Pearce, 2017, Drew 2022). It has also been noted that women usually undertake the vast majority of Athena SWAN work, often at a personal cost to their own careers, especially given the subsequent inevitable reduction in their research outputs and publications (Schmidt, 2020; Rosser et al., 2015; Caffrey et al., 2016).

Other issues that have been raised include concerns over perceptions of positive discrimination in favour of women (Ovseiko et al., 2017), as well as critiques that policies flagged as 'family friendly' may in fact simply serve to reinforce traditional conservative ideological stereotypes that caring work is a women's role (Caffrey et al., 2016). Other criticisms have included, for example, econometric analysis that notes that although improvements in women's representation in more senior academic roles have been observed in many Athena SWAN accredited organisations, this may not in fact be as a consequence of Athena SWAN initiatives (Gregory-Smith, 2015). It has also been suggested that linking requirements for Athena SWAN accreditation to research funding eligibility has led to the process becoming little more than a box ticking exercise (Xiao et al., 2020; Wilkinson, 2019; Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019), with minimal engagement with wider inequalities such as social class, or other intersectional factors (Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019; Pearce, 2017). Schmidt et al. (2020: 2) have critiqued this focus, stating that 'gender takes prevalence over race, and white middle class women become the main beneficiaries of the Athena SWAN Charter'. In an in-depth examination of the

Athena SWAN process in one Irish HEI, Houghton (2021) has explored organisational manipulation of the process and outcomes of the exercise.

Wider critiques of gender equality work are also important in relation to Athena SWAN. The concept of gender equality work has often been dismissed as 'tinkering', as well as overly focussing on data collection, monitoring, and evaluation (Meier & Celis, 2011). Peterson & Jordansson (2017) have discussed how Athena SWAN does not focus on gendered processes and practices, instead focussing on 'fixing the women'. It has also been argued that bureaucratic norms hinder real moves towards gender equality (Rawluszko, 2019). On this issue Prüggl (2011) outlines how managerialist discourses and ways of working are often complicit in neoliberal forms of governance. This phenomenon has been termed 'governance feminism' (Prüggl, 2011). It has been suggested that such work tends to centre on the 'technicalization and professionalization' of gender equity work with its statistical data and implicit 'acceptance of... positivist and managerial forms of knowledge' (Ikävalko & Kantola, 2017). This dilemma is neatly captured by Ahmed's (2007) comment 'you end up doing a document rather than doing the doing'.

A number of researchers have suggested that feminist knowledge and subjectivities are actively changed through participation in such endeavours (Meier & Celis, 2011; Prüggl, 2011; Ikävalko & Kantola, 2017). Ikävalko & Kantola (2017) have also noted that 'action that emphasises dialogue generates an impression of change although nothing transforms in power relations'. Overt displays of gender equality work by organisations has been queried as not necessarily stemming from a true commitment to principles of corporate social responsibility (CSR) around equality issues, but instead being a cynical example of 'femvertising' (Sterbenk et al., 2015; Ruggi & Duvvury, 2022).

Experiences of Racism in Academia

A recent (2021) survey conducted by the HEA explored the issue of race equality in Irish higher education institutions. The report details in-depth the experiences and perceptions of staff. The results are a damning indictment of the higher education sector in Ireland, and paint a poignant picture of the multiplicity of examples of both active and passive racism there. This report also notes the lack of collection of employment data by ethnicity. Although this has now been initiated there is patently no excuse for this deliberate oversight to date. The HEA has a statutory responsibility to promote equality of opportunity in higher education. As such, the deliberate neglect directed at this issue to date is unpardonable. A subsequent Implementation Plan developed by the HEA (2022) is notable for its focus on actions rather than outcomes. Such a focus on inputs is a poor substitute for a comprehensive impact evaluation.

A recent study by Darby (2023) examining feelings of inclusion and belonging among Black and minority ethnic students in the Irish higher education system noted generally positive feelings of belonging. However, this appraisal was based on their careful navigation and assimilation into the dominant white culture. This research also noted persistent microaggressions, and the need for more inclusive learning environments.

Eurostudent Survey VIII

The latest Eurostudent Survey (VIII) report from the HEA (2023) is an important source of information in the context of EDI issues among Irish students. As can be seen from Table 1, 5% of female respondents felt that they had experienced discrimination due to gender from academic staff, with 10% reporting the cause as fellow students.

Table 11: Student Experiences of Discrimination in Higher Education in Ireland

Discrimination due to...	Yes by students	Yes, by teaching staff	Yes, by other staff
Gender (N= 13,114)	6% (F= 10%, M= 3%)	3% (F= 5%, M= 2%)	2% (F= 3%, M= 2%)
Age (N= 13,117)	5% (F= 5%, M= 4%)	2% (F= 3%, M= 2%)	2% (F= 2%, M= 2%)
Age- Respondents 30 years or over	9%	3%	2%
Ancestry/ National Origin (N= 13,120)	5% (F= 5%, M= 4%)	2% (F= 2%, M= 2%)	2% (F= 1%, M= 2%)
Sexuality (N= 13,105)	4% (F= 3%, M= 4%)	1% (F= 1%, M= 1%)	1% (F= 1%, M= 1%)
Skin Colour (N= 13,161)	3% (F= 3%, M= 3%)	2% (F= 2%, M=2%)	1% (F= 1%, M= 2%)

Source: HEA, 2023

Table 11, also details experiences of discrimination on the basis of age, and other characteristics.

This in-depth report also details findings across a range of other crucial issues: from accommodation, student employment, health and well-being, to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important to note that 11% of female respondents and 9% of male respondents reported that they were currently experiencing very serious financial difficulties. Among IoT/TU respondents the rate was 13%, while among respondents from the traditional university sector it was 9%. Relevant USI documents exploring this issue include their Grant Reform Position (USI, 2021a), and the USI's Student Accommodation Position Paper (USI, 2019).

One notable finding in the HEA report is that 32% of students indicated that they have a disability. This figure is 7% higher than in the previous Eurostudent report. The figure for full-time undergraduates was 34%. The leading type of impairment was mental health issues, which was reported by 19% of full-time undergraduates. Rates of mental health problems were most prevalent among those studying Psychology (32%), Languages (29%), the Arts (28%), and Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (26%). The very real negative impacts of the Covid-19 impact must not

be forgotten. In the Eurostudent survey, 63% of female respondents reported that the pandemic had a negative impact on their mental health, while for males the figure was 52%. Responses to the health and mental health issues among students may be seen from the Union of Students in Ireland (Price & Smith, 2019; USI, 2021 b) and the HEA (Fox et al., 2020; HEA, 2020). It is important to remember that rates of mental distress rise from adolescence, and that third-level students generally demonstrate higher levels of psychological distress compared to the similarly aged cohort not attending university (Houghton et al., 2010; Karwig et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2020; Mahon et al., 2022).

It is highly problematic that the Key Findings section of this report minimises the crucial issue of the gendered fracture of perceptions of safety. The report simply states in this section that ‘female students are more likely to feel unsafe or very unsafe walking alone in their neighbourhood and on campus compared to their male counterparts’. The chasm in the differences observed in this sample of over 13,000 respondents is detailed in Table 12. Approximately three times as many males as females feel safe walking around either their neighbourhood or their higher education institution (HEI). Ten times as many women feel very unsafe walking alone on campus in the dark, while just over six times as many women feel unsafe walking alone in the dark in their neighbourhood.

Table 12: Gendered Perceptions of Safety Among Students (HEA, 2023)

Gender	Very safe	-	-	-	Very unsafe
How safe do you feel in the dark walking alone: in your neighbourhood (N=13,228)					
Female	15%	21%	22%	24%	19%
Male	45%	30%	15%	7%	3%
How safe do you feel in the dark walking alone: on the premises of your higher education institution (N=13,151)					
Female	20%	24%	27%	19%	10%
Male	56%	26%	13%	4%	1%

The minimisation of this issue is all the more stark given that the State, the IUA, and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) all produced papers and guidance on ending sexual violence, harassment, and misconduct in higher education (Government of Ireland, 2019; IUA, 2020), in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement (Skewes et al., 2021; Fitzpatrick, 2020), and a high profile sexual harassment case at UCD (Mullally, 2020).

2. Research Question

A critical exploration of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) dimensions to student engagement among higher education students in Ireland

3. Rationale

The banking model of education, whereby knowledge is simply given by authoritative, all-knowledgeable educators to less knowledgeable, subservient learners has long been rejected. Instead, it is generally agreed that knowledge develops through social interaction and language use, and is therefore a shared, rather than an individual experience. As such, the interactive nature of education must not be overlooked. Actions that promote feelings of inclusion and exclusion are thus vital to student engagement and learning.

Such inclusive and exclusionary actions may be taken by both staff and/ or fellow students. In addition to actions and words that can promote inclusion or exclusion, a host of other elements can also promote such feelings. These can include such factors as the presence or absence of religious iconology, or pictures that could potentially offend religious sensibilities (e.g. Islamic art often depicts geometric patterns as portrayals of humans may be seen as idolatry). Other factors that may influence feelings of support and belonging can include academic calendars that follow certain religious holidays (e.g. Easter), and the use of religious terminology to describe academic terms (e.g. Michaelmas Term). Further crucial factors could include the food available, which may neglect ethnic cuisines, or be offensive (e.g.

pork & beef to Jews & Muslims and Hindus respectively). Other important dimensions that can influence inclusivity and exclusion include the presence of individuals that represent and belong to the varied demographics of students. This includes both staff and members of the student body. Such representation or exclusion is equally important in official communications, such as web sites and prospectuses.

4. Method

4.1 The Research Question

This research sought to undertake a critical exploration of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) dimensions to student engagement among higher education students in Ireland.

4.2 The Qualitative Data

The data explored in this survey was generated via the 2022 iteration of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement. Specifically, responses to the two open-ended questions: What does your institution do best to engage students in learning?; What could your institution do to improve students' engagement in learning? In 2022 these two questions were answered by approximately 22,700 respondents.

4.3 Philosophical Approach

The main approach adopted in this research is firmly guided by a hermeneutic Heideggerian phenomenological approach (Heidegger, 1962). This research therefore attempts to interpret phenomena from the perspective of the participants, while acknowledging the researchers own bias and subjectivities as inevitable from 'being-in-the-world'. Thus this research rejects the mis-placed illusion of objectivity (Lowes and Prowse, 2001).

4.4 Analytical Approach

The qualitative data analysis method adopted here is that of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022). In line with the Heideggerian stance outlined above a hybrid inductive-deductive approach, as described by Fereday & Muir-Cochrane (2006), was adopted. Reflexive thematic analysis involves a six phase method: Familiarisation with the data-set; Coding; Generation of initial themes; Development & review of themes; Refining, defining and naming of themes; Write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022). In line with recent work by Braun et al. (2020) this approach was applied to the open-ended survey questions in this research. A reflective log was kept to facilitate the reflexivity required in the research process (Russell & Kelly, 2002; Smith, 1999).

Computerised searching of particular terms is too crude a methodology to adequately capture and explore the complexity of, and nuances that exist within language. Qualitative research requires an in-depth reading of and familiarisation with the data. The entire data-set was examined and relevant sections were subject to preliminary coding. In line with suggestions around immersion in the data (Houghton & Houghton, 2018) this data was then read three times before more in-depth coding and theme analysis took place.

Initial plans were to examine this dataset using NVivo. However, NVivo proved unable to adequately handle the volume and complexity of the data, and so MS-Excel was used instead. Codes were explored and discussed by both researchers to ensure validity.

4.5 Focus

This research aimed to explore the qualitative dataset through an EDI lens with a specific focus on the following aspects of potential exclusion:

- Gender

- Civil status
- Family status
- Sexual orientation
- Religion
- Age
- Disability
- Race
- Membership of the Traveller Community

In addition to the 9 grounds for discrimination covered by the equality acts, this research also explored inclusion/ exclusion on the grounds of Social Class/ Socio-Economic Status, Caring Responsibilities, and Nationality. Particular attention was paid to intersectionality in this analysis.

4.6 Reflexivity

In light of the particular qualitative approach adopted in this research, it is appropriate to give a small amount of detail on the two researchers involved.

The Principal Investigator of this project is a married heterosexual male in his early 50s. He was born in Singapore, and has lived for at least 1 year in ten different countries. He is a member of the nascent LGBTQ+ & Allies Staff Support Network at TUS. He is a current (2023-) and former (2019- 2021) member of TUS's Athena SWAN Self-Assessment Team (SAT). He was Chair of the Mid-West Traveller Health Forum for almost a decade, as well as formerly being a Board Member of Spokane AIDS Network (SAN) in Spokane, WA. His research routinely addresses issues of racism, sexism, and socio-economic exclusion

The Research Associate on this project is a woman in her early 20s. Her interests lie specifically in the fields of gender equity and sexualities. She has a strong interest in diversity, linguistic differences, human rights, and reproductive rights for women. She has lived in the US, Ireland and Spain.

5. Results

In reviewing the data explored in this survey it is crucial to remember that neither of the two open-ended questions directly or even obliquely asked about equality, diversity and inclusion issues. The implications of this are two-fold. Firstly, the issues raised can in no way be described as being prompted, and potentially less 'real'. Secondly, it seems likely that they are strongly felt to have emerged in this context.

Six main themes were identified in this research. These included the: Exclusion of Mature Students; Other Age Related Concerns; Gender; Socio-Economic Exclusion; Disability & Support Services; and Diversity, Racism & Inclusion.

It must be acknowledged that there are significant overlaps between some of these themes. Equally, it must be conceded there is often considerable debate in how qualitative research themes are presented and explored. This research is no exception. However, in this exploration the nine grounds of discrimination, as well as allied and cognate factors have been a guiding construct.

Theme 1: Exclusion of Mature Students

From an EDI perspective one of the most apparent themes to emerge was that of the need for further developments to support the inclusion of mature students. Although some of these sub-themes are related to other issues that will be discussed below, in light of the routine foregrounding of 'mature student' as a self-designated identity, these are dealt with under this category. Although many respondents praised supports provided by the various Colleges, it is clear that significant hurdles remain. This older cohort identified 7 areas where increased efforts are required to promote inclusion. These sub-themes are explored below.

Sub-Theme 1.1: Mature Student Social Inclusion

Although answers were often relatively short, it was clear that many mature students felt additional steps were required to help them socially integrate into the college environment. This can be seen in the quotations below:

Adult/mature student inclusion

More engagement with older masters students who feel a little out of place

Connect mature students

Creating a more age inclusive environment for mature students within the university

Network group for mature students starting back in college

It is clear that some mature students felt disconnected from their fellow, younger students and with the wider college community at large. The mutually supportive, collaborative experience of college is a crucial one for many students, and clearly increased efforts to aid integration are required.

Sub-Theme 1.2: Mature Student- Improved Learning Support Required

The second sub-theme to emerge was that of the need for increased learning support for mature students. As can be seen from the following excerpts many mature students also struggled with the academic side of their experience at college:

Have on campus writing classes as part of the course throughout the academic years especially for undergrad mature student

I didn't got to college after school, I went working, so I found a lot of the basic skills that students get when there are 18yrs and 19 yrs difficult to grasp, study skills, wrighting skills, project work.

Have more of a focus on adult learners, we juggle a lot of things that traditional students dont and we need better access to supports including tutors

may be provide more classes on writing assignments for the mature students or people who have been out of education for long time,as it can be very stressful.

Mature students often enter college with a different set of skills and responsibilities than traditional students. In this survey, mature students identified additional supports that are required to support and retain them at third level, including academic writing supports.

Sub-Theme 1.3: Mature Student- Technological Supports Required

Similar to the need for additional learning supports noted above, the third sub-theme identified explores the acknowledged need amongst mature students for additional targeted supports around technology. This sub-theme is evidenced in the following statements:

They could offer more support for older learners with using technology

on line learning ... It was a nightmare , and nothing was straight forward... the most stressful part of this last year... for myself... and especially mature students who may not be just quite as familiar with technology.

Because I am older than the average student, technology is a bit challenging for me. It would be helpful to be assigned a young helper at the beginning because you have to be able to handle technology to find help.

use simple technology in learning for off campus students

The struggle experienced by some mature students around this rapidly evolving domain of student life is made very clear in student feedback.

Sub-Theme 1.4: Mature Students- Increased Respect

Many mature students articulated that they should be treated with increased respect in the third-level environment. Many appeared to resent the infantilization they perceived themselves as experiencing. This is demonstrated in the following quotations:

Treat mature students as mature people with respect and understanding

Be more open minded and listen to students, especially mature students

dont forget we are all not 18 to 25 year olds

Stop treating students like they are in primary school

It is clear that many mature students felt disrespected by staff or college administration. This experience undoubtedly contributes to a sense of alienation, as their mature age is emphasised or ignored, rather than respected.

Sub-Theme 1.5: Mature Students- Reciprocal Learning

As sub-theme 1.4 concerns respect, so too does the fifth sub-theme, Reciprocal Learning. It was clearly articulated by some Mature Students that they and their contemporaries had valuable experience that could be drawn on to improve the student learning experience for all. Extracts relating to this sub-theme are listed below:

I think that the University could better use the experience of mature students

Leverage students' real-world experiences in a more formalised way, especially for EMBA students. There's lots of experience within the class let's leverage it better!

I believe the experience the mature students have could be tapped into more, we have a number of senior managers in our class, how about a presentation from one of them to the class

Provide dedicated supports for postgrad students, remembering that they are not 'students' they all have (or had) jobs, and should be encouraged to share experiences and come together more often and in a structured way.

Mature Students clearly reported that Colleges were failing to identify or utilise a valuable resource. Their inclusion in the education process would presumably help dispel feelings of disconnection and marginalisation, increase respect, and improve the quality of education.

Sub-Theme 1.6: Caring Responsibilities

The sixth theme to emerge related to mature students was that of caring responsibilities. The issue of trying to juggle a work-life-study balance was particularly problematic for mature students when it came to child care. This is clearly evident in the following excerpts:

More flexibility for people with children

Offer more for flexible options for students who work/have children/ other commitments. For example recording of all lectures even if I'm person would be brilliant even for revision purposes.

Offer online classes so people can access courses without having to travel. For many people family responsibilities and work prevent engagement. Everything that can be done to make educational opportunities available to a wider group should be done.

They need to understand that our world does not solely revolve around college. Many of us have work, family and social ... The lectures here act as though you've committed murder when someone dozes off in a lecture there are a myriad of reasons why this could happen and we're not just "bored". If the lecturers could somewhat understand the lengths some of us go to just to be here on a Monday morning and go to lectures every day.

Mature students clearly articulate the need for additional flexibility and understanding around the issue of children and family responsibilities.

Sub-Theme 1.7: Part-Timers

The seventh and final theme to emerge related to this domain was that of Colleges inadequately responding to the needs of part-time students. This is clear in the comments listed below:

Keep the college open on a weekend to use the computers or library

Improve supports for part-time students who are working full time

Cafes and more food options across campus and open later/earlier

Consider students who are doing part time courses (i.e. who work full time and attend classes during evenings and weekends). Many Master's programmes are part time,

yet access to many facilities is only available during business hours. Students enrolled in these courses are not able to avail of many services as a result, despite paying the same fees as full-time students.

Respondents identified that basic services were not available for part-time students who were forced to use campus facilities early in the mornings, evenings, or weekends.

Theme 2: Other Age Related Concerns

The theme of the Inclusion/ Exclusion of mature students came through so strongly in the data that it clearly warranted separate examination. However, other age-related concerns also emerged related to equality, diversity and inclusion. Three sub-themes were identified here. These were : Youth Transition to College; Respect for Young People; and Lecturer Age.

Sub-Theme 2.1: Youth Transition to College

In the same way that Mature Students outlined the challenges faced in transitioning to college life, notably in terms of writing and IT skills, so young adults reported challenges in adjusting to the new and different expectations they encountered. It is clear that the college environment required a different skill-set from that developed in the Leaving Certificate secondary school environment. This can clearly be seen in the quotes below:

I feel like in Semester one and two of first year the college should introduce academic writing lectures as I found it very difficult from transitioning from sixth year to first year

I think study skills classes should be offered. As a first year college student it became obvious to me that university learning and secondary school were very different , and the inability and struggle I faced to adjust had implications on my mental health as I felt I was falling behind and unable to grasp the learning needed in universities , I felt as a student I was not offered learning support for transitioning to university.

Offer more workshops or advice on how to approach university studying because it is very different to what we knew in school and its hard to adjust to it so quickly

Allow more flexibility in terms of course material. Bonding students to only one course for four years is quite difficult seeing as an 18 year old is still just figuring out what they want to do. They need to allow students to learn course content they are actually interested and become more interdisciplinary instead of being so hyper traditional.

Young adults clearly identified their need for additional help in making the successful transition to third-level education environment. Such assistance identified included study skills, writing skills and flexibility around course design and mobility.

Sub-Theme 2.2: Respect For Young People

Very similar to sub-theme 1.4 above in relation to mature students, young adults attending college in Ireland also reported that a lack of respect from lecturers was an important issue. It was apparent that these students wanted to be treated as adults and yet clearly felt that they were not. This is evident in the following extracts:

Have lecturers understand their module is not the only module being undertaken and be more flexible with students as we are adults not children

One or two of my lecturers at least need to understand that we aren't children we're just inexperienced, so they shouldn't speak down to us.

Treat us less like children, even if we are first years. Don't try to force us to speak up, let it flow naturally.

Treat us like adults not secondary school children

Younger students acknowledged their lack of experience and junior status within the university system. However, they still wanted the respect due to them as adults, rather than to be treated like children.

Sub-Theme 2.3: Lecturer Age

The age of lecturers also emerged as a relevant sub-theme. This issue had two distinct elements. Some respondents clearly articulated an age related assessment on the inadequacies of older staff:

Some lecturer's methods are outdated and less engaging. This usually happened with older lecturers not really as keen to use technology as much.

drag some "traditionalist" lecturers and tutors kicking and screaming into the 0's. Mandate a transfer into tech based teachings.

GIVE US MORE ENGAGING LECTURES [Redacted]. ALL OF MY LECTURERS ARE OLD LADS IN THEIR 50S

think about students without the arrogance of a lecturer's perspective from yesteryear,

In a similar vein, other respondents identified negative issues with being taught by younger lecturers:

Improve the recruitment process for new law postgraduate lecturers, as some of the young ones are simply not up to the standard

A couple of the lecturers are young (which in itself isn't an issue) but they are lacking experience and their lectures are really boring, based on the modules I took in the autumn semester I could be delivering the lectures as well

It is of course unclear whether these comments are based on a realistic assessment of teaching ineptitude, or are biased by ageist negative perceptions of either youth, or advanced age.

Theme 3: Gender

The third theme to emerge was that of gender. As can be seen below, at points this issue overlapped with the age dimension outlined above. However, though some of the issues noted could be construed as mild, others, such as sexual harassment and violence are extremely serious. This is demonstrated in the following statements:

Also some lectures (no offence to them) [are] about 75 years old & we could barely understand them, a lot of the time they said "good girl" etc that was not ok... respect your customers (students).

I think including a lecture or two each semester about diversity and how to deal with sexual harassment and violence as part of a module would be very beneficial.

Raising awareness of difficult social topics (rape, trauma, LGBT, race, etc.) and not just for clout or because they feel that they need to make a statement, it should be a continuous effort, not only when tragedy hits the news and it's being plastered everywhere. There should be yearly, monthly, etc. workshops (mandatory, perhaps) or resources for people to learn about difficult topics (and actually get input from people's from these marginalised groups or who have been affected by these topics).

More support for people affected by sexual violence on campus but do not wish to report it to the guardi

The last quotation above is particularly important and highlights a range of wider problematic issues in Ireland.

Theme 4: Socio-Economic Exclusion

The fourth theme to be identified in this research was that of socio-economic exclusion. Financial obstacles to participation in college life were a significant theme to emerge. These issues have been broken down into four subthemes: Financial Obstacles; Accommodation Costs; Food Poverty/ Price Gouging; and Intersectionality.

Sub-Theme 4.1: Financial Obstacles

The first sub-theme examined here is simply that of the financial obstacles that students routinely reported. Financial concerns were routinely identified as a crucial impediment to integration and inclusion to college life. The multitude of concerns raised can be seen in the following extracts:

be more lenient in the workload, do not tell students they need to quit their part time job so they can do coursework

By providing more student supports (counseling services, student advisors, etc.) and also making accommodation in n campus more affordable so that students don't feel they need to live far away and have long commute times, or work many jobs to support their way through college so they can actually focus on their learning and overall college experience

Acknowledge the financial restrictions young people in ireland have, make college fees and accommodation cheaper which would result in many more people being able to attend third level meaning more engagement and more learning for the people in the institutions hinterland

Become more understanding of the economic needs of students to work. Lectures MUST be recorded. We HAVE to work.

These excerpts from students are wide ranging. However, there were so many comments focused specifically on the issues of accommodation costs and food poverty that these were identified as distinct sub-themes.

Sub-Theme 4.2: Accommodation Costs

The cost of accommodation was a significant concern for students. The high price of accommodation was clearly identified as a major impediment to attendance at college. This finding is apparent in the following comments from respondents:

make it easier for students to get affordable accommodation near the university so that they can attend class

Take into account that a lot of students commute/can't afford accommodation

More blended learning for mature students and those who cannot afford accommodation or petrol

Provide better supports and affordable housing so we have the ability to engage instead of working 3 jobs to pay rent

The downstream impacts on students of high rents are obvious from the extracts above, with students being forced to commute long distances or work longer hours to pay rent, but ultimately forcing them to skip college in order to do so.

Sub-Theme 4.3: Food Poverty/ Price Gouging

Allied to the finding above re accommodation costs, many students objected to the high prices of food available on college campuses. Students outlined the implications of such prices on their ability to be present on campus. This sub-theme is evidenced below:

Resolve issues on campus for students to be able to bring in lunch and heat it, as this is putting us under pressure financially as lunch has to be bought on campus. If we can't afford to then we are not eating properly for the day, which affects our learning.

Subsidise food so that college isn't even more expensive and people don't have to skip classes to go to work to pay for the food they need for college.

cheap food so that we dont have to rush home during breaks

Reduce prices on campus, it's hard to study when you can't even afford lunch because everywhere is extortionately priced

Students noted the negative impact of high prices on their capacity to buy food on campus, as well as objecting to the lack of facilities for students to heat or prepare their own meals.

Sub-Theme 4.4: Intersectionality

The next sub-theme identified was that of intersectionality. Many students mentioned not just one factor that was likely to limit their inclusion and ability to equitably engage with college life, but many. This is demonstrated below:

Cater to those with both medical and mental health issues and allow them more freedom in regards to the access of exams and assignments. Significantly more

access to counselling needs to be a priority for the institution in order for students to be able to engage accurately with their studies.

I think making it mandatory for every lecture to have the slideshow and audio uploaded would make learning more accessible for everyone, as some people are trying to juggle education alongside health issues/family problems/financial concerns

Have better university wide policies on understanding and forgiving how mental health, and financial difficulties and life circumstances affects academic work

Be more mindful of students family, work and personal situations and be more flexible around those!

These excerpts clearly demonstrate the multiple obstacles that some students must navigate while also attempting to complete their studies.

Theme 5: Disability & Support Services

The fifth theme to be identified in this research was that of Disability and Support Services. This broad theme was explored via seven sub-themes. These sub-themes are: Disability; Anxiety & Stress; Neurodiversity Supports; Learning Support-Dyslexia; Learning Supports; International Student's Assignment Support; and Counselling/ Mental health Support Services.

Sub-Theme 5.1: Disability

A number of students mentioned specific disabilities that were clearly negatively impacting student engagement and inclusion at college. These are evidenced below:

Focus on hearing students too much than Deaf... Provide needs for Deaf Students

Lectures aren't the most accessible to hard of hearing people. Issues with projectors arose often setting back lectures and oftentimes accents/natural volume of lecturer's voices would make class difficult when hard of hearing, especially in large classroom settings where there is other noise. Construction noises also often disrupted class.

Would be better if classrooms were a little bit more sound proof and if lecturers had working mics.

Have staff better trained to deal with students with hidden learning disabilities. Some students may find it difficult to communicate their struggles. Approaches to all students should be supportive but not instill false confidence, while also encourage them to keep going.

Have better disability service - actually try to help the person's needs when consulted

As these quotes demonstrate, particular integration issues were noted in relation to people with hearing difficulties and those with learning disabilities.

Sub-Theme 5.2: Anxiety & Stress

The second sub-theme to emerge in this domain was that of Anxiety & Stress. Some students reported their feelings of anxiety in college situations, particularly when they had to perform or engage in group settings. This sub-theme can be examined in the following responses:

Be more welcoming to students who suffer from anxiety and may struggle to meet people in person

Be more understanding of students with anxiety who prefer to listen instead of speaking/participating

Alter certain things for certain people, if someone has anxiety they shouldn't lose points or miss opportunity for marks because they couldn't get up and present to an entire class, they should be allowed to submit the presentation as is... Having a get together that's mandatory may be a great idea for most people to get their engagement but a nightmare for people who are uncomfortable in big crowds. It must be adjusted and accessible for all to get every student's engagement equally.

This is very personal and may only concern a very small percentage of people, but I wish there's a way to show people that I don't want to talk to them. I avoided going to tutorials because the anxiety was too overwhelming. I'll benefit from them a lot more if it's acceptable to not participate and just listen.

Students suggested that they should not be adversely penalised for their anxiety in order to promote equity.

Sub-Theme 5.3: Neurodiversity Supports

A further relevant sub-theme was that of Neurodiversity Supports. A number of participants explicitly addressed the particular needs of neurodiverse groups, such as those with ASD. This is evident from the following extracts:

Better Mental Health and Neurodiversity support

Provide more resources for students with ASD.

For neurodivergent students, they could maybe help provide psychiatrists for diagnoses and prescriptions. Prescriptions are the only thing that keep many neurodivergent people in uni.

Design learning activities to support individualised learning needs (e.g. I find group work very difficult due to having Autism Spectrum Disorder, less of an emphasis on this sort of work would help me to learn better).

Supports requested ranged from individualised learning support, to psychiatry and associated medication.

Sub-Theme 5.4: Learning Support- Dyslexia

Alongside the call for improved supports for neurodiverse populations, other students cogently argued for the need for improved supports for those with dyslexia. Evidence of this sub-theme can be seen in the responses below:

Provide more support for students who have disabilities. For example, supports should be available for students with dyslexia not just in the final exam, but in every graded exam of the module, so the final grades reflect what that student is actually capable of.

more learnign support. sometimes I have to wait a few weeks for my essay to be read by learning support. I have dyslexia

Yes they could adademic supports and more anti oppressive practice for individuals with dyslexia

Set up an easier platform for dyslexic people.

Improved general supports for people with dyslexia were called for, not just in relation to student exams. A change in approach to anti-oppressive practice in relation to those with dyslexia was also requested.

Sub-Theme 5.5: Learning Supports

In addition to the calls for additional learning supports focused on particular conditions, such as dyslexia or neurodiversity, there was also a call for improved learning supports generally. This sub-theme can be seen in the following extracts:

Offer additional grinds/revision classes

More accessible ways to request lecturer/tutor help

more science-help centres, because math, machine learning etc, are pretty hard

Extra classes for students struggling in certain modules

Additional learning supports for students were requested, as well as a call to make such supports more accessible.

Sub-Theme 5.6: International Student's Assignment Support

In addition to the sub-theme identified above, specific supports were requested to facilitate international students. This is clearly demonstrated in the following quotes:

Need more help in assignment preparations for students from Non-English speaking countries.

Lecturers could pay more attention for the students whose first Language is not English.

I haven't met the course advisors or course staffs to help and organise plan together. It's because I am not an Irish, so there are some things that i do not know about system in Ireland. I would like to get some help to organise my course together.

More teacher and student interaction as we don't know the standards they expect being an international student the expectations are not clear

The struggle to succeed in a foreign and complex academic system with different processes and expectations is evident in these calls for additional guidance, support, and direction.

Sub-Theme 5.7: Counselling/ Mental health Support Services

As well as a call for improved learning supports, the final sub-theme to emerge in this domain was that of a call for improved Counselling/ Mental health Support Services. This can be seen below:

Provide adequate mental health support services.

Increasing funding for mental health services

There needs to be more than an understaffed and underfunded counselling service and posters around campus laying out how we can practice 'self-care'. If an institution truly wants their students to succeed they need to look at the context around why students are struggling to succeed

The counselling services are rubbish, I was told "I would get over it" after I attended the Psychologist

Some respondents were highly critical of the counselling and mental health supports offered, while others simply argued for improved supports and funding.

Theme 6: Diversity, Racism & Inclusion

The sixth and last theme to emerge in this research was that of diversity, racism, and inclusion. This broad theme incorporated a number of elements, which are

examined below. In total six sub-themes were identified. These were: Diversity; Racism; Oppression; Non-Native English Speakers; International Student Inclusion; and Health Inclusion. These are explored in turn below.

Sub-Theme 6.1: Diversity

The first sub-theme is simply a call for increased diversity. It was evident that this call was directed at both the student and the staff cohorts. Evidence for this can be seen in the following statements:

Have more diverse cohort

Include more diverse people in groups

More diversity in teaching staff

Diversify the teaching staff and the student body. There are no poor students in RCSI on SUSI grants, very little of us.

As exemplified in the final quote, this diversity can extend to include socio-economic status.

Sub-Theme 6.2: Racism

The second sub-theme to be overtly identified was that of racism. Racism was described as coming from both staff and students. This is evident in the following extracts from participants:

Improve collaboration and reduce racism

The institution will never actively stake a stance on anything from sexual harassment or racial discrimination until it is required for example the sexual harassment issues ignored by the university or the use of a Nazi slogan in their marketing materials

Also there is a group of Irish and German students who treat Indian students badly. In one of the presentations, we were waiting to answer questions, but few of the students were so rude that they raised hands and hijacked our moments and started

having conversations with the professors. Our group was made to feel humiliated. Since then, i dont feel like going to university.

Some of the teachers should be more human and respect every student equally. They should stop making migrant students work twice as much and give us our well deserved marks.

Ensure people of all color and background feel included

As can be seen above, the racism was an issue, not only among staff and students, but within the institutional culture of colleges as well.

Sub-Theme 6.3: Oppression

The third sub-theme to emerge was that of oppression. As can be seen from the excerpts below, this was approached by students from a number of angles:

Do little more about awareness on discrimination.

Stop teaching humanities and arts in a way that assumes there is one way to do so, ignorant to non-western studies, a single format to write essays and if you stray away from it you are punished for availing of creative liberty, and being a proprietor and preacher of narrow-minded art interpretation. Look inwards. NUIG seems to be another institution claiming liberty of mind yet suffers from the vices of the oppressor.

and more anti oppressive practice for individuals with dyslexia

It is clear that some students objected to the Western centric orientation of some material, while oppression was also highlighted in relation to a specific learning difficulty.

Sub-Theme 6.4: Non-Native English Speakers

The fourth sub-theme to emerge was that of Non-Native English Speakers. A number of students reported difficulties in understanding non-native English speakers. This can be seen in the following comments:

Be more professional in lectures and have more organisation for the quality control of lecturers such as if their English level is up to an understandable level for the class

Re-record the slide shows with good English speakers (it's hard to understand the content if they don't speak English)

Unfortunately, those lecturers who are not native English speakers does cause frustration for a lot of students. In particular [redacted], a number of students have said, they would rather not attend because they cannot understand. I must admit, it's a frustrating experience.

Ensure that all Teaching Assistants and Lecturers speak fluent English as it is often extremely difficult to understand what they are actually saying, which makes it nearly impossible to take in new information whilst trying to decipher what is actually being said

This finding raises similar questions to the sub-theme 2.3 examined above, which examined the age of lecturers. In that case it was unclear whether these comments were based on ageism or teaching ability. In this instance it is unclear whether what we are observing is a subtle form of racism, or potentially an access issue for students who are genuinely struggling to interpret material being presented to them.

Sub-Theme 6.5: International Student Inclusion

International students also reported significant issues with exclusion, inclusion and isolation. The fifth sub-theme identified here is termed International Student Inclusion. Aspects of these concerns can be seen in the following extracts:

Provide more opportunities to improve the interaction between international students and domestic students

More social engagement for international students,

to provide a connection between international students so they find their seniors and from their country by which they feel comfortable environment in campus or institution also

Encourage mixing with not just internationals both with locals. As it stands I don't have a single Irish friend or counterpart. That's because our activities are so far apart it's ridiculous.

Respondents indicate minimal interaction between foreign students and native Irish students, instead often mixing with other international students. A clear call for improved opportunities for mixing is evident, as is a call for facilitation of improved peer support.

Sub-Theme 6.6: Health Inclusion

The sixth and final sub-theme to emerge is that of health inclusion. This sub-theme is based on the negative experiences and exclusion that some students reported based on their health status. Evidence for this can be seen in the following survey responses:

Stop Penalising people for having sick days, some of us work hard with illnesses and can't afford to be told to drop out/repeat, we don't have 9 grand floating around be more supportive and understanding when people have serious situations that prevent them from attending class, and provide support and learning options for people that cannot always get to campus for health reasons

Accommodate an online environment when a students health is not well, making him physically incapable of even entering the Country. The Lecturers are fine with me working remotely,

Providing more chances for students to resit exams due to health or other issues.

Although health status is not one of the nine grounds covered by equality legislation in Ireland, it is clear from the statements above that ill-health resulted in exclusion and penalisation for some students.

6. Summary of Results

As can be seen from Table 13, six main themes were identified in this research. The first theme revolved around the Exclusion of Mature Students. The sub-theme elements included the need for improved social inclusion and respect. They also included the need for additional learning supports to be available, particularly in the field of IT. Additional sub-themes included the lost opportunities for reciprocal learning, as well as the need to better acknowledge and facilitate caring/ family responsibilities.

The second theme addressed Other Age Related Concerns and involved the difficulties for some young adults transitioning to a different style of learning and their engagement at college, which in turn requires additional support and tutelage. Under this theme, concerns over the lack of respect younger students felt they given by older lecturers were noted. The final sub-theme to arise was the disparaging remarks about more aged members of the lecturing cohort, that may be legitimate critiques or expressions of potential ageism.

The third theme to emerge was that of Gender, which featured a call for improved education and supports for women. The fourth theme identified was Socio-Economic Exclusion. This topic included a range of issues, including financial barriers with a specific focus on the prohibitive costs of food and accommodation. This theme also explored the issue of intersectionality.

Table 13: Themes & Sub-Themes Identified

Theme Identified	Sub-Themes Identified
1: Exclusion of Mature Students	1.1: Mature Student Social Inclusion 1.2: Mature Student- Improved Learning Support Required 1.3: Mature Student- Technological Supports Required 1.4: Mature Students- Increased Respect 1.5: Mature Students- Reciprocal Learning 1.6: Caring Responsibilities
2: Other Age Related Concerns	2.1: Youth Transition to College 2.2: Respect For Young People 2.3: Lecturer Age
3: Gender	

4: Socio-Economic Exclusion	4.1: Financial Obstacles 4.2: Accommodation Costs 4.3: Food Poverty/ Price Gouging 4.4: Intersectionality
5: Disability & Support Services	5.1: Disability 5.2: Anxiety & Stress 5.3: Neurodiversity Supports 5.4: Learning Support- Dyslexia 5.5: Learning Supports 5.6: International Student's Assignment Support 5.7: Counselling/ Mental health Support Services
6: Diversity, Racism & Inclusion	6.1: Diversity 6.2: Racism 6.3: Oppression 6.4: Non-Native English Speakers 6.5: International Student Inclusion 6.6: Health Inclusion

The fifth theme to emerge focused on Disability & Support Services. Along with issues of disability, students called for more accommodations in relation to anxiety & stress, and improved counselling and mental health support services. The need for improved learning supports was identified, as well as a call for specific enhanced supports in relation to neurodiversity, dyslexia, and for international students.

The sixth and final theme identified was that of Diversity, Racism & Inclusion. Diversity, racism and oppression were all identified as sub-themes within this domain. Furthermore, the need for improved supports for international students and those with health issues to ensure inclusion were identified. The final sub-theme to emerge related to non-native English speakers. Incomprehensibility was cited as an issue. However, it is unclear if this is an access issue for struggling learners, or a subtle form of racism.

7. Discussion

The results from this analysis clearly demonstrate the negative impact of equality, diversity and inclusion related factors on student engagement and integration within the Irish Higher Education system. The Higher Education system appears to operate based on ableist assumptions that helm an education system that caters to the historic norms of students, as being white, native, middle-class, male and well able, rather than the varied demographic of today. The modern student body is significantly more diverse. Mature students, foreign students and those with particular learning requirements all appeared to have a high degree of unmet need that is inhibiting inclusion and success.

Socio-economic inequalities were also reported by a considerable number of participants. The negative implications of student fees, as well as extortionate accommodation costs and rising food costs were also identified as real barriers to student participation. Students reported having to work and/or commute for increasing periods in attempts to cope with such financial pressure. Needless to say such strategies have their own negative consequences for inclusion and progression.

8. Conclusion & Recommendations

This research sought to explore EDI issues potentially coming to the fore based on responses to two open-ended questions which made no specific reference to these factors. Given the range of themes identified, this investigation was clearly worthwhile. EDI factors are currently significantly inhibiting student engagement. This can be seen most clearly in relation to mature students, foreign students, those with particular learning and mental health needs, and the more economically disadvantaged.

Additional supports to facilitate engagement are required across a range of domains. This includes improved financial supports, learning supports, and counselling/ mental health supports. In addition, specific interventions are required to promote a more diverse staff and student body, as well as to combat racism, and promote inclusion. Programs to highlight and teach anti-oppressive practice,

as well as similar initiatives to identify and respond to sexual harassment and intimidation are also required.

Further research should also be conducted on an annual basis to explore the impact of EDI factors on student engagement. Potential questions are outlined below in Section 9.

9. Future Questions

Ireland's Student Survey is focused on the issue of Student Engagement. It is not a general survey of equality, diversity and inclusion in the Irish Higher Education sector. Unlike, for example, the HEA (2022) Report on the National Survey of Student Experiences of Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions, it has another focus. However, as demonstrated above it would appear naive, if not complicit, to ignore these factors going forward.

Therefore, a set of sample questions that might potentially be utilised in future surveys that explore EDI issues in the context of student engagement are outlined below. It is suggested that some of these are explored, refined and piloted. Given the range of issues involved, and being mindful of response rates, one or two such questions might be included annually, potentially on a structured rotational basis.

Proposed potential questions:

- In your experience do issues of equity, diversity and inclusion impact student engagement in your college?
- In your experience do socio-economic issues impact student engagement in your college?
- In your experience do financial restrictions impact student engagement in your college?
- In your experience do issues of cultural and ethnic differences impact student engagement in your college?

- In your experience do issues of racism, ageism or sexism impact student engagement in your college?
- In your experience do issues of prejudice or intolerance impact student engagement in your college?
- In your experience do issues of bullying or intimidation impact student engagement in your college?
- In your experience do issues of sexism, sexual harassment, or sexual violence impact student engagement in your college?
- In your experience do issues of gender identity or sexual orientation impact student engagement in your college?
- In your experience do issues of caring responsibilities or work commitments impact student engagement in your college?

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10. Appendix 1: Coding Frame

Table 14: Coding Frame

No.	Code	No.	Code
1	Gender	20	Intersectionality
2	Civil Status	30	Learning Support
3	Family Status	31	Learning Support Dyslexia
4	Sexual Orientation	32	Learning Support Neurodiversity
5	Religion	33	Learning Support International
6	Age	34	Learning Support- Mature Students
7	Disability	35	Learning Support- Transition to College
8	Race	36	Learning Support- IT
9	Membership of the Travelling Community	40	Mature Students
10	Housing Issues/Assistance	50	Finances
11	Socio-Economic Status/ Class	51	Finances- Fees
12	Nationality	52	Finances- Accommodation
13	Caring Responsibilities	53	Finances- Travel/ Commute
14	Discrimination	54	Finances- Value For Money (VFM)
15	Respect	55	Finances- Materials
16	Oppression	56	Finances- Field Trips
17	Inclusion/ Exclusion	60	Counselling Supports
		61	Anxiety/ Stress

