Meeting with the representatives of the Higher Education Authority in Ireland

Date: 6 November 2019; 12-13,30h
Type of event: Meeting with the representatives of the Higher Education Authority (HEA): Mr. Neil McDermott (Senior Manager for the Access Policy) and Victor Pigott (Senior Statistics Manager)
Venue: Higher Education Authority, Shelbourne 3 Building, Crampton Avenue, Shelbourne Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4, Ireland
Type of the TEFCE activity: Presentation of the TEFCE project and consultation with higher education stakeholders in Ireland
TEFCE representatives: Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt and Thomas Farnell

Goals of the meeting

1. To learn about Irish best practices in developing community engagement in higher education and equity of access to higher education.
2. To present the project "TEFCE: Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education" and its goals, as well as the main outcome of the TEFCE project – the TEFCE Toolbox. To find out if the Irish policy makers use similar Toolbox for fostering community engagement in higher education and equity of access to higher education.
3. To learn about Irish experience in collecting data about socio-economic profile of higher education institutions.

Background related to the decision to organize the meeting:

The HEA leads the strategic development of the Irish higher education and research system with the objective of creating a coherent system of diverse institutions with distinct missions, which is responsive to the social, cultural and economic development of Ireland and its people and supports the achievement of national objectives. The HEA has a statutory responsibility, at central government level, for the effective governance and regulation of higher education institutions and the higher education system.

In exercising its mandate the HEA works to ensure that:

- institutional strategies are aligned with national strategic objectives,
- agreed objectives (detailed in compacts with institutions) are delivered through effective performance-management at institutional and system-levels.

Objectives span the enhancement of teaching and learning, the promotion of equity of access to higher education, the enhancement of institutions' responsiveness to the needs of wider society, research capacity-building, and the internationalization of Irish higher education. The HEA leads in developing the evidence-base, which underpins strategic planning and strategy implementation at institutional, regional and national level.
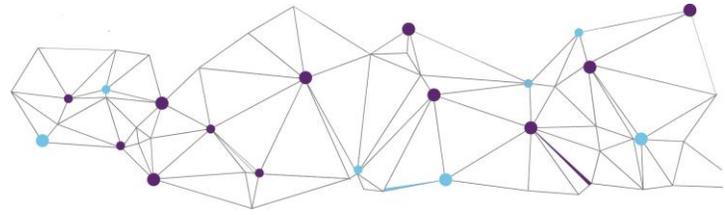
In support of its mandate the HEA exercises functions in respect of:
- Funding
- Accountability
- The quality of outcomes
- Policy research and advice to the Minister
- Data analytics and knowledge management
- Advocacy and communicating higher education
- Co-ordination of interaction between public bodies and the higher education system.

Taken overall, the HEA exercises a central oversight role in the higher education system and is the lead agency in the creation of a co-ordinated system of higher education institutions with clear and diverse roles appropriate to their strengths and national needs. HEA acts as a catalyst for change in the higher education system, requiring higher levels of performance while demonstrating an appropriate level of accountability, consistent with institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

Main conclusions of the meeting:

- Community engagement could be used as an instrument to promote equity of access to higher education:

  o A special opportunity and challenge for universities, in terms of community engagement, arises in respect of creating the conditions to enhance equity of access. A community engagement approach can support access to, and participation in, higher education by young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, from adults who never had the opportunity to pursue higher education programs, and from people of all abilities.

  o Engagement between universities, families and schools, aimed at strengthening relationships and communication and presenting universities as welcoming to people of all backgrounds, is key to developing student, parent and community aspiration for higher education. This will require universities to work with all schools, including primary and secondary schools. Such engagement would help break down misconceptions about, and in-built prejudice and hostility towards universities and to present them as friendly and open places where there is room for people from all backgrounds.

  o Teachers are central to the success of all students, but especially those who come from families and communities who suffer from socio-economic disadvantage. Initial teacher education programs should focus on the needs of the disadvantaged students.

  o Guidance, counsellors, mentoring, especially by successful graduates from similar backgrounds and programs focused on parents, especially mothers, are of particular importance for universities.

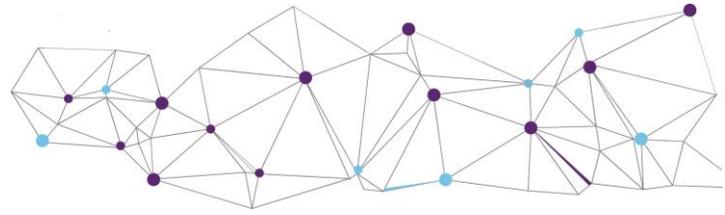- o Universities should be required to actively implement the concept of lifelong learning in order to help adults to acquire skills relevant for job markets and to help them contributing to the civil society throughout the life.

- Schmidt and Farnell presented the TEFCE project. In the discussion after the TEFCE presentation, Irish colleagues informed us about the "Campus Engage" initiative (run by the Irish University Association), which is the only Irish initiative that helps universities developing their community engagement policies.

- HEA representatives presented the following Irish policy initiatives:
  - o National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019: https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Plan-for-Equity-of-Access-to-Higher-Education-2015-2019.pdf
  - o Progress Review of National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021: https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/12/HEA-Progress-Review-NAP-2021.pdf
  - o Data Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education: https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/05/HEA-Data-Plan-Report-2017-V16-Haase-Pratschke-Final.pdf
  - o Overview of Program for Access to Higher Education (PATH) projects – it is a document outlining the projects funded under PATH (Program for Access to Higher Education). PATH is a funding program launched in 2017 to support objectives set out in the National Access Plan.

  The above-mentioned initiatives could be used for enhancing both access to higher education and community engagement in higher education.

- HEA representatives presented more in detail their newest publication: "A Spatial & Socio-Economic Profile of Higher Education Institutions in Ireland: Using Census Small Area Deprivation Index Scores derived from Student Home Address Data, Academic Year 2017/18":

  - o The publication is available at https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/10/Higher-Education-Spatial-Socio-Economic-Profile-Oct-2019.pdf

  - o Since 2007 the HEA has used the Equal Access Survey (EAS) to collect equal access data on the socio-economic, ethnic/cultural and disability background of incoming students. The socio-economic elements of the EAS are based on the socio-economic group categories used in the Census. Throughout the 2015-2019 National Access Plan's consultation phase, the limitations of the current data in relation to students from target socio-economic groups was raised including the need to move away from a survey-based approach for measuring disadvantage to one that made use of recent technological advances in data collection to develop a more refined and targeted understanding of socio-economic disadvantage.
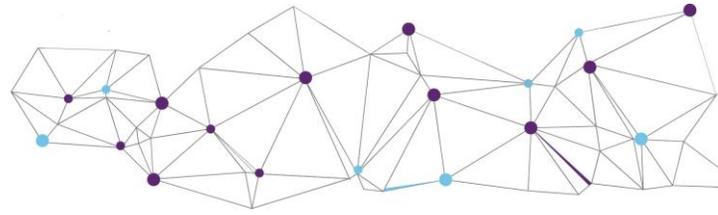
o The main approach underpinning the new data plan for equity of access to higher education consists in identifying and geocoding students entering and studying in higher education institutions and estimating the socio-economic position of these students by identifying the Census small area based on home address.

o For the 2017/18 academic year the HEA's Student Record System (SRS) was enhanced by the collection of name and address data for all enrolments and graduates in all higher education institutions. This address information was subsequently geocoded. Using this information, the HEA has been able to analyze the socio-economic profile of Irish higher education students on an institutional level and, as presented in this report, develop deprivation index scores and profiles for each institution.