Summary (informal) report on Ireland's progress against Discrimination in Education

(Period 2012-15)

1. Introduction

This summary report was submitted 8th December 2016, at request of UNESCO and on the full understanding that Ireland has not formally ratified the 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education. The material provided here is indicative and exemplary only, provided to help inform UNESCO rather than under any obligation of compliance with the 1960 Convention, and should not be taken as comprehensive or definitive. It is provided using the headings and sub-headings of the 2016 reporting template provided by UNESCO, for ease of decipherment. These are from Sections 2 and 3 of the template.

2. Equal opportunities in Education

2.1 concrete actions taken by government to guarantee equal access to all levels of education.

Ireland has recognised a range of international legislation - e.g. Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), Council of Europe, Political Declaration (2003) and Action Plan (2006) and United Nations International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Ireland continues to work towards guaranteeing equal access to all levels of education. Among recent issues and steps taken are:

- Having provided for a free year of pre-school education for all children previously, a free second pre-school year was announced in 2015-6. This is a major initiative designed to support family life, support early years education for all and allow mothers to return to the workplace as desired. It is particularly seen as a support to lower paid families and to children from immigrant backgrounds, and is enhanced by the provision since 2015 of education-focused inspections in early years settings, and the ongoing roll-out of a play-based education programme called Aistear. This has a significant focus on building relationships, trust, equity and understanding between children.
- Ireland has faced challenges in terms of schools admissions rules, not least because the majority of schools are under the patronage of religious institutions, although the curriculum, funding and teachers' salaries are the responsibility of the State. The State has been working on legislation, particularly since 2013, aimed at making school admissions more inclusive, tackling challenges of school policies which could discriminate against admission of students on religious or special needs grounds, or where applicants are not children of former students. The State is due to publish a new School Admissions Bill as we approach the end of 2016.
- This bill will increase the transparency and fairness of school admissions. It makes clear that every school must be welcoming of every young person – regardless of their colour, their abilities or disabilities. It will help to end the soft barriers that some of our schools erect in the way of children with special needs. Publication of this Bill reflects a commitment contained in the Programme for Government to publish new School Admissions legislation taking account of current draft proposals and addressing issues including publication of school enrolment policies, an end to waiting lists, introduction of annual enrolment structures, and transparency and fairness in admissions for pupils and their parents.

- Slow progress is also being made on making Irish schools more pluralistic through the patronage of non-denominational bodies. For example, Educate Together has a network of 81 primary schools nationwide. Nine second-level schools with Educate Together involved as patron, co-patron or as partner have opened since 2014 alone, with more planned. Our non-denominational Education and Training Boards (ETBs) have also begun to operate community national schools in recent years.
- At the post-primary level, the schemes that facilitate schools in addressing educational disadvantage include the Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme, the School Completion Programme, the School Books Grant Scheme, the Junior Certificate Schools Programme, the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme for post-primary schools, and related projects that facilitate access to third-level education.
- DEIS (Delivering Equality of Educational Opportunity in Schools: An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion) was introduced in 2005. This plan addresses the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school to the end of post-primary education (age three to eighteen years). A primary motivating factor for the introduction of the plan is the fact that the rates of educational under-achievement and early school-leaving remain much higher for students from disadvantaged communities than for other children.
- In 2015, the Department initiated reviews both of its National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, and of the DEIS programme. The findings of these reviews are as yet unpublished but interim reports indicate an increased focus on supporting schools in areas of high urban disadvantage, based on census returns and other indicators, and a re-invigoration of literacy and numeracy as key drivers in tackling social and cultural disadvantage, including membership of minority groups and for students for whom English is an additional language.
- The policy of the Department of Education and Skills is that the culture and traditions of the Traveller community should be acknowledged and reflected throughout the education system and that Traveller children should receive their education in an inclusive manner in mainstream schools. To encourage the enrolment in post-primary schools of students from the Traveller community, additional staffing of 1.5 teacher-hours per week per child is provided. Arising from these allocations, additional part-time and full-time equivalent teachers are appointed. An enhanced capitation grant is paid to schools to help them to promote the participation of Traveller children and their families in the life of the school.

Actions to Increase Access to Higher Education

Achieving a more equitable higher education system has been a long-standing priority for the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA). The commitment in policy and legislation to tackling social inclusion through education has been followed through with a large investment of resources in student support and third level access measures.

Setting targets to increase participation by under-represented groups in higher education has been at the core of three National Access Plans for Higher Education. The third National Access Plan 2015-2019 was published last year and was developed by the HEA in partnership with the DES and following a wide consultative process. The Plan is cognisant of equality principles and sets out the goals, objectives, actions required to increase representation in higher education by members of target equity groups. These include students from low-participating socio-economic groups; learners with disabilities, mature student new entrants,

members of the Irish Traveller community and entrants on the basis of further education qualifications.
The National Access Plan is being implemented in the context of a National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 and system objectives for higher education that have been framed by the Department's Higher Education System Performance Framework 2014 – 2016 and by the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019. A first report of progress on higher education system performance was published by the HEA in 2015 Higher Education System Performance Report 2014-2016 . This report includes an overall evaluation of the current position on indicators to increase access by under-represented groups. This report is supplemented with more specific objectives, actions and targets for equity of access to higher education which are being implemented as part of the National Access Plan 2015-2019. A second report on performance will be published shortly.

Financial support for students

The statutory based student grant scheme is the main financial support for students attending full-time courses in further and higher education in Ireland. The scheme makes available means-tested financial assistance towards maintenance and fees to students in further and higher education. Means tested student grants are divided into maintenance grants and fee grants. The maintenance grant ranges from €305 up to €5,915 per academic year. The fee grant is available up to a maximum limit of €6,270 and can encompass costs in respect of fees, the student contribution and field trips.

Funding Programmes for Access to Higher Education

In addition to the Student Grant Scheme, a number of other funding schemes support increased equity of access to and participation in higher education including:

- The *Student Assistance Fund* provides financial assistance to students experiencing financial difficulties while attending third level. Students can be assisted towards their rent, childcare costs, transport costs and books/class materials. The operation of the Fund is devolved to third-level institutions and allocations are based on a combination of total enrolments and equal access data. €7.9m is being allocated under this programme in 2016-17. This programme supported almost 14,000 students in 2015/16. A report on a review of this fund has been recently published.
- The *Fund for Students with Disabilities* supports participation by students with a disability in full-time programmes of further and higher education. The aim is to ensure that these students can participate fully in education, on an equal basis with their peers. The supports and services that are funded include assistive technology, personal/academic support and transport. €10.3m is being allocated in 2016-17. This programme supported almost 10,450 students in 2015/16. A review of this programme is underway as part of the implementation of the National Access Plan.
- *Core access funding* supports the operation and development of access and lifelong learning programmes of higher education institutions. This funding is allocated as part of the annual recurrent grant by the HEA. In 2015 €29m in core funding was allocated to 26 higher education institutions on the basis of student numbers enrolled in those institutions from access target groups.

2.2 Strategies and Programmes available to ensure equality of educational opportunity

Among the measures taken to ensure equality of educational opportunity are:

- Ireland has made good progress in the area of retention of students beyond the end of compulsory education at age 16. A number of the initiatives identified in 2.1, such as Home School Liaison officers and School Completion Programme have been important supports to this effect. So has curricular relevance, not least the Leaving Certificate Applied programme which is targeted specifically at students who may be at risk of early school leaving. It provides an alternative, skills and employment focused Leaving Certificate, a route to employment but to alternative tracks to further and higher education in certain circumstances also.
- Another important consideration in Ireland is that the curriculum followed in schools is effectively the same, whether private or State system. There has been a common Primary Curriculum in place since 1999, and there is no significant variation in the Irish system at ISCED 2 or 3 e.g. we do not divide schools into 'academic' or 'vocational' when students finish ISCED level 2, and the range of subjects available in schools is relatively uniform. Where variations occur, these are dictated more by school size (e.g. wider range of subjects in larger schools), location (e.g. more demand for Agricultural Science in rural schools) and sometimes gender, although great efforts are being made to promote STEM and other traditionally male dominated subjects among girls.
- In 2014, Ireland adopted a National Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development, which is due to run until 2020. This will reinforce the efforts to promote gender equity in education, multi-denominationalism and tolerance across the education system. The Department held a major forum of stakeholders in 2014 when this was launched, and is due to hold another such forum to monitor progress on December 1st 2016.
- For those students who leave the school system around the end of compulsory education, there are a number of State-sponsored schemes which support their further education and preparation for the labour force. For example, the Youthreach programme provides two years integrated education, training and work experience for unemployed early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training who are between 15 and 20 years of age.
- There are almost 6,000 places available nationwide under the Youthreach umbrella. Almost 3,700 of these places are provided by ETBs in just over 100 Youthreach centres. The majority of the remainder of places are provided in Community Training Centres.
- The programme usually provides two years integrated education, training and work experience. Basic skills training, practical work training and general education are features of the programme, and the application of new technology is integrated into all aspects of programme content.
- There is a strong emphasis on personal development, on the core skills or literacy/numeracy, communications and IT, along with a choice of vocational options and a work experience programme. Youthreach centres managed by ETBs are designated as ‘centres of education’ under the Education Act, 1998. In 2006, the Departments Inspectorate began carrying out whole centre evaluations of Youthreach ETB centres. Learners on the Youthreach programme are entitled to receive training allowances. Additional allowances for meal, travel and accommodation are also available.

2.3 Actions planned and taken to ensure inclusion of all learners in the learning process

Ireland has acknowledged a need to reform its curricula in order to better ensure inclusion of all learners in the learning process. Among the measures taken in recent years are:

- Under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (the EPSEN Act) each child assessed with a special educational need should have a personal education plan. This system is not yet in place but its implementation is being coordinated by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) which has published Guidelines for the Individual Education Plan process (pdf). The NCSE has also published Implementation Report: Plan for the Phased Implementation of the EPSEN Act 2004. This sets out how the Act can be implemented. However there is currently no date for the implementation of the assessment of need and individual education plans.
- A new Inclusion Support Service has been set-up as part of the NCSE. The Inclusion Support service will include the Special Education Support Service (SESS), the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) and the Visiting Teacher Service (VTS). The Service is to provide a more integrated service to children and their families as well as to teachers and schools.
- Section 2 of the act provides that a child with special educational needs will be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs, unless this is inconsistent with the best interests of the child, as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under the act, or with the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated.
- Boards of management are also required to ensure that the parents of students with special educational needs are informed of their child's needs and how those needs are being met and that they are consulted about, and invited to participate in, the making of all significant decisions regarding their child's education.
- The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has produced a range of guidelines and teacher supports, on behalf of the State, to enhance inclusion of all learners in the learning process. In addition to its central role in developing the Junior Cycle Framework outlined below in Section 3.2, the NCCA has done the following:
    - To support the teaching and learning of students with special educational needs guidelines for teachers of students with general learning disabilities and exceptionally able students are available.
    - Recently, the NCCA has worked with schools and other settings involved in educating learners in detention and those requiring high support and care. Look at the curriculum framework that has been developed for use in these schools and settings.
    - Promoting diversity and challenging racism through the curriculum – guidelines for teachers are available on intercultural education in primary and post-primary schools.
    - English as an additional language- These materials have been prepared for teachers of students in primary schools for whom neither English nor Irish is their first language.
    - The Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) is particularly targeted at junior cycle (lower secondary) students who are identified as being at risk of early school leaving, perhaps without completing the Junior Certificate. A revised programme statement for the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) is now available. Note that many of the best ideas within JCSP are currently being

deployed in Junior Cycle Reform overall, so that the long term future of JCSP remains open to reinterpretation as Junior Cycle reform embeds up to 2021.

- The guidelines in Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School (NCCA, 2006) identify ways in which intercultural education can be integrated in the curriculum in post-primary schools. This publication has relevance also for the inclusion of Traveller children.

3. Progress made in implementing the Right to Education

3.1 Primary education

- The ongoing efforts by the State to improve access to education for all, on an equal footing, have been outlined in the second and third bullets of Section 2.1 above.
- Ireland believes that the recent provision of a second free, State-funded pre-school year, allied to education-focused inspections in pre- and early primary schools will enhance educational opportunities and standards for children as they enter primary school.
- The Department of Education and Skills has a key role in supporting quality within the Early Years Education sector and works closely with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (D/CYA). Working with agencies funded by the D/CYA, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) produced an Aistear-in-Action toolkit which is a resource for use in early years settings showing how the Aistear themes of Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Exploring and Thinking and Communication translate into practice.
- The Department of Education and Skills' policy in relation to early years education is to raise the quality of provision in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings. As part of this, the Department funded the development of Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. Síolta is designed to support practitioners to develop high quality services for children from birth to six years and is relevant to all settings where children spend time out of their home environment. The final report on the implementation of this phase of Síolta was published in December 2013.
- A new, integrated languages curriculum at primary level will further support students whose parental language may not be English. The central rationale for integration across languages is that learning efficiencies can be achieved when teachers explicitly draw children's attention to similarities and differences between their languages and reinforce effective learning strategies in a coordinated way across languages. There is extensive research highlighting the potential of bilingualism to enhance children's metalinguistic awareness. There is also consensus among researchers that transfer of knowledge and skills takes place across languages. An explicit instructional focus on integration across languages will enable children to make cross-lingual connections and develop their awareness of how language works more effectively than if the process remains implicit and haphazard.

3.2 Post-primary

- Junior Cycle Reform - this work is spearheaded by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and focuses on transforming the curriculum, and pedagogical approaches, at ISCED level 2. Ireland seeks to place a greater focus on developing knowledge, skills and attitudes and less on mere retention of content. This is in line with key competences work in Europe, and with much good practice internationally. The reform places the student at the centre of the learning process, allows much greater flexibility regarding subjects, short courses and other learning experiences, and places a

far greater stress on assessment as a vehicle to promote learning, not just as the measuring process at the end of learning.

- Within Junior Cycle reform, for the first time there will be certification at Level 2 available for certain categories of student with special educational needs, and work is already underway on Level 1 certification. These steps have brought a significant new level of equity to the system, allowing for formal certification of some students with special needs for the first time.
- Ireland continues to support the rights of students with special needs to education, through a range of measures at a practical level, especially around assessment. These include grants for assistive technology where a student's needs are supported by this technology, a proactive scheme of Reasonable Accommodations in Certificate Examinations (RACE) in certification examinations, and exemption from the study of Irish for students with certain categories of special educational needs and for those who arrived to live in Ireland after the age of 11.

3.3 Higher Education

Extent to which Access to Education is Realised

The Europe 2020 strategy has set a target to increase the share of those aged 30–34 having completed tertiary education to at least 40% by 2020. In 2015 the rate was 38.7%. Ireland's individual target is to increase attainment by this group to 60% by 2020. Eurostat data for 2015 indicates that Ireland's tertiary attainment rate of 52.3% is joint third highest in the EU.

The Department's Higher Education System Performance Framework monitors progress towards Ireland's Europe 2020 targets, as well as targets in the National Access Plan. Progress over the past decade on some of the key indicators of equity and targets for 2019, where applicable, are summarised in a table below.

	2006	2012	**Target 2019**
Overall Participation Rate (18-20 year olds)	44%	52%	n/a
Participation rate of 18-20 age cohort from non-manual socio-economic backgrounds	n/a	23%	**30%**
Participation rate of 18-20 age cohort from semi & unskilled socio-economic backgrounds	n/a	26%	**35%**
Full and part-time mature student new entrants	18%	19%	**24%**
Enrolments on flexible/part-time courses of HE	7%	16%	**22%**
New entrants with Disabilities	3%	6%	**8%**
Entrants from the Irish Traveller Community	n/a	35	**80**
Entrants on the basis of a FET qualification	n/a	7%	**10%**

3.4 Adult and lifelong learning

- Goal 2 in the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014-2019 (*http://www.solas.ie*) relates *to* **active inclusion** which means enabling every citizen, notably the most disadvantaged, to fully participate in society, including having a job. Supporting the active inclusion goal, the *SOLAS Corporate Plan 2014- 2016* (http://www.solas.ie) sets out the following action items:-
    - Ensure that Further Education and Training (FET) serves the needs of priority groups identified by the Department of Social Protection

    - Support the provision of education and training for inclusion.
    - Examples of actions currently taking place within the FET sector to support the active inclusion of all citizens are as follow:
    - The Introduction of *new* part-time programmes as well as timetabling study and ICT skills and academic literacy support across all level 3 and 4 provision.
    - Increased flexibility in course provision to suit the lives of all learners, including weekend, evening, part-time provision as well as full-time
    - Enhanced pre-assessment policies and procedures to support the identification of best fit programmes and award levels for all.
    - Development of learner engagement programmes, designed to meet the needs of persons most removed from the education/training environment, affording participants the opportunity to engage in active learning in an environment that is welcoming and supportive of their learning needs.
    - Modularisation by some providers of Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme, (VTOS) which mean learners have the opportunity to achieve certification much earlier and also allowing learners to enter the programme at two points in the year rather than on a single annual enrolment date.
    - SOLAS also provides funding to a number of other bodies/agencies to provide for the needs of older learners including Age Action Ireland, NALA and the People's College.
- The FET adult literacy strategy is largely informed by the recommendations of the 2013 Review of Adult literacy, which included revision of the operational guidelines for the Adult Literacy Programmes and more intensive options, more group tuition as well a broader range of tuition
- The current Service Plan indicates that funding for literacy and numeracy provision will be sustained, and will remain in place, until an agreed strategic inputs/outcomes-based funding model has been trialled and tested on other types of FET provision.
- Adult literacy service provision is planned to benefit almost **38,000 beneficiaries** in the current year.

3.5 Quality Education

The regular inspection of schools and of probationary teachers is carried out by a cohort of approximately 140 inspectors. Among key areas of school life which are frequently evaluated, are the admissions policies, inclusivity of boards of management, student councils and links with parents. The major quality assurance initiative which was added during the period in question here was a drive to promote school self-evaluation.

- Systematic school self-evaluation was introduced in 2012/13 as a collaborative, reflective process of internal school review, focused on school improvement. Circular 0040/2012 required all schools to engage in the process, and set out its purpose and rationale. The circular made explicit reference to the application of the process to schools' implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, and to the introduction of a reformed junior cycle programme.
- In the first four-year cycle of school self-evaluation, schools were required to develop and implement improvement plans for literacy, numeracy, and an aspect of teaching and learning that they selected themselves. Irish-medium schools were specifically required to focus on literacy in Irish, literacy in English, and numeracy. In this way school self-evaluation provided schools with a process for implementing a national initiative, and also for identifying and working on an aspect of teaching and learning that would be meaningful for them.

- Many schools have gained very useful knowledge of their own strengths and areas for development and improvement through their initial engagement with school self-evaluation. They have not only reflected on and evaluated aspects of their teaching practices and students' learning but have also gained valuable insights into the process of evidence-based action planning for improvement.
- As the first cycle of school self-evaluation concludes, schools have begun to embed the teaching and learning practices that are leading to improved outcomes in literacy, numeracy and other areas. They should continue this process of embedding successful practices as they embark on the next cycle.
- By 2016, a new guide to self-evaluation had been developed, built around a guidelines document called 'Looking at our Schools' which expects school leaders to 'foster a commitment to inclusion, equality of opportunity and the holistic development of each student.' As a guide to good practice, this document advises that:
    - The board of management and principal foster students' holistic development by providing a very broad range of curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular learning opportunities.
    - Those with leadership and management roles promote an inclusive school community which demonstrably values diversity and challenges discrimination.
    - Those with leadership and management roles ensure that all relevant school policies are inclusive and are implemented accordingly.
    - Those with leadership and management roles establish clear principles of inclusion and social justice to deliver equality of opportunity for students throughout all aspects of school life. They do so in collaboration with all staff.

3.6 Teaching Profession

- During the reporting period in question, salary reductions were imposed on all civil and public servants in the drive towards economic recovery. Teachers' salary reductions were in line with those of similar qualifications and pay grades. Some moves are being taken now to restore elements of public service pay as the economy recovers.
- Teacher training received a significant boost in Ireland during the period of the report. Since 2011, teacher training programmes have been extended by a full year, to allow for increased practical experience within schools, a greater chance for teachers to learn about and gain experience of working in disadvantaged contexts, a greater emphasis on literacy and numeracy pedagogy, and more understanding of student-centred approaches to pedagogy and to rights and responsibilities in schools.
- The Equality Act in Ireland governs nine different protections against discrimination, and protects teachers from any form of discrimination on the grounds of gender, sexual orientation, religion or ethnicity, among others.

3.7 Respect for Human Rights and fundamental freedoms

Much of the work in this area has been referred to in sections above. Here, we highlight six further supports to human rights and fundamental freedoms which have been engaged in as well:

- Ireland has a strong commitment to facilitating and partnership with a range of non-governmental agencies who deliver resources and sometimes teacher-training courses in the area of citizenship and human rights education. Naming these here would risk omitting others, but these are highly reputable bodies, including some affiliated to UNESCO itself.

- Ireland continues its involvement with a range of EU and Council of Europe actions to support human rights and citizenship education. We participate and generally are found to do well in the ICCS surveys when they are held, and are currently engaged in a range of ET2020 working groups with the EU Commission to promote greater citizenship and rights awareness across pedagogy, school patronage and other areas.
- Ireland was admitted to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance in 2012, and its commitment to Holocaust Education was a central factor in the success of its application to join. The Department continues to support the work of Holocaust Education Trust Ireland.
- Under Junior Cycle reform, we have moved to place Civic, Social and Political Education within the sphere of 'wellbeing' a compulsory programme of up to 400 hours which must be delivered for all students during the three years of ISCED level 2. Thus, Ireland sees citizenship as an integral component of wellbeing, alongside social, personal and health education.
- For the first time ever, a subject at ISCED level 3 has been introduced with a specific emphasis on human rights, sustainable living, gender equality, civic action and political education. This subject is called Politics and Society. It was offered to 41 schools initially, at the end of 2015, and will be available to all post-primary schools from 2018.
- Finally, as an example of the work for human rights and fundamental freedoms in the general life of schools, the Department introduced a comprehensive set of guidelines against bullying in 2013. Within these, bullying is defined as unwanted negative behaviour, verbal, psychological or physical, conducted by an individual or group against another person (or persons) and which is repeated over time. These procedures make clear that this definition includes cyber-bullying and identity-based bullying (such as homophobic bullying and racist bullying).'

3.8 Private Education

- The State continues to focus on school admissions, as explained above in 2.1, and is deeply committed to fair access to education for all.
- It should be pointed out that the State system at both primary and post-primary is the education of choice of the vast majority of people. Based on 2015 statistics, there are very few private primary schools (under 2 %), and (by comparison with other countries) a low number of private or fee-paying post-primary schools in the State (c.7%).
- Most private schools are concentrated in the more affluent areas of cities, particularly Dublin. The State generally pays teachers' salaries but otherwise the schools fund themselves through fees.

3.9 Rights of national minorities

- We have covered the vast majority of measures being taken in Ireland to support the rights of national minorities. Such minorities are protected by the Equality Act, and are supported throughout the school system in areas like providing for English as an Additional Language, exemptions from the study of Irish where necessary, and in the ongoing efforts of the Department to ensure transparency and inclusion in school admissions policies.
- One further area of which Ireland can be proud is its support for the study of home-languages by many students from national minorities in our schools. It is possible for students whose home language is Polish, Lithuanian, Russian, Arabic or any one of over 20 languages, to take an examination in this language as part of the Leaving Certificate (i.e. at the end of ISCED level 3). The marks gained in the examination can count for

points towards admission to university and thus this provision is seen as a very positive support to ensuring equitable access to third level for students from national minorities.