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N-TUTORR Student Empowerment Stream: Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Impact Assessment.

Dr Moira Maguire (DkIT), Dr Claire McGing (IADT), Dr Carina Ginty (ATU), Dr Sarah Carroll (ATU), Olya Antropova (ATU), Dr Sharon Flynn (NTUTORR/THEA).

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Cover design and report template: Dr Sarah Carroll (ATU)

N-TUTORR Student Empowerment Stream: EDI Impact assessment

Table of Contents

Background and project context

The N-TUTORR programme was designed to transform learning, teaching and assessment and enhance the capacity of the technological higher education sector to respond to uncertainty.

Funded under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and EU NextGeneration, the project focused on student empowerment, staff capabilities and digital infrastructure. The following themes were addressed: Academic Integrity, Education for Sustainability, Employability, Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), Digital Transformation and Universal Design for Learning (UDL),

The programme was delivered through four work streams. **This report focuses on Stream 1: The Student Empowerment Stream**, which aimed to empower students as leaders and change agents and develop a culture of student and staff partnership in learning, teaching and assessment design. Table 1 outlines the workpackages and deliverables.

Table 1. Stream 1 workpackages and deliverables.

Work package	Deliverables
1.1. Sustainable pathways to higher education	• Hyflex Access Programme • Micro-credentials to support regional needs[1] • Student Support Assistant pilot
1.2. Empowering students as change agents	• Partners in Innovation & Change Fellowship Programme • Student Competency Framework.
1.3. Academy for Education for sustainability, leadership and employability	• Digital Backpack • Student Champions

[1] A needs analysis was conducted, and micro-credentials were developed by some partners, however, policy development was needed to launch micro-credentials and it was not possible to co-ordinate this across partners. Micro-credentials that responded to regional needs were developed by some partners, but it was not possible to launch a co-ordinated suite in the project timeline and therefore this work package is not included in this report.

EDI Assessment

Aims and report sections

As noted above, EDI was a core project theme, and the student empowerment stream was explicitly designed to be inclusive. This report aims to assess the inclusivity of the project design and delivery, with a specific focus on students. Inclusivity of the project design and delivery was assessed through:

i. Investigative review of structures and processes embedded in:
   a. Stream 1 generally (Section 2.2)
   b. Partners in Innovation Fellowship Scheme (section 2.3)
   c. Student Champions (Section 2.4)

ii. Analysis of EDI monitoring data (Section 3)
   a. Partners in Innovation (Section 3.1)
   b. Student champions (Section 3.2).

Guidelines and recommendations generated from insights to inform future work are described in Section 4.

Structures and processes within the Student Empowerment Stream

Accessibility and engagement

Measures were taken to promote accessibility and reduce barriers to engagement for students. The partnership opportunities offered via the Partners in Innovation Fellowships and the Student Champions initiatives were structured intentionally to reduce barriers, promote inclusion with the aim of promoting empowerment (see Gibson & Cook-Sather, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

Academic performance was deliberately excluded as a criterion within the application processes and student champions were paid, measures that should help to increase participation (Dwyer, 2018) and reduce barriers (Marquis et al., 2019). Given the number of student fellows (n=1850)[2], it was not possible (financially nor administratively) to pay them. Further, the number of student fellows, and their roles varied considerably, across projects (see Fellowship Impact Cases). Nonetheless many projects did include vouchers or other acknowledgement of students' time. Fellowship applications were required to explicitly design their projects to reduce barriers to student participation and this included reasonable expectations around realistic student time committment.

Other measures across the Stream included:

- Inclusive recruitment guidelines developed and implemented.
- Student recruitment information encouraged diverse applications.
- Student Champion applications were explicitly asked to identify supports that would help them to engage.
- Providing buses for travel to events and hybrid attendance options

[2] Compared to 98 Student Champions annually

- Single-sign on for My Digital Backpack and platform available to all students across the sector, both directly and via their home institution's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).
- Chatbots were developed as pilots by two partners. These were explicitly designed to make key information more accessible to all students 24/7.
- Accessibility principles applied in communications and activities, including MyDigitalBackpack and the pilot chatbots.
- Digital accessibility principles applied.

Support and capacity building

Measures which were embedded to enable support and capacity building included:

- Student Empowerment Co-ordinators in partner institutions provided significant support to students and to staff.
- Training for student champions.
- Training for staff and student fellows, with particular focus on inclusive partnership.
- Partnership toolkit
- EDI focused Digital Badges on MyDigitalBackpack

Co-creation

Inclusive partnership was a significant priority within the work of this stream.

- Partners in Innovation Fellowships explicitly promoted and supported co-creation at local level across the sector (170 projects, 1850 students and 600+ staff). An inclusive approach to partnership was an explicit criterion for evaluating applications.
- Student Champions evaluated the Digital Badges for MyDigitalBackpack.
- Student Champions co-created and led campaigns in their home institutions.
- The Student Competency Framework was co-developed by staff and Student Champions

Partners in Innovation Fellowship Scheme

The Partners in Innovation and Change Fellowship scheme was key initiative of the N-TUTORR Student Empowerment Stream that empowers students and staff to work in partnership to enhance the student experience. A total of 170 Fellowships were awarded across the technological higher education sector to support partnerships between several hundred staff and students that addressed the N-TUTORR themes of Academic Integrity, Digital Transformation, EDI, Education for Sustainability, Employability and UDL.

Approximately one-third of the projects addressed the EDI theme[3]. To provide a sense of the impact of these projects, they involved 295 student partners and 98 staff partners and have had a direct impact on 1648 students and 235 staff to date. They produced 10 platforms/resources(digital and physical), 12 events or workshops, 3 guidelines/toolkits and 3 pieces of research (see Carroll et al., 2024).

[3] Ninety-five projects completed the final project impact assessment, 29 of these (31%) addressed the EDI theme.

Fellowship teams had to include a minimum of two students and two members of staff. They were awarded €5,000 for small-scale projects that would result in concrete enhancements to the learning and/or the student experience.

Accessibility and inclusive design

The Students as Partners in Innovation and Change Fellowships was designed to address common challenges encountered in student-staff partnerships, to maximise student success and promote inclusion and accessibility (e.g. see Figure 1). An introductory document was prepared and distributed to all student and staff partners, to ensure a shared understanding of what is partnership (see Carroll et al., 2024). In addition, care was taken to ensure all information and materials were provided in accessible formats and a set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) was available online.

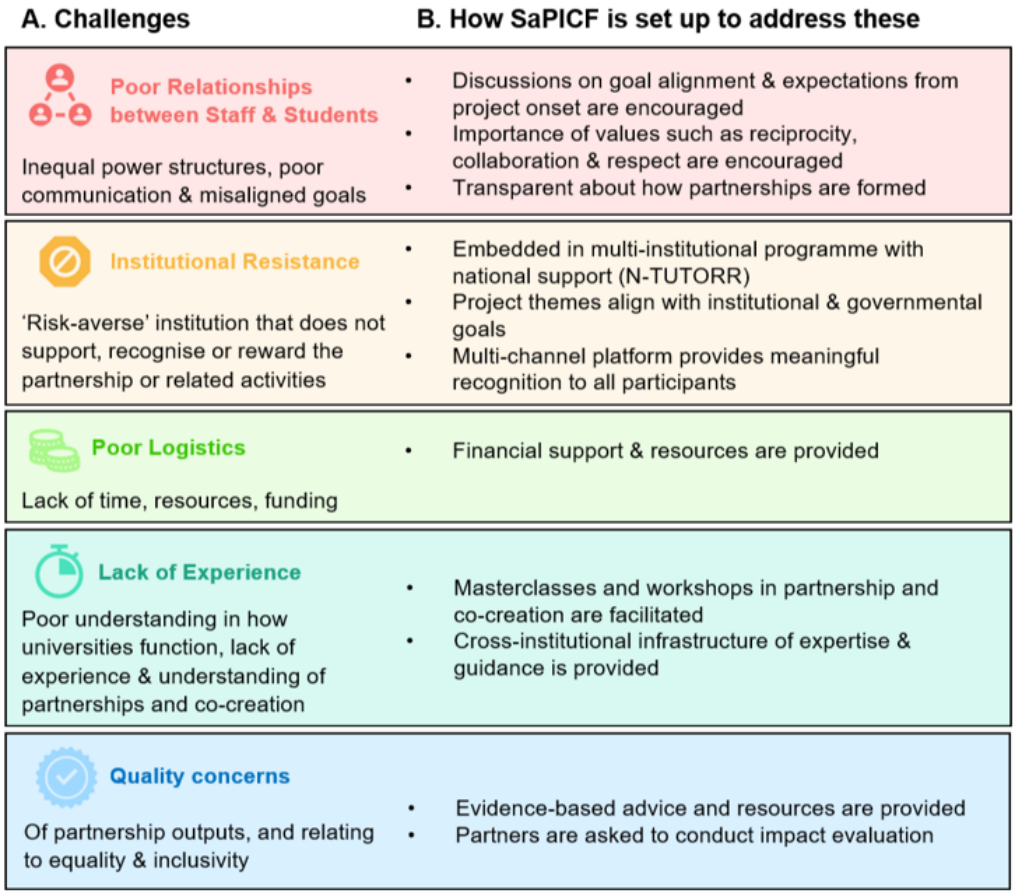

Figure 1. How the Partners in Innovation Fellowships were designed to maximise student success and promote inclusion. Carroll et al., 2023

Process

While student partnership aims to be inclusive, it is widely recognised that this is not always the case in practice and that not all students are offered, or can avail of, opportunities to work in partnership. Given this, the process was specifically designed to promote inclusivity.

Promotion

The initiative was heavily promoted within N-TUTORR partners, with the support of key stakeholders within each partner (Students' Union, Marketing Team, Heads of Department, Student Services, Library, EDI units in some cases). Each partner agreed a plan to raise awareness among students and staff. This included print/digital information, face-to-face and online information sessions.

Guidance was produced for local project teams that explicitly asked them to consider the impact of the process in terms of EDI. Specifically:

- Are there aspects of the process likely to disadvantage or advantage certain groups of students or staff?
- What can be done to ameliorate this?
- How can we encourage students from under-represented groups to participate?

Application Process

Inclusion was an important and explicit criterion by which applications were assessed. The application form specifically asked teams to:

> *Outline the steps taken to promote inclusive opportunities for partnership in this project. Explain how the project has considered potential barriers for students in terms of the promotion/recruitment to the project and participation and engagement in the project (e.g., time, costs, location etc.) What steps have been taken to enhance inclusiveness?*

Guidance emphasized the importance of realistic expectations in terms of the time and energy that students should be contributing to the project, alongside their studies and other commitments. While projects of this nature are typically driven by staff, there was a parallel application process for students who did not have staff partners. This was designed to reduce barriers to participation for students.

Evaluation of applications

The applications were evaluated anonymously by a panel that included members of the wider NTUTORR team, external experts and student representatives. To mitigate against the potential of biases, evaluators did not assess applications from their home institutions.

All applicants were notified of the outcome and given access to their scores and any feedback/comments. Unsuccessful student applicants were given an opportunity to discuss their application.

Capacity Building

Work was undertaken to support staff and students both pre-application and post award. This focused on building capacity for genuine partnership, with an emphasis on inclusion. This included:

- Masterclass on Fellowships and Partnership (online 18/1/23)
- Masterclass on partnership and project evaluation toolkit (25/9/25)
- Project toolkit
- Support locally from Student Empowerment Co-ordinators.

N-TUTORR Student Champions

The Student Champion initiative recruited students across the sector to develop student engagement and empowerment within their own HEIs. Ninety-eight were recruited in 2022 for the academic year. Further recruitment took place the following academic year. Each Champion engaged with one or more of the N-TUTORR themes:

- Academic Integrity
- Digital Transformation
- Education for Sustainability
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
- Employability

Accessibility and inclusive design

Care was taken to ensure all information and materials were provided in accessible formats.

A set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) was available online.

Process

The process was designed to be inclusive and to attract a wide range of students.

Promotion

The Students' Unions in each partner played an important role in promoting the opportunity, in addition to promotion by Student Services, Heads of Department, lecturers and Learning and Teaching units. As for the Fellowships, each partner agreed a plan to raise awareness among students and staff. This included print/digital information, face-to-face and online information sessions.

Importantly, these were paid roles. Student champions were paid for 10 hours work per month (€3,000 per year). Unpaid roles are widely acknowledged to exclude some students, particularly those who are less well-off (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Paid roles removed a barrier for some students.

Recruitment

Inclusive recruitment guidelines were developed by Dr Claire McGing, EDI Manager, IADT Dún Laoghaire. Applications were made online. Scoring was based on evidence of motivation, commitment to team, reflection on own experience as learner and the perspective they bring to the role, relevant skills and experience. Constructive feedback was available locally (in person, online or via email, as preferred) to unsuccessful applicants.

Pre-application support and guidance was provided by each partner locally. There was strong interest in these roles. Applications from each partner were shortlisted locally for interview. Shortlisted applicants had the option of face-to-face or online interviews.

EDI data monitoring

Students as Partners Fellowship EDI data

All student applicants were sent an email post-submission asking them to complete an anonymous EDI monitoring form. For team applicants, the project lead was asked to forward this to all student applicants.

Overall, the response rate is low which considerably limits the usefulness of this data (Figure 2A). This is consistent with broader trends observed in EDI student surveys in Irish HEIs, such as for Athena Swan self-assessments, which typically yield low response rates, hindering the ability to accurately capture and address the diversity profile and lived experiences of student groups.

In addition,nature of the projects meant that it was practically difficult to clearly identify the student partners for some time. While efforts were made to do this within each partner at an early stage, in practice it was very difficult to get the information. The Fellowships were awarded in June 2023, at the end of the academic year and for some projects, partners were not finalized until the next academic year. There was also some flux as projects developed, and students joined or sometimes left. A second survey was as the projects finished in 2024, however as only 8 responses were received this data is not included. The project lead was the key point of contact and disseminated information to the other members. This was a disadvantage in terms of contacting student partners, however there was no other practical way to manage this.

Overall, the limited evidence does suggest that the Fellowships attracted a diversity of students. The proportion of students from Irish Traveller and Roma backgrounds was above the sectoral benchmark (Figure 2B) and that of students with a disability was around the sectoral benchmark (Figure 2D). Self-reported gender included a non-binary option, however there is no benchmark to compare this figure to. Those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are at twice the rate of the national benchmark of 10% (Figure 2C), however this benchmark is for the entire higher education sector and the technological sector attracts a greater proportion of students from socio-economically disadvantaged groups than the traditional university sector. Nonetheless, this does suggest, on the basis of very limited data, that the fellowship initiative attracted a diversity of students.

Data prepared by Claire McGing. *Figure 2 prepared by Sarah Carroll*

Sources: HEA Equal Access Survey, 2021/22; HEA student demographics dashboard, 2021/22; HEA DIS Student Profile, 2020

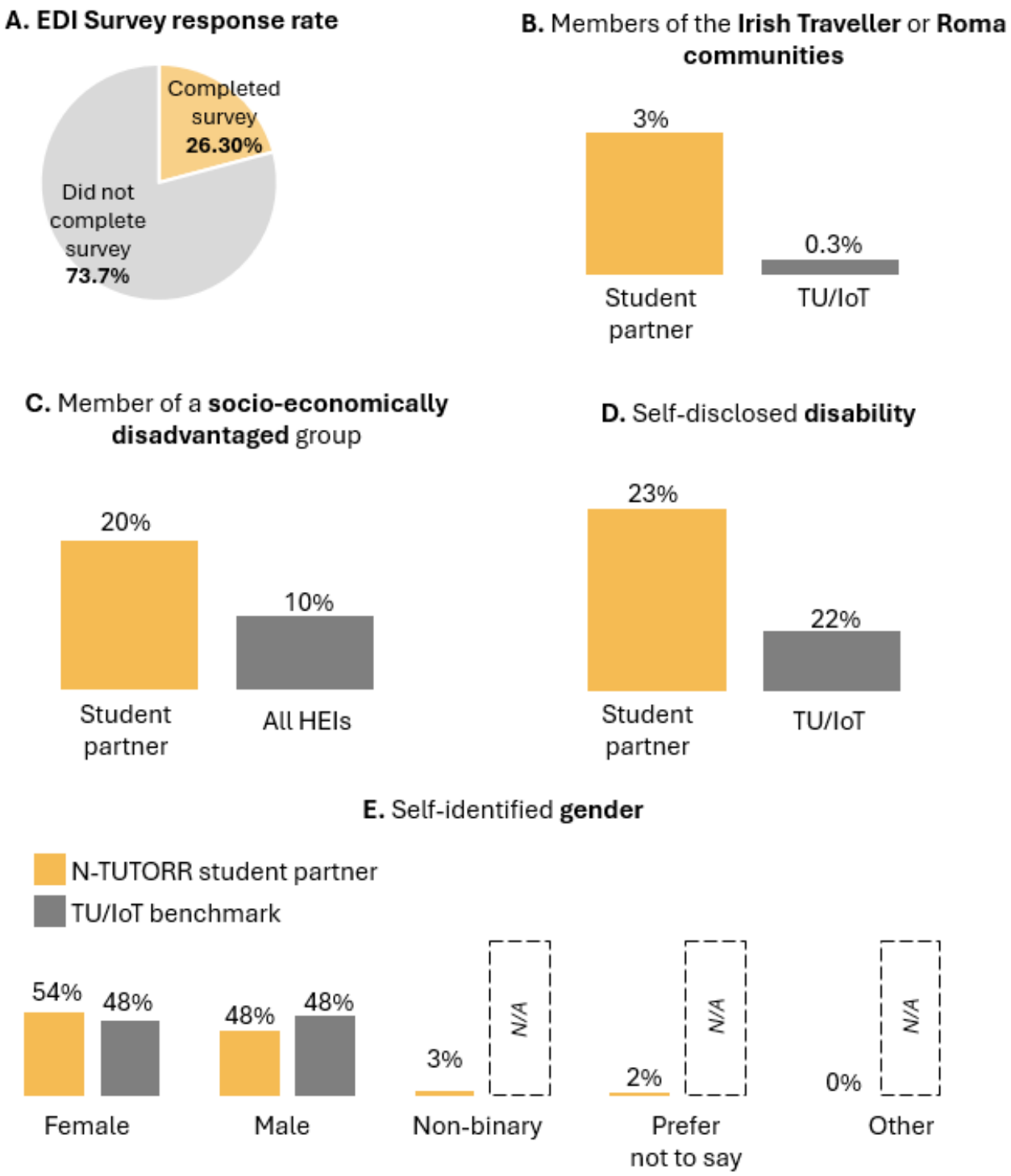

Figure 2. EDI data of Student Fellows. A. Response rate = 65/247. For B-D only 'Yes' responses shown. **B**. Q: Are you a member of the Irish Traveller or Roma communities? **C**. Q: Are you a member of a socio-economically disadvantaged group? Another 18% of respondents selected unsure/PNTS. This benchmark is the best capture of socio-economic disadvantage at present (based on DIS scores). The TU/IoT breakdown is unavailable; the figure includes all universities, TU/IoTs, and colleges that report to the HEA. **D**. Q: Do you have a disability? **E**. What is your gender?

Student Champions EDI data

Data was collected through voluntary self-disclosure using a very short anonymous survey. This measured categories in the *National Access Plan 2022-2028* to allow for benchmarking across the sector. Data was collected twice.

- All applicants were invited to complete this at the time of application (EDI survey was separate and could not be linked to applicant data).
- Once appointed, Student Champions were invited to complete the survey.

This allowed us to compare the diversity of applicants and successful candidates against sector benchmarks. By gathering the data at both points, we aimed to assess whether our applicant pool was representative of the wider population, and whether certain groups were disproportionately advantaged or disadvantaged during the selection process. The response rate for applicants was lower than that for appointees (Figure 3A). While this is not unexpected it does make it more difficult to make meaningful comparisons between the two.

Students from economically disadvantaged groups were represented in both groups at higher rates than the national benchmark, however, as noted earlier, this is almost certainly an under-estimate for the technological higher education sector (Figure 3C). Nonetheless, this data indicates that students from these groups were well represented. Notably, the proportion of appointees from socio-economically disadvantaged groups is greater than the proportion of applicants which suggests that the selection process did not disadvantage them.

The proportion of applicants with disabilities was lower than the benchmark (17% vs 22%) and this reduced further for appointees (13.5%, Figure 3D). While considerable efforts were made to encourage students with disabilities to apply, this does suggest that there may have been some barriers, particularly in the selection process. Finally, female students were over-represented both at the application and appointment stages (Figure 3E).

The first cohort of student champions were appointed for the academic year 2023/24. A second cohort was appointed Summer 2024 until the project ended in December 2024. This included continuing champions and newly appointed, depending on local needs. A further survey was distributed to this group. Unfortunately, the response rate was low and considerably lower than for the first cohort (Figure 1A). While the proportion of respondents who reported being members of a socioeconomically disadvantaged group is slightly higher than the sector benchmark, it is considerably lower than the rate for the first cohort (Figure 3C). Similarly, the proportion of second cohort champion respondents reporting a disability is lower than that for the first cohort and lower than the sector benchmark (Figure 3D). The proportion of female students was lower (Figure 3E). However, the discrepancy in response rates makes it difficult to make a meaningful comparison between these.

Data prepared by Claire McGing and Olya Antropova. Figure 3 prepared by Sarah Carroll

Sources: N-TUTORR EDI Surveys; HEA Equal Access Survey, 2021/22; HEA student demographics dashboard, 2021/22; HEA DIS Student Profile, 2020.

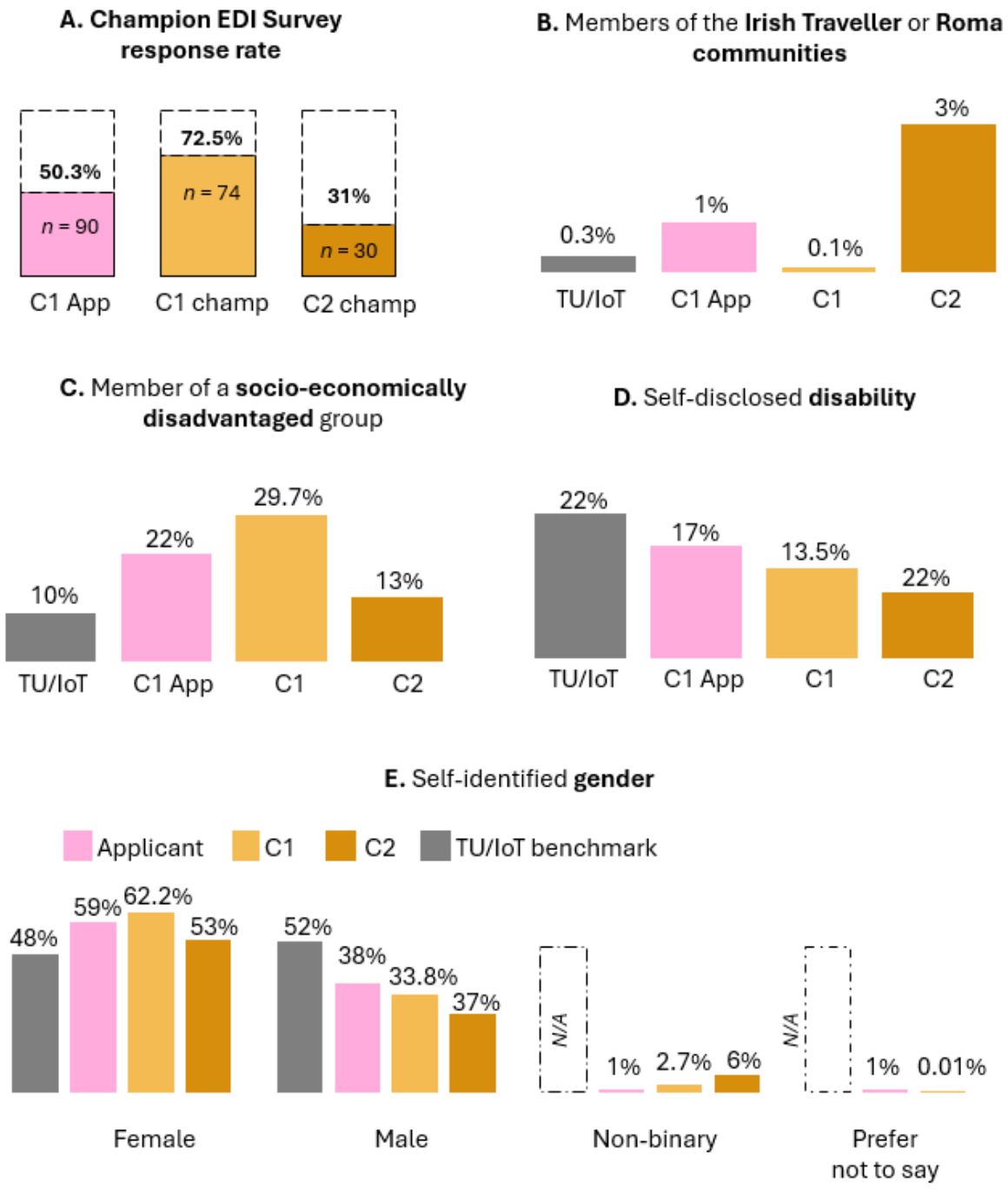

Figure 3. Student Champion EDI data. C1 = Cohort 1, C2 = Cohort 2. **A.** Response rate. For B-D only 'Yes' responses shown. **B**. Q: Are you a member of the Irish Traveller or Roma communities? **C**. Q: Are you a member of a socio-economically disadvantaged group? Another 17% of respondents selected unsure/PNTS. This benchmark is the best capture of socio-economic disadvantage at present (based on DIS scores). The TU/IoT breakdown is unavailable; the figure includes all universities, TU/IoTs, and colleges that report to the HEA. **D**. Q: Do you have a disability? **E**. What is your gender?

EDI monitoring Limitations

EDI monitoring data was collected from student partners and champions to allow comparison to national benchmarks aligned with the National Access Plan. However, this as this was voluntary, response rates varied which makes comparisons difficult. Further, the evolving nature of the fellowship projects and reliance on project leads, meant that it was difficult to carry out additional surveys. This was further compounded by the short project timeline and very high level of activity within the stream which limited our capacity to assess inclusivity in greater depth.

Monitoring had focused on NAP categories and this was important in terms of aligning with national strategy. However, this does not include ethnicity, which is clearly an important factor, although there are no sectoral benchmarks. Consideration was given to including this in the second round of monitoring for the Student Champions, however, given the relatively small number of Champions, and their high profile, this was felt to be too intrusive in terms of privacy. In future work, including a wider range of characteristics would be preferable, but this needs to be balanced with privacy considerations and there is a need for sectoral guidancearound this.

A further limitation is the lack of qualitative data. While the benchmarked data provided useful insights, qualitative data would have enabled deeper insights, particularly into potential barriers in recruitment and engagement. A wider range of methods would also help to overcome some of the privacy concerns.

Conclusions and recommendations

To conclude, EDI was integral to the student empowerment stream from the outset and informed the development of the workpackages, fostering an inclusive approach. EDI principles informed the structures and processes used to develop and deliver the workpackages. These measures certainly will have contributed to greater inclusivity, although this is difficult to measure, particularly for activities such as MyDigitalBackPack. Certainly, the stream raised awareness of inclusivity, particularly partnership approaches and increased the opportunities for dialogue. The evidence, while limited, does suggest that the key student engagement activities performed well in terms of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds but less well in terms of engaging students with disabilities. Male students were underrepresented overall. Further work, particularly qualitative evidence, is needed to explore this and identify ways to promote engagement from an EDI perspective. While the evidence is limited, there are indications of greater student diversity in the fellowship scheme than among the Student Champions. This would not be surprising as the number of student partners was very much greater than the number of Student Champions (1800 vs 98) and, in some cases, included entire class groups.

On the basis of our experience, we recommend:

- Intentionally design work to embed inclusivity as an integral part of the project,
- Include EDI assessment as part of a final impact evaluation, rather than as a separate activity.
- Draw on the NAP benchmarks, but include measures of ethnicity and investigate the scope to collate data on additional diversity characteristics
- Incorporate qualitative feedback specifically around EDI,
- Explore how to increase male student engagement
- Use student partnership to increase inclusivity.

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Appendix

EDI monitoring tables for Student Fellows

Response rate	**%**
65/247	26.30%

Q1. Are you a member of the Irish Traveller or Roma communities?		
	NTUTORR	**TU/IoT**
Yes	3%	0.3%

Q2. Are you a member of a socio-economically disadvantaged group?		
	NTUTORR*	**Sector (all HEIs) ****
Yes	20%	10%

** Another 18% of respondents selected unsure/PNTS.*

*** This benchmark is the best capture of socio-economic disadvantage at present (based on DIS scores). The TU/IoT breakdown is unavailable; the figure includes all universities, TU/IoTs, and colleges that report to the HEA.*

Q3. Do you have a disability (including intellectual disabilities)?		
	NTUTORR	**TU/IoT**
Yes	23%	22%

Q4. Describe your gender.	**NTUTORR**	**TU/IoT**
Female	54%	48%
Male	42%	52%
Non-binary	3%	N/A
Prefer not to say	2%	N/A
Other	0%	N/A

EDI monitoring tables for Cohort 1

Table 1. Total response rates. Applicants and Appointees.

Cohort	%	*N*
Applicants	50.3	90
Appointees	72.5	74

Table 2. Membership of Irish Traveller/Roma communities. Q: Are you a member of the Irish Traveller or Roma Communities?

Cohort	Yes %	No %
TU/IoT benchmark	0.3	0.7
Applicants	1	-
Appointees	0.03	97.3

Table 3. Membership of socio-economically disadvantaged group. Q2: Are you a member of a socio-economically disadvantaged group? *PNS = Prefer not to say.*

Cohort	Yes %	No %	PNS %	Unsure %
Sector (All HEIs benchmark)**	10	-	-	-
Applicants	22	-	-	-
Appointees	29.7	58.10	5.4	6.8

** Another 17% of respondents selected Unsure/PNTS. ** This benchmark is currently the best capture of socio-economic disadvantage in Irish higher education (based on DIS scores). The TU/IoT breakdown is unavailable; the figure includes all universities, TU/IoTs, and colleges that report to the HEA.*

Table 4. Self-reported disabilities. Q3: Do you have a disability (including intellectual disabilities)? *PNS = Prefer Not to Say*

Cohort	Yes %	No %	PNS %	Unsure %
TU/IoT benchmark	22	-	-	-
Applicants	17	-	-	-
Appointees	13.5	82.4	4.1	-

Table 5. Gender. *Q4: Describe your gender. PNS = Prefer Not to Say*

Cohort	Female %	Male %	Non-Binary %	PNS %	Unsure %
TU/IoT benchmark	48	52	-	-	-
Applicants	59	38	1	1	1
Appointees	62.2	33.8	2.7	0.01	0

EDI monitoring tables for Cohort 2

Table 1. Response rate for second cohort

	%	*N*
Champions (cohort 2)	31	30

Membership of Irish Traveller/Roma communities. Q: Are you a member of the Irish Traveller or Roma Communities?

Cohort	Yes %	No %
TU/IoT benchmark	0.3	0.7
Champions (cohort 2)	3	-

Table 3. Membership of socio-economically disadvantaged group. Q2: Are you a member of a socio-economically disadvantaged group? *PNS = Prefer not to say.*

Cohort	Yes %	No %	PNS %	Unsure %
Sector (All HEIs benchmark)**	10	-	-	-
Champions (cohort 2)	13	63	6	16

Table 4. Self-reported disabilities. Q3: Do you have a disability (including intellectual disabilities)? *PNS = Prefer Not to Say*

Cohort	Yes %	No %	PNS %	Unsure %
TU/IoT benchmark	22	-	-	-
Champions (cohort 2)	10	90	-	-

Table 5. Gender. *Q4: Describe your gender. PNS = Prefer Not to Say*

Cohort	Female %	Male %	Non-Binary %	PNS %	Unsure %
TU/IoT benchmark	48	52	-	-	-
Champions (cohort 2)	53	37	6		3

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