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### Under-Represented Groups in Post-Secondary Education in Ontario and the Republic of Ireland

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#### Introduction

Three major recurring themes exist in higher education (HE): quality, access, and funding. These concepts are interrelated in such a way that if one of them is altered, at least one of the other two must be altered as well in order to maintain balance (Clark, Moran, Skolnik, & Trick, 2009). Ultimately, for a post-secondary education (PSE) system to be successful, all three of these parameters must be in harmony (Clark *et al.*, 2009). There is a growing consensus that PSE is important to society in providing the skills workers require in the labour market, in supporting the social and economic health of the society, and in ensuring individuals have the necessary abilities to participate and contribute fully in that society and labour market (Deller&Oldford, 2011).

The demands for HE are greater than ever but the barriers to access PSE are often complex, multi-faceted, and inter-related (Deller&Oldford, 2011, p.1). These barriers are even more pronounced among under-represented groups (e.g., students with disabilities, from low-income families, and with parents who have no PSE<sup>1</sup>) because they are faced with additional and unique challenges when they are trying to access and participate in PSE. Access refers to the general concept that relates to making higher education accessible and to a shorthand of programs that provide preparation for entry to higher education (Harvey, 2004). Widening or increasing access refers to “increasing the number of socio-economically disadvantaged students in higher education” (Bernard, 2006, p.20). Access to and participation in HE are important concepts to examine for several reasons. First, as countries strive to become knowledge-based economics, HE will play a significant role in assisting with this shift by widening access and encouraging participation in PSE where the ultimate goal is to generate human capital and knowledge that will lead to productivity and practical application in the society (Lennon, 2010). Second, this is important for equity reasons because there are clear private economic and non-economic benefits to PSE and there are important social benefits to PSE where the economy will benefit as whole when majority of the population is educated (Norrie & Zhao, 2011, p.5). Third, the demand for PSE is higher than ever with Ontario projecting to be estimated at 463,000 undergraduate universities students and 236,000 college students by 2034 (Janzen, 2012a). Similarly, the Republic of Ireland projects that approximately 70% of the total secondary students will be entering higher education by 2020 (B. Gormley, personal communication, June 13th, 2012). Therefore, strategies and programs that promote accessibility and participation are needed in order to meet the anticipated demand.

#### Overview of Ontario's Postsecondary Education System

The Ontario's PSE system is the responsibility of the provincial

government, specifically the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) (Clark *et al.*, 2009). The system can be described as a homogenous system and it is comprised of 19 publicly funded universities and 24 Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (Clark *et al.*, 2009). In the 1960s, Ontario underwent a massive expansion with several new universities being built (e.g., York and Trent University) while simultaneously undergoing differentiation by creating the college system where the purpose was that colleges will be “separate but equal to universities,” although it was made very clear by the universities that transferability will be very limited between the two types of institutions (Clark *et al.*, 2009, p.156). The key characteristics of Ontario universities include having their own individual charters, being autonomous, degree-granting abilities from the undergraduate to the doctoral level, academic freedom, heavy emphasis on research, and non-for-profit institutions (Clark *et al.*, 2009).

Colleges' main focus is on vocational training and remedial upgrades for adult learners where the emphasis is on providing a skilled labour force to meet the economy's needs (Clark *et al.*, 2009). The key characteristics of colleges are that they are vocational-focus, non-for-profit crown corporations of the provincial government, they have the authority to grant diplomas and certificates and since 2002, they also granted applied baccalaureate degrees. Each college has their own Board of Governors and academic councils where the latter is responsible for academic matters and is authorize to make recommendations to the president. Colleges do not have their own Charter as they are mandated by the Ontario's government. In 2002, the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act was established that gives authority to five colleges to grant applied baccalaureate degrees (Clark *et al.*, 2009).

Ontario's universities and colleges are funded by enrollment-based funding formulas and direct funding for specific programs and services (Clark *et al.*, 2009, Lang, 2005). Currently, the student population in Ontario represents approximately 40% of the total Canadian student population (MTCU, 2012). According to Statistics Canada (2012), the total enrollment in Ontario's universities and colleges are 583,677 and 161,778 respectively in 2009-2010. The total full-time enrollment at Ontario's universities increased from 227,131 in 2000-2001 to 351,263 in 2009-2010 (Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) Quick Stats, n.d.). At the same time, the total full-time enrolment at colleges increased from 168,560 in 1997 to 211,817 in 2010 (HEQCO Quick Stats, n.d.). Access to PSE is a key priority for Ontario and this is exemplified through the 2010 Throne Speech where it states that Ontario's goal is to reach a 70% attainment target of the population being post-secondary educated with a particular focus on increasing access and participation for under-represented groups (Deller&Oldford, 2011; Norrie & Zhao, 2011). In order to reach this target, it will require an emphasis on increasing access to and participation in PSE for traditionally under-represented groups such as low-income youth, students with disabilities, from immigrant families, students with parents with no PSE, and students living in rural areas (Deller&Oldford, 2011; Norrie & Zhao, 2011, p.3). In particular, the additional groups that are under-represented in higher education in Ontario include: aboriginals, francophones, new Canadians, first generation students, and Western provinces luring high school students to oil fields

(Dietsche, October 3rd, 2012).

## Overview of The Republic of Ireland's Postsecondary Education System

The Republic of Ireland's PSE is considered a third-level sector and the binary system is comprised of seven Universities and fourteen Institutes of Technology (IoTs) (B.Gormley, personal communication, June 13th, 2012). The Republic of Ireland is one of the signatories to the Bologna Declaration signed in June 1999 (McMahon, 2010). The Republic of Ireland has a binary system because it retains the flexibility, access, and responsiveness of the PSE system to respond to the needs of students and to a wide variety of social and economic requirements (Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), n.d.). Similar to Ontario, universities have the authority to grant and award their own undergraduate and graduate degrees and they focus on basic and applied research while the HETAC is the awarding body that authorizes IoTs to grant diplomas, certificates, and some applied undergraduate degrees. The designations granted by HETAC are more aligned with the labour market needs and the economy (B.Gormley, personal communication, June 13th, 2012). There is a growing involvement at IoTs to conduct applied research in attempt to remain competitive in the PSE system (B.Gormley, personal communication, June 13th, 2012).

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) was established in 1971 and its main responsibility is to advance development in higher education and assist in the coordination of State investment in higher education (HEA, n.d.). Universities and IoTs are funded directly by the HEA (HEA, n.d.). According to B.Gormley, funding for PSE is enrollment-based, either determined by the number of students or by the types of program offered where if an institution is more research-focused, the more money they will receive (Personal Communication, June 13th, 2012). To increase access, tuition fees were eliminated in 1996 and students only have to pay a "Student's Contribution Fee". However, this contribution fee has steadily increased over the years where the current amount that students have to pay is approximately €2,000 pounds (approximately \$3,180.43 CDN based on Dec 1st currency rate) in the 2011-2012 academic year.

The Republic of Ireland has made significant gain in terms of access and participation:

The very substantial and steady increase in the number of places at third level (universities and IoTs) over the last 20 years is one of the most remarkable developments in modern Irish education...

The availability and supply of substantial numbers of highly qualified graduates with third-level qualifications contributed significantly to Ireland's much improved economic circumstances. (HEA's National Plan, 2008, p.24)

Statistics support the HEA's claim. For example, full-time studies in higher education grew from 41,000 in 1980 to 140,000 in 2004 where the expansion in IoTs is greater than the in the university sector: 388% increase in IoTs versus 174% increase in universities between 1980-2004 (HEA's National Plan, 2008; McCoy and Smyth, 2011). Thus, this is a 35% increase in the higher education participation rate from 1980 to 2004. The

overall undergraduate full-time enrollment for the university sector is 78,973 while the overall undergraduate full-time enrollment for IoTs is 60,119 respectively (HEA's 10/11 Key Facts and Figures, 2012). Seventy percent of full-time undergraduate entrants are between the ages of 17-19 (B. Gormley, Personal Communication, June 13th, 2012). Full-time undergraduates are made up of 49.1% male and 50.9% females (HEA's 10/11 Key Facts and Figures, 2012). However, these statistics mask the continuing social inequality in access and entry to higher education by under-represented groups (McCoy and Smyth, 2011).

It is interesting to note that the overall structure of Ontario and the Republic of Ireland's PSE systems are similar in several ways. First, both PSE systems provide students with the option of pursuing higher education either through universities or colleges in Ontario or IoTs in the Republic of Ireland. Ontario and the Republic of Ireland's universities are autonomous and both have the authority to grant their own degrees from the baccalaureate level to the doctoral level while Ontario's colleges and the Republic of Ireland's IoTs are both authorized to grant diplomas, certificates, and some applied baccalaureate degrees (Clark *et al.*, 2009). The latter is similar in that both types of institutions are vocational-focus, cheaper than universities, and they are more geographically spread out in comparison to universities (B. Gormley, personal communication, June 13th, 2012; Clark *et al.*, 2009). This is especially prevalent in the Republic of Ireland since most of the universities are concentrated in urban areas. Second, both Ontario and the Republic of Ireland PSE systems are funded by enrollment-based formulas based on the number of students or programs (B. Gormley, personal communication, June 13th, 2012; Clark *et al.*, 2009; Lang, 2005). Currently, both Ontario and the Republic of Ireland's PSE systems are experiencing a reduction in funding due to government cutbacks. For example: a report from the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities determined that direct government funding per student fell by \$1,474 between 1995 and 2001, which forced universities to make up the annual shortfall of more than \$107 million. As a result, spending on infrastructure of buildings and staff reduction are occurring at post-secondary institutions (Payne, 2003). In Ontario, the Vice-President of University Operations at the University of Toronto reported that 49% of the operating funding budget comes from students' tuition fees due to government cutbacks (Malbury, 2012). Based on the comparison above; I would conclude that both PSE's systems are similar. For the purpose of this paper, only the common groups between Ontario and the Republic of Ireland (e.g., students with disabilities, from low-income families, and with parents who have no PSE) will be discussed for comparison purposes.

#### Similarities between Ontario and The Republic of Ireland's PSE Systems

Students with disabilities, from low-income families, and with parents who do not have any PSE have historically been under-represented in higher education in Ontario and in the Republic of Ireland. A possible explanation is that higher education was considered elite access and only upper class men were allowed to pursue higher education in the early 20th century (Trow, 1972). The purpose of higher education was to create knowledge for the sake of knowledge itself and not to teach skills or acquire applicable knowledge (Newman, 1873/1976). It is also important to recognize that students from these under-represented groups tend to

belong to one or more of above mentioned categories. For example, students from low-income families are more likely to have parents who do not have any PSE. The following section will provide background information on these under-represented groups in Ontario, followed by a discussion of some of the strategies that Ontario is currently using to increase access to and participation in higher education. A similar discussion about the Republic of Ireland will follow.

### ***Increasing Access for Students with Disabilities***

In Ontario, data collected from the Youth in Transition Survey as cited in Norrie & Zhao (2011, p.14) state that 68.3% of the respondents with a documented disability participated in PSE compared to 83.7% of students with no disability. Chambers, Sukai, & Bolton (2011) reported that the average percentage of students with disabilities represented on campuses is 5.67% and the average number of total students on campuses is 10,746 respectively. The additional costs that these students face in attending and completing PSE and the greater uncertainties they may encounter in labour markets upon graduation contributes to the low rates of participation in PSE (Norrie & Zhao, 2011). Chambers *et al.*(2011) found that nearly half of the participants in their study expected to graduate with a total debt of more than \$20,000 and 81% of the participants were concerned about the amount of debt they will incur by the time they graduate. In addition to the challenges encountered by all students, students with disabilities are faced with extra and unique challenges. First, they take longer to complete their education, largely due to either their disability and/or government requirements regarding course limits. Second, they also meet an increasingly challenging work environment, as many struggle with the demands of heavy work and school schedules coupled with restrictions limiting the types of work and opportunities available. Third, the additional expense of assistive aids, medication, and support services, including the cost of being assessed to receive full documentation of their disability, which alone can exceed \$3,000, acts as another barrier to success in PSE. Unfortunately, much of these costs are being borne by the students and yet without these services and resources, many students would be unable to complete their postsecondary education. Therefore, the reality is that even with government financial assistance, students with disabilities still end up accumulating significant debt upon graduation.

To help increase access to and participation in PSE, the Ontario government and institutions are implementing strategies to lessen the burden. First, all Ontario institutions have an accessibility office where students with disabilities are provided with support and accommodation. Disabilities can be either physical, mental, learning, or multiple disabilities. For example, the University of Toronto (UofT) has an Accessibility Centre, which provides academic accommodations such as test centre, note-takers, and scribes to students with documented disabilities the equal opportunities to achieve academic and co-curricular success (UofT Accessibility Services, n.d.). Second, Chambers *et al.* (2011) suggested strategies to address the financial and educational needs of students with disabilities. From a financial need perspective, since these students are often required to take reduced course loads for full-time status, thus prolonging their undergraduate experience, government and institutions can considered extending access to financial assistance over a longer period of time and increase the number of grants offered. Furthermore, the requirements for

students to be eligible for financial aid can be re-evaluated to ensure that they are accurate and reflective of the population. In addition, the government and institutions can consider including longer grace periods for loan repayments, partial loan forgiveness, and income tax breaks on direct loan payments from pay cheques since it typically takes the students longer than four years to complete an undergraduate program. From an educational need perspective, more effective coordination and communication of institutional-based resources would help ease some of the confusion and challenges that students with disabilities experience, especially those in first year, who are simultaneously dealing with transitional issues. Lastly, better and comprehensive training for faculty and staff members on the needs and experiences of students with disabilities as well as the services and resources that are available to them should be provided to enhance their understanding of this population. Therefore, they will contribute to student success by providing more accurate and relevant services to this population and helping them meaningful relationships at their institutions.

Similar to Ontario, students with disabilities in the Republic of Ireland have been to date, significantly under-represented in the Irish's PSE system due to the historic lack of support for them throughout the education system and the low educational expectations (HEA's National Plan, 2008). For example, it is estimated that approximately 3.20% of all undergraduate students have disabilities in 2005-2006 (HEA's National Plan, 2008). Current participation rates are estimated at 15-17% for people with sensory disabilities and 14-16% for people with physical disabilities (HEA's National Plan, 2008). One of the factors in increasing the participation rates of people with disabilities in higher education is that learners with disabilities are now increasingly integrated and successful in the primary and second-level system, thus providing these students with the necessary academic attainment and resources to aspire to and compete for opportunities in further and higher education (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE), n.d.). Significant improvements have been made in attempt to increase this group's participation. For example, students with a specific learning disability are the largest category of new entrants in 2010-2011 although they require an additional 43.3% of support (HEA's 10/11 Key Facts and Figures, 2012). Although efforts have been made at increasing access and participation for students with disabilities in higher education, evidence still indicates that their participation rate is still very low in comparison to students with no disabilities.

There are several strategies that the Republic of Ireland is using to increase access to and participation in HE for students with disabilities. First, all post-secondary institutions have designated disability officers who are responsible for coordinating the support and accommodation for students with disabilities (HEA's National Plan, 2008, HEA's Mid-Term Review, 2010). Second, the Disability Act was established in 2005 which requires all public bodies, including publicly funded education providers, to ensure that access by people with disabilities to their services is a fully integrated element of the overall service provision (EADSNE, n.d.). Therefore, this allowed institutions to be in a more proactive position of ensuring access to services by students with disabilities. Third, the government has allocated specific funding for students with disabilities.

Funding is provided under three main headings: assistive technology, academic/personal support, and transportation needs (EADSNE, n.d.). For example, 3,849 and 6,097 students in the 2008-2009 and 2010-2011 academic years were approved for support through the Fund for Students with Disabilities grant for a gross allocation of €13.7 million (EADSNE, n.d.; HEA's annual report, 2011). Lastly, the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) was established, which is an independent non-profit organization, whose mandate is to promote full access to and participation in further and higher education for students with disabilities and to enhance their employment prospects after graduation (AHEAD, n.d.).

### ***Increasing Access for Students from Low Income Families***

Both Ontario and the Republic of Ireland have an under representation of students from low-income families accessing and participating in higher education. This will continue to be an emerging challenge as both PSE systems are shifting towards universal and mass access<sup>3</sup>. One possible explanation for this is that the combination of the high cost to participate in higher education and the limited opportunities to combine work and study are hindering this group from participating in PSE (Bernard, 2006).

In Ontario, the general trend is that post-secondary enrollments are rising but not among students from low-income families. Specifically, approximately half of these students who are pursuing PSE are not taking advantage of government grants and loans such as the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) that are designed to help them (Deller&Oldford, 2011). Five to twenty percent of students from this group are loan-averse, which means that they will avoid grant opportunities when they are coupled with an optional student loan even though the loans can be refused due cultural (e.g., receiving financial assistance is perceived a weak) and social reasons (e.g., lack of understanding of the financial system) (Frenette& Robson, 2011). In Ontario's universities, the participation rate is more pronounced with individuals from families earning over \$100,000 annually *being more than twice likely* to attend university than those from families earning less than \$25,000 annually (Deller&Oldford, 2011). This gap remains relatively constant and has increased slightly from 1999-2009 (Zhao, 2012). Therefore, the general conclusion is that family income has a strong impact on students' decision to pursue PSE in Ontario.

Deller&Oldford (2011) found that students from low-income families cite the following reasons for not pursuing PSE: financial (e.g., the lack of money and the fear of debt), parental factor (e.g., parental education, influence, and involvement), and their secondary school experience (e.g., high school marks and the quality of their high school). The researchers reported that Ontario students from low-income families perceive finances and debt aversion as significant barriers to entering or continuing PSE and they tend to have the highest average estimates of the cost of pursuing a PSE because of the lack of understanding about the Ontario's post-secondary education, specifically the financial aid, systems. However, research by Junor and Usher (2004, p.104) showed that participation rates from this group remains stagnant regardless of changes in tuition levels or student financial assistance where "the evidence to support the notion that price—that is, tuition and foregone income—is a barrier to access is, in an

aggregate sense, slim to nonexistent.” Richard Wiggers’s research from HEQCO on the issue of access for under-represented groups also support Junor and Usher (2004) conclusion where his research showed that the cost of a PSE is not the only factor that influences students’ decision to pursue HE. There are other factors that play a role in this decision such as cultural, lack of knowledge, and parents’ PSE.

Deller&Oldford (2011) also reported that parents’ ability to contribute to their children’s PSE and parents’ educational background are critical factors in young people’s decision to pursue PSE, regardless of their parental income. Results from the Youth in Transition survey shows that having parents with no PSE is an important determinant of whether an Ontario youth will pursue higher education (Norrie & Zhao, 2011). However, this impact is only marginally reduced when other factors (e.g., economics and secondary school experience) are considered together. Many children of immigrants pursue PSE because their parents who are trained professional in their home country but are unable to get their credentials recognized by the Canadian government, encourage them to do so because they understand the value of getting a PSE. For example, 53.7% of children from parents who have some PSE are more likely to pursue universities compared to 25.7% of children from parents who have no PSE (Norrie & Zhao, 2011, p13). While university participation is greater for youth from higher-income families, those with at least one university-educated parent are 40% more likely to attend university than those whose parents have a high school education or less (Zhao, 2012).

Lastly, Deller&Oldford (2011) reported that students’ secondary school experience also influence their decision to pursue PSE. Specifically, students’ marks, the quality of the secondary institution, and the location of the institution influence whether students will pursue higher education. Motivation is another factor that influences access and participation and it is intertwined with all of the factors discussed above. For example, if a student decides early in one’s secondary career they want to pursue higher education, he/she is more like to engage in the appropriate steps to ensure that they will reach this goal (Deller&Oldford, 2011). In summary, students from low-income families are often faced with multiple barriers such as financial and parental factors that will hinder their access to and participation in higher education. They often make decisions about PSE during their secondary experience without being fully informed with the necessary and correct information about the different pathways to PSE and the various programs that are available. Therefore, the information provided during students’ secondary school experience as well as the overall secondary school experience influence their decision to pursue HE.

There are several ways that Ontario is trying to increase the access and participation of students from low-income families. First, the Ontario government introduced the Student Access Guarantee (SAG) in 2006 that “promises that no Ontario student should be prevented from attending Ontario’s public colleges and universities due to the lack of financial support” (Deller&Oldford, 2001, p.7). However, the catch with this guarantee is that the students must already be OSAP recipients, which most students in this group would qualify. However, as research by Frenette and Robson (2011) indicated, 5-25% of these students do not take advantage of these opportunities. This also raises the question of equity

and fairness since this guarantee excludes students who do not qualify for OSAP but are still struggling financially to pay for their PSE. Second, some institutions have expanded on the OSAP program by providing additional financial assistance to students who are eligible for OSAP. For example, the University of Toronto has a University of Toronto Advance Planning for Student program (UTAPS) whose mandate is to ensure that students who are assessed by OSAP as requiring maximum assistance and whose assessed need is not fully covered by the government aid, the University will ensure that the unmet needs are met (UTAPS, n.d.).

Third, to create an overall more accessible and equitable PSE and to remove some of the financial barriers, the government established the new 30% off Ontario Tuition Grant for students from the middle-income families since they tend to be students who do not qualify for OSAP but they are still struggling to finance their education (MTCU, 2012). Fourth, the provincial government made the promise that there would be a space for every qualified Ontario student by creating an additional 60,000 spaces in the system and creating conditions to reach the 70% attainment rate among Ontario's adult population (MTCU, 2012). In order to reach this target, participation rates from this group and other previously under-represented groups need to increase in order to realistically achieve this goal. Lastly, an idea proposed by the MTCU is to offer year-round learning at post-secondary institutions. The advantages of this include increasing choice for students, giving students the opportunity to decide when they want to work (e.g., fall, winter, or summer), and allowing students to earn their credentials sooner, which could result in decreasing PSE-related costs (MTCU, 2012). However, one problem with this idea is that the students will have decreased earning power of students for those who chooses to attend school instead of working during the summer term in order to finance their education. This idea can be further enhanced by more technology-enabled models of delivery (MTCU, 2012).

In the Republic of Ireland, Clancy research as cited in Bernard (2006) has dominated the framework that is used to define access entry and the characteristics used to identify students from low socio-economic background for the past 30 years. Clancy research as cited in Bernard (2006) examined the patterns of entry to higher education by socio-economic background in 1980, 1986, 1992, and 1998. The main conclusion from the Clancy research is that there is large expansion in the third-level participation in the Republic of Ireland from 1950-1998, which is in line with European trends, but this expansion mask the patterns of inequality in higher education participation. Specifically, the participation ratios for under-represented groups increased from 1980 as part of the expansion in higher education. However, the participation ratios for these groups have remained significantly below the highest participation ratio of students from high socio-economic background, implying clear patterns of inequality (Bernard, 2006). In conclusion, Clancy's work has been so influential in the Republic of Ireland that it has been perceived as the only approach to analyzing educational inequality and it has provided a framework and justification for actions to support socio-economically under-represented students in accessing higher education (Bernard, 2006).

McCoy and Smyth (2011) found that the entry rates to HE are the lowest among the "lower-manual group" with a 9% participation rate at

universities and a 15% participation rate at IoTs respectively. The “lower-manual group” is comprised mostly of service workers such as bus drivers, barbers, childcare workers, and waiters/waitresses (McCoy and Byrne, 2011). McCoy and Byrne (2011) identified educational, economic, and parental factors as contributing to this low rate of participation in HE. For example, the results that secondary students obtained on the Leaving Certificate Examination significantly determine whether they would pursue PSE. The researchers reported that most of the students from this group did not perform well on this exam and the poor outcomes can be attributed to their negative secondary school experience, which results in the self-efficiency belief that, “college is not for me” (2011, p.149). In addition, similar to Ontario students, economics is another contributing factor where the students felt that the financial commitment would be too great and they would put too much hardship on their parents. Furthermore, many felt that they would not qualify for financial aid, which shows that students have a low financial literacy and the lack of understanding about the financial system.

McCoy and Byrne (2011) also identified that parents’ education has a significant influence on whether their offspring would pursue higher education. For those parents who have no PSE, they were highly supportive in “whatever they (their children) wanted to do” because they do not know any better and their parents did not encourage or discourage them to pursue any specific PSE path (p.151). Furthermore, due to the current youth unemployment rate, there may be increased pressure from parents on these students to forego PSE and seek employment instead to help out their families. Also, the participation in PSE varies strongly between different communities where the poorest communities have the lowest level of participation and the richest communities have the highest participation rate in PSE (HEA’s National Plan, 2008, p.26). The main conclusion is that there is multitude of factors that influences students in this group as to whether or not they will pursue higher education and these factors are often multi-faceted and inter-related. These results echo research conducted by Deller&Oldford (2011) and Zhao (2012) on Ontario students described earlier.

Similar to Ontario, the Republic of Ireland utilizes a combination of financial and non-financial strategies to increase access to and participation in PSE. The most dramatic policy change in attempt to remove the financial barrier to PSE is when the Irish government abolished tuition fees in 1996. The assumption is that by eliminating tuition fees, more students will be inclined to pursue PSE. However, research from McCoy and Smyth (2011) found that the removal of tuition fees did not have the significant impact that the government had hoped because it did not increase working class participation in higher education since other direct costs (e.g., accommodation and textbooks) remained high and employment represented an attractive option. This argument is also supported by B. Gormley who states that even though tuition fees have been removed since 1996, there are other indirect costs of higher education that makes it inaccessible to all (personal communication, June 13th, 2012). The specific indirect cost that he is referring to is the “Student Contribution Fee”, which every student must pay in order to attend PSE. This fee essentially covers non-tuition costs such as ancillary fees, student programs and services, and library access to name a few. However, this Student Contribution Fee

does not cover other indirect costs such as commuting, phone/internet cost, and printing costs. Furthermore, this contribution fee has been increasing steadily over the years where the cost is approximately €2,000 in 2011-2012 per student. This implies that by reducing one element of direct cost (e.g., tuition fees), it is not sufficient to produce a change in the participation rate when other direct costs remain high. Therefore, the abolishment of tuition fees did not reduce the class differentiation in participation nor did it boosted the overall participation rates.

In addition to abolishing tuition fees, the Irish government and the HEA used other financial strategies to improve financial literacy and to increase access for students. First, all institutions funded by the HEA are allocated core access funding, such as the Student Assistance Fund, to support the recruitment and participation of under-represented students in higher education (HEA's Annual Report, 2011; HEA's National Plan, 2008). Second, the HEA funded the hiring of access officers in all post-secondary institutions. Third, the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is created to provide support to students between the ages of 16 through 18, especially to students in Northern Ireland, with financial support of up to €30 a week (approximately \$60 CDN) for education and training (Lennon, 2010; Osborne, 2006). However, this amount is too insignificant to encourage students to pursue PSE (Osborne, 2006). Fourth, the HEA developed a website "Studentfinance.ie" that advises potential students and their families as well as current students on the changes to student grant schemes and other sources of funding for higher education (HEA's National Plan, 2008; HEA's Annual Report, 2011). The site is quite popular with 1.87 million visits as of December 31st, 2011 since its creation in January 2008 (HEA's Annual Report, 2011, HEA's Midterm Review, 2010). In addition to the creation of studentfinance.ie, the government promises to provide timely grant payments to students and have the money deposited directly into students' bank accounts on a monthly basis (HEA's National Plan, 2008, p.50).

Moreover, the government developed the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), which are supplementary admission routes that allocate reserved places at reduced Leaving Certificate points at seven universities (HEA's Mid-Term Review, 2010, p.11). These programs target specifically students who have been under-represented due to their socio-economic circumstances or because of their disability (Bernard, 2006; HEA's Mid-Term Review, 2010, p.11). These programs have moderate success since its creation in 2001 where they had approximately 300 entrants entering into PSE to over 800 entrants in 2007 through these routes (HEA's National Plan, 2008). The success of these programs has led to a national expansion in 2009 (HEA's National Plan, 2008, p.32). However, one drawback of these programs is the heavy bureaucratic coordination that is required to operate these programs across all access participation offices.

Lastly, some universities have developed programs that specifically target students from under-represented groups and encourage them to pursue higher education. For example, the University of Ulster funds a project called "Step Up into Science Programme" that provides new learning opportunities for talented young people who live in areas of social and economic disadvantage (University of Ulster, n.d.). This program aims

to raise students' aspirations, expectations, and academic performance with the ultimate goal of going to higher education (Osborne, 2006; University of Ulster, n.d.). Lastly, Queen's University Belfast organizes a program called, "The Discovering Queen's" where it offers various programs and events such as "Insight to Higher Education Days" and "Pathways to the Professions Days" targeted specifically at increasing access and participation to previously disadvantaged groups (Osborne, 2006; Queen's University, n.d.). The next section will discuss the main differences between Ontario and the Republic of Ireland's PSE systems.

## Differences between Ontario and The Republic of Ireland's PSE Systems

### ***Pathways to Higher Education***

One of the major differences between Ontario and the Republic of Ireland's PSE system is the pathway to PSE. Based on my own educational and professional experiences, Ontario's secondary education is four years and there is no standardized school leaving exam that students must write in order to determine their PSE pathways. There are only two standardized tests, which is the Grade 9 mathematical test and the Grade 10 literacy test that students must pass in order to graduate from high school. Students have the option of either choosing an academic or vocational/applied stream of study. Admissions to universities and colleges are based on the marks that students achieve in their last year of high school. Streaming occurs in the secondary school system indirectly in two ways. First, the level (academic versus vocational/applied) of the courses that students choose determines whether they are university or college-bound. Second, admission criteria and averages of post-secondary institutions control which PSE pathways students can select. For example, the admission averages for universities, especially reputable universities, tend to be highest, followed by smaller, less reputable universities, and finally by admission averages for colleges. This logic also applies to certain programs such as Engineering and Commerce where the admission averages tend to be very high. For example: only 4.8% of students with averages between 60-69.9% attended universities while 42.7% of students with same averages attended colleges in comparison to 71.0% of students with averages 90% or higher attended universities while only 14.5% of students with the same averages attended colleges (Drewes, 2008). Therefore, one can clearly see how streaming occurs indirectly in the Ontario's PSE system.

In contrast to Ontario, the Republic of Ireland's secondary school consists of three years where the students have to write a national standardized examination, the Junior Certificate, before they can graduate (McCoy & Smyth, 2011). The grades achieved on this examination will determine which PSE pathway students will follow. They can either pursue the Leaving Certificate Established or the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme where students are eligible for higher education or the Leaving Certificate Applied programme where students take a general pre-vocational type curriculum, which does not lead to direct access to higher education (McCoy & Smyth, 2011). The higher education system operates on a *numerous clauses* basis where applicants for specific programs are ranked based on points (e.g., grades) with the highest-ranking students offered positions to those programs (McCoy & Smyth, 2011). Therefore,

given the demand and points required for entry, universities tend to be much more selective than IoTs in terms of admissions and favours students from more advantaged backgrounds such as middle or upper class social status or parents who are post-secondary educated.

### ***External Advisory Agencies***

Ontario and the Republic of Ireland each have an external advisory agency where the purpose of the former is to conduct research on the access and quality of higher education and the latter focuses on the funding and administration of the PSE system. The Ontario government created HEQCO in 2005. HEQCO is an arms-length agency of the government whose purpose is to “evaluate the postsecondary sector and provide policy recommendations to the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities to enhance the access, quality and accountability of Ontario’s colleges and universities<sup>1</sup>” (HEQCO, n.d.). Its main function is to conduct research on higher education and make recommendations to the provincial government (Clark *et al.*, 2009). Some of the key access areas that HEQCO investigates include: the barriers faced by under-represented groups in completing PSE and the strategies that can be utilized to improve their participation; the barriers to pursuing PSE, staying in school, and graduating; and students’ satisfaction with their postsecondary experience (HEQCO, n.d.). Some of their recent work that focused on access and participation includes: Financial Literacy of Low-income Students - Literature Review and Environmental Scan published in September 2011 and Evaluation of the PSE Support for Students with Learning Disabilities published in April 2012.

In contrast, the external agency that exists in the Republic of Ireland is “The Higher Education Authority” (HEA) and it is primarily responsible for the funding and administration of the higher education system (HEA, n.d.). HEA’s mission statement is “to foster the development of a higher education sector which is accessible to all potential students; be recognized internationally for the high quality of teaching, learning, and research; and to have the capacity to address the changing needs and challenges in our society” (HEA, n.d.). Similar to Ontario’s HEQCO, some of the principal functions of HEA include: to further the development of higher education; to maintain a continuous review of the demand and need for higher education; and to promote the attainment of equality and opportunity in higher education (HEA, n.d.). Recently, the HEA developed a section of their website specifically for students where they can access information throughout their entire post-secondary experience from applying and admission to the services and programs that are available during one’s post-secondary experience, and to the graduation and post-graduation services (HEA, n.d.).

In order to investigate the access and participation of higher education in the Republic of Ireland, the HEA established the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (National Access Office) in 2003. Their main mandate is to coordinate and advise policy, practice, and funding measures to increase opportunities for access to and participation in higher education by under-represented groups (HEA’s Annual Report, 2011). The National Access Office has the following two principles that are relevant to my paper: develop and implement a national action plan to achieve equity of access to higher education and promote the rationale for

access to higher education in a way that wins widespread practical support from the education and political authorities and the public at large (HEA, n.d.). The under-represented groups in higher education prioritized by the National Access Office are those who are socially, economically, or culturally under-represented in higher education, mature students, and students with disabilities (HEA, n.d.). Similar to one of Ontario's HEQCO's priorities, the ultimate goal of the National Access Office is to facilitate educational access and opportunity for groups who are under-represented in higher education (e.g., students with disabilities and from low-income families), which is (HEA, n.d.; HEQCO, n.d.).

## Discussion and Conclusion

Increasing access to and participation in PSE for students with disabilities, from low-income families, and with parents who do not have any PSE are common issues that Ontario and the Republic of Ireland are currently facing. The barriers confronted by these under-represented groups in both PSE systems are often complex, multi-facet, and inter-related. Based on the research conducted, I can tentatively conclude that the PSE system in Ontario and the Republic of Ireland are very similar. Therefore, it is not surprising that there are no major differences between the two systems except for the pathways to PSE although the underlying theme of streaming is evident in both systems. On one hand, streaming is dependent upon on one's result on the national standardized examination in the Republic of Ireland while on the other hand, streaming is dependent on the marks that one achieves in their last year of secondary school in Ontario where the higher the grades achieved in both systems will result in greater PSE's choices. Ontario and the Republic of Ireland employ similar and different strategies to increase access to and participation in HE. Similarly, both PSE systems implement many financial incentives such as the development of the OSAP program in the former and the abolishment of tuition fees in the latter. On the contrary, Ontario's government promises to create an additional 60,000 spaces in PSE to reach a 70% target rate of the adult population being post-secondary educated while the Republic of Ireland has developed alternate admission routes (e.g., HEAR and DARE) for under-represented groups to access and participate in HE. These initiatives are especially critical since the Ontario's PSE system is shifting towards universal access<sup>2</sup> and the Republic of Ireland's PSE system is shifting towards mass access (Trow, 1972).

A common issue that Ontario and the Republic of Ireland face is the lack of financial literacy that students have about the available resources and this issue applies to students from all income levels (Frenette&Robson, 2011). Therefore, governments and institutions need to take proactive actions to ensure that prospective and current students are knowledgeable about the pathways to PSE and informed about the financial resources that are available to them. Examples of proactive measures include school visits, public universities and colleges fairs, and a comprehensive website on financial resources. Based on the arguments presented in the paper, the main ways that Ontario and the Republic of Ireland are trying to improve access to and participation in higher education for under-represented groups is through financial incentives. However, I question whether this is really the best way. Alternatively, is that the only way to improve access? I believe that it is important to remember that this is only one of the many barriers that students face when accessing PSE. As it was discussed

throughout the paper, there are many barriers (e.g., parental factor, finances, motivation, and secondary experience) to PSE. Addressing the financial barriers will continue to be a key challenge in higher education in the future. This challenge includes providing funding directly to students who will be able to access PSE as well as to the institutions that will need to provide the opportunity and resources for access.

There are several general strategies that Ontario and the Republic of Ireland can utilize to increase access to and participation in PSE. First, each government needs to develop a national framework that defines what access and participation means, and the criteria used to determine under-represented groups. Only by having a national and consistent framework, will progress be made on improving under-represented groups' access and participation on a provincial and national scale and providing them with the appropriate financial and non-financial resources. Examples of potential criteria include income status, parental status, a member of a visible minority group, immigrant status, and parent's education to name a few. However, establishing the criteria used to determine under-represented groups can be tricky since there are many sub-groups within one group and each sub-group has their own set of unique characteristics and challenges. The compromise would be to develop a range of comprehensive criteria where students have to only meet a certain number of them when assessing for access (Bernard, 2006, p.31).

Second, governments and institutions should partner with secondary institutions and communities, especially in areas that housed many low-income families and under-represented groups, to disseminate information about the different PSE pathways and to improve students' financial literacy (McCoy and Byrne, 2011). Specifically, the advantages and disadvantages of PSE as well as the different opportunities (e.g., universities, colleges, apprenticeships) within HE should be discussed. This way, students are informed about all of the different pathways and the available financial resources before they make their decision regarding PSE. The dissemination of information should occur early in students' secondary or middle school education as students' decision on PSE will influence their motivation and attitude towards school and the courses they will take during their secondary school career. Therefore, the dissemination of this information and advice is a key factor in students' decision to enroll in HE (McCoy and Byrne, 2011).

Third, Ontario and the Republic of Ireland can both explore the idea of creating or partnering with an Open University. Open University refers to a university that is committed to open admissions and providing flexibility that enables learners to utilize its resources and infrastructure in ways that will best meet the learner's needs (Clark *et al.*, 2009). The flexibility and affordability of an open university makes it a valuable component of PSE, especially for individuals who find it impossible to access a conventional degree program due to work and/or family responsibilities, mobility constraints, or inflexible admission requirements of conventional universities (Clark *et al.*, 2009). By creating or partnering with an open university, it may increase access to PSE for all students. Fourth, universities, colleges, and IoTs can offer joint programs. For example, Seneca College and York University collaborated to offer a Radio and TV broadcasting program. These programs are advantageous because they

provide students the opportunity to develop theoretical knowledge and practical hands-on skills (Clark *et al.*, 2009).

Fifth, Ontario and the Republic of Ireland's government should continue to allow colleges and IoTs to award applied baccalaureate because this provides an alternative route for students to obtain an undergraduate degree (Janzen 2012d). Sixth, international partnerships can be established to allow students the opportunity to go aboard. For example, ten Pittsburgh area colleges and universities entered into a cooperation agreement with thirteen institutions in the Republic of Ireland that will allow students to study aboard at the host institution (Chute, 2012). Also, the University of Toronto offers an exchange program through the Centre for International Experience (CIE) for undergraduate students where students can study aboard for a semester or the entire academic year (UofT's CIE, n.d.)

Despite the various government and post-secondary institutions initiatives described above, there remains a persistent under-representation of students from under-represented backgrounds in higher education (McCoy & Bryne, 2011). What is even more worrisome is that there seems to be a gap in the Canadian and European literature on access by under-represented groups, especially as it relates to financial literacy and institutions' incentives (Deller & Oldford, 2011). One possible explanation is that programs developed at institutions tend to be developed by staff members and not academics. Therefore, the successes and failures of these programs are often shared with fellow staff members and not recorded in the literature. Better and more effective research methodology and practice must be used when assessing access that will provide more accurate and relevant data on outcomes (Bernard, 2006). Ontario and the Republic of Ireland have created external agencies in attempt to address this gap. With the creation of HEQCO in 2005 and the HEA's National Access Office in 2003, it seems to point that governments are placing a priority on conducting research on under-represented groups in PSE and generating more evidence-based data on access. However, Canadian and European research is still lagging behind in the scholarly world, especially in comparison to other developed countries such as the United States. Even with the creation of the HEQCO and the HEA's National Access Office, what is becoming clear is that factors affecting access to and participation in PSE cannot be examined in isolation as their effects are often multi-faceted and inter-related. Research that examines multiple factors at the same time would be more beneficial and relevant than research examining an isolated factor (e.g., financial) since these factors influence each other in reality. One possible solution to examine these complex relationships is to apply a mixed method approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies where it will allow participants to describe their experience in their own words through the qualitative methods while simultaneously collecting data using quantitative methods such as surveys. Consequently, richer and more accurate data will be obtained.

There are several areas for future research. First, the experience of access for students with disabilities can be explored more thoroughly. For example, researchers can examine the similar and divergent experiences of students with invisible and visible disabilities; the experiences of students

attending colleges versus universities; and the experiences of international and immigrant students with disabilities as they access and participate in HE (Chambers *et al.*, 2011). Second, future research should examine the reasons of students who are from under-represented groups and who have successfully entered and completed PSE (Bernard, 2006; Jones, 2012). This way, researchers can identify and inform institutions of the areas that they are doing well so they can continue those initiatives and areas that they can improve upon. Also, by gathering data on these students' success stories, institutions can shared with them prospective students from these groups, which may serve as a motivator for them to pursue PSE or they may become mentors for these students. Third, the potential impact of parents' knowledge about PSE and their attainment in PSE on their offsprings' motivation to pursue HE can be explored. Specifically, what are the differences in access and participation rates between having parents being educated in Canada compared to the rest of the world? Are these students more likely to pursue universities or colleges and what factors impact their decisions? Fourth, because of the poor access to higher education in the Republic of Ireland, the effects of "brain drain" can be examined. For example, why does brain drain exist and what are some of the strategies that can be used to ameliorate this situation? Brain drain occurs when Irish students who go aboard to study and upon graduation, they do not return to the Republic of Ireland (Osborne, 2006). Instead, they choose to stay and work at the location where they attended PSE. This implies that there is a lack of opportunities for graduates after graduation so students who studied aboard prefer to remain there to start their career (Osborne, 2006).

Given the reality of today's budgetary constraints and the similarities between Ontario and the Republic of Ireland's PSE systems, I believe that resource sharing between these two systems will expand each other's strategies repertoire and be mutually beneficial for both PSE systems. Ontario is close to becoming an universal access system with approximately 65% of the adult population being post-secondary educated and the Republic of Ireland is also moving towards that trend as they are at mass access with approximately 55-60% of the adult population being post-secondary educated (Trow, 1972). The Republic of Ireland's enrollment target is to have an overall entry rate of 72% and to have all social-economic groups (e.g., upper to lower-manual group) achieve an entry rate of 54% by 2020 (HEA's National Plan, 2008). Therefore, by resource-sharing, mistakes and pitfalls can be avoided by Ontario and the Republic of Ireland's PSE systems when they are implementing the new strategies.

In an ideal world, the characteristics of an accessible education system should include equal opportunity for all eligible participants regardless of age, gender, culture, ethnicity, social status, disability, and social-economic status (Dietsche, 2012). Unfortunately, the reality is far from this ideal situation since the demand for access-related services is greater than the resources available to provide these services, "In some institutions...there is a lack of permanent staff, inadequate accommodation, and a lack of appropriate secretarial, administrative and financial support for the effective operation of the access programme (HEA's National Plan, 2008, p.36)."Both Ontario and the Republic of Ireland are facing similar barriers in terms of access to and participation in PSE for under-represented groups such as students with disabilities, from low-income

families, and with parents who have no PSE. The lack of financial literacy is a significant barrier for all students, regardless of income level (B. Gormley, personal communication, June 13th, 2012). Based on the discussion so far, it is evident that money alone is not enough to increase access to and participation in PSE (Norrie & Zhao, 2011). It will require providing accurate and accessible information on the costs and benefits of pursuing PSE to secondary students as well as the financial resources and other services that are available to students during the application process and during their post-secondary experience (Norrie & Zhao, 2011). Improvements on PSE's access and participation will play a critical and central role in shifting Ontario and the Republic of Ireland's societies towards knowledge based economics (Zhao, 2011). Given government cutbacks to support higher education and the increasing demand for higher education, what will be the future of access in higher education? What strategies and policies are needed in order to keep up with the anticipated demand for higher education? Given the current structure of Ontario and the Republic of Ireland's PSE, will it be able to continue to sustain the current access level? How will this impact the access and participation levels of under-represented groups? How will this impact these groups' graduation rates? Alternatively, will the access and participation level decrease, especially for under-represented groups, since they generally require more support and resources in order to complete their post-secondary education? Ultimately, for Ontario and the Republic of Ireland to achieve equitable access and participation, it requires reducing and eventually eliminating some of the PSE barriers described in this paper and increasing the participation and graduation rates for students from under-represented groups although I question the possibility of this becoming a reality (Norrie & Zhao, 2011).

End notes:

<sup>1</sup> There are other under-represented groups in Ontario and Republic of Ireland such as women in technology, immigrant population, and visible minorities. For the purpose of this paper, I am only listing the common groups between Ontario and Republic of Ireland above.

<sup>2</sup> Universal access: greater than 50% adult population that is eligible for higher education participation in a society (Trow, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> Mass access: a 15% to 50% participation rate in higher education in a society for particular socio-economic groups (Trow, 1972).

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