Beyond Access: Inclusive Work Placements and Transitions from Higher Education to Employment

Dr Miguel Flores

August 2026

Cover Image Credit: Ivan S (Pexels)

Beyond access: Inclusive work placements and transitions from higher education to employment

Dr Miguel Flores, National College of Ireland

Abstract

Ireland's National Access Plan 2022–2028 marks an important shift in widening participation policy, broadening its focus beyond access to encompass participation, student success and graduate outcomes. At the same time, work-integrated learning (WIL) has become an increasingly important component of higher education and an emerging priority for national quality assurance. Drawing on evidence from Disability Office managers, Career Office managers, and undergraduate students with disabilities across eight Irish higher education institutions, this paper examines the barriers and facilitators shaping equitable participation in work placements. It argues that inclusive work placements should become an explicit consideration within both Ireland's widening participation agenda and the emerging national quality assurance framework for WIL, as part of a broader approach to supporting the transition from higher education to employment for students with disabilities.

1. Public policy context: From widening access to equitable participation in higher education

The *Mid-term Progress Review of the National Access Plan 2022–2028* shows important progress in widening access to higher education for students with disabilities. The proportion of new entrants reporting a disability increased from 12.4% in 2020/21 to 18.1% in 2023/24, exceeding the National Access Plan's 2028 target of 16% ahead of schedule (HEA, 2026). However, progress in widening access is only one dimension of the widening participation agenda. As more students with disabilities enter higher education, increasing attention must be given to whether they can participate equitably in the educational experience, progress and succeed in their studies, and achieve equitable outcomes after graduation.

The National Access Plan places emphasis on participation, student success and graduate outcomes, alongside access (HEA, 2026).[i] The widening participation agenda therefore extends across the student journey: from equitable opportunities to enter higher education, to equitable participation in the educational experience, progression

UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland.
Phone: +353 1 716 4615 Website: https://www.ucd.ie/geary Email: geary@ucd.ie

and completion, and outcomes after graduation. Within this broader journey, the *transition from higher education to employment* deserves greater policy attention. While graduate outcomes are an increasingly important policy objective, comparatively less attention has been given to the processes and experiences that may support equitable transitions into employment, particularly for students with disabilities. Preparation for this transition involves more than academic achievement alone; opportunities to develop professional skills, gain workplace experience, build career confidence and engage with employers before graduation can also play an important role.

Work-integrated learning (WIL), including work placements, internships and professional practice, provides opportunities to connect academic learning with workplace experience and can contribute to students' preparation for the transition to employment. Recent work by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) indicates that WIL is a significant feature of Irish tertiary education, delivered through diverse models and involving collaboration between education providers, employers, professional bodies and learners (Peck, Jackson and Anton-Aherne, 2025). QQI's work towards national quality assurance guidelines for WIL further signals its growing importance within Ireland's education and skills system (Peck and Jackson, 2025). These developments create an opportunity to ensure that equity and inclusion are integral to the quality of WIL provision, including equitable opportunities to participate in, and benefit from, these experiences.

The QQI reports identify challenges relating to employer engagement, communication between partners, learner preparation, resource constraints, equity and inclusion. They also identify barriers that may particularly affect learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, caring responsibilities and disability, while highlighting the importance of clearer roles, responsibilities and inclusive practice (Peck and Jackson, 2025; Peck, Jackson and Anton-Aherne, 2025). These national reviews provide an important foundation for improving the quality of WIL, but further evidence is needed to understand the barriers affecting equitable participation in work placements for students with disabilities and how responsibility for addressing these barriers is distributed across the work placement system.

This paper contributes to that evidence base through findings from a Research Ireland New Foundations project[ii] involving Disability Office managers, Career Office managers, and undergraduate students with disabilities across eight Irish higher education institutions. It examines the barriers and facilitators shaping equitable participation in work placements and considers how barriers and supports are distributed across the work placement system. As Ireland's widening participation

UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland.
Phone: +353 1 716 4615 Website: https://www.ucd.ie/geary Email: geary@ucd.ie

agenda evolves and national approaches to quality-assuring WIL develop, ensuring equitable participation in work placements for students with disabilities should become an explicit consideration within both policy agendas.

2. Why work placements matter

Work placements are one of the most established forms of work-integrated learning (WIL) in higher education, providing opportunities for students to apply academic learning in workplace settings and develop experience relevant to their preparation for employment. International evidence associates participation in work placements and related forms of WIL with the development of employability skills and with subsequent career and labour-market outcomes (Jackson, 2015; Brooks and Youngson, 2016; Inceoglu *et al.*, 2019; Jackson and Rowe, 2023). Evidence from UK graduates also suggests that work placements can be associated with differences in job quality and pay trajectories following graduation (Arsenis and Flores, 2024a, 2024b).

These potential benefits make equitable access to, and participation in, high-quality work placements increasingly important. However, opportunities to participate in, and benefit from, work placements are not necessarily experienced equally. International research identifies financial, organisational and workplace barriers that can disproportionately affect students from underrepresented groups. These include costs associated with unpaid placements, transport and relocation, as well as limited flexibility, inconsistent accommodation and concerns about disability disclosure or stigma (Dollinger *et al.*, 2023; Garant-Jones *et al.*, 2024; Bell *et al.*, 2025; Jackson *et al.*, 2025). This creates an important policy concern: while work placements can provide valuable opportunities for skills development, professional experience and preparation for employment, unequal access to and participation in these experiences may contribute to inequalities in the opportunities that students have before entering the graduate labour market.

This issue is particularly relevant in Ireland, where WIL is a significant feature of tertiary education. Recent research commissioned by QQI demonstrates the scale and diversity of WIL provision across the Irish tertiary education system, including placements, internships, professional practice and other forms of workplace learning across different disciplines and programmes (Peck, Jackson and Anton-Aherne, 2025). QQI's work also identifies challenges relating to equity, accessibility and learner support, alongside the need for clearer and more consistent approaches to quality assurance across WIL provision (Peck and Jackson, 2025).

UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland.
Phone: +353 1 716 4615 Website: https://www.ucd.ie/geary Email: geary@ucd.ie

These developments have wider public policy significance. As access to higher education has widened, policy attention has increasingly extended to equitable participation in the higher education experience, student success and graduate outcomes (HEA, 2026). Work placements sit within this broader agenda. Where they form part of the higher education experience, ensuring equitable access to and participation in placements matters because these experiences can provide opportunities to develop skills, professional networks, workplace experience and career confidence relevant to students' preparation for the transition from higher education to employment.

For students with disabilities, this raises an important policy question. If work placements provide valuable educational and employment-related opportunities, barriers to accessing or participating fully in them may create inequalities in students' experiences and opportunities before they enter the graduate labour market. Ensuring inclusive work placements should therefore be understood not simply as a matter of individual accommodation, but as part of the wider objective of achieving equitable participation in higher education and supporting equitable transitions from higher education to employment.

3. New Evidence from Irish Higher Education

This paper draws on findings from a Research Ireland New Foundations project examining barriers to and facilitators of equitable participation in work placements for students with disabilities in eight Irish higher education institutions (Flores, 2026). It focuses on two institutional stakeholders, Disability Office and Career Office managers, and students with disabilities. Responses were obtained from Disability Office managers in all eight institutions and from Career Office managers in five institutions. To complement the institutional perspectives, this paper includes survey responses from the experiences of fifty undergraduate students who completed work placements. Using descriptive quantitative and qualitative evidence, the study examines how barriers and supports are distributed across institutional, employer, structural and student-level domains, and how these patterns vary across different types of work placements.

Finding 1: Barriers and supports are unevenly distributed across the work placement system

The first key finding is a mismatch between where barriers arise and where support is concentrated. From an institutional perspective, employer-related barriers were the

UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland.
Phone: +353 1 716 4615 Website: https://www.ucd.ie/geary Email: geary@ucd.ie

most frequently reported, particularly limited employer awareness or preparedness and inflexible workplace policies. Structural barriers, including the availability of suitable work placement opportunities, financial costs and transport, also affected students' ability to access and participate in placements. By contrast, supports were concentrated primarily within higher education institutions and around students, through measures such as pre-placement preparation, disclosure guidance and accommodation support.

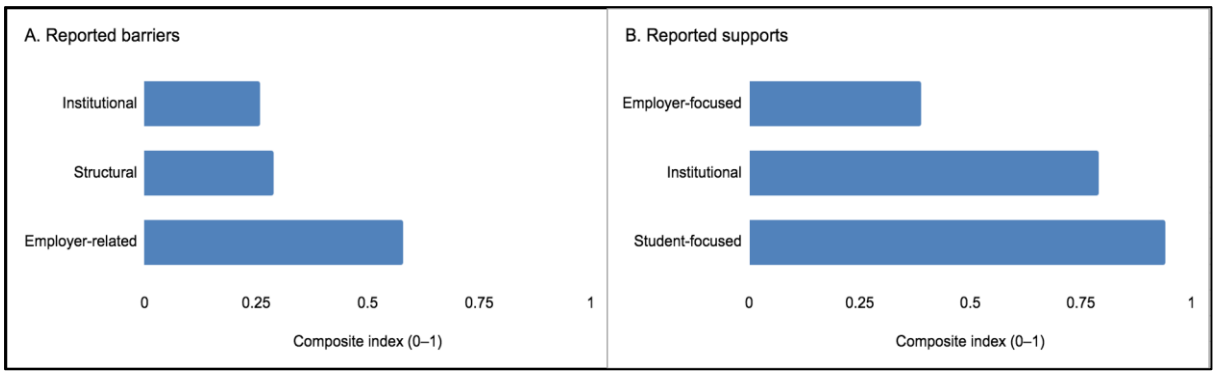

Figure 1: Barriers and supports are concentrated in different parts of the work placement system

Source: Author's analysis based on Flores (2026). Indices range from 0 to 1 and represent the proportion of relevant items within each domain identified by Disability Office and Career Office managers. Higher values indicate a greater concentration of reported barriers or supports within that domain. The indices are descriptive and do not measure severity or relative importance.

As Figure 1 illustrates, this distribution creates an important misalignment between barriers and supports. Composite indices summarise how frequently the different barriers or supports within each domain were identified by respondents. An index of 0.58, for instance, means that respondents reported, on average, 58% of the employer-related barriers included in that category. Employer-related barriers had the highest barrier index (0.58), compared with structural (0.29) and institutional barriers (0.26). In contrast, reported supports were concentrated around students (0.94) and within higher education institutions (0.79), while employer-focused support was considerably less prevalent (0.39).

Students' experiences reinforce the importance of looking beyond institutional support alone. Among students who had completed a work placement, frequently reported barriers included lack of confidence (58%), inflexible placement requirements (52%), transport (50%), financial costs (46%) and difficulties balancing placements with health needs (44%). More than one-third (36%) also reported concerns relating to stigma or discrimination. At the same time, some of the strongest facilitators identified

UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland.
Phone: +353 1 716 4615 Website: https://www.ucd.ie/geary Email: geary@ucd.ie

by students were located within the workplace, including positive relationships with colleagues and supervisors (70%) and supportive workplace cultures (65%).

Taken together, these findings suggest that higher education institutions can provide substantial preparation, guidance and disability support, but many of the conditions shaping equitable participation in work placements extend beyond their direct control. Support is concentrated largely within higher education institutions and around students, while important barriers arise within workplaces and from wider structural conditions. Improving inclusion therefore requires attention to the alignment between institutional support, workplace practices and structural conditions, rather than relying primarily on interventions directed at individual students.

Finding 2: Barriers vary across different types of work placements

The second key finding is that work placements should not be treated as a uniform experience. The pattern of barriers varies across compulsory, professionally mandated and optional work placements, highlighting the importance of how different placement models are structured and governed.

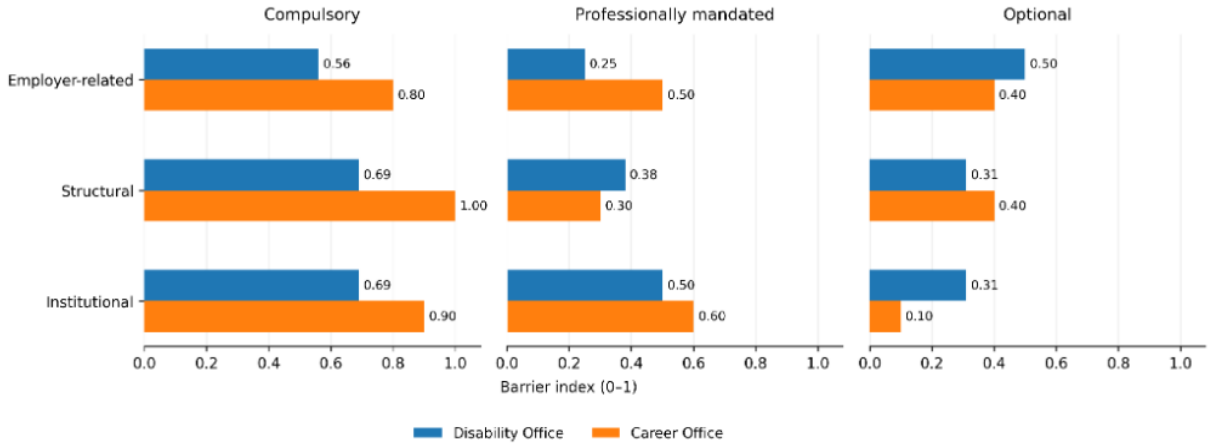

Figure 2: Barriers vary across different types of work placements

Source: Author's analysis based on Flores (2026). Composite indices range from 0 to 1 and represent the proportion of relevant barrier items identified within each domain by Disability Office and Career Office managers. Higher values indicate a greater concentration of reported barriers. Results are descriptive and illustrate patterns across placement types.

As Figure 2 shows, compulsory work placements displayed the broadest concentration of reported barriers, with relatively high barrier indices across employer, structural and institutional domains. This is particularly important from an equity perspective because

UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland.
Phone: +353 1 716 4615 Website: https://www.ucd.ie/geary Email: geary@ucd.ie

students may have limited scope to avoid or substitute a placement that is required as part of their study programme.

Professionally mandated work placements presented a different configuration of barriers. Where placement requirements are shaped by external competency standards or professional regulation, the scope for flexibility may involve actors beyond the higher education institution, including employers and professional bodies. Optional work placements showed comparatively lower institutional barriers, although employer-related and structural barriers remained relevant. The different patterns observed across these placement models indicate that the conditions shaping equitable participation are not uniform across work placements.

These patterns should be interpreted cautiously given the small institutional sample and descriptive nature of the analysis. Nevertheless, they highlight an important policy consideration: **a single approach to inclusion is unlikely to be equally effective across all work placement models.** The scope for addressing barriers, and the actors involved, may differ according to how placements are structured and governed and the roles played by higher education institutions, employers and, where relevant, professional bodies.

Altogether, the two findings indicate that inclusive work placements represent a system-level challenge. Higher education institutions have an important role in preparing and supporting students, but many of the conditions shaping equitable participation extend beyond the institution. Employers shape workplace conditions and cultures; professional bodies can influence placement requirements in regulated disciplines; and structural factors such as transport and financial costs can affect students' ability to access and participate in placements. More inclusive work placements therefore require stronger coordination across the actors who shape the work placement system and greater clarity about their respective roles in supporting equitable participation.

4. Why this matters for public policy

The findings have important implications for Ireland's widening participation and WIL agendas. As increasing numbers of students with disabilities enter higher education, widening access needs to be accompanied by attention as to whether they can participate equitably in the educational experiences available during their studies. Work placements are one such experience. If students with disabilities face barriers to accessing or participating fully in work placements, progress in widening access may

UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland.
Phone: +353 1 716 4615 Website: https://www.ucd.ie/geary Email: geary@ucd.ie

not translate into equitable opportunities to develop skills, gain workplace experience, and prepare for the transition to employment.

The first policy implication concerns shared responsibility for inclusion. Higher education institutions have developed mechanisms to prepare and support students with disabilities, but the findings show that important barriers also arise within workplace environments and from wider structural conditions. Strengthening institution-based support alone is therefore unlikely to address all barriers. Employers shape workplace conditions and practices, while professional bodies can influence placement requirements in regulated disciplines. Government and national agencies also shape the wider policy, funding and quality-assurance environment. The distribution of barriers and supports across the work placement system therefore points to the need for clearer expectations, coordination and shared responsibility among the actors involved.

The second implication is that a one-size-fits-all approach to inclusion is unlikely to be effective. Compulsory, professionally mandated and optional work placements present different configurations of barriers and operate within different organisational and governance contexts. Policy and quality-assurance approaches therefore need sufficient flexibility to recognise these differences. Compulsory placements may require particular attention to equitable participation where students have limited alternatives; professionally mandated placements may require coordination with professional and regulatory bodies; and optional placements raise important questions about whether students have equitable opportunities and resources to access and participate in these experiences.

The third implication is the need to connect widening participation more explicitly with national quality assurance for WIL. The National Access Plan places increasing emphasis on participation, student success and graduate outcomes alongside access (HEA, 2026), while QQI's work on WIL provides an opportunity to embed equity and inclusion within national expectations for high-quality provision (Peck and Jackson, 2025; Peck, Jackson and Anton-Aherne, 2025). These agendas should be mutually reinforcing. Quality assurance should consider not only how WIL is designed and delivered, but also whether students with disabilities have equitable opportunities to access, participate in and benefit from workplace-based learning experiences.

This connection becomes increasingly important as widening participation policy extends beyond access to consider equitable participation, student success and graduate outcomes. Work placements alone cannot ensure equitable transitions to employment, and the evidence presented here does not measure graduate employment outcomes. However, where placements provide opportunities to develop

UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland.
Phone: +353 1 716 4615 Website: https://www.ucd.ie/geary Email: geary@ucd.ie

skills, gain professional experience and engage with the workplace, ensuring equitable access to and participation in these experiences should form part of a broader policy approach to supporting the transition from higher education to employment for students with disabilities.

5. Policy Recommendations

The findings presented in this paper suggest that inclusive work placements should become a more explicit consideration within Ireland's widening participation and WIL agendas. Three priorities emerge for policymakers, higher education institutions, employers and professional bodies, which are detailed below.

Recommendation 1: Integrate widening participation and quality assurance through inclusive work placements. Ireland has made progress in widening access to higher education and is increasingly focusing on equitable participation, student success and graduate outcomes. At the same time, QQI is developing national approaches to quality assurance for work-integrated learning. These policy developments should be viewed as complementary rather than separate. Embedding inclusive work placements within both agendas would help ensure that students with disabilities have equitable opportunities to access, participate in and benefit from workplace learning experiences that can contribute to their educational development and preparation for employment. Widening participation policy and WIL quality assurance should therefore work together to promote accessible, inclusive and high-quality work placement experiences.

Recommendation 2: Establish shared responsibility for inclusive work placements. The uneven distribution of barriers and supports across the work placement system indicates that higher education institutions cannot address all barriers independently. While institutions provide preparation and support for students with disabilities, important barriers also arise within workplace environments and from wider structural conditions. Inclusive work placements therefore require coordinated action involving higher education institutions, employers, professional bodies and national policymakers. Clearer expectations about the respective roles of these actors, together with stronger coordination across the work placement system, would help address the misalignment between where support is concentrated and where important barriers arise.

Recommendation 3: Tailor inclusive practice to different work placement models. Compulsory, professionally mandated and optional work placements present different configurations of barriers. National guidance, quality assurance and

UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland.
Phone: +353 1 716 4615 Website: https://www.ucd.ie/geary Email: geary@ucd.ie

institutional practice should therefore avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to inclusion and recognise the different contexts in which placements are organised and delivered. Approaches to inclusion should be sufficiently flexible to account for the requirements, constraints and actors involved in different placement models, including the role of professional and regulatory bodies where relevant.

Altogether, these recommendations call for a shift from relying primarily on support that helps individual students navigate existing work placement systems towards ensuring that the systems themselves enable equitable access and participation. Achieving this shift requires stronger alignment between widening participation policy and WIL quality assurance, clearer shared responsibilities across the work placement system, and approaches to inclusion that recognise the diversity of work placement models.

Final remarks

Ireland has made progress in widening access to higher education for students with disabilities. The next challenge is to ensure that widening access is accompanied by equitable participation in the educational experiences that can help prepare students for the transition to employment.

This paper argues that inclusive work placements should become an explicit consideration within both Ireland's widening participation agenda and national quality assurance for work-integrated learning. This requires coordinated action across higher education institutions, employers, professional bodies and policymakers. By moving beyond access to ensure equitable participation in work placements, Ireland can better support the transition from higher education to employment for students with disabilities.

References

Arsenis, P. and Flores, M. (2024a) 'Do professional year placements matter for job quality?', *Studies in Higher Education*, 49(5), pp. 869-883. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2225540.

Arsenis, P. and Flores, M. (2024b) 'University-to-work transition and work placements: evidence of heterogeneous pay dynamics', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 43(8), pp. 1689-1703. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2385357.

UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland.
Phone: +353 1 716 4615 Website: https://www.ucd.ie/geary Email: geary@ucd.ie

Bell, A., Khan, M., Sibir, L., Soanes, T. and Tran, T. (2025) 'Ameliorating placement poverty: insights from OECD countries', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 47(3), pp. 299-316. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2025.2469356.

Brooks, R. and Youngson, P.L. (2016) 'Undergraduate work placements: an analysis of the effects on career progression', *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(9), pp. 1563-1578. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.988702.

Dollinger, M., Finneran, R. and Ajjawi, R. (2023) 'Exploring the experiences of students with disabilities in work-integrated learning', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 45(1), pp. 3-18. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2022.2129317.

Flores, M. (2026) 'Unequal access to work-integrated learning: Misalignment, barriers, and inclusion for students with disabilities', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 1-16. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2026.2700687.

Garant-Jones, E., Eady, M.J. and Dean, B.A. (2024) 'Designing for inclusion in work-integrated learning: a scoping review', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 43(8), pp. 1754-1768. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2385354.

Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2026) Mid-term Progress Review of the National Access Plan 2022–2028. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Inceoglu, I., Selenko, E., McDowall, A. and Schlachter, S. (2019) '(How) do work placements work? Scrutinizing the quantitative evidence for a theory-driven future research agenda', *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 110, Part B, pp. 317-337. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.09.002.

Jackson, D. (2015) 'Employability skill development in work-integrated learning: barriers and best practice', *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(2), pp. 350-367. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.842221.

Jackson, D., Dean, B.A. and Eady, M.J. (2025) 'Equity and inclusion in work-integrated learning: participation and outcomes for diverse student groups', *Educational Review*, 77(2), pp. 329-350. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2182764.

Jackson, D. and Rowe, A. (2023) 'Impact of work-integrated learning and co-curricular activities on graduate labour force outcomes', *Studies in Higher Education*, 48(3), pp. 490-506. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2022.2145465.

Peck, C. and Jackson, N. (2025) Quality Assuring Work-integrated Learning in Irish Tertiary Education: A Thematic Analysis of Stakeholder Perspectives. Dublin: Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

Peck, C., Jackson, N. and Anton-Aherne, A. (2025) Work-integrated Learning Practice in Ireland. Dublin: Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland.
Phone: +353 1 716 4615 Website: https://www.ucd.ie/geary Email: geary@ucd.ie

[i] Access, participation, student success and graduate outcomes are treated here as distinct but connected dimensions of the higher education journey. Access refers to equitable opportunities to enter higher education; participation to the ability to engage equitably in educational experiences and opportunities during higher education; student success to progression, completion and educational achievement; and graduate outcomes to destinations and experiences after higher education, including employment and further study. The transition from higher education to employment is understood as a process connecting experiences during higher education with later employment outcomes, rather than as a graduate outcome itself. "Widening participation" refers to the broader policy agenda encompassing these dimensions.

[ii] This publication has emanated from research conducted with the financial support of Taighde Eireann – Research Ireland under Grant number [NF/2024/11854].

UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland.
Phone: +353 1 716 4615 Website: https://www.ucd.ie/geary Email: geary@ucd.ie