

# **Presentation to the EASNE seminar on inclusion in higher education, Rome, 12<sup>th</sup> November 2015**

## **The inclusion of disabled students in European higher education: progress and challenges**

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# Background

- Expansion of participation in higher education across Europe since 1990s driven by both economic and social justice concerns.
- Participation by students from middle class backgrounds already at saturation point
- Creation of ‘knowledge society’ therefore requires higher rates of participation by ‘non traditional’ groups, including disabled students
- Despite official rhetoric on widening participation, progress appears to be slow – this presentation asks why this is the case and what measures may promote change

# Structure

- Overview of European policy on widening access to higher education
- The construction of disability and national participation rates
- Policy and practice in the UK and Sweden
- British data on the social characteristics of disabled students, including some intersectional analysis.
- Short case studies illustrating intersections of disability and social class
- Summary and discussion of key points.

# Key policy documents and strategies

- The Bologna Process focuses on harmonisation of HE across European Higher Education Area
- Social dimension developed from 2001 onwards
- Focus on increasing participation and diversity
- ‘The student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations’ (EACA, 2012)
- Supported by the *European Disability Strategy 2010-2020* and the *Education and Training within Europe 2020 Strategy*

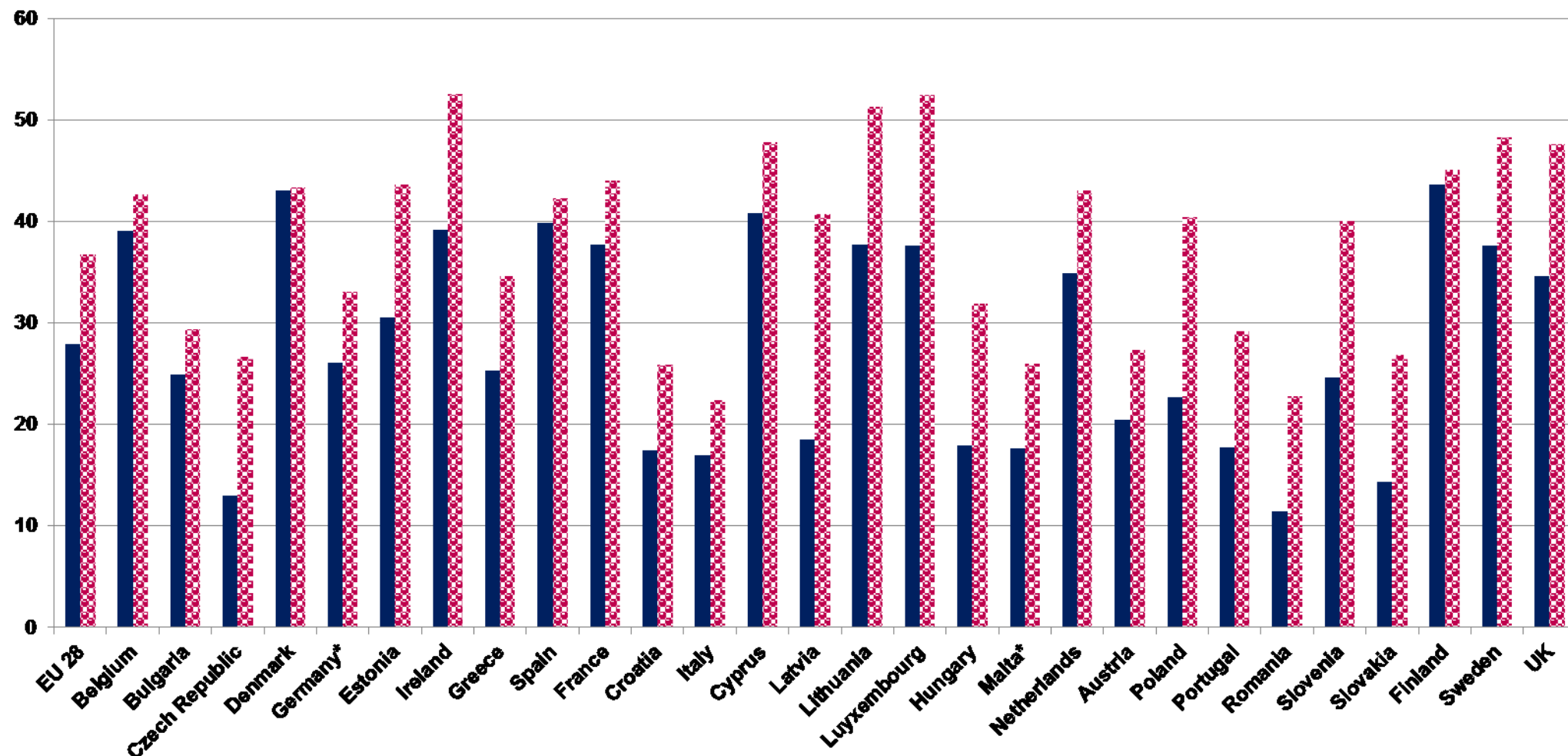


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# Progress towards EU benchmark on HE participation – By 2020, 40% of 30-34 year olds should have completed third level education



■ 2005 ■ 2013



# Understandings of 'non-traditional' students varies across Europe

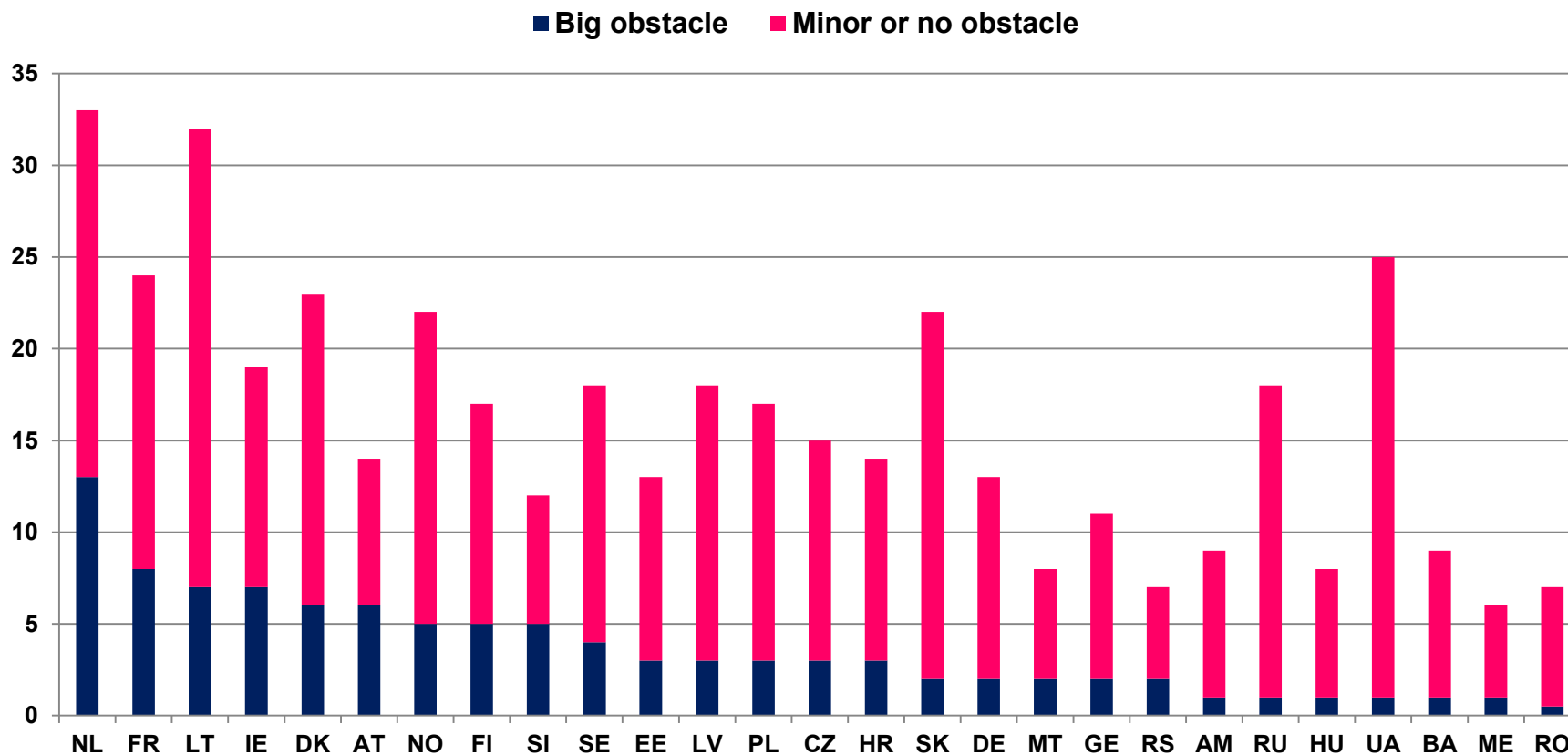
- Eurydice report suggests that most countries have few or no targets and limited data gathering.
- Data may be gathered in relation to:
  - Qualification prior to entry (27 jurisdictions)
  - Socioeconomic status (19 jurisdictions)
  - Disability (17 jurisdictions)
  - Labour market status prior to entry (13 jurisdictions)
  - Labour market status during studies (12 jurisdictions)
  - Ethnic/cultural/linguistic minority status (8 jurisdictions)
  - Migrant status (13 jurisdictions)



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# Eurostudent Survey shows national differences in disabled students' participation

## Cultural differences in understanding of disability?



# Sweden and Scotland have adopted different approaches to promoting access for disabled students

- Both countries committed to widening access and have comprehensive equalities legislation
- Sweden – hub at Stockholm University distributes funding to institutions and collates data. Does not use benchmarks and targets.
- UK – tighter national regulation. Data on each institution's performance published annually and benchmarked against comparator institutions.
- Institutions obliged to submit annual widening access outcome agreements - potentially financial penalties for failure to meet targets





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- **Outcomes of UK approach.....**



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# Increases and changes in categories (full-time undergraduate) UK, HESA

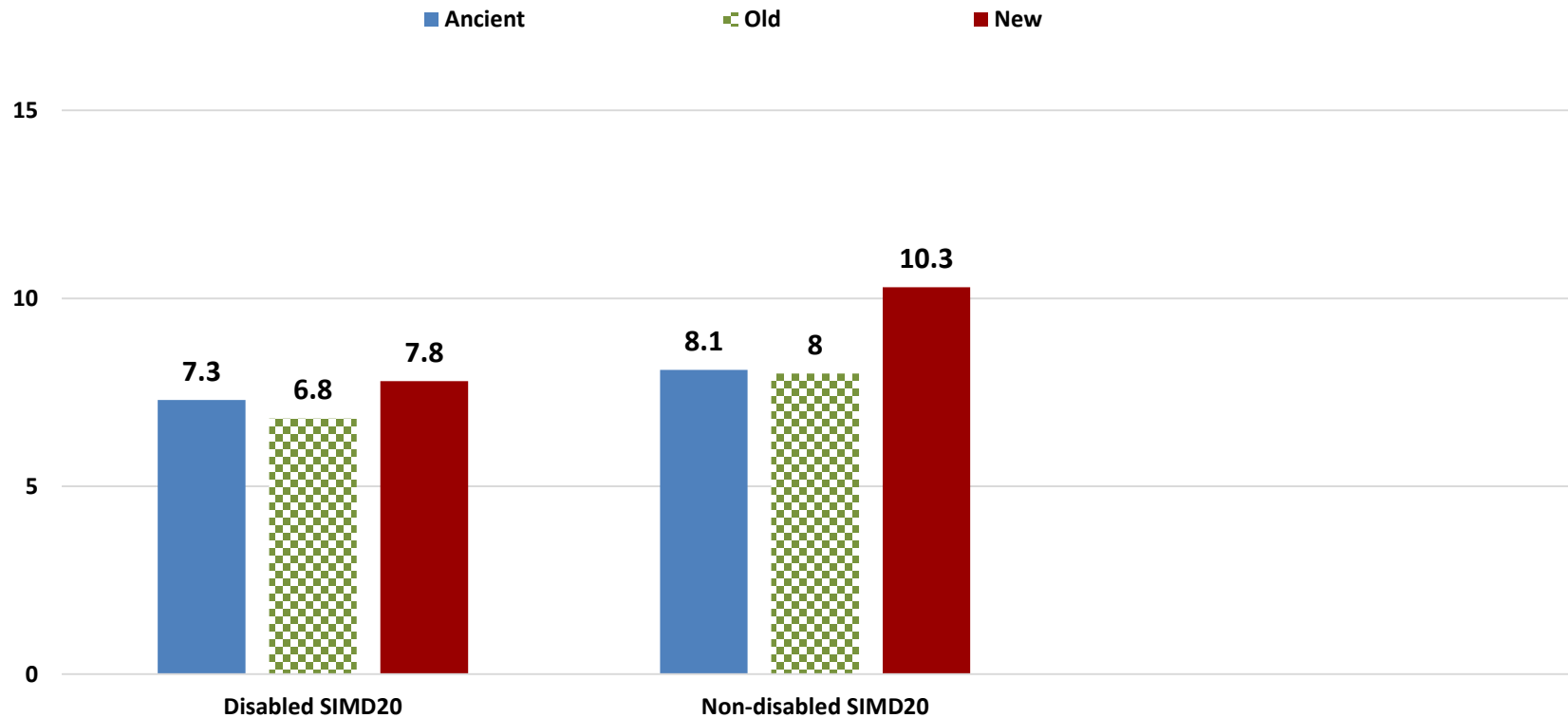


Type of impairment	1994-95	2004-05	2013-14
Unseen disability	57.5	17.1	-
Dyslexia ( <i>Specific learning difficulty</i> )	16.2	54.2	53.3
Other disability ( <i>or medical condition</i> )	8.9	10.2	8.8
Deaf/hard of hearing	5.9	3.7	2.1
Wheelchair/mobility difficulties ( <i>A physical impairment or mobility issues</i> )	2.9	2.6	3
Blind/partially sighted	3.9	2.4	0.2
Multiple disabilities ( <i>Two or more conditions</i> )	3.3	4.8	5.3
Mental health difficulties	1.2	4.0	12.5
Personal care support	0.2	0.1	-
( <i>Social communication and</i> ) Autistic spectrum disorder	-	0.9	4
Proportion of all F-T first degree students	3.6	7.1	11.3



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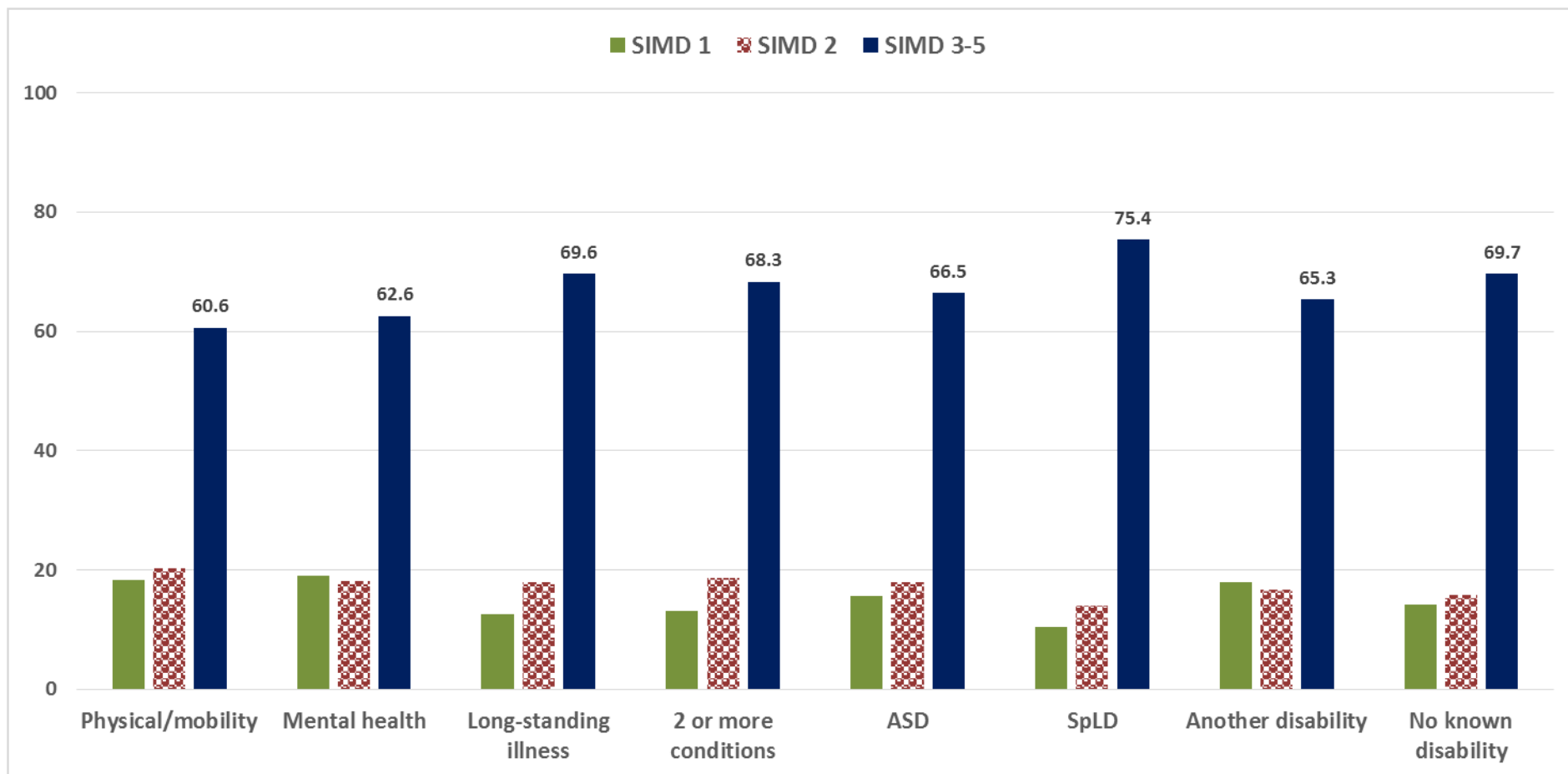
# Under-representation of disabled and non-disabled students from poorest neighbourhoods – particularly in most selective universities





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# Disabled university students come from more socially advantaged neighbourhoods – but variations by nature of impairment



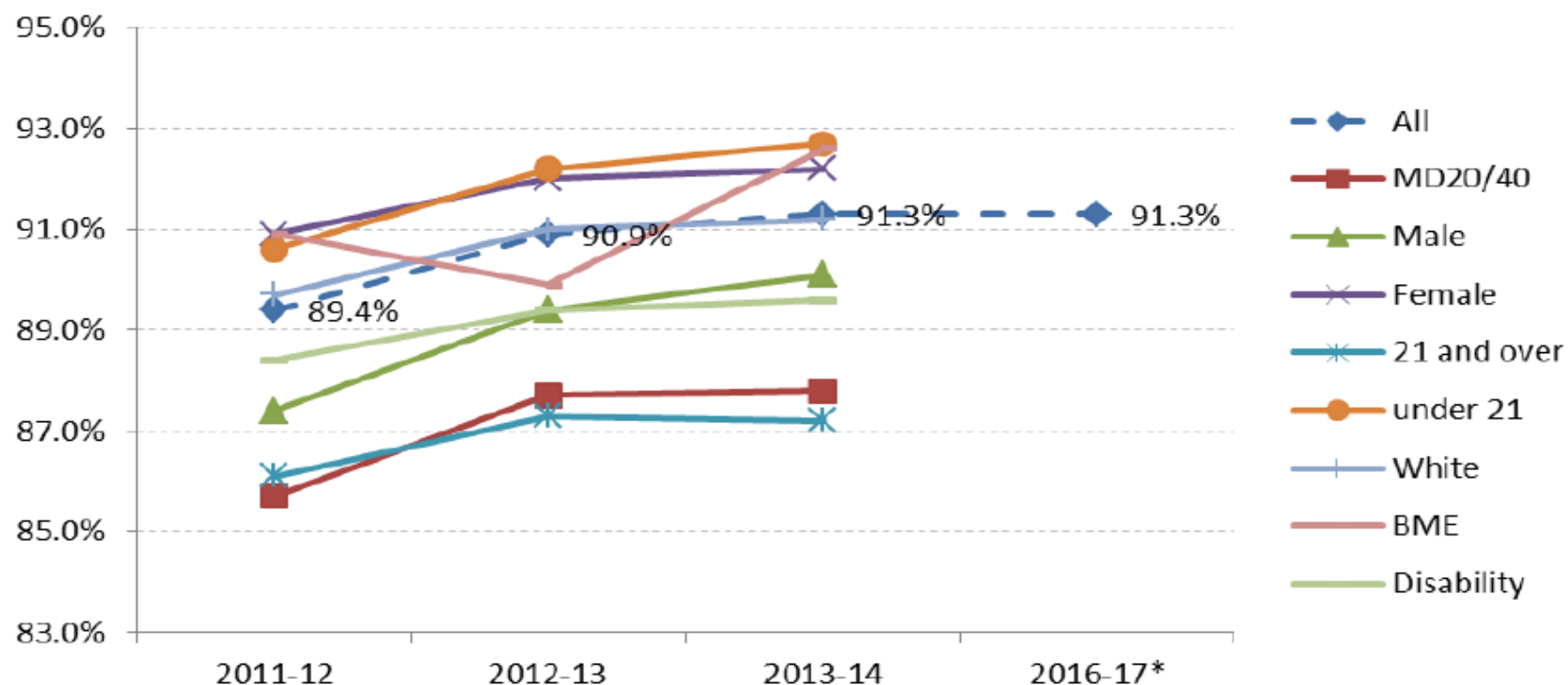


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# Comparison of students 'drop out' rates – those from poorer backgrounds mature students and disabled students particularly at risk



The proportion of full-time first year Scottish-domiciled entrants from different protected characteristic groups returning to study in year two

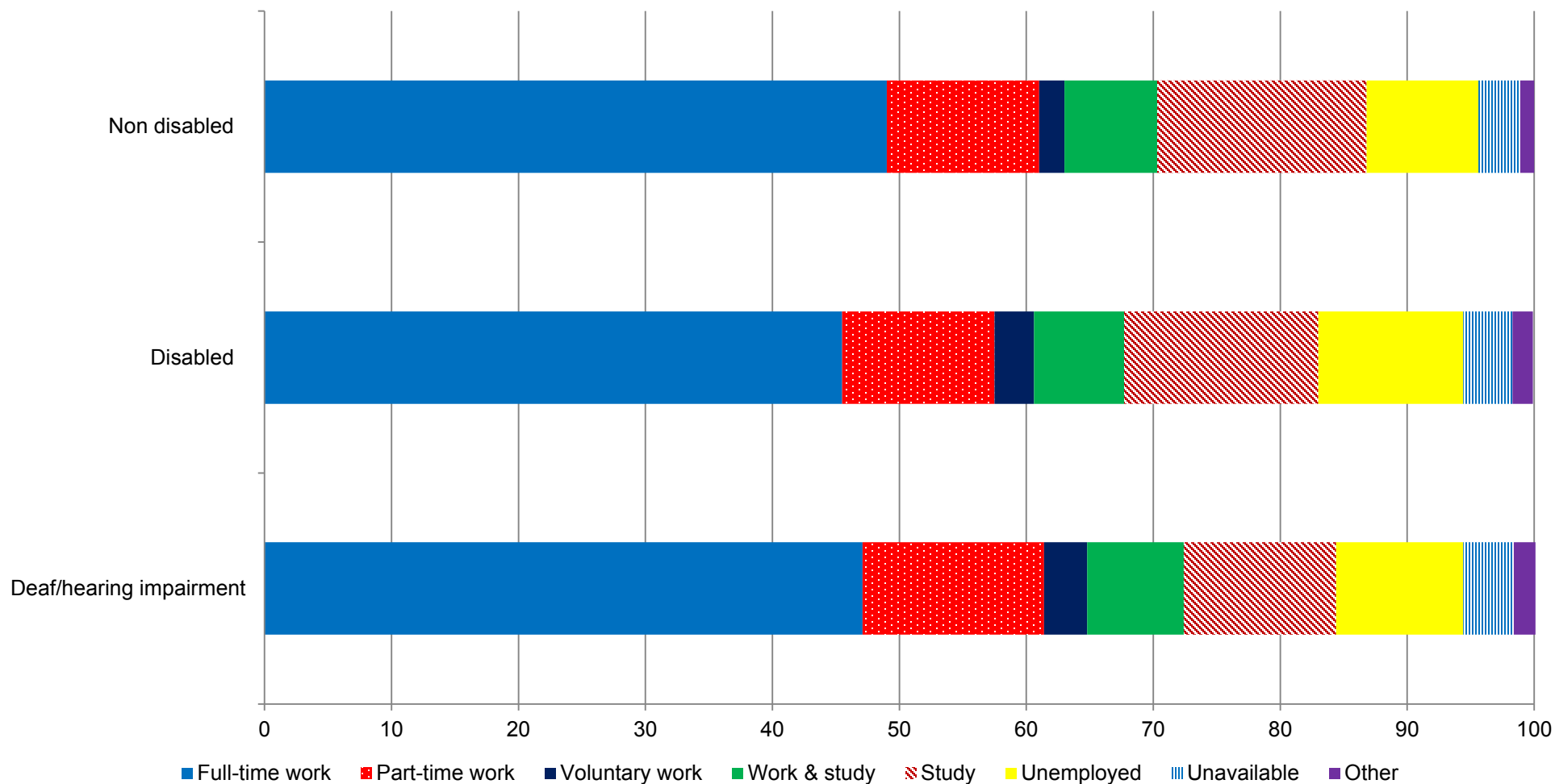


Source: HESA



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# Labour market outcomes of disabled graduates only slightly worse than those of non-disabled graduates – disabled people with few or no qualifications fare much worse





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# Case studies of deaf students from different social class backgrounds



- **Sophie – more advantaged background**
- **Isla – less advantaged background**
- **Illustrate different access to economic, social and cultural capital**

# Conclusion

- Marked expansion of higher education systems across Europe since 1990s
- Strong emphasis on inclusion in policy rhetoric – but difficult to know which groups have benefited due to lack of comparable data
- Disability particularly complex area because of differences in cultural understandings
- British data shows importance of inter-sectional analysis – increase in participation rates of disabled students, but disproportionately from middle class backgrounds and with diagnosis of specific learning difficulties/dyslexia



# Lessons for the future

- Policy rhetoric must be accompanied by robust data gathering systems
- Targets and benchmarks may encourage change
- Additional resources need to be targeted at institutions and disabled students
- Social class remains the major cause of unequal participation – affects both disabled and non-disabled students
- Inter-sectional analysis essential
- Public sector austerity may reduce or halt progress