

Widening access to higher education: balancing supply and demand in Ireland

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Outline

- Structure of Irish system
- Funding regime
- Selection mechanisms for higher education
- HE access policy
- Trends in HE entry
- Current debate about funding

Higher education institutions

- 7 Universities, account for 55% of HE entrants
- 14 Institutes of technology (IOTs), account for 45% of HE entrants
- 8 Other institutions (art, education)
- 15 Private HEIs (>15,000 students) – lack of systematic information and not included in national statistics

Funding regime

- Higher Education Authority (HEA) – channels funding to universities and IOTs; recurrent block grant based on student numbers and discipline breakdown, with a weighting for under-represented student groups; specific purpose grants; performance funding
- Tuition fees in publicly funded HEIs were abolished in 1996; ‘Free Fees Initiative’ – government covers costs for first undergraduate courses (residence requirement) in publicly funded HEIs
- Left open to HEIs to charge a registration fee (to cover student services and exam fees); initially €190 but increased over time to a maximum of €3,000 in 2017/18
- Private HEIs charge fees

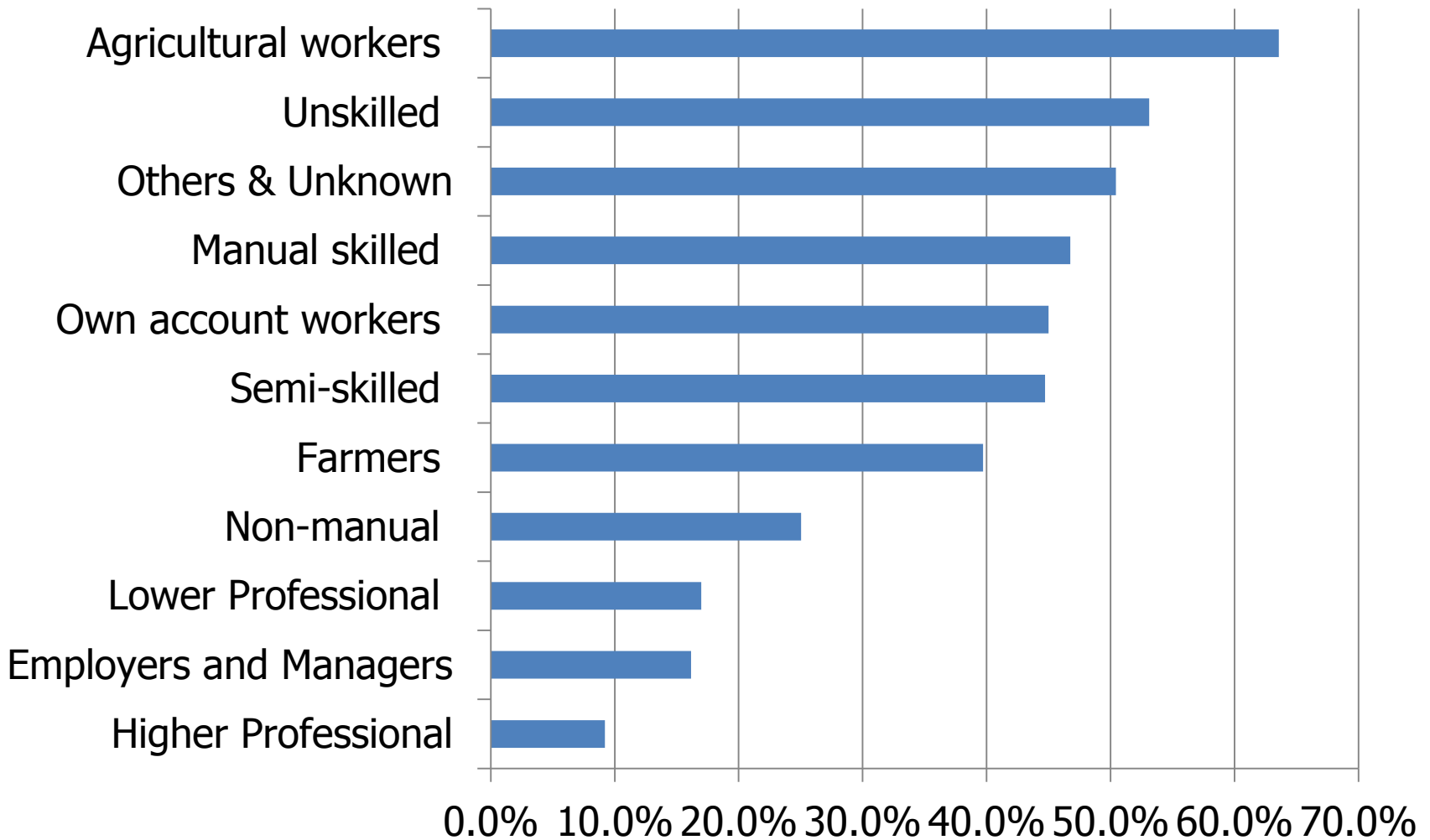
Student financial support

- Tuition fee and maintenance grant; size of grants varies on whether 'adjacent' or 'non-adjacent'; 'top-up' grant for welfare-dependent families
- Dependent students: assessed on gross income of parental and own income, with cut-offs varying by family size (and no. in college)
- Independent students (over 23 and living independently): assessed on gross income of self and spouse/partner
- Postgraduate level: tuition fees only (after hiatus during recession); maintenance grant only given to very low income welfare-dependent families
- Student Assistance Fund: money allocated to HEIs to assist students with difficulties in covering expenses.
- Fund for students with disabilities

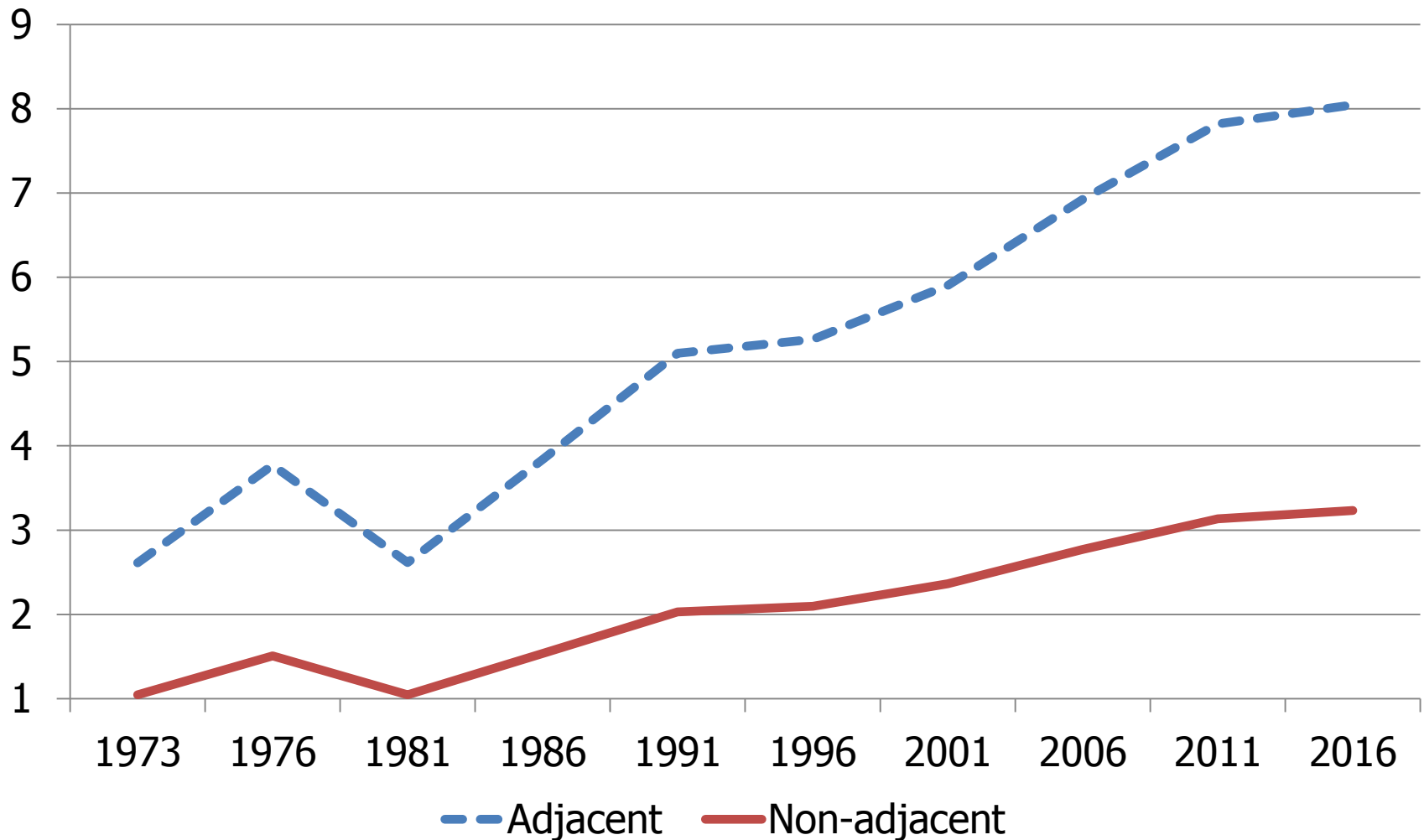
Issues in financial support

- Receipt of grants: 46% all entrants; 56% in IOTs, 36% in universities, 41% in other colleges
- Reliance on income v. capital assets
- Adequacy of maintenance grants

Grant receipt by socio-economic group (2009/10)



Ratio of Unemployment Assistance payments to the student maintenance grant



HE access policy

- Long-standing emphasis on equity of access to higher education
- Framed in terms of 'equity' rather than 'social mobility'
- Measured in terms of socio-economic group rather than social class, parental education or profile of local area; initially targeted working-class groups but included 'other non-manual' (service workers) after research by McCoy et al. (2010)
- Other target groups: mature students; students with disabilities; Travellers
- Focus on undergraduate entry with relative neglect of postgraduate patterns
- Emphasis on point of application to HE; lack of connect to policy to promote equity at earlier stages of the educational career

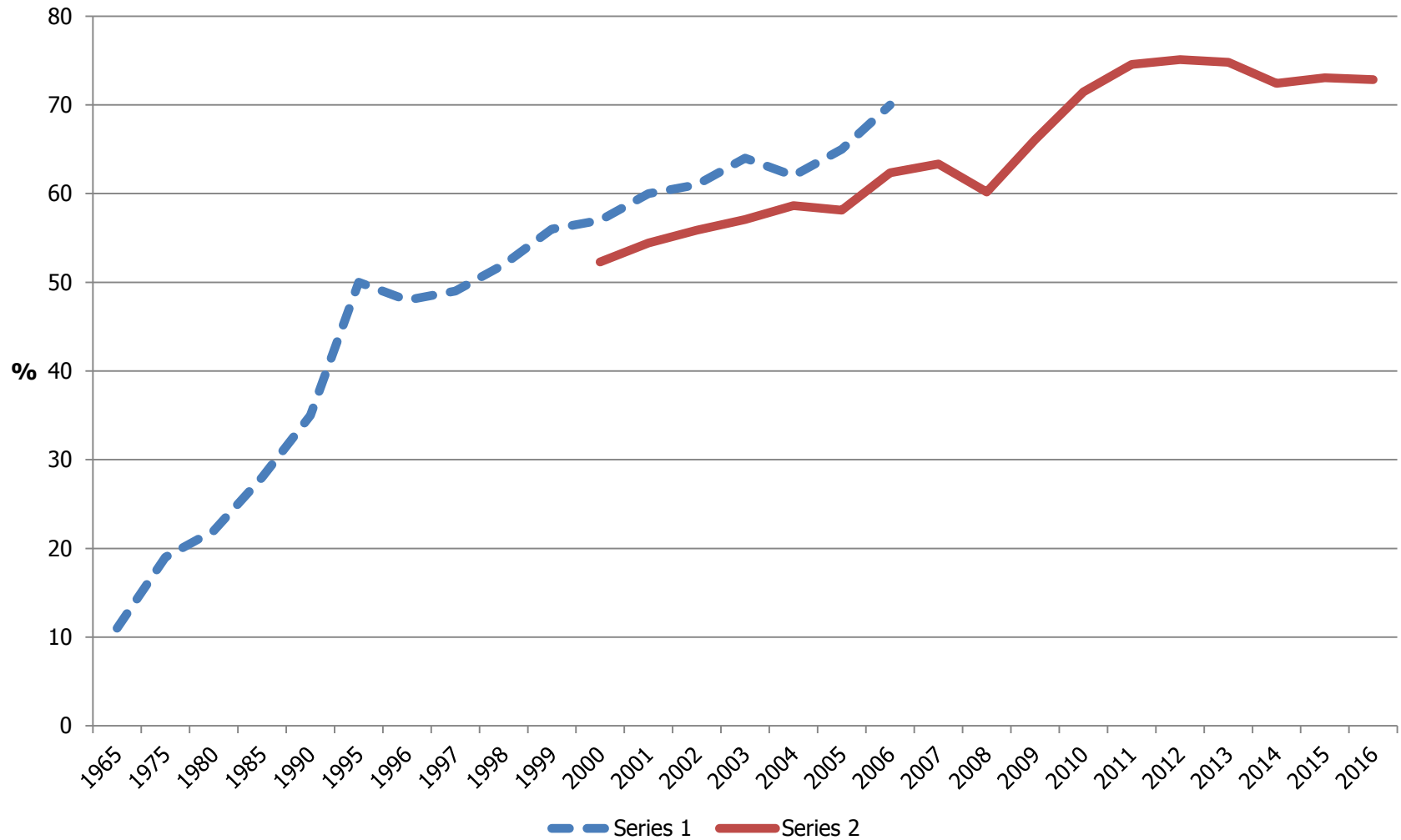
Entry mechanisms

- Reliance on grades in the upper secondary (Leaving Certificate) exam; six subjects counted for 'points' purposes (grades and subject levels – higher/ordinary)
- Less emphasis on subject requirements, except for some science/medicine courses (so very different to Scottish system)
- Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme – introduced in 2000 to offer places on reduced points to socio-economically disadvantaged LC school leavers (under 23); not offered by all HEIs (but some colleges have their own process); only offered to all schools from 2009; reserved places (limited) and need to meet minimum criteria

Entry mechanisms (2)

- Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme – introduced in 2009 to offer places at reduced points to LC students (<23) with disabilities; not all HEIs but more than HEAR
- Mature students: 23+; basis of LC grades OR additional information on qualifications and statement of interest; admissions test for some HEIs
- For those without qualifications, adults can enter by first taking an access programme which focuses on return to learning skills

Trends in HE entry



What difference did 'free fees' make?

- Analysis of regular School Leavers' Survey (McCoy, Smyth, 2011):

1980-1988 – beginning of expansion

1989-1996 – further expansion

1997-2000 – shift in costs because of free tuition

2002-2006 – medium-term impact of shifting costs

- Analyse patterns by social class, distinguishing the farmer group; confine to upper secondary leavers

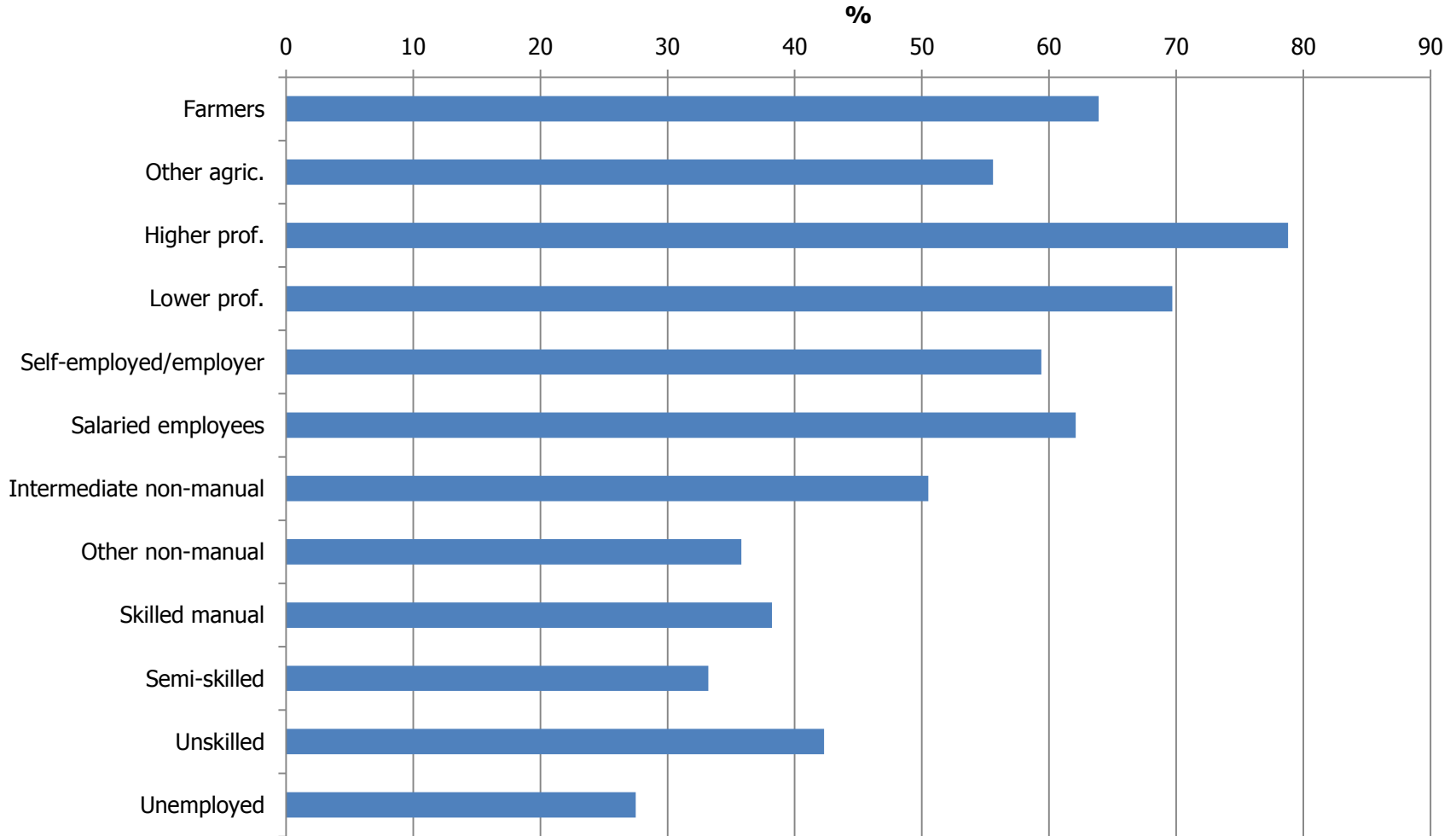
Patterns of inequality

- Social class differentiation in higher education entry
- Universities are more socially selective than IOTs
- Grades mediate some of the class effects but direct effects remain

Trends in inequality

- Higher professional groups benefit most from initial expansion with some reduction in the gap as this group reaches near saturation
- Expansion does not improve the *relative* position of working-class young people but there is a significant growth in their numbers within HE
- Abolition of tuition fees was not sufficient to change overall pattern – still issues of other direct costs, risk aversion etc.
- Farming families were the only group to experience a relative increase in representation after the abolition of fees:
 - Decline in agricultural sector – education > inheritance
 - Eligibility for financial support

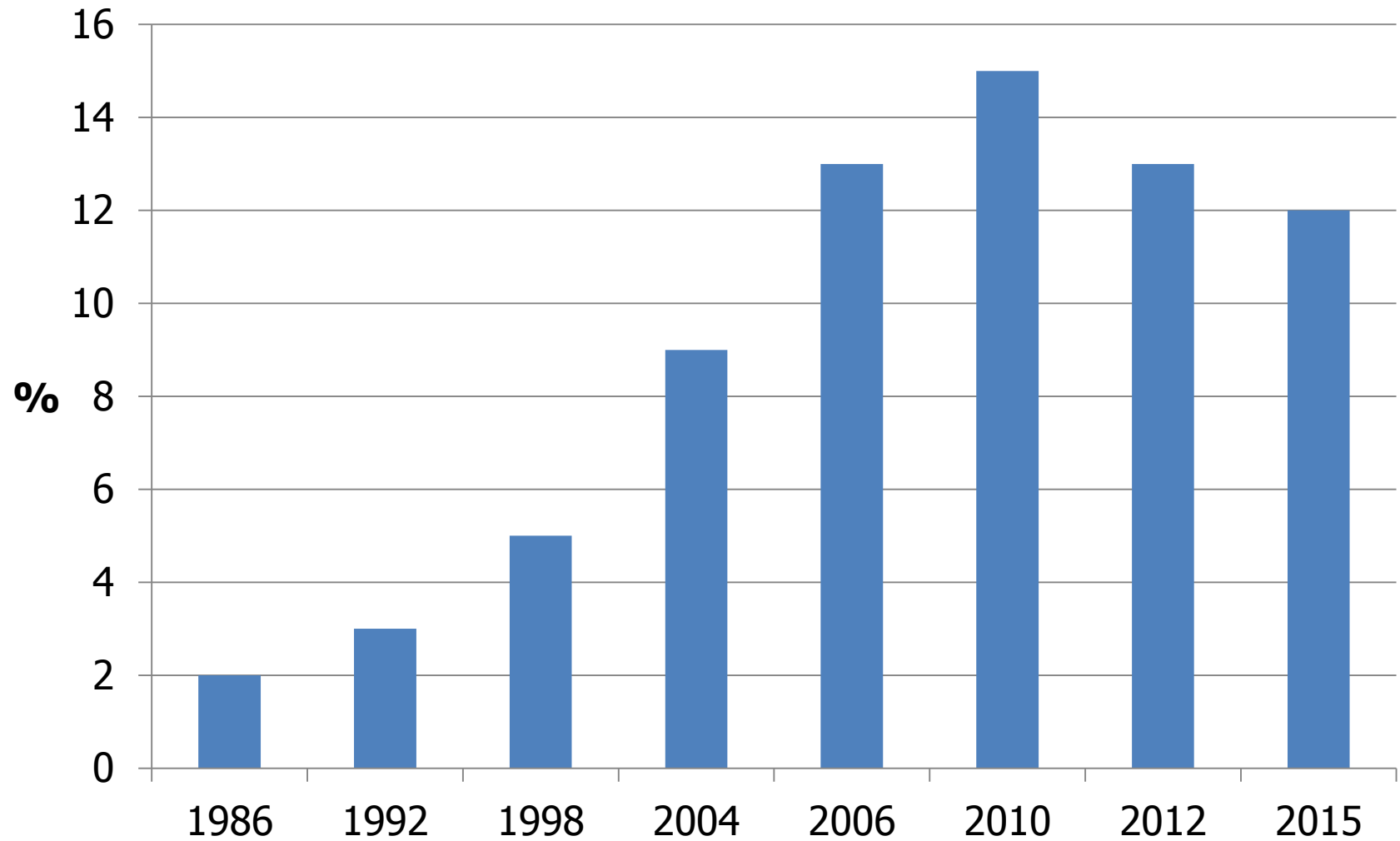
HE entry rates by SEG, 2007 (all leavers)



More recent trends

- Discontinuation of the School Leavers' Survey after 2007 means that there is a lack of systematic information to monitor trends
- HEA collects information on profile (incl. SEG) of students and monitors targets – but relative to administrative data and large % of SEG unknown; this approach yields participation rates of over 100% for some groups
- Variation in the application of the HEAR and DARE programmes across HEIs has limited their potential (Byrne et al., 2013)
- % of new entrants with a disability: 3.2% in 2005 and 11% in 2014

Mature students among new entrants (full-time undergraduate)

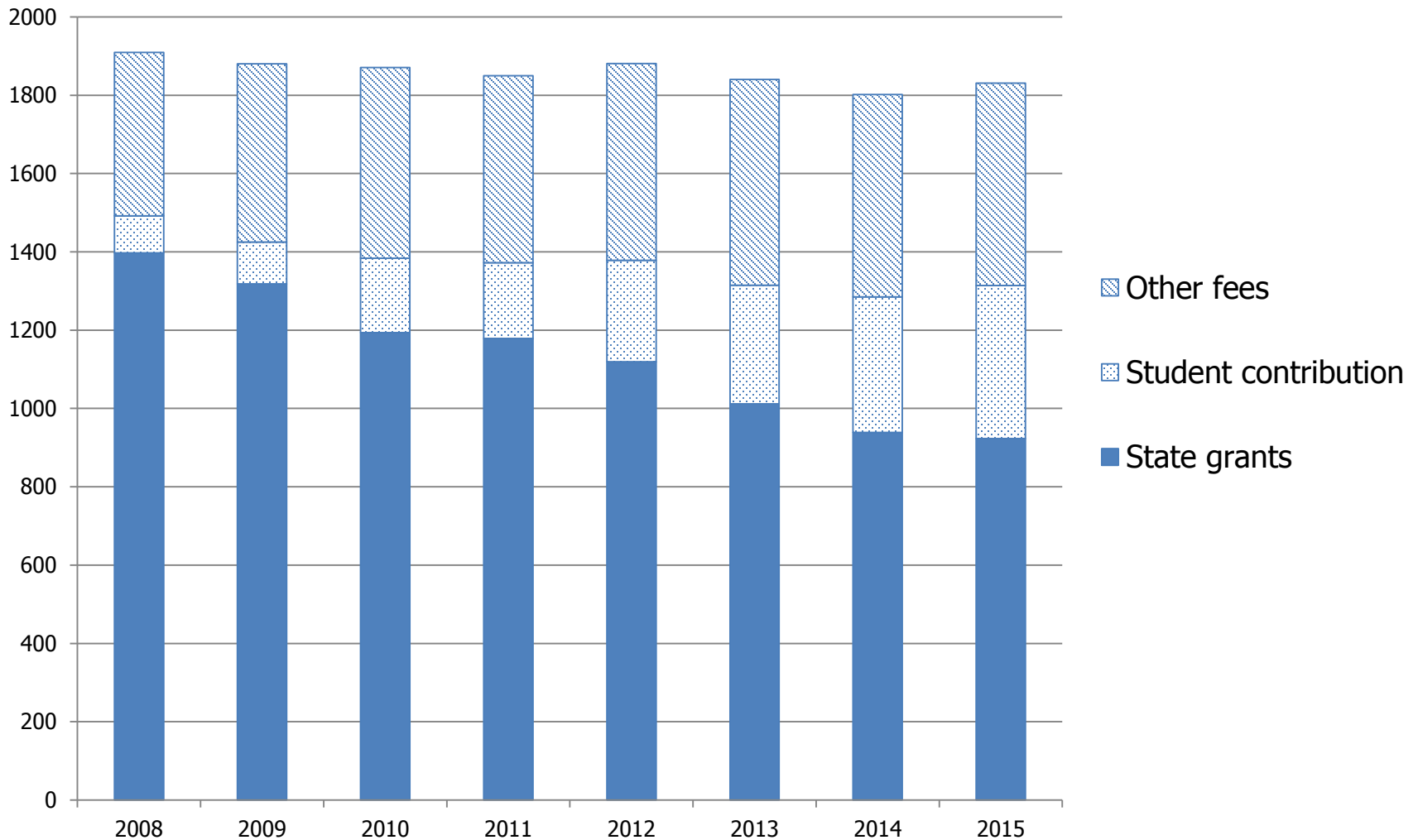


A shift in the policy discourse: “A crisis in funding”



- Despite an increase in student contributions, total income per HE student decreased by 22% over the period 2007-2014 with resulting increases in student-staff ratios
- HEIs were very vocal about the resulting ‘crisis in funding’ and this prompted the establishment of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education in summer 2014
- The group reported in 2016 and recommended:
 - Increased investment in HE, especially given projected demographic trends up to 2030
 - Enhanced levels of student financial support – to include UG, PG and part-time students; capital asset test
 - Some contribution from employers, e.g. through education/training levy

Core income of HEIs (publicly funded)



Who pays?

- Three options:
 1. State-funded system: free at point of entry; increased block grants to HEIs
 2. State funding plus student contribution: increase block grants and maintain UG student contribution and PG fees
 3. Increased State funding plus income-contingent loans (ICLs)
- Report recommendations are with an Oireachtas (Parliamentary) Committee for review but public debate has largely focused on the ICL option

Potential implications for equity

- Assumes a constant level of demand with increased numbers driven by demographics; how can this be balanced against targets of increased participation among under-represented groups?
- Suggest that fee levels would be ‘modest’ but experience elsewhere suggests potential difficulties
- Parameters of ICL are not yet determined but two studies (Flannery and O’Donoghue, 2011; Chapman and Doris, 2016) suggest repayments will be affordable if fees are kept at modest level; particular issue of recouping repayments in a context of emigration
- Increased maintenance grants are likely to make a much bigger difference than the abolition of fees but the scale of any such increase is left open
- Relative lack of part-time and flexible provision is a continuing barrier to the (re)entry of adults to HE

Conclusions

- Long-standing policy emphasis in Ireland on equity of access to HE
- Growth in participation v. persistent inequality; trends have largely been driven by HE expansion rather than removal of tuition fees or other policy measures; maintenance costs emerge as a more important potential barrier than fees
- Gaps in policy focus: part-time provision; postgraduate access; no targets relating to ethnicity/nationality other than being a Traveller
- Unequal access is largely shaped by inequalities earlier in the educational career but lack of joined-up thinking on policies at different stages
- Potentially on the cusp of a major policy reform regarding student loans in response to a crisis in HE funding
- But danger that responses will focus on meeting student demand for places rather than promoting access