



A protocol for a scoping review on understandings of inclusion in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Ireland

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Abstract

Background: This paper describes the protocol for a scoping review to map understandings of inclusion in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Republic of Ireland. To-date, there have been no scoping reviews published of the most current literature on inclusion in Irish HEIs.

Method: Scoping reviews can inform decision-making and research as they involve rigorous identification and analysis of literature on a chosen subject. This search protocol will use the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) scoping review model to investigate empirical research and other relevant research, including grey literature, on inclusive practice in Irish HEIs from the years 1996 to 2023. The PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR) will steer the scoping review itself. The following databases will be searched: ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science (Social Sciences Citation Index), and ASSIA; Google Scholar will be the final search tool. Thematic analysis will be used for appraisal and analysis of the data to assess inclusion in Irish HEIs.

Results: This review is part of a wider study into inclusive practice in Irish Higher Education. It is envisaged that the scoping review that will follow this protocol will be published by Autumn 2025.

Conclusion: This paper outlines the methodology for a comprehensive investigation into current understandings of inclusion in Irish HEIs. By systematically searching and analyzing relevant literature from 1996 to 2023, this review will identify key themes, gaps, and emerging trends in the field. The findings will help inform future research, policy development, and institutional strategies to enhance inclusion in Irish universities.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present a protocol for a scoping review on inclusion in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This research study is motivated by a desire to investigate practices in inclusion in Irish HEIs so that they may be fully inclusive of all the people who attend them. This research meets with four of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Quality Education (SDG 4), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8) and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10).

The Republic of Ireland has a population of just over 5 million, with 20 universities and a host of other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), some of which are private and independent (Higher Education Authority, 2023). The majority of HEIs in the Republic of Ireland are state-funded – 25 institutions in total receive public funding (Higher Education Authority, 2023). Notably, the Irish context is a mix of established “traditional” universities and more recent “technological” universities. This binary divide is a product of the 1960s where the Irish government of the time, following the introduction of free secondary education in 1967, set up regional technical colleges focusing on engineering and science (Borooah & Knox, 2023). These technical colleges became technological universities in 2019. This expansion of HEIs has been mirrored by a growth in higher educational attainment in the population. Over half of 25-62 year olds in Ireland have a university degree, and Ireland is well above the EU-27 average in third-level attainment (Central Statistics Office, 2023a).

Tuition fees were removed from Higher Education in 1996 in a move to encourage greater access to tertiary education at a time of economic growth in Ireland. This change in tuition fees saw more women than before accessing HEIs (McCoy & Smyth, 2011). By 2004, over 55% of young people in Ireland attended a HEI compared to 20% in 1980 (O’Connell et al., 2006). These high rates of university attainment have been helped by the promotion of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) and access initiatives in Ireland such as the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR), and the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH). There has been an increase in the number of disabled students entering HEIs in Ireland since the inception of the DARE programme in 2009, with the HEAR and PATH programmes also drawing in students who may have been under-represented in Higher Education previously, such as those from families with lower socio-economic income (Keane et al., 2023). Table 1 shows the increase of learners accessing HEIs through the DARE programme and the drop in the numbers of learners entering HE through the HEAR programme, between 2018 and 2022. DARE applications have continued to grow, representing

Table 1. Enrolment details of the DARE and HEAR programmes.

Year	DARE Applications	HEAR Applications
2018	9% of entrants	12% of entrants
2022	11% of entrants	10% of entrants

a growing number of disabled learners accessing Higher Education. However, it is concerning that there is a drop in numbers of learners from socio-economically disadvantaged students and shows that more needs to be done to ensure the HEAR programme better serves the needs of students from less affluent backgrounds (Atif, 2024).

Another change in Irish society has been Ireland’s shift as a country of net immigration to net migration (Central Statistics Office, 2023b). There has, therefore, been increasing diversity in the student populations of Irish HEIs, which has led universities to focus on issues of inclusion in their institutions (Arellanes & Hendricks, 2022; Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022). With more people attending university from more varied backgrounds, HEIs need to facilitate everyone who wishes to pursue a university degree. The aim of this paper is to present a protocol for a scoping review on inclusion in Irish HEIs. This research study is motivated by a desire to investigate practices in inclusion in our HEIs so that they may be fully inclusive of all the people who attend them.

The Salamanca Protocol caused a worldwide shift in governmental attitudes towards inclusion in education (Spain, 1994). The Ireland of the 1980s and 1990s, however, trailed behind other countries in terms of inclusive education. It was only in 2004, with the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, that inclusive practice became a reality in the Irish educational sector (Zhao et al., 2021). However, 20 years on from the EPSEN Act, parts of the Act still remain to be implemented (Mulholland & O’Connor, 2016); another example of dissonance between words and actions is demonstrated by the fact that even though Ireland signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007, it took until 2018 before the UNCRPD was ratified (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021). In the Higher Education context, the Irish Human Rights Equality Commission Act came into law in 2014, which requires public bodies—including universities—to integrate a human rights and equality assessment into strategic planning processes and outcomes. The National Access Plan 2022-2026 requires that

the higher education student body, at all levels and across all programmes, reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population, and that our higher education institutions are inclusive, universally designed environments which support student success and outcomes, equity and diversity (Higher Education Authority, 2023, p. 51).

In Universal Design for Learning (UDL), teaching and assessment are designed with multiple means of representation (the “what” of learning), expression (the “how” of learning), and engagement (the “why” of learning) (Burgstahler, 2020; O’Shaughnessy, 2021). This is supported by the roll out of the UDL badge initiative and the development of A National Charter for UDL in Irish HE to support UDL as a “vehicle for greater coherence and collaboration on access and inclusion, both within and across institutions” (AHEAD Educational Press, 2024, p. 2).

Therefore, the concepts of inclusion, universal design, equity, and diversity are now considered essential practices for Irish HEIs and as such, these concepts will therefore guide this research protocol. Figure 1 traces the trajectory of inclusive practice policy impacts on Irish Higher Education.

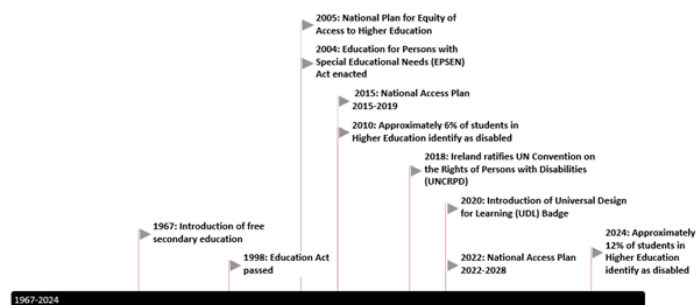


Figure 1. Trajectory of inclusive practice policy impacts in Irish higher education.

Contested understandings of inclusion, belonging, and EDI

The challenge with researching inclusion is that there is no consensus on what inclusion means in education (Finkelstein et al., 2021; Forlin et al., 2013). According to UNESCO (2017), inclusive education is a way to identify and remove all barriers to education, including barriers to inclusive teaching, pedagogy, and curricula. This sense of “barriers” echoes the seminal work of Ainscow (2005), for whom inclusion is a set of actions to overcome barriers to student participation and learning. When discussing how to dismantle these barriers, different theorists propose different approaches. For example, Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) advise that one needs to look to inclusive pedagogy to understand the reasoning behind teaching practices and for teachers to reflect on their practice.

For Moriña et al. (2020), the focus should not just be on inclusive practice (the teaching techniques that support the learning and engagement of all students), but on an inclusive pedagogy that comprises the beliefs, knowledge, design and actions that guide teaching and learning in higher education. Of interest in the Irish context is Moriña’s emphasis on design. As mentioned in the National Access Plan, UDL is considered an inclusive co-design process. UDL has been championed in Irish HEIs with initiatives such as the UDL Digital Badge delivered by AHEAD, an independent not-for-profit organisation that promotes inclusive environments in Irish HEIs and the workplace (AHEAD, 2024). However, the concern remains that the term “inclusion can be used as a panacea, a word that might register the presence of difference while keeping its participation delayed” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 84).

Other theorists have raised similar concerns about the term inclusion, arguing instead for the concept of belonging as a less contested concept (Slee, 2010; Strnadová & Nind, 2020). Belonging has less negative policy connotations (Hall, 2013). Slee (2019, p. 917) argues that belonging is central to achieving inclusion as “at the heart of inclusion [...] lies the principle and practices of belonging”. Belonging is about “feeling at home” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 197) in a

“space of familiarity, comfort and security” (Antonsich, 2010, p. 645). Belonging is “tied to the quality of interaction and acceptance by others” (Renwick et al., 2019, p. 9). Given that no definition of inclusion has been universally accepted (Florian, 2014), developing an understanding of inclusion as encompassing belonging is a positive step towards developing an understanding of inclusion.

A further contested area is that of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives. Ahmed has long argued that EDI initiatives in academia can often be performative rather than genuinely tackling issues of disenfranchisement, racism and injustice (Ahmed, 2012, 2017). “One-offs”, the term that is often applied to one-off training in EDI, can be another example of performative inclusion initiatives in the university space as “by itself, a one-off EDI workshop is never going to effect change” (Leung, 2022, p. 759). In addition, a wide variety of different terms are used in academia to describe EDI initiatives including:

“equity, diversity and inclusion”, “equality, diversity and inclusion”, “diversity, equity and inclusion”, “belonging, dignity, and justice”, “diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging”, “diversity, dignity, and inclusion”, “equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility”, “justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion”, “inclusion, diversity, equity and accessibility”, “inclusion, diversity, equity and accountability”, and “equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization” (Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023, p. 168).

It is apparent that there is a lack of clarity around the meanings of the different concepts that play a key role in driving inclusion in HE in Ireland. As a result, such concepts are worthy of investigation.

Methods

A scoping review aims to identify and better understand the state of research on a given topic (Grant & Booth, 2009). This research design is for a scoping review rather than a systematic literature review. As no scoping review has been carried out on the various understandings of inclusion in the Irish HEI context, the proposed research will address this gap in the knowledge base. A scoping review is beneficial to explore the breath of research on a topic; to identify gaps in the research literature on a topic; and to summarise and disseminate findings from the literature (Grant & Booth, 2009). This protocol paper is guided by the scoping review methodology proposed by Arksey and O’Malley (2005). The scoping review itself will be presented in line with the PRISMA extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Tricco et al., 2018).

Arksey and O’Malley (2005) recommend that scoping reviews use the following steps:

1. Identify the research question and write the protocol
2. Identify relevant studies
3. Study the selection

4. Chart the data (quality appraisal)
5. Collate, summarise and report the results

Arksey and O'Malley (2005) do not include qualitative appraisal of the studies in a scoping review. However, for some commentators, this is considered a lack in their research methodology (Levac et al., 2010). Our project is focused on understandings of inclusion; therefore, we feel that qualitative thematic analysis would be a better fit for the research rather than the quantitative analysis that is typically found in scoping reviews. Therefore, for Step 5, we will apply thematic analysis as utilised by Braun and Clarke (2013) to the results to determine the relevance of the data (returned papers) to advancing understandings of inclusion in Irish HEIs. This form of thematic analysis enables rich and detailed accounts of data interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Review objectives

A scoping review identifies the breadth of knowledge on a research area rather than the depth of research itself (Prihodova et al., 2015). The primary objective of this paper is to create a protocol for a scoping review on inclusion in Irish HEIs. The research question is driven by the Irish Higher Education Authority National Access Plan, which emphasises inclusion, universal design, equity and diversity (National Action Plan A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028, 2022). While legislation is now in place for inclusive environments in Irish HEIs, a scoping review has yet to be published on inclusion practices in Irish HEIs. Therefore, this paper will address the following research question: *What are the current understandings of inclusion as it impacts students in Irish HEIs?*

Inclusion/Exclusion criteria

There are a wide range of the search terms when it comes to inclusion, as shown in the Power to Fly glossary (2024); as a result, a broad range of papers will likely be returned. Therefore, it is crucial that we have strong inclusion/exclusion criteria. Included studies must satisfy the following criteria:

1. Peer-reviewed studies that describe issue of inclusion encompassing EDI, UDL, belonging and diversity in HEIs in the Republic of Ireland. The concept of belonging is growing in use in Ireland and so will be a key search term alongside inclusion.
2. As tuition fees were removed from HEIs in the Republic of Ireland in 1996, we include studies from 1996 to 2023 as this period marked a change in access to Higher Education in Ireland.
3. Relevant grey literature, such as Masters and Doctoral theses on inclusion in Ireland.

4. Studies written in English. While relying on English-language papers may present a language bias, it is considered that this impact will have minimal effect considering that Ireland is an English-speaking country and studies on Irish HEIs are more likely to be written in English.
5. Research methodologies that can be qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, literature reviews and meta-analyses.

Excluded studies will include:

1. Studies that focus on issues of inclusion, EDI, UDL, belonging and diversity in HEIs in Northern Ireland, the UK, and elsewhere.
2. Studies that focus on staff rather than students; for example, studies on the gender pay divide and Athena Swan initiatives.
3. Personal correspondence, emails, reviews, and letters.
4. Studies that focus on workplace transitions and work placements. These typically include studies on clinical placements such as the experiences of nurses with dyslexia on hospital placements.

Search strategies

Studies will be identified using thematic combinations derived from the National Access Plan. These themes include (1) Ireland (2) inclusion (3) belonging (4) EDI (5) UDL (6) diversity (7) higher education. Furthermore, within each thematic combination, search terms will be separated by the Boolean operators AND or OR. An asterisk will be attached to the stem of the word "inclusion" as the "inclus" wildcard will enable more comprehensive searches of terms like inclusion/inclusive. As noted earlier, there is a lack of consensus on what inclusion means and there are different terms used to describe EDI initiatives. Terms like Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) are common in US HEIs but are not so common in Ireland (Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023). The research team are highly aware of such differences within the literature and therefore the decision was made that the search terms "EDI" and "diversity" will be used as these terms are commonly used in Irish HEIs.

A selection of combinations of Boolean phrases are outlined in Table 2. These studies will be identified by searching for literature on inclusion in Google Scholar and the following databases: ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science (Social Sciences Citation Index), and ASSIA. These studies will be identified by titles, abstracts and keywords.

In addition to the Boolean phrases, reference lists from papers identified in the searches will be examined to ensure that all relevant literature will be captured to evaluate inclusion and inclusive practices in Irish HEIs.

Table 2. Example of search terms used.

1. "Ireland" AND "inclusion" OR "belonging" AND "higher education" OR "university"
2. "Ireland" AND "inclusion" OR "belonging" AND "EDI" AND "higher education" OR "university"
3. "Ireland" AND "inclusion" OR "belonging" AND "UDL" AND "higher education" OR "university"
4. "Ireland" AND "UDL" OR "EDI" AND "higher education" OR "university"
5. "Ireland" AND "diversity" AND "higher education" OR "university"

Study selection and quality appraisal

The initial search will be carried out by the researcher assigned to this project, who will use Zotero and Covidence software to prepare studies for screening and remove duplicates. Covidence is a cloud-based systematic literature review management platform which is GDPR-compliant. Using Covidence, it is possible to collect, store, screen and synthesise the data. All research titles, abstracts, and key words will be assessed to ensure relevance to the research project. The inclusion/exclusion criteria outlined above will support the study selection process. Papers that are not centred on inclusion in Irish HEIs will be removed from the process. Once a title or abstract has been identified, the full text will be read to ensure that they are within the remit of this study. Furthermore, the reference lists of the texts will be hand-searched for additional studies and sources. This may include grey literature. For balance and transparency, two reviewers are available for consultation. All steps of the study selection process (identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion) will be outlined in a PRISMA flow diagram (Tricco et al., 2018).

Analysis

Thematic analysis, a technique for finding, analysing and interpreting meaning patterns, will be used to analyse the selected studies (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Research questions for scoping reviews are typically quite wide in scope as the aim is to draw on a diverse range of sources and methodologies (Peters et al., 2020). The analysis will assess the following themes:

1. The different understandings of inclusion and belonging in Irish HEIs particularly in terms of teaching, learning and assessment practices.
2. What views do staff and students in Irish HEIs have of diversity in terms of teaching, learning and assessment practices?
3. How UDL is understood and operationalised in Irish HEIs.
4. How EDI is understood and operationalised in Irish HEIs.

Results

The results of this scoping review will be presented using the PRISMA extension for scoping reviews PRISMA-ScR (Tricco et al., 2018). All the stages of the scoping process will

be presented in the recommended PRISMA flow diagram. Arskey and O'Malley (2005) recommend the use of a data charting table which will be refined iteratively by the researchers during the full-text screening process. The data charting table will fit with the research aims and research questions of this project (Peters et al., 2020). The data collected in this scoping review will include the following:

- Author/year
- Location
- Type of source
- Study aims
- Research questions
- Study design
- Participant details
- Sample size if applicable
- Key findings
- Recommendations

The results of the scoping review will include a narrative summary which will detail how the results link with the objectives of the review. While Ireland has made significant strides in recent years to promote inclusive education in HEIs, challenges persist in terms of barriers to inclusion, effectiveness of inclusion initiatives, and implications for policy and planning. Any limitations or gaps in the literature will also be identified.

Figure 2 details the process for selecting studies following the PRISMA flowchart (Tricco et al., 2018). The results of the scoping review will be presented in a future paper.

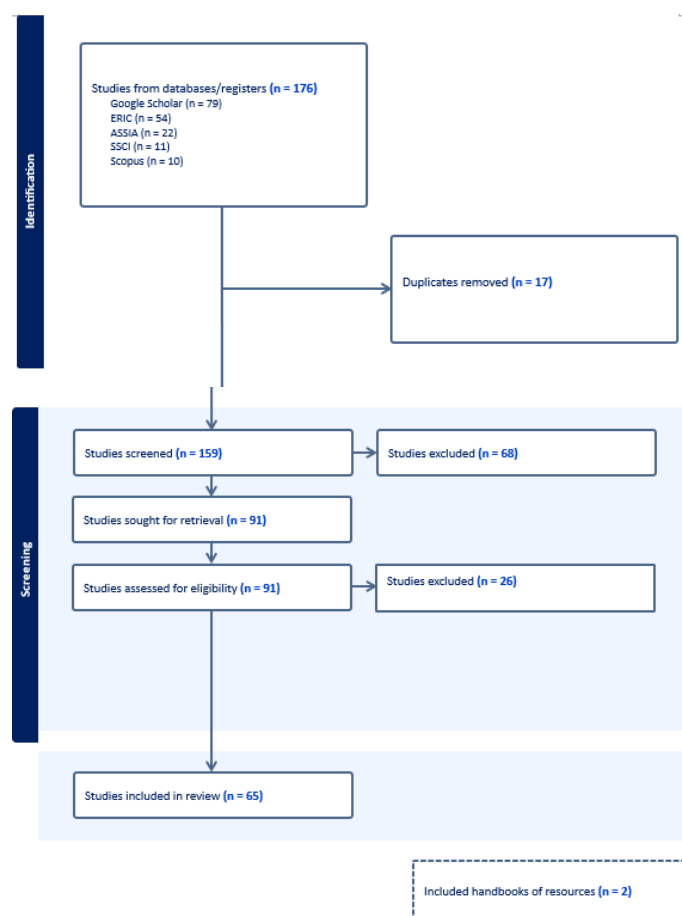


Figure 2. Prisma flowchart of the studies selected for the scoping review.

Proposed timeline and researcher involvement

This scoping review will be completed within six months. The start time is October 2024 and the finish time is April 2025.

Ethics and dissemination

Ethics approval for this research project was granted from the Faculty of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences in the University of Limerick on 1 December 2023.

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