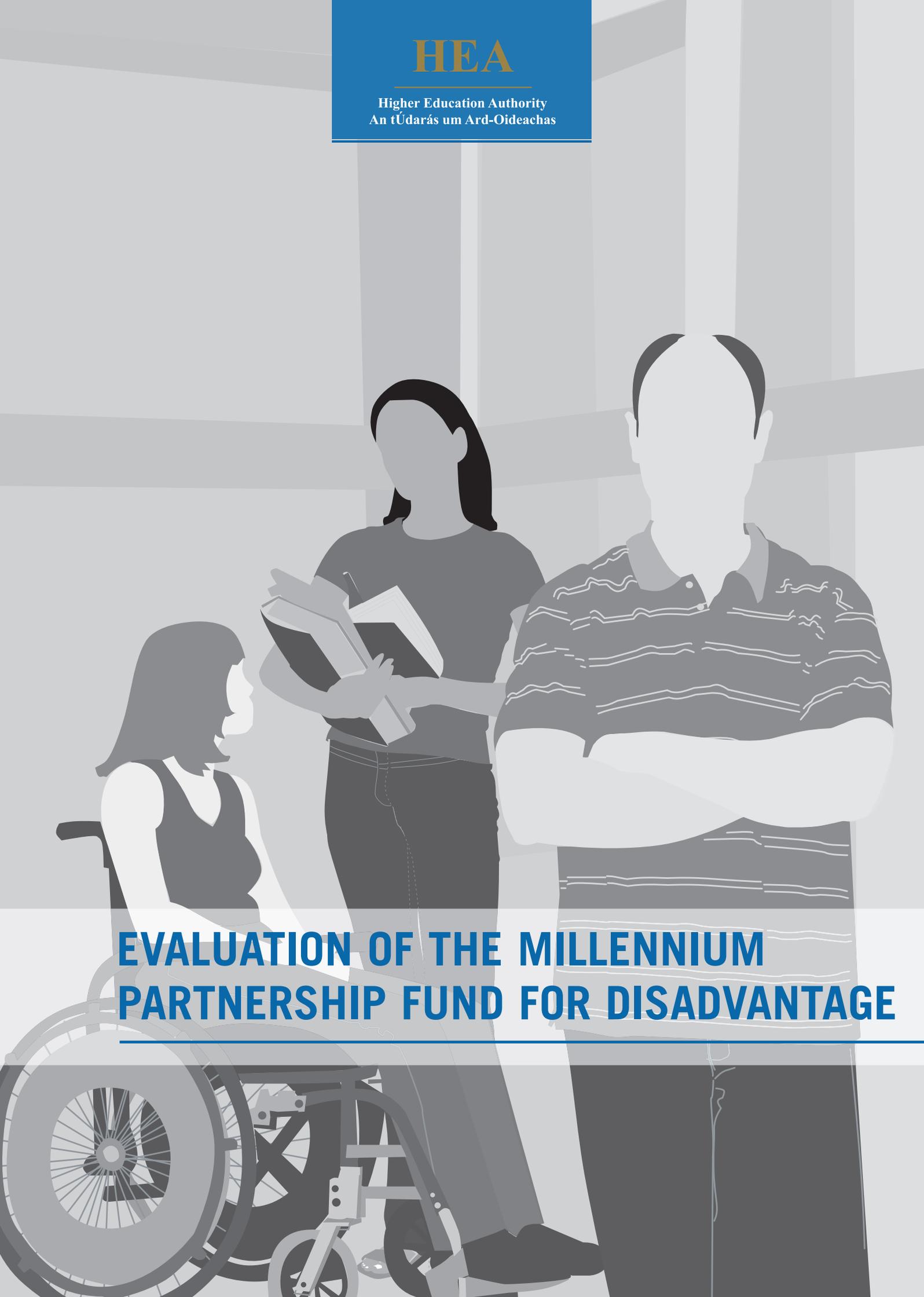**HEA**

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An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas

EVALUATION OF THE MILLENNIUM PARTNERSHIP FUND FOR DISADVANTAGE

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By Siobhan Phillips & Anne Eustace

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Millennium Partnership Fund for Disadvantage was launched in September 2000. It forms part of a European Social Fund-aided package for education disadvantage at further and higher education known as the 'Access Measure' which includes the Special Fund for Students with Disabilities, the Student Assistance Fund and the Special Rate of Maintenance Grant. The Access Measure is a feature of the Government's National Development Plan 2000–2006. There is a strong rationale for this measure based on evidence of unequal participation rates in third level colleges of children from different social backgrounds and across different geographic areas as demonstrated in the Clancy reports (HEA)[1].

The objective of the Millennium Fund as stated by the Department of Education and Science is to 'support students from disadvantaged areas with regard to retention and participation in further or higher education courses'. Funding is allocated on a competitive year-to-year basis to partnerships and community organisations through Area Development Management Ltd (ADM). Thirty-seven partnerships and 22 community organisations received funding totalling approximately €1.836m in 2003. A total of 3,385 individuals have benefited from the financial and/or non-financial support from the Fund in 2002/3.

The National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education was established in August 2003, following a decision by the Minister for Education and Science. The role of the Office is to facilitate educational access and equity for groups who are underrepresented in higher education – those who are disadvantaged socially and/or culturally, those with a disability, and mature learners.

Originally it was envisaged that the Fund would be situated in the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education which was to be located within the structures of the Higher Education Authority (HEA). However, due to delays in establishing the National Office, the Department of Education and Science invited ADM to manage the Fund (September 2001) on an interim basis for the 2001–2002 period. ADM continued to manage the Fund for 2002–2003 and retained this role at the time of this research in 2004.

1.1 Terms of Reference for the Evaluation

The Millennium Partnership Fund has been operating for five years. In 2006 the current National Development Plan (NDP) will terminate. In this context it is important to identify how the strategic utilisation of the Fund at community level can be optimised for 2005–2006 and into the next national development phase. It is also appropriate at this juncture to reflect on the extent to which the Fund has made a difference in relation to retention and participation in further and higher education. It is expected that the evaluation will contribute to the development of national policy on the role of communities in facilitating equity of access to higher education.

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1. Clancy, P. (2001; 1995; 1988; 1982) National Surveys on Access to Higher Education. Dublin: HEA; Clancy, P. and Wall, J. *Social Background of Higher Education Entrants.* Dublin: HEA.

The terms of reference for the evaluation are as follows:

■ Assess the *impact* of the Millennium Partnership Fund in supporting *participation and retention* in further and higher education amongst students from participating disadvantaged communities.

■ Assess the *balance between the provision of financial and non-financial supports* provided under the Millennium Partnership Fund and the nature of overlap or duplication (if any) with other sources of student support at community, institutional or statutory level.

■ Assess the *impact* of the Millennium Partnership Fund *on participating community groups and partnerships* in terms of response to educational disadvantage with specific reference to community infrastructure, linkages, capacity and enabling of good practice.

■ *Recommend a model for the future of the Millennium Partnership Fund* that builds on best practice and the opportunities created by its community-based dimension. The model should address areas to include the following:

  ■ Scope
  ■ Rationale for allocation
  ■ Resourcing of the Fund
  ■ Funding time frame
  ■ Geographical targeting
  ■ Socio-economic targeting
  ■ Types of supports provided to students
  ■ Support provided to partnerships and community groups
  ■ Reporting and data requirements.

1.2 Historical Context for the Millennium Fund

The Action Group to advise the Minister on the most effective ways of increasing participation by disadvantaged groups (students with disabilities, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and mature 'second chance' students) at third level was launched in September 2000. Simultaneously, the Minister for Education and Science announced the establishment of the Millennium Partnership Fund for Disadvantage with a provision of £1m (€1.27m) in 2001 as part of a suite of interventions which also included targeted increases in maintenance grants for disadvantaged students from January 2001, £1m (€1.27m) for the Special Fund for Students with Disabilities, and £1.8m (€2.28m) for the Student Assistance/Access Fund.

The Minister indicated that the Millennium Fund was to be administered by the Department in conjunction with area partnership companies. It was to build on the experience of the Support Scheme for students from disadvantaged families operated by the Northside Partnership in Coolock.

A more fleshed out idea of how the Millennium Fund should operate was not articulated until the Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education was published in May 2001. Thus, the Fund was implemented by ADM before formal policy documentation was in place.

1.3 Rationale for the Millennium Fund

The idea behind the Millennium Fund grew out of experiences some partnership organisations, namely Northside, Finglas and Clondalkin had, with local attempts to boost very low access to third level in their areas. What was identified from an early stage was that one of the reasons the children did not go to third level was that they had no 'role models', i.e. no friends going.

These partnerships had developed different ways of trying to boost participation but the emphasis was on a community approach to the problem rather than on supporting individuals *per se*. A strategic approach containing both 'push and pull' components was stressed. For example the Northside Partnership developed a two-pronged strategy built around two programmes to boost third level participation. One was aimed at boosting access (the Challenger Programme) and the other at supporting participation (Higher Education Support Programme). It was explicitly recognised that supporting participation is meaningless unless there is a reasonable cohort entering into third level in the first place.

The Challenger Programme was community based and focused on promoting the development of a third level cohort from primary and second level school students in the Darndale/Dublin 22 area. It essentially fostered children with academic ambition on a longitudinal basis. Selected children were provided with educationally enriching experiences including cultural outings, university samplers, grinds and extra tuition. The idea of attending third level was thus normalised and supported from an early age. This school-based programme was complemented by the Higher Education Support Scheme which provided students who had made the transition to third level with a number of non-monetary supports like bus passes, books, access to study facilities and mentors. Again, the strong community-based nature of the support means that attending third level is normalised through providing support at home.

The Millennium Fund was intended by its originators to be selective of partnerships/community groups in very disadvantaged areas with strategic approaches to tackling educational access. It is modelled largely on the Higher Education Support Scheme of the Northside Partnership.

1.3.1 The Participation Issue

Differential participation in third level education is a feature of the Irish educational system. Lower socio-economic groups tend to be underrepresented in third level education while, at the upper end, higher professionals tend to have almost 100% representation. In 1980, there was a 3% probability that someone from the least well-off socio-economic group – the unskilled manual worker group–would

progress to third level. That has now increased to 23%, which is a significant rate of improvement, but is still below the participation level of the better-off classes (Joint Committee of Education and Science, 27 February 2003).

According to Clancy (2001), the more prestigious the sector and field of study, the greater the social inequality in participation. There is greater representation of lower socio-economic groups in the institutes of technology than in the universities and a higher rate of participation by higher socio-economic groups in medicine, dentistry, law, pharmacy, architecture and veterinary medicine. The Clancy surveys also reveal disparities in participation by geographical area. Connacht and west Munster have the highest levels of participation in third level education and the east, midlands and south-east have the poorest. Dublin records the lowest levels of participation, but within the area the proportion receiving higher education ranges from 77% in Foxrock and Glencullen to less than 10% in Ballyfermot, Chapelizod, Darndale, Priorswood and the north inner city.

1.3.2 The Underlying Reasons

It is generally recognised that achieving greater equity in third level access is not an educational issue alone. Progress requires coherent, co-ordinated policies and approaches across a number of social, cultural, economic and educational spheres. Similarly, the issue of third level access is not a matter for the third level sector alone; improvements in third level access by disadvantaged groups require improvement in early childhood, primary and second level education. Skilbeck and O'Connell[2] citing a World Bank report, point out that the quality of instruction at lower levels of education is one of the major determinants of representation in higher education.

The report notes that barriers to access begin at birth and significant progress can only be achieved in the context of a wide range of initiatives to tackle the underlying issues of poverty and social exclusion. Inequalities that present themselves at the point of entry to third level are rooted in a cumulative process of disadvantages which manifest themselves at a very early stage in childhood.

The Clancy reports (Clancy and Wall 2000; 1995; 1988; 1982) track patterns of access of different socio-economic groups to higher education over time. They discuss three critical schooling transitions at which the effects of social background are significant:

- Students from lower socio-economic groups are significantly less likely to complete second level education.
- Those students from lower socio-economic groups that sit the Leaving Certificate tend to get lower grades.
- For students with modest grades in the Leaving Certificate, those from higher socio-economic groups have a higher transfer rate to third level than those from lower socio-economic groups.

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2. Skilbeck, M. and O'Connell, H. (2000) *Access and Equity in Higher Education: An International Perspective on Issues and Strategies.* Dublin: HEA.

Clancy and Wall conclude that some of the most fruitful areas for policy intervention to improve equality of access lie outside the higher education system:

Policies in respect of increasing retention rates to Leaving Certificate and facilitating higher attainment levels at this level will be especially effective in reducing SE group inequalities in access to higher education. (Cited in McNamara, p.35–6)[3]

In particular, the report highlights environmental conditions impeding educational achievement:

Perhaps the most critical factor… is the relatively low level of educational achievement of the parents and adult relatives of many young disadvantaged people in junior and senior cycle education.

In doing so, it implies the need, articulated by others, for community-based models to encourage greater educational participation at third level.

1.3.3 The Community Dimension

According to the Action Group, in many disadvantaged areas more than 50% of the population has left school by the age of 15. Participation in education after the age of 20 is below 4% in some areas and as low as 1–2% in districts of extreme disadvantage including inner city Dublin, Finglas, Blanchardstown, Ballymun, Darndale and some remote rural areas. Students from these areas face a number of inter related obstacles which have been summarised under the relevant headings below:

Social/Community Factors

- The need to earn a wage whatever the long-term impacts on earning potential and career development
- Lack of role models in the community and a lack of a local peer group in higher education
- Lack of information and support at community level
- Isolation from local friends and community

Individual/Family Factors

- Low expectations of entering third level
- Poor study habits
- Poor family tradition of education
- Family pressures to become economically independent and supplement household income
- High cost associated with extended education
- Difficulty adjusting to college life

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3. Department of Education and Science (2001) *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education.* Dublin: Stationery Office.

Institutional Factors

■ Low academic expectations within schools

■ Inability of schools to offer a wide range of subject options and/or higher level courses to small numbers

■ Inability of schools due to lack of resources to offer study and tutorial support to help students maximise their potential

■ Inadequate personal and study support at college.

The strategy identified by the Action Group to improve access to third level focuses on each of the critical transition points outlined above. It is worth noting that the definition of 'access' used throughout the report is both global and comprehensive: 'Access is understood to mean not only entry to third level but also retention and successful completion.' (European Access Network, cited in McNamara, p.14)

Accordingly, the approach to access recommended by the group is comprehensive and concentrates on:

■ Increasing the rate of application from target groups through the provision of study, career and guidance and financial supports

■ Improving the level of access through partnership involvement in college-based access programmes and other supportive arrangements including the delivery of third level courses on a distance learning and outreach basis

■ Providing tailored support for those who do participate in third level through personal, study, career and flexible financial support schemes.

The group recommended that the disadvantaged area dimension should form part of the national programme to radically increase participation in third level by socio-economically disadvantaged groups. It envisaged a package of multi-annual supports being implemented locally through existing partnership and community groups networked with local schools and college access programmes. It emphasised that the focus for intervention should be 'community' rather than school or college based and that communities with low levels of participation be prioritised.

In terms of the Millennium Fund specifically, the Action Group considered that its deployment would support the consolidation of existing partnership approaches to educational disadvantage and the continuance of a tailor-made approach locally. It recommended that the National Office on its establishment manage the fund and that its focus should be initiatives designed to support students from disadvantaged target groups to participate in further and higher education courses. The group noted that the Fund was not aimed at supporting students in second level education but that its development would make second level students aware of the viability of progression to higher education. The eligibility and application procedures proposed are in accordance with what ADM's guidelines propose with a couple of

small but significant differences. The ADM guidelines specified that inclusion in RAPID and CLAR areas be prioritised whereas the Action Group urged targeting the most disadvantaged students and areas, which is a wider and possibly more exacting emphasis.

The report supported wide participation amongst the partnerships and advocated that the National Office and ADM engage in capacity building to ensure widespread coverage over time. It also encouraged support for pilot work with groups that are particularly poorly represented at third level or affected by particular barriers to participation such as former prisoners, members of the traveller community or students from remote rural communities.

Finally, the Action Group noted the proliferation of different access funds and the need for rationalisation of financial supports. In particular, the Action Group considered that 'in the context of a rationalised student support system, organisations involved in topping up State support for students in further and higher education should be planning to disengage from this provision in the medium term and to concentrate their efforts on non-financial supports' (p. 115).

Some of these issues emerged as themes over the course of the evaluation field work and are discussed later in this report.

1.4 Initial Approach to Administration of the Millennium Fund

When Area Development Management began administering the Fund on an interim basis in 2001, it did so on the basis of oral discussions with the Department of Education and Science. It was told that the Fund was to have a definitive focus on projects supporting third level *participation and retention*, i.e. a narrow definition of 'access' was adopted, one that excluded projects aimed at enhancing entry to third level. The Fund was to be open to all partnerships and community groups and to be administered on a year-to-year rather than a multi-annual basis. Hence, both partnerships and individual students would have to apply for support each year.

An application form and guidelines setting out the criteria for funding were devised by ADM and approved by the Department. Eligible actions included:

- Promotion of the initiative locally
- Financial supports to meet student participation costs including travel, childcare, books, materials, accommodation and subsistence
- Provision of information, guidance and mentoring to entrants initially and at stress points throughout the year
- Study supports including tuition and study skills
- Administration.

These are in keeping with what was proposed by the Action Group.

Eligibility was confined to students (including those of mature years) who had already been accepted to participate in a recognised further or higher education course and who are normally resident in the geographic area covered by a partnership or community group. Hence the Fund was not aimed at encouraging/supporting school students to consider entering third level.

Students who were members of existing target groups of the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme were to be given priority as were students on full-time courses.

The appraisal criteria used by ADM to consider funding applications included the following:

- The socio-economic and demographic profile of the area
- The capacity of the group to implement the proposal
- The quality of the proposal, in particular its scope, targeting strategy, added value, innovation and monitoring/tracking arrangements
- Linkage with other agencies and colleges and particularly access facilities at local/national level
- Value for money
- Geographical spread
- Inclusion in RAPID and CLAR areas was to be prioritised.

Issues concerning the practical operation of some of these criteria arose during the fieldwork phase of this evaluation and are discussed later in this report.

The methodology for the evaluation included a blend of desk research, consultations with key stakeholders and site visits, structured interviews and focus group sessions with a selection of five partnership organisations and two community groups. These included:

- Roscommon Partnership
- Cork City Consortium
- Clondalkin Partnership
- Ballyfermot Partnership
- Northside Partnership
- Kerry Action Network
- Athlone Community Task Force.

All partnerships and community groups were made aware of the evaluation process and offered an open invite to contribute to the evaluation by communicating their perspective confidentially to the evaluators through email or telephone. Two organisations made written submissions to the evaluators (Blanchardstown Partnership and North Meath Community Development Association) and these were considered along with individual 'local' evaluations that were completed by a number of organisations (e.g. Southside Partnership and Galway Rural Development Company Ltd.)

A review was conducted of all documentation and statistical records held in ADM.

Table 1 presents a summary of the consultations.

Table 1: Stakeholder Consultations May – September 2004	
Stakeholder	**Research Tool**
Fund recipients in further and higher education	Six focus groups with a sample of current and past beneficiaries
Partnership companies/community groups (rural, town and city)	Consultation with a sample of five partnership companies and two community groups
Access officers (universities and institutes of technology)	Individual meetings and/or telephone discussions with six Access Officers Consultation with AMA on 9th August 2004
Institute of Guidance Counsellors	Written submission by the National Executive of the IGC
ADM	Consultation meetings and on site review of documentation and files
National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education/HEA	Consultation meetings
Department of Education and Science	Consultation meetings
Vocational Education Committees	Consultation

This section presents the analysis of statistics held in ADM. This includes analysis of the profile of beneficiaries, e.g. age, prior employment status, educational attainment level, etc. It also presents the distribution across educational institutions, an analysis of the per capita allocation of funding, and the breakdown of financial and non-financial expenditure.

3.1 Age and Gender Profile

As can be seen from the table below, the majority of Millennium Fund students (62% and 63% respectively) are female. This compares with a 53% female to 47% male participation level in higher education generally. The majority of Millennium fund students in 2001/2 were under 25 (73%) and slightly less (68%) the following year. This is significantly higher than the 3% of students who are over 25 nationally (Clancy, HEA 2001) and indicates that the programme is achieving the National Office's aim of facilitating the access of mature students.

Table 2: Millennium Fund Student Age and Sex Profile 2001/2 and 2002/3

	2001/2	2002/3
Total number of students	1747	3385
Male	664 (38%)	1268 (37%)
Female	1083 (62%)	2117 (63%)
Under 25	1276 (73%)	2334 (68%)
Over 25	471 (27%)	1051(32%)

3.2 Educational Profile

As can be seen be Table 3 the vast majority of Millennium Fund students have Leaving Certificate or equivalent levels of education. Twelve percent of students progressed into third level with sub-Leaving Certificate levels of education and of these 4% had no formal educational qualifications. Again, this rate of access (12%) is a higher rate of entry by students with less formal qualifications than is indicated by national trends. The Clancy report shows that just 6% of students nationally entered third level education without an honours Leaving Certificate. It is probable that considerably less entered at sub- Leaving Certificate level.

Table 3: Millennium Fund Student Educational Profile 2001/2 and 2002/3				
Highest educational achievement	**2001/2**		**2002/3**	
No formal education	65	(4%)	132	(4%)
Primary Certificate	36	(2%)	29	(1%)
Group Certificate	63	(4%)	41	(1%)
Junior/Inter. Certificate	68	(4%)	165	(5%)
Leaving Certificate	1153	(69%)	2400	(73%)
Leaving Cert. Applied	-	-	17	-
Further education	82	(5%)	321	(9%)
Third level	199	(12%)	246	(7%)
Total	**1666**	**(100%)**	**3258**	**(100%)**

3.3 Prior Employment/Educational Status

The majority (57% and 58% respectively) of Millennium Fund students have transferred into further or higher education from some form of full-time education, either school or some other form of higher education. A significant minority were either short- or long-term unemployed (25% and 27%) and some 14% were either part-time or otherwise employed.

Table 4: Millennium Fund Student Prior Employment or Educational Status 2001/2 and 2002/3				
Prior Employment Status	**2001/2**		**2002/3**	
Long term unemployed	179	(13%)	518	(15%)
Short term unemployed	68	(5%)	313	(9%)
Unregistered unemployed	98	(7%)	95	(3%)
Full-time employed	29	(2%)	89	(3%)
Part-time employed	89	(7%)	263	(8%)
Seasonally employed	17	(1%)	62	(2%)
Underemployed	106	(8%)	39	(1%)
Self employed	2	-	22	(1%)
Full-time education (direct transfer)	777	(57%)	1967	(58%)
Total	**1365**	**(100%)**	**3368**	**(100%)**

3.4 Award Levels

Millennium Fund students undertook courses of different award levels. Around half of the students across both academic years undertook degree level courses. A small proportion engaged in higher level postgraduate courses (2–3%). Some 40–50% undertook sub-degree level awards of which 25% in 2001 and 32% in 2002 were at higher educational entry (Certificate) level. As Clancy pointed out, Ireland has high levels of students in sub-degree level courses. The Millennium distribution is in keeping with national level statistics (1997) that show 55% of students engaged in degree level courses and 45% at sub degree level.

Table 5: Millennium Fund Student Course Profile 2001/2 and 2002/3				
Course Type	2001/2		2002/3	
Certificate	387	(25%)	1082	(32%)
Diploma	270	(17%)	642	(19%)
Degree	854	(55%)	1550	(46%)
Postgraduate	32	(2%)	97	(3%)
Doctorate	16	(1%)	8	-
Total	1559	(100%)	3379	(100%)

3.5 Distribution Across Different Educational Institutions

The institutional breakdown of Millennium Fund students largely mirrors the educational level of award. Most university entrants are degree level students whereas institutes of technology and further education colleges cater for sub-degree and degree level students.

As can be seen from Table 6, approximately half (48%) of the 2001/2 Millennium cohort entered universities and this dropped to 38% the following year. A significant minority (12%) attended further education colleges in 2001, rising to 27% in 2002/3. Some 40% attended IT colleges in the first year of operation (2001). Again this proportion dropped the following year to 32%, reflecting the increase in Millennium Fund students generally and an emerging trend of increasing levels of entry to further education (FE) colleges.

Many of the partnerships see the further education route as an important first step in the higher education process. Further education colleges were said to be less intimidating for entrants who have no family experience of higher education. Some partnerships noted that some FE students they had supported had more than adequate points for university but opted for FE colleges because they were in their locality and friends from school were also attending. Unfortunately, the lack of progression statistics means that it is impossible to estimate the movement from FE to higher education courses.

Table 6: Millennium Fund Student Institute Type				
Institute Type	2001/2		2002/3	
Further education college	176	(12%)	896	(27%)
Institute of technology	577	(40%)	1082	(32%)
University	689	(48%)	1298	(38%)
Other	-	-	105	(3%)
Total	1442	(100%)	3381	(100%)

3.6 Levels of Funding Referenced to Deprivation Levels

Table 7 below provides a breakdown of allocated budgets by partnership/community group. It provides an analysis of per capita allocations, which are referenced to District Electoral Division (DED) deprivation scores and third level access levels in 1996. The distribution of Millennium-funded students undertaking degree level studies across different areas/deprivation levels is also provided.

The numbers and overall budgets differ considerably by group. Student numbers range from under 10 (Eiri, Arklow and Waterford) to over 100 (Ballyhoura, Cork, PAUL, Inishowen, Blanchardstown, Kerry, Tallaght, Clondalkin, Northside). Some of the larger groups like Northside Partnership and Clondalkin have long established programmes in higher education participation. The largest programmes with over 200 beneficiaries (Cork and Northside) are urban based.

The per capita analysis provides a means of comparing available resources across areas and levels of deprivation. It is acknowledged that different groups have different practices regarding levels of support provided to students and this averaging exercise is for indicative purposes only. It should also be noted that non-financial actions come into play which absorb funding, i.e. funding approved per capita to groups will not necessarily be the same as funding awarded per capita by groups. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that area-based analysis of deprivation is a crude instrument at best, and that partnerships and community groups use more individualised indices of deprivation on which to base funding decisions. That said, given that the programme is area based, some comment on anomalies arising is warranted.

Most of the partnership and community groups are located in areas of greater than average deprivation (4.6) as per the 1996 assessment. The exceptions are Lucan (1), Southside (2.4), Fingal (2.9), Portlaoise (3), Galway city (3.1), KCAN (3.3), Bray (3.6), Nenagh (3.6), South Kildare (4) Tullamore, (4.1), Ballyhoura (4.3), Wexford Area (4.3), Northside (4.4) and Meath (4.3). Some of these groups in 'better off' areas had higher than average per capita levels of resource available, notably Lucan (€1,071), Bray (€1,000), South Kildare (€1,000) and TIDE Meath (€714). Some of the better off areas were also responsible for relatively high levels of throughput (Galway city, Ballyhoura and Southside).

By contrast, some of the groups in some of the more deprived areas like Cavan (384), Inishowen (485), Canal (512), KWCD (350), Cumas (491) and Meitheal (434) had less than average per capita resources to disperse. While some of these anomalies may be a function of decisions about numbers, the point is that the relationship between funding and area level of deprivation is not particularly strong. Large levels of funding are generally associated with large numbers of students and not necessarily with high levels of geographic deprivation.

The capacity of the organisation to locate suitable students to support seems to be the critical factor in determining the scale of operations. Given that the programmes focus on participation rather than access, it is probably fair to say that unless there is a ready pool of applicants in a given area, which tends to be more likely in less deprived or highly diverse areas, it is difficult for groups in more deprived/less diverse areas to make significant inroads into the higher education echelons.

Table 7: Per Capita Allocation by Level of Deprivation and Proportion of Degree Level Beneficiaries					
Partnership/ Community Group	No. students	Allocations	Per Capitas	Deprivation Score 1996	DED % Third Level	% Degree & above
Athlone Comm.	16	14,000	875	4.6	19.5	81
Cando	44	25,000	568	5.8	15	27
Cavan Partnership	99	38,000	384	6.8	14	55
Eiri Corca	5	10,000	2,000	7.3	12	0
Cork Pship	410	150,000	366	5.3	20	26
Ballyhoura	180	65,000	361	4.3	18	63
Inishowen Pship	103	50,000	485	9.6	11	50
Lucan Pship	14	15,000	1,071	1	29	78
Canal Pship	39	20,000	512	9.2	13	44
Ballyfermot Pship	40	33,888	847	10	3.5	22
Finglas Pship	53	30,000	566	7.5	11	64
Ballymun	64	80,000	1,250	10	4	31
KWCD	77	27,000	350	6.5	14	49
DICP	53	35,079	662	6.9	24	72
Co-op Fingal	35	17,539	501	2.9	19.5	63
Blanchardstown Pship	118	95,000	805	4.7	16	49
Southside Pship	81	39,259	485	2.4	37	39
Galway City Pship	98	36,000	367	3.1	34	68
Cumas Teo	112	55,001	491	6.9	19	70
Galway Rural Dev.	78	55,000	705	5.6	16	63
Kerry Access	140	70,000	500	5.0	18	68

Partnership/ Community Group	No. students	Allocations	Per Capitas	Deprivation Score 1996	DED Third Level	% Degree & above
Table 7 (cont): Per Capita Allocation by Level of Deprivation and Proportion of Degree Level Beneficiaries						
Northside Pship	237	120,000	506	4.4	15	48
Oak Pship (kd)	23	32,000	1,391	5.7	12.5	43
Action Sth Kildare	30	30,000	1,000	4	18.5	60
KCAN	33	10,000	303	3.3	23	55
Mountmellick Dev. Assoc.	37	13,000	351	6.9	12	46
North Meath	0	10,000	0	5.45	13	
Portlaoise Comm. Action	43	20,000	465	3	17	58
Leitrim Pship	93	30,000	322	6.5	19	48
PAUL Pship	135	55,000	407	5.6	17	63
West Limerick	24	15,500	646	6	23	67
Longford Comm. Resour.	33	32,000	970	6.5	13.5	33
Drogheda Pship	36	40,000	1,111	7	15	67
Dundalk Employment	32	30,000	937	8	14	37
Meitheal	69	30,000	434	6.8	15	64
TIDE (Meath)	14	10,000	714	4.3		50
Co. Monaghan Pship	58	50,000	862	6.5	13	24
Roscrea Pship	15	10,000	666	6	15	47
Nenagh Comm.	10	5,000	500	3.6	19	50
Tullamore	15	10,000	666	4.1	19	40
W. Offaly	15	10,000	666	5.2	11	53
Roscommon network	80	90,000	1,125	5.1	14	40
Sligo Leader	40	30,000	750	4.9	20	37
Tallaght Pship	110	80,000	727	6.1	11	30
Clondalkin Pship	177	100,000	565	5.5	15	55
Waterford Pship	7	10,000	1,428	5.4	16.5	28
Wexford Area	36	30,000	833	4.3	16.5	36
Co. Wexford	93	50,000	538	6.7	12	39
Bray Pship	20	20,000	1,000	3.6	23	70
Arklow	8	10,000	1,250	5.9	14	50
Total/national	3382	1,943,266	575	4.6	20	

There is considerable variation across areas in relation to the proportion of students undertaking degree/sub-degree awards. However, no strong relationship between levels of area-based deprivation/ affluence and level of higher education is discernible, other than in a few cases (Lucan and Ballyfermot for example), where the areas in question are fairly homogenous (or less diverse) in terms of socio-economic profile. In the case of Lucan, which is the most 'affluent' area in the group, 78% of students were at degree level whereas in Ballyfermot, which is the most deprived area, just 22% of students were degree entrants.

3.7 Breakdown of Financial and Non-Financial Expenditure

Tables 8 and 9 below provide a breakdown of Millennium Fund financial and non-financial expenditure for 2002 and 2003. Financial expenditure is by far the largest category accounting for 81% of expenditure in 2002 and 83% in 2003. Of the non-financial spending categories, administration accounted for 6% in 2002 and 7% in 2003, and information accounted for 7% in 2002 and 4% in 2003. Study supports (including tuition, study skills, IT and mentoring) absorbed 5% of expenditure in 2002 and 2003 and promotion accounted for just 1% of expenditure in 2002 and 2003. The National Office/ADM sought to assist partnerships and community groups for 2004/5 with promotion through the development of a brochure and a large poster. Packs were sent to all participating groups and other key personnel such as Access Officers.

The seeming regional variations in expenditure on information and study supports in particular are a function of different spending patterns across a small number of partnerships rather than a general inter-regional trend. For example, in 2003 Cork and Clondalkin accounted for 82% of the expenditure on information provision, and Cork, Clondalkin, Southside and Waterford Partnerships accounted for 75% of the expenditure on study supports. Many partnerships and community groups did not spend anything under these headings and interview feedback indicated low take up of study supports when provided by some groups. The low expenditure on promotion locally is notable, particularly when taken together with interview feedback which indicates low levels of awareness amongst students of the Millennium Fund and some service deliverers, e.g. Career Guidance Counsellors. Partnerships and local groups acknowledged low levels of promotion because of an understandable fear that they would be swamped with applicants for whom a small amount of funding and limited administration facilities were available.

Table 8: Breakdown of Financial and non-Financial Expenditure 2002													
Region[4]	Admin.		Financial		Promotion		Information		Study		Total	
	€	%	€	%	€	%	€	%	€	%	€	%
BMW	31,310	54	329,630	45	3,643	30	5,376	8	14,513	33	384,472	42
S&E	26,256	46	408,559	55	8,549	70	60,990	92	29,968	67	534,322	58
Total	57,566	6	738,189	81	12,192	1	66,366	7	44,481	5	918,794	100

4. BMW – Border midland western region. S&E – Southern and eastern.

Table 9: Breakdown of Financial and Non-Financial Expenditure 2003													
Region	Admin.		Financial		Promotion		Information		Study		Total	
	€	%	€	%	€	%	€	%	€	%	€	%
BMW	60,266	43	553,091	36	3,900	26	7,218	9	6,723	8	631,198	34
S&E	80,121	57	988,800	64	11,305	74	72,533	91	80,430	92	1,233,269	66
Total	140,387	7	1,541,891	83	15,205	1	79,751	4	87,153	5	1,864,467	100

Table 10 provides a breakdown of financial expenditure across groups for 2003. Subsistence accounted for 24% of overall financial expenditure and this figure is fairly consistent across groups. Travel and transport and expenditure on books and materials both accounted for 16% of overall financial expenditure respectively. Course fees accounted for 13% of expenditure, a high proportion (37%) of it incurred by one partnership (Ballymun). Childcare accounted for 5% of expenditure, which is probably an underestimate given the difficulties with receipting care provided by the informal sector.

Table 10: Breakdown of Financial Expenditure 2003												
Region	Travel		Registration		Course Fees		Exam Fees		Books		Rent	
	€	%	€	%	€	%	€	%	€	%	€	%
BMW	76,174	30	4,193	29	41,231	21	369	15	53,284	22	180,096	51
S&E	176,484	70	10,177	71	155,848	79	2,088	85	188,040	78	169,706	49
Total	252,658	16	14,370	1	197,079	13	2,457	0	241,324	16	349,802	23

Table 10: Breakdown of Financial Expenditure 2003 (continued)												
Region	Childcare		Trips		Subsistence		Medical		Other		Total	
	€	%	€	%	€	%	€	%	€	%	€	%
BMW	25,338	35	1,972	37	134,010	36	535	31	35,889	96	553,091	36
S&E	46,446	65	3,309	63	234,177	64	1,189	69	1,336	4	988,800	64
Total	71,784	5	5,281	0	368,187	24	1,724	0	37,225	2	1,541,891	100

This chapter presents the themes that emerged from our analysis of the evaluation findings based on the review of relevant documentation, consultations with the Department of Education and Science, ADM Ltd, a sample of partnerships and community organisations, Access Officers and other stakeholders including the Institute of Guidance Counsellors and the VECs.

4.1 Administration of the Fund – Global Administration Issues

In accordance with the decision by the Department of Education and Science, ADM was invited to manage the Millennium Fund on an interim basis for the 2001–2002 period until the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education was established. Given the delays in setting up the National Office, ADM continued to manage the Fund into the 2002–2003 period and retains this role currently. The tentative arrangement as regards the management role and function has to some extent hindered strategic planning and decision-making in relation to the Fund.

ADM has administered the Fund in accordance with the specific emphasis and guidelines outlined by the Department of Education and Science. This includes a focus on actions to assist participation and retention at third level rather than on access-type initiatives.

There was a period of intense learning in the first two years of operation of the Fund partly due to the fact that there was a rush to get systems up and running in a very short time frame. Systems and clarification were required around the interpretation of application forms, criteria, eligibility, financial requirements and the need for receipting. The results indicate that many partnerships and community organisations struggled with the administration of the Fund in the first year of operation and relied heavily on ADM, and in some cases on each other, for support and clarification.

The learning and decision-making in relation to the operation of the Fund began to 'bed down' in the second year and the administration, both nationally and locally, was running more smoothly at the time of this research. That said, there is still a development need in relation to the best use of the Access[5] database. At present data are not cross-tabulated so full analysis is not possible. A training input would enable the system to be better utilised and maximised as a monitoring and information tool.

The administration of the Millennium Fund is resource intensive, involving the servicing of committee meetings, conducting interviews and appraisals, collection, collation and reconciliation of receipts. It may also involve the management of non-financial supports including open days, introductory sessions, study groups, access to books, laptop, personal contact/guidance, help with grant applications, and organising tuition. However not all organisations provide non-financial support.

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5. Access is a software package that (amongst other options) allows data to be imported from other sources, e.g. Excel, and facilitates statistical analysis and reporting.

4.2 Local Administration Issues – Procedural Differences

While all funded organisations adhere to the same set of global funding and eligibility criteria, there are different administrative arrangements in place locally, as is characteristic of local development generally. The different structures for administering the Fund include in some instances dedicated steering groups, dedicated staff, dedicated guidance counsellors, selection committees, and in some cases non-dedicated staff absorbing the responsibility for the Fund into their existing role. Some organisations were much better supported than others in terms of administrative back up due to funding from other sources. The existence in particular of higher education co-ordinators or dedicated CE workers in some partnerships or community groups made a considerable difference in terms of organisational capacity to engage fully with the scheme and conduct the considerable amount of administrative work involved.

The role, responsibilities and levels of involvement of Access Officers vary in the context of the operation of Millennium Fund. There are some examples of Access Officers actively involved in selection committees and local scheme administration. In other cases, Access Officers were minimally involved mainly because of other commitments.

Different systems of data gathering and monitoring were in evidence. For example, some organisations use Access spreadsheets for processing returns whereas others use pen and paper systems.

Different organisations practise different methods of processing payments, e.g. some students receive cheques prior to spending, some receive funding on presentation of receipts and some receive vouchers (e.g. bus passes, book tokens). The Northside Partnership has an arrangement with Hodges Figgis whereby their students receive text books from the shop on presentation of a letter from the Partnership. Hodges Figgis then invoice the Partnership with lists of books, prices and names of students. They also offer a 10% discount to the Partnership. The Northside Partnership has a similar arrangement in relation to travel passes, bus tickets, etc. in that students receive vouchers as opposed to actual money. This appears to work well, ensures efficient record keeping and avoids the need for receipts.

Different administrative processes were also in evidence. Different organisations utilised different promotion, recruitment and selection systems. For example, some groups relied largely on word of mouth to promote the Fund, others used local radio, talks in local schools, fliers and student networks to advertise the scheme. In terms of recruiting and selecting applicants, some organisations used weighting systems, others targeted priority cases that were known to them. Some groups held interviews with all eligible candidates, others made selection decisions on the basis of paperwork alone.

Furthermore, some organisations allocated different levels of funding to individuals on the basis of need (over and above the eligibility baseline) whereas others shared available funds uniformly across all eligible applicants regardless of circumstances. In practice this meant that different amounts of financial support were offered to individual students across areas, ranging from 100 to over 1,200 euro, and different levels of individual need attracted different levels of individual support in different areas.

Some of the organisations had the very difficult experience of having to refuse very disadvantaged student applicants because they lived outside the geographical boundaries of the area-based partnerships. Some of the difficult cases cited lived within a mile of the partnership boundary.

Different organisations accept different courses for support. For example, KAN does not support any PLC courses and will not support students on post-grad courses after 2004. In contrast, the Northside Partnership supports mainly PLC students, its rationale being that PLC courses provide a vital bridge into third level, particularly if there is no history of third level attendance in a specific area.

Different years of course attendance also attract different prioritisation levels across different organisations. For example, first year is priority in some cases whereas final year is priority for other organisations and higher rates of funding thus apply.

4.3 Timing of the Fund

Timing is important, as regards when funding is received by organisations and when it is available to students. Generally, the release of budgets to partnerships/other groups needs to be harmonised with the start of the academic year, which means it needs to be received by August as was the case in 2004. According to partnerships and other groups, the optimal time for appraisal/assessment of student applications is July – September.

The level of year-to-year funding is also an issue. Numbers are increasing from year to year as students enter and other students continue. In consequence, the level of funding demand is rising over a two-to-four-year academic cycle while available funding is being diluted as it is spread across bigger numbers of students. There is also uncertainty about the continued existence of funding post-2006 and the end of the current NDP. Organisations need to be in a position to continue the funding of students to whom a commitment has been shown over the lifetime of their courses. If funding is to be discontinued, a long lead-in time is needed so as to ensure no new commitments are entered into and existing students are supported in line with legitimate expectations.

4.4 Prioritising Different Student Groups

It is generally agreed that the Millennium Fund works best where there is a strategic long-term plan to combat educational disadvantage starting at preschool levels and working up through the system. With regard to improving third level access of more deprived students/areas, it is also generally agreed that there needs to be a comprehensive complementary access programme which starts at the preschool door and funds additional resource teachers, psychological services, parent support services etc., so that base line numbers start coming through the system.

There are some examples of the Fund fitting within a package of access/participation/retention measures (for example in Clondalkin, the Northside and Ballyfermot) but, generally, these examples are cases where higher education access programmes were in existence before the Fund and/or cases where an education co-ordinator and other support staff are employed and funded from sources other than the Millennium Fund. More generally, organisations are struggling with concepts of 'access' and 'participation' and there is a strong perception in some of the more disadvantaged/RAPID areas that the Millennium Fund should be more about *enabling* access[6] to places in further and higher education, particularly in the case of more deprived students who need more intensive/flexible arrangements to access the first step on the higher education ladder.

4.5 Fit with Other Funding Instruments

There is a need for much greater clarity and transparency across different third level funding supports that include the Millennium Fund, VEC maintenance grants and top up allowance, Back to Education Allowance and the Student Support Scheme. Some Access Officers and consortia feel there is a need for centralisation of information about who is in receipt of monies from different sources. At present there is no means of monitoring different students' uptake of different funding supports. Anecdotal and local analysis suggests the possibility of parallel funding. For example, KAN have access to an analysis from the Access Officer at IoT Tralee and early results suggest that approximately one third of those benefiting from the Millennium Fund were also benefiting from the Student Support Scheme in 2003/04. This overlap may be entirely justified, but some means of checking sources and levels of funding of individual students is nevertheless needed. Some duplication of effort in terms of assessment processes across the Millennium Fund, the Grant and the Student Support Scheme is also evident.

4.6 How the Fund Made a Difference

As part of the methodology, focus group sessions with beneficiaries were held in partnerships and community groups visited during the fieldwork phase[7]. Their experience of the Fund is an important indicator of its effectiveness and is incorporated into the following sections which focus on financial support, non-financial support and the community dimension. The majority of focus group students were

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6. The design of the Fund, as proposed by the Department, laid down the proviso that only students who had secured a third level place were eligible for funding.

7. Students were not available in Roscommon due to the holiday period. Over the course of the evaluation, we met 36 students who had benefited from the Millennium Fund.

in higher education programmes and were mainly female (over 66%). They had first heard about the Fund through a range of methods including word of mouth, poster advertisements, newspaper advertisements and altar announcements.

4.6.1 Financial Support

This section explores how students spent the funds provided as support. The basis of this analysis rests on oral feedback from students and administrators together with an examination of records. Overall, the students were very positive about the Millennium Fund as a financial support. They were unanimous in the view that the financial help provided is the most important support given by the Fund. Their views were very much in keeping with individual reviews and surveys conducted by some of the partnerships and community groups.

As part of funding conditions, students were required to keep receipts for all expenditure above a small subsistence amount. While some students found this difficult during the first year of operation, all complied and most found it less difficult the following academic year. That said, for administrators, there was a considerable amount of record keeping and reconciliation involved.

There was a fair degree of consistency across areas as to how funds were spent with the exception of rural students, who tended to spend more on transport and accommodation than urban students. The main expenses covered by the Millennium Fund were transport, subsistence/accommodation, books, photocopying and printing, childcare and course and examination fees (for a full breakdown of financial expenditure see Table 10, p.22). Despite the sums granted being fairly modest in many cases, the students maintained that the Fund made a real difference to their quality of life:

'The Fund meant that at least I knew my bus pass costs were covered.'

'As a returning mature student who failed exams last time around I fall through all the funding gaps. If it wasn't for the Millennium Fund I wouldn't have any financial support at all.'

'The Fund allowed me give up my part-time job for the couple of months before my examinations, making an enormous difference to my ability to concentrate on my studies at a critical time.'

'The support provided meant that I was able to become more involved in student life – little things like not being able to afford to go for coffee isolate you even more than your accent or background.'

'It helped reduce some of the financial pressure for my mother (widow) and myself.'

'The money I received from the Millennium Fund was greatly appreciated and helped me a great deal. It allowed me to buy books/materials and took away the general stress of not being able to afford the items I needed.'

Benefits cited by students included:

- Ability to buy books, pay for travel, childcare, accommodation, ESB, etc.
- Help filling in grant forms
- Binder with information and contact details (Ballyfermot)
- Took pressure off – meant not having to work extra hours or give up work in final year
- Covered cost of printing and photocopying thesis, projects, etc.
- Access to computers (CDB)
- Relief/reduction of stress of worrying about money
- Ability to go to the canteen.

The financial support provided by the Fund was of particular help to students of lone parents and families on very low incomes. One of the Access Officers noted the high number of families trying to survive on incomes of less than €15,000 per year. These families generally do not have credit facilities and the burden of supporting children at college in terms of foregone income and additional outlay is considerable.

The age profile of students also had an impact on how funds were spent. For mature students the opportunity cost of returning to education is significantly higher to that of school leavers. It was evident from the focus group sessions that the financial pressures on mature students were different to those of younger students. Many had children and needed affordable childcare, which is very difficult to find outside the informal sector. Childcare is an enormous issue for mature students and lone parents. The use of unregistered childminders is common but is not eligible for support because of the need for receipts. The lack of available childcare places at colleges was brought up as was the practice of places being utilised by college lecturers' children.

The statistics presented in Chapter 3, Table 7 highlight the funding disparity across groups. As can be gathered, there is a disconnectedness between levels of funding, levels of need and levels of support as a consequence of different local funding arrangements. This is an issue that most groups raised during the interviews and discussion groups.

4.6.2 Non-Financial Supports

Based on discussions with students who have benefited from the Millennium Fund there was a general lack of awareness of the range of non-financial supports that might be available to them. The most frequently mentioned non-financial supports were help completing grant application forms, a friendly face or contact point, a person to chat with and, in a few instances, provide career advice and guidance.

In the case of the Northside Partnership the majority of students had met with the Guidance Counsellor numerous times in relation to decision-making around college, grant applications, course options and the Millennium Fund. Some students were aware of and had used study supports and computer facilities. However, the general sense coming through was that while these facilities and supports are very welcome it was viewed as more practical and realistic to have access to these facilities on campus. Overall, the results point toward students placing a higher value on the financial support received through the Millennium Fund to date as opposed to the non-financial support.

4.6.3 Community Dimension

The community- and capacity-building dimension of the Fund was explored with ADM, beneficiaries, partnership/local development/community organisation staff and Access Officers. As described in the Introduction, the model for the Millennium Fund grew out of a successful community-based model that addressed educational disadvantage at different levels of the cycle with the Millennium Fund facilitating the third level component.

The Millennium Fund is currently the only mainstream community-based programme/fund. The strengths of the community-based approach include flexible response to local needs, inclusion of grass roots actors and knowledge in determining change, and the possibility of developing local role models in areas with no history of attending third level education. The challenges of a community-based approach are that there may be uneven development with pockets of excellence and differences in practice that are difficult to rationalise. For example, a student with high needs may get much less in one area than another for reasons that are unrelated to need or, in some cases, to geographic deprivation.

The development of linkages between the community/partnership groups and higher education in particular (most FE colleges already have strong presence in and linkages to the community sector) was more evident at a strategic and organisational level. Some organisations had formed consortia for the purpose of implementing the Fund in a cohesive and co-ordinated manner. While consortia members acknowledged the additional workload in terms of attending meetings, they also highlighted considerable benefits that accrued in both directions. The educational and access members spoke about the important contextual knowledge partnerships and community groups were able to provide in terms of particular

family and community circumstances. In fact, the 'combined' or 'joined up' knowledge of the range of players was highlighted as particularly useful in terms of decision-making in relation to the application process.

In some instances the Millennium Fund has enabled partnerships/community organisations to redirect monies previously earmarked for retention at third level to access-type actions at second level, thus maximising the range of supports offered as well as the resources. The Millennium Fund also provided some partnership and community groups with their first opportunity to network and form relationships with organisations in the higher education sector. Many of the organisations spoke about how this contact improved their knowledge of the workings of and the challenges associated with further and higher education. This knowledge put them in a much better position to support entrants from their community. Some built on the links formed with the education sector to develop actions designed to encourage access by working with the primary and secondary school sector and through the employment of dedicated higher education support staff.

Through the Millennium Fund, some Access Officers developed very strong relationships with the groups. Examples include Access Officers sitting on steering and funding committees and visiting partnership/local development area schools and community groups. Gaps in awareness were also evident, however. Feedback from the Institute of Guidance Counsellors[8] indicates that the majority of Guidance Counsellors are unaware of the Millennium Fund. Of those surveyed, none had received any promotional material or application forms for use with their second level pupils.

Most of the students consulted had no contact with the partnership/community group prior to their Millennium Fund involvement. Levels of interaction varied across organisations with some providing library/study and drop-in facilities and others meeting students, mainly around grant disbursement time. While some of the organisations also provided or offered career guidance, many students were not in a position to engage these services due to time and travel pressures. Generally, the level of involvement of funded students with partnerships/community groups was fairly low and confined to funding related administration.

Suggested improvements outlined by students included:

- Awareness raising of the Millennium Fund with schools, students, parents and through the Guidance Counsellors within Schools
- Better information about grants and how to apply for them
- Making the Fund more accessible
- Providing clarity around the selection process

8. Short survey conducted by the National Executive of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, September 2004.

- Standard amounts of financial support across different partnerships
- Introductory sessions, particularly for mature students.

During discussions the majority of students expressed a willingness to 'give back' to their communities in the future. For example, some have given talks in the old schools or given grinds/tutored younger students, etc. However, the results indicate that the potential for Millennium beneficiaries to act as role models and 'give back' to their communities could be further developed.

The majority of students indicated that they have recommended the Millennium Fund to others within their communities.

This chapter draws conclusions based on the findings of the research and addresses the terms of reference of the evaluation which were to:

- Assess the *impact* of the Millennium Partnership Fund in supporting *participation and retention* in further and higher education amongst students from participating disadvantaged communities.

- Assess the *balance between the provision of financial and non-financial supports* provided under the Millennium Partnership Fund and the nature of overlap or duplication (if any) with other sources of student support at community, institutional or statutory level.

- Assess the impact of the Millennium Partnership Fund *on participating community groups and partnerships* in terms of response to educational disadvantage with specific reference to community infrastructure, linkages, capacity and enabling of good practice.

- *Recommend a model for the future of the Millennium Partnership Fund* that builds on best practice and the opportunities created by its community-based dimension.

5.1 Overall Conclusion

The overall conclusion of this research is that the Millennium Fund has served an important function in supporting students from disadvantaged areas to attend further and higher education. It has significant potential to facilitate outreach and role modelling if further developed within a holistic strategy to combat educational disadvantage.

5.2 Impact of the Millennium Fund on Participation and Retention

The results suggest that the Millennium Fund has made a difference to student beneficiaries in the sense of 'every bit helps'. In other words, the Fund has made a difference in terms of easing hardship for students. There is insufficient impact and follow-up evidence gathered to back up the occurrence of more substantive effects. For the first two years of operation, data on drop-out rates, progression (year to year and further to higher level education) and awards were not required or gathered. This data needs to be built into requirements and routinely tracked by the managing agent.

It is thus difficult to conclude that the Fund has been instrumental in supporting students' retention and progression at college. The amounts of money distributed by some groups are too small to have affected major decision-making around retention and progression per se. In addition, our sense from student feedback is that the majority would have continued their studies in the absence of the Fund, but with greater difficulty.

There is a related question mark over amounts of funding and the probability that it is being diluted across too many beneficiaries. To recap on some of the results of the financial analysis presented in Chapter 3, the per capita amounts distributed by many groups were sub-500 euro per annum.

Another difficulty is that knowledge about the range of supports provided to any one student is not automatically available. We came across instances of very needy students who are disqualified from the VEC grant system because of academic requirements. Such students are entirely reliant on the Millennium Fund and in need of a higher level of support whereas other students who are in receipt of the VEC top up grant may also receive the Millennium Fund and arguably are less in need of additional support. In the absence of increased funding, the conclusion is that a system that focuses on the intensity of financial support and tighter decision-making as regards who benefits is preferable to the system of universal provision of support to all qualified applicants. This decision-making needs to be facilitated through the easy availability of robust information on the funding status of all students.

5.3 Impact on Participating Communities and Partnerships

The scope of the Millennium Fund as envisaged by the Action Group was that it be open to 'applications from partnerships and community groups (area partnerships ADM community groups, leader groups, and other community and voluntary organisations). Other organisations focused on the needs of particular sectors among the disadvantaged target groups should also be eligible to apply e.g. the Educational Trust that supports ex-prisoners.' (p.113)

To date, participation has been confined to area partnerships, ADM community groups, (as per departmental guidelines set out for ADM) – virtually all of which have been supported – and some Leader programmes. As noted earlier, some individuals who were classified as highly disadvantaged were not supported because they lived outside the boundary of a particular partnership. In our view the broad intended scope of the Fund implies that such boundary issues either should not arise or should not be interpreted in such a hard and fast manner. Obviously, the operation of a more flexible geographic support policy highlights the need for a centralised/shared funding database. This point will be elaborated further below. To return to the point of community involvement in the most elemental sense, we also note that no organisations focused on the needs of particular sectors among the disadvantaged target groups (e.g. ex-offenders or travellers) have been involved to date. However, some individual ex-prisoners and traveller students came forward through the existing structures. There are also awareness and capacity issues for these groups.

On the capacity side, there are some questions marks over the 'targeting' of some groups, for example travellers. The evaluators would argue that the very low incidence of travellers entering third level suggests a need for considerable *pre-development* investment of resources that may not be within the scope of the

Millennium Fund. It might be more appropriate for this to happen within a more integrated approach for the travelling community, for example within the framework of the Five Year Strategy for Traveller Education currently being drafted by the Department of Education and Science.

In terms of impact on involved community groups and partnership organisations, generally the results are positive. Where a strategic and networked approach was adopted impact was more obvious. Examples of good practice include the consortia approach, active partnership and shared arrangements between key stakeholders including matched funding.

Other positive developments include the involvement of Access Officers, representatives of VEC, Youth Information Services, community, etc. in the selection process and involvement in decision-making. The introduction of local knowledge to the funding process through the community/partnership dimension is also highly valued and useful in ensuring that funds are allocated on the basis of need.

There is scope to develop the role-modelling component of the Millennium Fund further by involving beneficiaries in community activities, e.g. homework clubs, tutoring, mentoring, giving talks, etc. We believe that much more can be achieved as the programme develops particularly in the critical area of 'making second level students aware of the viability of progression to higher education as an option'. (Report of the Action Group, 113)

There is a lack of awareness of the Fund amongst students, career guidance counsellors and others. Better promotion of the Fund in second level schools is needed and there is scope to involve career guidance counsellors and Millennium Fund beneficiaries to promote the Fund and, as importantly, maximise the community-based role-modelling component.

The main reason why promotion has been restrained to date is that some organisations are concerned that if they promote the Millennium Fund more widely they will encounter levels of demand they cannot accommodate in terms of administrative effort and available financial resources. This is a valid concern. However, it is important that the Fund does not become some kind of 'in the know' type instrument. There is a related issue around eligibility and targeting which is addressed below.

5.4 Balance Between the Provision of Financial and Non-financial Supports

The bulk of support (over 80%) provided under the Fund is financial. This is partly the result of the focus of the Fund as set out for ADM by the Department of Education and Science. Financial support is categorically what is expected, needed and most valued by student beneficiaries. Financial support is important in its own right but is also viewed as an important means of drawing students in, engaging them and using these encounters to build relationships and ascertain other supports that may be required.

The majority of students consulted were very appreciative of the friendly face and known contacts that they encountered through the partnerships and community organisations.

Some but not all of the organisations provided non-financial support which took the form of career guidance, mentoring, help with completing grant applications, study support/tutoring, access to quiet places to study, access to reference books, computers and laptops. A significant proportion of these supports were funded under other programmes including urban and local development initiatives.

The results indicate that there are low levels of demand and take up of non-financial supports generally with some exceptions. Our findings suggest that non-financial supports and particularly those of an academic variety such as study skills and tutoring are best delivered on campus from both efficiency and effectiveness perspectives. We are aware that this runs counter to the view of the Action Group that

'in the context of a rationalised student support system, organisations involved in topping up state support for students in further and higher education should be planning to disengage from this provision in the medium term and to concentrate on non-financial support'. (Report of the Action Group, p.115)

However, the findings indicate that a focus on non-financial support for existing students (as distinct from aspiring second level students) is unrealistic and a poor use of Millennium Fund resources given the limited demand evident.

5.5 Fit with Other Supports

As has been noted, there are duplication difficulties at the level of individual grant recipients and from an administrative/institutional perspective, arising from the existence of five funds each administered by different agencies. While there are no other community-based supports for participation and retention in third level, the Fund has operated largely as a limited financial aid to date.

In the context of the range of student supports that are available, the Millennium Fund operates in a knowledge vacuum in the sense that there is no formal means of 'cross-checking' who is in receipt of what supports. In some instances the collaborative arrangements between organisations (e.g. Access Officer, partnerships, community representatives, etc.) during selection processes facilitate shared information as to a particular student's situation and whether or not he/she is benefiting from other supports and thus whether or not it is appropriate or reasonable that he/she should also benefit from the Millennium Fund. This arrangement does not operate universally and there is a critical need for a central database containing all grant/benefit sources being provided to beneficiaries so as to improve impact analysis, decision-making and guard against double funding or fraud.

In the absence of such a system or in the interval while it is developed, formal and informal processes for improving grant knowledge need to be improved. An electronic system of communication between partnerships and Access Officers might be useful, e.g. emailing lists of Fund beneficiaries so that Access Officers are kept informed. However, it is important to be mindful of data protection issues. Advice in this regard is available from the Data Protection Commissioner.

In addition, a generic application form should be designed for implementation across all participating partnerships and community organisations. This form should capture information such as educational detail, social welfare status, grants applied for and grants awarded. It should be designed in consultation with relevant stakeholders following an analysis of current systems to ascertain what works and what does not. The rationale is to aid decision-making and to ensure consistency in this regard across participating organisations.

5.6 Administrative Issues

As has been noted earlier, the Millennium Fund is fairly resource intensive and there is a view that there is some duplication of effort in terms of the administration involved in student recruitment and selection. In some areas and colleges, communication and/or systems could be enhanced to ensure integrated awareness and access to the full range of college-based supports available. On this point, the fit of the Millennium Fund with the role and responsibilities of the Access Officer needs further investigation and clarification.

More globally, it is appropriate to examine the efficiency of the administration arrangements for the Fund as a whole. ADM has been responsible for managing the Fund on behalf of the Department of Education and Science since inception. It was anticipated by the Action Group that management responsibility would move to the National Office on its establishment and be 'fully integrated into the other elements of the National Access Programme'.

Before addressing the integration issue, it is important to state that the Fund has been well administered by ADM to date. ADM have taken responsibility on a year-to-year basis and operated within the guidelines outlined by the Department of Education and Science. Feedback from local groups was universally positive and the level and type of support provided was highly regarded. To a certain extent, the 'temporary' management arrangements and year-to-year decision-making have constrained ADM in relation to the strategic development of the Fund and also hampered its potential not only in relation to the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) but also in respect of other initiatives both community and university based.

The question of where the Fund should reside is primarily a question of best policy fit as well as one of competence and ethos. The main responsibility of ADM is local development and within that it manages programmes for social inclusion, reconciliation and development. It specialises in managing programmes on behalf of government departments and has an ethos that is facilitative of grass roots local development. There is potential added value to be gained from the complementarities between the Fund and the actions under the LDSIP including the capacity to form a continuum of interventions and supports from access to retention, provided the Fund is embedded within a holistic strategy.

The policy brief for the National Office is to facilitate educational access and equity for groups underrepresented in higher education and specifically those who are disadvantaged socially and/or culturally and those with a disability or mature learners.

Arguments can be made for the Fund being managed by either organisation. If it continues to be managed by ADM the advantages are existing infrastructure, continuity of relationships, its proven competence and commitment, and complementarity with the LDSIP. The main drawback is that the Millennium Fund would be somewhat isolated from mainstream educational policy and related synergies.

The advantage of the National Office managing the Fund is that it fully concords with its role and brief. Furthermore, given the drive towards rationalisation of student supports (as raised in a number of recent reports), the Office could be the central place for educational disadvantage data design, collection and impact assessment. The Fund could also be aligned or integrated with much needed complementary early educational measures (preschool through secondary). The main disadvantage is that the Office has no track record in managing the programme and its transfer would mean the need for an adjustment period to allow for relationship building, knowledge and systems development.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that this is not necessarily a zero sum decision. Should the parties be agreeable and funding permitting, there is scope for a transfer of ADM Millennium Fund staff with the programme. Ultimately, the decision is inextricably linked with other decisions relating to the rationalisation of student supports. If rationalisation goes ahead it is very difficult to sustain an argument that the Millennium Fund be managed by any organisation other than the National Office.

5.7 Model for the Future

The Millennium Fund could be an important intervention in the context of a fully developed holistic strategy to combat educational disadvantage. It has potential as a tool for outreach and role modelling within a more holistic strategy to combat educational disadvantage. It is largely acting as a bolster to what is perceived by many as an inadequate grant system, providing small but badly needed levels of support to students from low-income families. It should not be dismantled unless something better takes its place, for example an integrated, accessible and adequately funded maintenance grant system.

In recommending a model for the future development of the Millennium Fund, we draw on good practice and learn from less desirable features of what has been implemented to date. Given the early stage of programme development and pending decisions on rationalisation of third level student supports, it is not possible to make a definitive statement on continuance, whether on a stand-alone or merged/collaborative basis. However, a few comments on the implications of any future rationalisation are merited. In the event of rationalisation becoming operational, the reality would be that a comprehensive and co-ordinated system of financial support would be made available to all third level students who need it. If this were the case then it would make sense to discontinue the financial actions currently funded under the Millennium Fund. However, such an outcome should be managed in a way that would cause no or minimal disruption to the current beneficiaries of the Fund.

As has been highlighted, Millennium funding has been focused on participation and retention at further and third level education through the largely financial support of entrants rather than on access-type initiatives where the greater need exists. Arguably, the partnerships and community organisations are better placed to conduct the more strategic exercises needed to facilitate access bridging between primary, second level and further and third level education than to continue a role of what is essentially for most that of grant provider.

It has been acknowledged by various reports that the third level sector in general, and the university sector in particular, cannot solve the access dilemma alone. The Action Group felt that the partnerships and community sector were particularly well placed to conduct the necessary encouragement and access-promoting programmes based on local school networks in order to deliver more equitable entry levels to third level. Our sense is that there is stronger logic for access programmes to be delivered by partnerships and community groups rather than participation and retention programmes, which of their nature will take a largely financial form.

Having said that, if the Millennium Fund continues to exist into the post-NDP period (as we believe it should) as an access and capability instrument (assuming its financial provision role is rationalised as part of an integrated maintenance grant system as logic and efficiency considerations would suggest) then only those organisations that have the proven commitment and capabilities to make a real impact should be supported to develop this role. In practice this would mean that support would be confined to a rigorously selected sample of partnerships, adult/community education groups and/or community groups with a strategic focus and good linkages with disadvantaged primary and secondary schools and adult education organisers in their areas.

As noted above, ultimately decisions about the future shape of the Fund are inseparable from other decisions about funding supports and this discussion is framed by awareness of that wider context. The features outlined below should inform the continuance of the Fund and influence the shape of any future model, however.

5.7.1 Scope

The scope of the Fund needs to be revisited in line with the Action Group's vision of eligible organisations and target groups. Some realism should underpin the focus on target groups, however. If, say, ex-prisoners or other groups in need of highly targeted intervention are to be included in a meaningful way, then other developmental measures need to predate and integrate with provision under the Fund to enhance access in the first instance.

5.7.2 Rationale for Allocation

The rationale for the Millennium Fund rests on evidence of unequal participation rates in third level colleges of children from different social backgrounds and geographic areas as demonstrated in the Clancy report (2001). This rationale still holds; however, there is a major question mark over whether the Millennium Fund or similar programmes in isolation can ever make significant inroads to this problem given its focus on students who have already secured third level places. The more pressing need is for early education interventions (preschool through secondary) that prime less privileged students to benefit from the likes of the Millennium Fund. As stated throughout this report, the Millennium Fund works best when it is part of a holistic approach that combines 'push and pull' elements from early education through access to third level education. Thus it is important that the Fund is positioned within a holistic strategy to address educational disadvantage.

5.7.3 Targeting

Geographic targeting is a crude instrument but has some merit if sensitively and sensibly included in a more comprehensive assessment process, as is mainly the practice currently. The model should not, however, exclude individuals who fit socio-economic indices of disadvantage but fall outside a geographic area (see 5.3). The ADM assessment guideline that individuals must reside in a partnership/community group area should be dropped although it must be stressed that partnerships and/or community groups would not be required to actively promote the fund outside their target areas.

As has been noted throughout the report, the operation of financial support under the Fund is very diluted in some areas and levels of support can seem somewhat arbitrary because of different local conditions. In terms of improving coherence, impact and levels of support to those most in need, a number of targeting options could be examined including the following:

- Confining support to first year further education and undergraduate students on the rationale that drop-out rates are highest amongst new entrants[9] and disadvantaged students are particularly vulnerable in this regard

- Focusing support on mature students and those without formal qualifications on the basis that these students benefit strongly from Millennium funding and are not targeted by traditional access programmes

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9. Lynch, K., Healy, M. and Carpenter, A. (1999) *Non-Completion in Higher Education: A Study of First Year Students in Three Institutes of Technology.* Carlow: Institute of Technology, Carlow; Dundalk: Dundalk Institute of Technology; Tralee: Institute of Technology, Tralee.

- Confining support to final year undergraduate students on the basis that low-income students are more likely to be under additional financial pressure when the educational stakes are highest

- Make funding decisions on a regionalised basis prioritising the most needy students. This would require a regional committee-type arrangement along the lines of existing consortia models to be established on an ad hoc basis for selection purposes. No new structures are required and a regional meeting would cut down on the amount of administration necessary locally.

5.7.4 Types of Support

Finance is the most needed and most effective form of support provided to date. The emphasis on financial support should continue with a couple of provisos. Non-financial supports of an academic nature are available on campus and should not be duplicated locally. Broadly, information on all forms of student support needs to be improved both locally and in colleges. While we are validating the financial emphasis we feel that the trade off in some locations between universal funding of all 'qualified' applicants and more intensive funding of high need applicants needs to be squared off. We favour the more intensive funding approach for the continuance of the Fund in terms of maximising impact and effectiveness.

5.7.5 Resourcing of the Fund and Funding Time Frame

At this point in time it is difficult to justify any increase in funding. Better use and careful monitoring of existing funding is preferable so that impacts can be better assessed and informed decisions taken.

The funding timetable needs to continue to line up with the academic year. Any wind down or change in arrangements needs to be signalled well in advance (i.e. a number of years) so that orderly handovers are achievable. If rationalisation is agreed, for example, it will be necessary to develop a transition plan in consultation with ADM to facilitate as seamless a changeover as possible. This plan should be mindful of the financial and non-financial actions supported under the Fund and ensure that there is no real loss of service to students and participating organisations in the interim period.

5.7.6 Support Provided to Partnerships and Community Groups

Financial support is being provided to virtually all organisations that apply. At this point in time all organisations have had the opportunity to participate and it is now timely that choices be made between more competitive and strategic or targeted use of funds. We would prefer to see fewer organisations and/or individuals funded to greater effect. This implies greater selectivity and we recommend that the National Office together with ADM and a representative of the Access Officers and the community/partnership sector discuss the options outlined under 6.3 with a view to taking the necessary decisions for the post-NDP period.

5.7.7 Reporting and Data Requirements

There is a critical need for a central database containing all grant/benefit sources being provided to beneficiaries so as to improve impact analysis, decision-making and to guard against double funding or fraud. Routine data collection needs to include impact and outcome data specifically: year-to-year carryover rates, progression rates from FE colleges to higher education and other destinations, drop-out rates and award levels. A system of intensive tracking of a random selection of beneficiaries from each target group could also be developed and implemented with a view to assessing impact and outcomes.

5.8 Concluding Comment

As stated earlier in this report the Millennium Fund has played an important role in supporting students from disadvantaged areas to attend further and higher education. The results of this research show that the Fund has significant potential for further development and should not be dismantled unless something better takes its place. It is important that the lessons learnt from this research are given careful consideration by policy makers in any decision-making as regards the future of the Millennium Fund and the rationalisation of third level student supports.

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