

The image features a dark green rectangular box at the top center containing the HEA logo and its name in English and Irish. Below this, the background is a stylized illustration of four students in a classroom or library setting. One student is seated in a wheelchair on the left, while three others stand around her, holding books and papers. The illustration uses a limited color palette of dark green, light green, and white.

HEA

Higher Education Authority
An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas

PROGRESSING THE ACTION PLAN:

**FUNDING TO ACHIEVE EQUITY OF ACCESS
TO HIGHER EDUCATION**

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INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of student grant schemes in the early 1970s the state has been investing resources to overcome financial barriers to educational opportunity and to widen access to higher education. From the mid-1990s in particular, the funding available has grown substantially through a range of funding programmes that are supported both by the state and by the European Union. The Student Assistance Fund was introduced in 1994 for students experiencing particular or unexpected financial hardship. A dedicated fund for students with a disability was also introduced in 1994. In 1996, the Higher Education Authority introduced a 'targeted initiative' programme to widen access within the institutions it funds. The same year, fees for full-time undergraduate students were abolished. In 1999 the Department of Education and Science began providing additional funding for access and retention to the institutes of technology, including the Dublin Institute of Technology. In 2000, the Millennium Partnership Fund was introduced within area partnerships to promote participation in further and higher education. In the same year, a new element to the higher education grant, the 'top-up' grant, was made available to students from families with particularly low incomes.

By 2002, nine different funding programmes were in place, with over €180m being invested in the national grants and allowance schemes and over €65m in the other programmes. However, a report in 2001 by an action group on access to third level education highlighted the fragmented nature of available funding, the absence of ongoing review of the programmes, and evidence of overlap and duplication between several of the funds (Action Group, 2001). The group recommended that a dedicated unit be set up to develop a co-ordinated national strategy on access and to consolidate and expand access funding. Following the establishment of this unit, the National Access Office, in 2003, a national action plan to achieve equity of access to higher education was launched by the Minister for Education and Science Mary Hanafin TD in December 2004. This plan is now being implemented. It underlines the need for adequate and effectively used resources if the aim of creating higher education opportunities for learners of all backgrounds, identities and abilities, at all stages in their lives, is to be realised. It also reiterates the points made by the action group in 2001 that funding is not always adequate and there is duplication and considerable variation in the existing resources (HEA, 2004c).

Lack of money is by no means the only barrier to participation in higher education. Others include the limited routes of access and progression, the perception among under-represented groups that higher education is not a real option for them and the absence of a sufficiently inclusive culture in higher education institutions, particularly in teaching, learning and curriculum development. Work is underway in these areas through the action plan; this review concentrates on financial issues and barriers. It proposes key steps to achieve a model of access funding in higher education that will provide adequate and effectively used resources for students, institutions and communities and will complement other investment in educational access and opportunity within the education system. The review does not examine the equally important resources invested in educational opportunities and support for students from early childhood through to adulthood. Work in this area is being undertaken by other partners in education, most recently by the Educational Disadvantage Committee (2004) and by the Department of Education and Science with the publication of its action plan for education inclusion in schools (2005).

The methodology underlying the review is based on four main elements. Firstly, an analysis was completed of reports and studies published over the past ten years which deal with funding and access to higher education in Ireland (Clancy, 1995, 2000, 2001; Skilbeck and Connell, 2000; Action Group, 2001; Department of Education and Science, 2003). Relevant Irish legislation was also reviewed and a range of international literature on funding to widen access.

The second element involved analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from each of the funding programmes for the years 2002–4. This included, where available, the numbers of students, gender breakdown, the purpose for which expenditure was approved to students or educational institutions, and the annual level of expenditure by individual institutions as a proportion of their allocation. In the case of the Millennium Partnership Fund, an external review completed by Phillips and Eustace (2005) analysed the fund data for 2001–2 and 2002–3 in terms of the profile of beneficiaries, distribution across educational sectors, per capita allocation of funding, and breakdown of financial and non-financial expenditure.

The third element comprised meetings and interviews with fifty practitioners working directly with students from under-represented groups and six senior administrators in higher education institutions, as well as representatives from the VEC sector, the Department of Education and Science, and the community and voluntary sector. Student perspectives on funding were gathered through a number of focus groups and meetings. Interviewees responded to a range of detailed questions on administration of funding programmes, strengths and weaknesses of the programmes, and ideas for further development. Dialogue and discussion were also incorporated from a national conference *Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education: Setting an Agenda for Action in Ireland*. During the conference, detailed commentary was gathered on removing financial barriers to higher education for students, communities and education providers (HEA, 2005, pp.67–72).

The fourth element was a discussion document which was drawn up and sent to over 300 individuals and agencies representing students and their families, officers working with students, representatives from the primary, second-level, and further and higher education sectors and social partners. Focus group meetings were held with students and with staff working with under-represented groups in higher education, and 44 detailed written responses were received (see appendices). The discussion paper was also debated in a number of public fora nationally and internationally, including seminars organised by Clondalkin and Ballyfermot community partnerships, the Conference of Student Services in Ireland (CSSI) and a meeting in Portugal organised by the European Commission. The feedback, comments and suggestions received were incorporated into the final report.

The review is structured into five parts. Section one provides summary details of existing funding programmes. Sections two to four present a critique of the impact of the funding programmes for students, institutions and communities. The final section presents conclusions, recommendations for the future and an implementation timetable.

Three educational maintenance grant schemes assist students with the costs of attending higher education. These are the Higher Education Grant Scheme, the Vocational Education Committees' Scholarship Scheme and the Third Level Maintenance Grants Scheme for Trainees. The scheme students apply to depends on their course of study. Each scheme is overseen by the Department of Education and Science, and all students who meet the eligibility criteria are awarded a grant. Almost 35,000 students receive support annually through the schemes, at a cost of €181m in 2005. In 2005–6, depending on reckonable income,¹ students are eligible for an 'ordinary rate' of grant ranging from €305 if they live within fifteen miles of the college (adjacent rate) to €3,020 if they live more than fifteen miles from college (non-adjacent rate). Students apply to either their local authority or VEC for the grant. Educational maintenance grants are only available to students on approved, full-time, further and higher education courses. There is no maintenance grant support for students on part-time courses.

An additional 'special rate of maintenance' or 'top-up' grant was introduced in 2000. The scheme assists grant applicants from households who are in receipt of certain long-term social welfare payments. Such students receive an additional 'top-up' amount to the standard maintenance grant. The reckonable income limit for eligible applicants in 2005–6 is €15,626. The additional amount to be awarded to students in 2005–6 ranges from €935 (adjacent rate) to €2,335 (non-adjacent). Eligible mature students automatically receive the non-adjacent rate. Over 12,000 students received the additional grant in 2004–5, of whom over 9,000 students were in higher education.

The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) was introduced in 1990 and is managed and allocated by the Department for Social and Family Affairs.² It is an important source of support for progression to full-time further or higher education for particular groups of students. Unemployed persons, single parents or people with disabilities, aged 21 or over, who have been in receipt of social welfare payments for twelve months or more can apply for funding which is not means-tested and is not affected by maintenance grant payments. Participants are also entitled to a cost of education allowance, payable at the start of each academic year. This is currently €254 but is to be increased to €400 from September 2005. In 2004, 7,308 students benefited from the scheme at a cost of €44m; of these, 4,825 are in higher education (Department of Social and Family Affairs press release, 15 August 2005).

The Student Assistance Fund is available to students experiencing particular or unexpected hardship during their course of study. The fund is allocated on a per capita basis to publicly-funded higher education institutions. In 2004–5, 35 institutions received €43.32 for each of their full-time students,

¹ Reckonable income for candidates other than mature and also mature candidates dependent on parents for the purposes of the grant schemes is gross income of parent(s)/guardian(s) and the applicant for the tax year immediately preceding the academic year. Reckonable income for independent mature students is that of the candidate and her/his spouse, if applicable.

² The 'Third Level Allowance' (TLA) was introduced in 1990 and, following expansion to include second level and further education studies, was renamed the Back to Education Allowance in 1998.

at a total cost of €5.6m. Until 2005, the amount of funding available tended to vary annually, depending on the level of demand for the top-up grant. A decision in 2004 by the Department of Education and Science to separate expenditure on the top-up grant from other funding programmes has ended these variations. Students apply for the Student Assistance Fund through their student services office or to the access officer within their institution. Over 11,000 students benefited from the fund during 2003–4; the numbers benefiting in subsequent years are not yet available.

The Fund for Students with Disabilities is allocated to students with a disability who require additional supports and services in further or higher education. The fund is also available to Irish students attending higher education in the United Kingdom. Colleges apply for funding for individuals or groups of students to the National Access Office. Funding is allocated to identified individual students and spending through the fund is restricted to services or equipment directly linked to individuals. Following applications from the institutions on behalf of the students the National Office determines the allocation of grants to individuals. Because the grants can only be approved if they are linked to an individual student, funds for other items such as a disability officer post are ineligible. During 2004–5, 1,731 students were supported through the fund, at a total cost of €6.5m.

The Strategic Initiatives Scheme, formerly called the ‘Targeted Initiatives Scheme’, has been operated by the HEA since 1996. Universities and other HEA-funded institutions submit proposals annually for funding under a number of headings, one of which promotes access to higher education. Funding for the scheme is drawn from the annual block grant for institutions that is managed by the HEA. In 2005, €7.7m was allocated to eleven institutions for access initiatives. A proportion of the targeted funding for access is allocated as part of the core grant to assist institutions in mainstreaming access activities and supporting key personnel. Institutions submitting proposals for funding under the scheme are required to co-fund the cost of initiatives with at least 30% matching funding from their core grant or other sources. A review of access initiatives within the scheme identified a number of steps that are required to make further progress, including a holistic policy on access within each institution, systematic data collection, and evaluation and further development of strategic funding (HEA, 2004b).

The Department of Education and Science currently manages funding for the thirteen institutes of technology, the Dublin Institute of Technology and other publicly-funded higher education colleges including the National College of Ireland and Tipperary Institute. Each year, approximately €1.3m in total is allocated to these bodies to promote access and retention. Institutes of technology are also directed to allocate €10.16 of their capitation fee for students to support access activities; this amounts to approximately €525,000 annually across the fourteen institutions.³ The funding supports one access

³ This figure is based on provisional figures of 53,586 full-time students in institutes of technology in 2003-4.

officer post in the institutes of technology. The Dublin Institute of Technology supplements funding for its access activities (which includes a community links programme, a disability support service and a centre for lifelong learning) through a combination of public and private resources.

The Millennium Partnership Fund, which was established in 2000, also provides some community-based funding. It supports retention and participation among under-represented groups of students in further or higher education and is available to students in area partnerships and community groups which participate in the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP). Application for Millennium funding is made annually by organisations through Area Development Management (ADM) Ltd, a state company established to promote social inclusion, reconciliation and equality in Ireland and which has administered the fund since it was established. In 2005, a total of €1.89m was allocated to 57 community groups and partnerships. In 2003–4, the latest year for which figures are available, 3,750 students in higher and further education benefited from the fund.

Higher education institutions and community groups also succeed in accessing a number of additional sources of access funding. There has not been any attempt to gather this information to date. Within the institutions, sources of additional funding for access activities include private funds (donations/bequests), recurrent or core grant funding and fee income. Some community organisations receive supplementary funding from local companies, and additional statutory funding to partnerships and community groups is another source.

The issues arising in access funding can be divided into three: financial support for students, for higher education institutions, and for communities. This section examines the situation regarding students, but some of the issues arising are shared by all three groups.

Six principal sources of financial support are available to students from the state: maintenance grants, the top-up grant, the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA), the Student Assistance Fund, the Millennium Partnership Fund and the Fund for Students with Disabilities. Over €181m is allocated each year to grant-aid eligible students in higher education (including recipients of the top-up grant); €44m for the BTEA; and over €13m for the three other student support funds. Although the importance of these funding programmes in widening access should not be under-estimated, this review has identified the following six issues that need resolution if further strides are to be made in achieving equity of access to higher education over the coming years:

- Navigating a maze: difficulties for students in accessing a range of different funds
- Inadequate levels of financial support for students
- Local variations in funding
- The costs of essential equipment and childcare
- Failing to complete a year and loss of financial support
- Lack of support for part-time education

Navigating a maze: difficulties for students in accessing a range of different funds

Although students and parents acknowledge the benefits of the existing grants systems, they also emphasise the difficulties of navigating through the range of available funding and the impression that some people have an ‘inside track’ when it comes to information on the various programmes. A number of students reported that they only became aware of the Student Assistance Fund when they were on the verge of dropping out due to financial hardship. It is possible that others who did drop out had not heard of the fund at all. Some students who have particular problems such as low family income, participation in courses with high equipment costs, or childcare requirements, must try to access a range of different funds, with the accompanying burden of meeting administration demands and eligibility criteria. Students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds often do not have any family or community support in navigating the range of funding programmes or completing detailed application forms. This fragmented and potentially opaque approach does not facilitate fair and equitable support for students.

Since 2000, the Department of Education and Science has produced information in leaflet and booklet form on the range of funding available to students in further and higher education (Department of Education and Science, 2000–5). But ensuring that this information reaches a wide body of people is a challenge; the Department issues an information leaflet to each student applying to the Central

Applications Office (CAO) for a higher education course and sends copies of the booklet to schools. Yet despite these efforts, the students contacted in this review said they were unaware of the information, and access personnel had doubts as to whether students in general are aware of its existence. It was also reported that the booklet is difficult to follow, in part due to the range of funding programmes on offer and their associated criteria. Second-level representatives report that certain school-leaver groups are particularly at risk of being under-informed, in particular students on Leaving Certificate Applied programmes who do not normally use the CAO but are interested in accessing a further education course. It is therefore felt that information sources are in urgent need of expansion and development into a range of formats to reach the widest possible number of students and that steps need to be taken to consolidate and simplify funding programmes.

Inadequate levels of financial support for students

Although significant resources are invested in aiding students through the state maintenance grant, many of the people contacted in this review believe that the amounts available and criteria used are inadequate and therefore lessen the chances of access and successful participation in higher education by disadvantaged students. It is argued that two of the other funding programmes, the Student Assistance Fund and the Millennium Fund, are providing supplementary support which is considered essential by many students. In interviews with access officers and senior administrators this point was reiterated several times. It is also a conclusion in a recent evaluation of the Millennium Fund:

The results suggest that the Millennium Partnership 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. (Phillips and Eustace, 2005, p.32)

In effect, without the help of the Student Assistance Fund and the Millennium Fund, many students would not be able to successfully participate in higher education. This is corroborated by the people who administer the funds:

Over the past two to three years in particular an increasing number of students are depending on the Student Assistance Fund just to make ends meet, with ongoing college costs, accommodation, books, clothing, mandatory field visits, equipment and so on. Of course most also work to earn extra money; the funding available through the Student Assistance Fund often makes the difference between someone continuing their studies with success and doing so much part-time work that they can't cope with the academic demands and drop out. (Senior university administrator)

It is believed that a lot of socio-economically disadvantaged students engage in so many hours of part-time work that their academic participation is compromised, as the time available to study and participate in learning has a major bearing on academic outcomes and completion. An ESRI study (2004) of part-time employment among second-level students has reported that part-time work has a negative effect on

educational participation and achievement, and the negative effects of part-time employment outweigh the positive effects, such as work-related skills development. The scale of part-time working by higher education students is reported in two recent surveys (Health Promotion Unit, 2005; Research Solutions Survey, 2005), and students participating in more intensive work activities in the regular labour market are increasingly less likely to be from more economically advantaged backgrounds. The Fleming and Kennedy study (1999) of a sample of third-level students from a disadvantaged area found that those students who worked during term time found that their academic work suffered, whilst those who worked only during the summer fared better.

It appears that family circumstances significantly affect students' thinking prior to going to higher education and the subsequent risk of drop-out. There is considerable variation in the financial support students receive from parents, guardians or other family members, and even with support from the state they can find themselves impoverished by circumstances such as family breakdown, bereavement or addiction problems. Childcare responsibilities are often an added burden.

The decision by the Department of Education and Science to introduce the top-up grant for some students in 2001 has been a positive development. This additional grant has provided additional financial aid to those with particularly low incomes and the increase (over 12,000 recipients in 2004–5) in the numbers availing of the scheme has been welcomed by institutions and communities. Another positive feature of the initiative is the Department's commitment to link the maximum top-up grant with unemployment assistance. The income threshold for the top-up grant is, however, a concern among access personnel in institutions and communities. It is argued that it is not making inroads in concentrated areas of socio-economic deprivation, and further research is required to establish how effectively it is supporting access and participation in such areas:

We use a targeted approach, working with both urban and rural schools that have lower than average progression rates to higher education. Overall, we are seeing results, albeit slowly. We struggle to raise participation from the urban 'blackspots' where there is little family or local tradition of higher education. Part-time and casual employment is widely available, so many household incomes in these areas are over the threshold for eligibility and thus the additional financial incentive for the student is lost. It would be useful to know exactly where and to whom the top-up grant is going around the country. (Senior university administrator)

The Department of Education and Science is currently reviewing the administration of the grant schemes, with a range of possible developments being considered.

Local variations in funding

The Student Assistance and Millennium Funds are both administered locally, with general guidelines on administration and allocation of funding. This means that the responsibility for student financial support

is devolved to 35 institutions and 57 communities, and has led to significant variations in how funding is allocated. Students believe that this creates inequalities, and this view is shared by several administrators. With the Student Assistance Fund for example, some institutions operate closing dates, while others do not. Some institutions means-test applicants whereas others do not. Some permit international students to apply to the fund, others do not. Through the Millennium Fund some community organisations allocate different levels of funding to individuals on the basis of need whereas others allocate the available funds uniformly regardless of circumstances. There are different timescales for implementing the programme in the community and institutional sectors. As a result of all these variations, the students who require financial support have different experiences and receive different levels of funding according to where they live or the college they attend. There is a need for funding guidelines that can be fairly and consistently applied.

An additional issue is the fact that students in both further and higher education are entitled to apply for the Millennium Fund, whereas only higher education students can apply for assistance from the Student Assistance Fund. The justification for the overlap between the two funds is not clear. Nor has the rationale for limiting the Student Assistance Fund to higher education been clearly articulated. The Student Assistance Fund applies to courses approved for free fees and maintenance grants in institutions in receipt of recurrent funding, but some smaller institutions are excluded.⁴ Some students are made aware of all of the available funds, whilst others in need fail to get any additional assistance. Greater information-sharing and collaboration between institutions and communities would help to reduce this risk.

The costs of essential equipment and childcare

Although students acknowledge that maintenance grants are of immense help, and lack of money is not the only barrier to participation in higher education, significant hidden costs are not taken into consideration in the grants. Students face different financial demands, chiefly because of the distance between their home and the college they attend. Through the adjacent and non-adjacent rates, this distinction has been a feature of the maintenance grant schemes for some time. There are, however, two further distinctions which should be recognised. Firstly, certain courses, including art and design, architecture, medicine, veterinary and dentistry, require specialised, high-cost equipment and materials. Such requirements present a financial barrier to lower income students. Other courses such as engineering, environmental science and teacher education feature mandatory fieldwork and periods of unpaid professional practice. These additional costs are not recognised in the maintenance grant system. Many of the above courses are considered 'high status', and, as demonstrated by Clancy (2001), the more prestigious the course, the greater the social inequality in participation levels.

⁴ Institutions such as Milltown Institute, All Hallows, St. Patrick's College Thurles, St. Patrick's College Carlow.

Another area where costs are unavoidable is childcare. The costs of childcare represent a major barrier to both access and participation in full-time higher education, particularly for mature students with low or no income or family support. Examples of this were clearly illustrated by contributors to the review, often with reference to the stated national policy objective to increase the numbers of mature students participating in higher education. The need for childcare support was also raised in a recent submission to the Minister for Education and Science by the Educational Disadvantage Committee:

One of the key supports identified by both research and by the feedback from local providers is childcare/eldercare. Feedback from the adult guidance projects has also highlighted the main barriers to access as lack of childcare/ eldercare.... Models of practice developed under the Education Equality Initiative and other programmes which provide childcare/eldercare....have been proven to be successful in ensuring access for the most disadvantaged people. (Educational Disadvantage Committee, 2004, p.10)

The maintenance grant makes no distinction between students with children and those without. Data from both the Student Assistance and Millennium Funds show that a significant proportion of these funds is being used to support students with additional course costs or childcare commitments. For example, in 2004 up to 61% of the Student Assistance Fund was spent on childcare within institutes of technology. Students and access personnel believe that an additional weighting should be included in the statutory grant system to recognise these financial burdens in the same way as recognition is given to the different distances between home and college.

The lack of financial assistance for childcare contrasts with provision in England and Wales, Canada and the United States. In England and Wales a comprehensive and means-tested financial support system for full-time student parents is available. It includes a childcare grant (up to €8,663 for one child and up to €12,834 for two children), an adult dependants allowance (up to €3,477), a parents learning allowance (up to €1,982) and a child tax credit paid in cash (up to €5,509) (Department for Education and Skills, 2005). This assistance does not preclude further help in the form of a higher education grant (up to €1,452) or assistance with payment of tuition fees.

In Canada, the means-tested Canada Study Grant for Student Dependants involves a bursary of up to €2,107 per year (full-time courses) or €1,296 (part-time courses) for students with one or two dependants. A childcare bursary plan provides further means-tested financial assistance to student parents who have childcare costs for three or more children (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2005). Many states in the United States offer a childcare assistance grant for post-secondary education students. In Minnesota, a grant of up to €1,800 for each child is available to eligible post-secondary students (Minnesota Higher Education Services Office, 2004).

Failing to complete a year and loss of financial support

Contributors to the review from institutions and communities argue that there is a strong link between students repeating an academic year and serious financial pressure with consequent dependence on the Student Assistance Fund or the Millennium Fund or excessive part-time work. There are a range of non-educational reasons why students do not succeed in completing a year of study successfully. These include bereavement (especially bereavement by suicide), ongoing disabilities that affect participation, such as deafness or psychiatric illness, trauma that can include a serious accident or assault, pregnancy, and serious illness involving either the student or a family member. The majority of students, regardless of socio-economic or other background factors, have one chance at completing an academic year of a higher education course in which fees are state-funded and maintenance grants apply. If the year is repeated, fees must be paid and the maintenance grant is no longer available. In some cases the grant agencies can use discretion, but this is not generally publicised and there are no data available on such cases. In addition, students doing a national certificate or ordinary degree/diploma course that is funded through the Third Level Maintenance Grants Scheme for Trainees can avail of a grant while repeating first year. However, the student must be participating in a different course to the one previously started.

The issue of students losing financial support in this way has been highlighted in previous reports: Osborne and Leith (2000) reported a view from one university that there is a contradiction between a commitment to widen access to higher education and the likely withdrawal of all state support if a year must be repeated. The Action Group on Access to Third Level recommended that the scope of the maintenance grants/free fees schemes be extended to allow students in receipt of the special rate of maintenance grant to repeat a single year. However, this has not been implemented to date. Many other countries have a student loans system for higher education students that provides access to a source of funding to support a repeat year.⁵ In the absence of such a system in Ireland, a possible remedy could be the funding of fees for one repeat year for all students eligible for maintenance grants.

Lack of support for part-time education

Respondents to the review emphasised the need to create new part-time education opportunities to achieve equity of access. For many people in under-represented groups, it is not a realistic option to engage in higher education on a full-time basis. Mature students in particular tend to have substantial financial and family care commitments, and part-time education is inhibited by the requirement to pay for courses regardless of income levels.⁶ The Report of the Commission on the Points System (1999) recommended that mature students on part-time or full-time courses should have access to the same financial support as school leavers, and this recommendation was recently endorsed by the OECD in its *Review of Higher Education in Ireland*:

⁵ Includes Australia, Austria, Britain/NI, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, India, Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, United States.

⁶ Some relief on income tax is available to students on approved courses.

Every effort [should] be made to increase part-time student numbers as a proportion of total numbers in tertiary education and to this end distinctions between part-time and full-time students should be removed for the purpose of the obligation to pay fees and receive maintenance support. (OECD, 2004, p.64)

The European University Association *Review of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities* (2005, p.23) noted that the current requirement for part-time students to pay tuition fees appears to work against stated national objectives to increase participation. There is a lack of fairness in a system which provides for free full-time courses while failing to provide for those aspiring to the same qualification but requiring more flexible provision.

The movement to structure higher education courses into modules should help part-time students, and following the agreement of the Bologna declaration by EU Ministers for Education in 1999, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) will, over the coming years, be fully implemented. Under this system, students will be allocated a specified amount of credits on successful completion of each module of a course, with a total of 60 ECTS credits achieved in a standard full-time academic year. Students on part-time courses could therefore be assessed for tuition fee and maintenance grant support.

Other countries provide examples of financial support schemes for part-time students. In the UK, financial help is available to students in part-time education who do not already hold a degree qualification, where the course lasts for at least one academic year and where the workload is equivalent to at least 50% or more of a full-time course. The financial support, which is means-tested, includes a course grant of up to €363 and a fee grant of up to €1,285 (Department for Education and Skills, 2005b). Similarly, in Canada, grants are available to various categories of part-time students whose workload is between 20% and 59% of the full-time workload (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2005).

There are two main sources for access funding for higher education providers, the HEA Strategic Initiatives Scheme, amounting to €7.7m in 2005, and a Department of Education and Science fund of approximately €1.8m per year for access and retention for the thirteen institutes of technology, the DIT and other publicly-funded higher education institutions. The HEA fund has been available since 1996 and that of the Department of Education and Science since 1999. The availability of these funds has led to progress in widening access; however, this review has highlighted six issues that should be addressed:

- Variation in funding
- Lack of administrative resources at local level
- Need for 'baseline' funding
- Need for evaluation and learning from what works
- Encouraging partnership and collaboration
- Review of HEA recurrent funding model

Variation in funding

Due in part to the different administrative arrangements, the amount of funding available over the past five years to different institutions has varied significantly. Following the 1996 decision by the HEA to divert funding from its block grant for strategic initiatives, individual universities have had between €500,000 to €1.4m specifically to promote access. Institutes of technology have, however, had a much smaller figure, something like €50,000 on average. As a result, the universities have been able to develop a significant infrastructure and programme of activities to widen access whereas the institutes of technology have only been able to fund the employment costs of one access officer post plus expenses and have had almost nothing allocated for developmental or outreach work. This contrast was highlighted by a representative of the Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology in December 2004:

Better resourcing means that universities, rather than having an access officer, can afford an access service. This means that they have individuals who can look after the needs of disabled students exclusively and others who can deal exclusively with the problems of mature students. [...] Just think what we would be able to do if we had adequate funding to actively address equity of access, and in this instance, at a minimum, I mean equality of funding with the university sector. (HEA, 2005, p.31)

The impact of this variation in funding has affected the success of institutes of technology in attracting and retaining students from under-represented groups. Students from lower socio-economic groups enter the institutes in significant numbers; however, the lack of learning and pastoral supports mean that many drop out before the end of their first year. This contrasts with the retention rates in universities where access officers claim that, thanks to additional learning and pastoral support, students supported by access programmes have even higher rates of completion than the general student population. The

proportionate numbers of students with a disability attending the institutes is considerably lower than the universities; whereas three universities with a full disability service have over 300 such students attending higher education courses, the majority of institutes have less than 50 students with a disability enrolled:

The participation rates of students with disabilities in the institute of technology sector have not increased at the same rate as the university sector, nor have they kept up with the rate of increase in the enrolment of non-disabled undergraduates. In many colleges the participation rate of students with disabilities is unacceptably low and needs to be urgently addressed. (From forthcoming survey by AHEAD of 2003–4 participation rates of students with disabilities)

Institutes of technology are important regional centres for higher education and opportunities to complete a higher education course must be available to all types of students all around the country.

Lack of administrative resources at local level

The Student Assistance, Disability and Millennium Funds are all supported by the European Social Fund (ESF); this entails administrative demands that require each college to submit quarterly and end-of-year returns to the National Access Office. In addition, a detailed account, known as the 'third level access measure return', is required from every education provider in receipt of funding. All the necessary documentation must be checked and verified, and subjected to a 'transaction testing procedure', which is an audit of a selected number of institutions. For instance, the ESF announced an audit of the Disability and Student Assistance Funds in seven universities and two institutes of technology. Many of the people interviewed for this review reiterated the difficulty in complying with these reporting requirements and wondered whether the effort expended was worth the funding received:

Were it not for the fact that the Student Assistance Fund is an essential source of additional financial support for many students, we might have considered handing the funding back to the Department of Education on the grounds that we simply could not cope with the administrative demands. The college receives no funding to meet this cost. (University Access Officer)

The difficulties created by ESF reporting requirements were also noted in a recent report on university equality policies chaired by the former governor of the central bank, Maurice O'Connell:

The administration of funding supports for students with disabilities gives rise to considerable frustration. There were complaints that it is unduly bureaucratic and lacks transparency. (Equality Review Team to the HEA, 2004, p.4)

Difficulties also arise for local administrators of the Disability Fund. As funding is allocated to individual students, the administrative demands are considerable. The institutes of technology, unlike the universities, have been attempting to administer this fund with minimal staffing one access officer, who

must also work with each of the other under-represented groups and the associated funding programmes. Local administrators also have limited flexibility in re-allocating resources approved under the fund if the needs of individual students change. A supplementary application must be made to the National Access Office and the application-decision process is repeated, with an associated increase in administration time.

Another administrative burden arises from the necessity of submitting a needs assessment report to the Disability Fund. There is often duplication of information between the fund application form and the needs assessment form. Documentation providing evidence of disability must also be submitted at this stage.⁷ As a result, the amount of material to be gathered and processed makes it difficult to finalise decisions speedily on funding. After the entire process has been completed, frequently there are changes in the students' needs (lesser or greater), which result in either 'frozen' surplus funding in the institution concerned, or the need for a supplementary application to the National Office for additional resources. These developments often occur at the same time. The individualised applications approach may not be particularly effective in estimating the resources required by the institutions to support students with disabilities. ESF policy requires that institutions report on the costs actually incurred for individual students during the accounting year, not what was sought by the institution or approved by the National Office for individual students.

The Disability Fund operates on the assumption that staff have the expertise to conduct a needs assessment of students with a disability.⁸ The staff in institutes of technology where there is not a dedicated disability service often have to refer students elsewhere for needs assessments due to the lack of internal resources and expertise. This is presented as one of the reasons why the institutes find it more difficult than the universities to attract students with a disability.

In further education, there has been a marked growth in the numbers seeking support from the Disability Fund, and further education is increasingly being used as a route of re-entry and progression for adults with a disability who may not have had adequate opportunities in the past. A disability support service for eight colleges of further education in Dublin is in place, through a partnership between the National Learning Network and the City of Dublin Vocational Educational Committee:

The partnership between the National Learning Network (formerly the NTDI) and the CDVEC is unique in that it marries the expertise of the National Learning Network with students participating in courses

⁷ The Disability Advisor Workers Network (DAWN) together with AHEAD collaborated with the CAO to produce a standard and prescriptive 'evidence of disability' form, to be completed by a relevant specialist. This form is submitted as part of 'special entry' applications to colleges. This form can also be submitted as evidence of disability as part of an application to the fund for students with disabilities. It is not used by all applicants, however, and there are wide variations in the quality of 'evidence of disability' documentation submitted in support of applications. No standard template or prescriptive report format for psycho-educational assessments currently exists.

⁸ An assessment of need is a formal process undertaken by the college's disability support officer and the student. The student's needs and the demands of the course are discussed followed by agreement on the equipment, support and reasonable accommodations required. The information is documented by the assessor in a standard report.

with the largest further education provider in the country. The CDVEC has seen an increase in the number of students who are coming forward with particular learning needs and also in the numbers accessing further education for the first time. For us, it means the expertise of the National Learning Network is available on learning styles and assistive technology, to name just two areas that have improved the service we offer to students. (Chief Executive Officer, City of Dublin VEC)

Work is underway to include all eighteen further education colleges in the CDVEC service. Such an initiative is not as yet, however, on offer in other VECs. Whilst the fund for students with disabilities does not support institutions, but rather students, the experience in further education has underlined the need for investment in disability support services, in particular providing staff who are experienced in needs assessment and supporting students with disabilities.

Need for 'baseline' funding

Although access activities in higher education institutions have grown considerably, there is still limited provision for them in institutions' core budgets. Since 2003 the HEA has addressed this issue by allocating a proportion of the strategic initiative funding for access to institutions' core grant. However, there is now a sense that the number of students has increased to the point that comprehensive 'baseline' funding is needed if the institutions are to put in place the necessary services for a more diverse student population. Such core services should be linked to quantitative and qualitative outcomes and include recruitment strategies, communication, extra learning support and tuition, guidance and counselling, provision of alternative assessment, improvements to physical access, and staff training and development. The need for such outcomes-based funding was summed up by one access officer:

This is about raising services and supports to minimum basic level, and baseline funding is essential in raising participation levels among target groups where they are currently relatively low. For some colleges, including ours, the need to obtain baseline funding is a priority if we are going to make any real progress over the next three years. (Institute of Technology Access Officer)

There is a particularly strong case for baseline funding to cater for students with a disability. At present, the structure of the Disability Fund means that funding is tailored to individual student needs and is not available to build capacity and infrastructure in the overall services and physical environment of colleges. As a result, core services in the institutes of technology, which do not have access to strategic initiatives funding, are almost non-existent and this has a negative impact on the numbers of students with a disability attending.

Notwithstanding the access funding that is allocated by the HEA to institutions' core grant, there is still an over-dependence on strategic initiative funding for baseline costs. This limits development of initiatives and keeps access on the periphery of institutions' strategy and practical agenda. It also limits the involvement of lecturers in academic departments whose involvement is essential if equity of access

is to be achieved. Such issues were noted by the panel assessing access activities through the strategic initiative scheme in 2004 and 2005. Their comments echo an evaluation of HEA targeted initiatives in 2000, in which Osborne and Leith argued that the institutional culture in universities and colleges had to be changed from one where widening access was a 'marginal, bolted-on activity' to one where institutions have a rounded and robust rationale or policy for widening access initiatives, and where a more socially inclusive student population is valued and developed by the academic community as a whole. In its review of quality assurance in Irish universities, the European Universities Association noted that a number of strategic issues were not covered by regular review procedures, unless they were the responsibility of a specific service department:

The quality review methodology could easily be adapted, as needs arise, to focus on university-wide issues such as teaching methods, modularisation, PhD programmes, non-traditional students. (European Universities Association, 2005, p.21)

Despite its disadvantages, the HEA's practice of 'ring fencing' funding for access initiatives over the past ten years is viewed as a positive step and there is concern that funding for access activities will diminish significantly if this practice were to cease. According to one respondent:

In the current environment, if extra money becomes available to the college and activities such as research, student services or access are competing for the resources, in my opinion there is no doubt that research will win the argument and get the money. That's the reality of the situation at present. (Senior university administrator)

The HEA is currently developing a revised funding model that will take account of the competing demands for resources in institutions. It will provide baseline funding that is linked to institutional and national outcomes, and developmental funding for new and innovative access initiatives.

Need for evaluation and learning from what works

Despite significant spending on access over the past five years, there has been little evaluation of its impact and to what extent the available funding is achieving the stated objective of equity of access. Some indicators have been suggested, such as those completed by Clancy (1980, 1986, 1992, 2000) and the HEA/AHEAD survey of participation of students with a disability (2004). Such surveys do not, however, focus on the impact of funding. There is an urgent need for more systematic evaluation of how funding is helping to achieve set objectives; an initial step would be to gather and evaluate comprehensive data on participation in higher education by under-represented groups. The HEA is currently working with all higher education institutions on a student records system that will gather information on the social, economic and cultural profiles of students. Such a system will provide a reliable and transparent means of knowing what students are in higher education and will be essential in developing a fair and transparent process to allocate funding.

Encouraging partnership and collaboration

At present, funding arrangements do not generally encourage partnership and collaboration between higher education, other educational institutions or the community sector. To some extent, the current arrangements tend to discourage it. For instance, HEA funding aims to reward the best proposals from institutions and is on a competitive basis. In the past two years, however, collaboration with institutes of technology has been promoted in the guidelines for new proposals. That said, there is no overt mechanism to encourage sector-wide collaboration such as, for example, in the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLII). Links with further education are weak. In institutes of technology, there is no overall access programme in place, with the result that the various colleges tend to work in isolation from each other, particularly regarding funding arrangements and decisions. Some institutes allocate more funding internally for access activities than others, with a consequent variation in services and development. But the need to build practical partnerships across the education system to achieve equity of access is widely accepted, however, and promoting this through a funding framework is arguably the first step.

Review of HEA recurrent funding model

How best to allocate public funding to higher education institutions is receiving widespread interest at present, and the HEA is reviewing the model it uses to allocate funding. It intends to put a revised model in place which 'will enable institutions to respond to public interest agendas, at national, international and regional levels, while also taking a greater responsibility for their own financial sustainability' (HEA, 2004a, p.1). The review is being undertaken with reference to the challenges that face higher education in Ireland and internationally. These include equity of access among under-represented groups, and the need to support and encourage the development of lifelong learning. Options being considered for the new model include allocating a proportion of the core budget on the basis of performance in the key areas of access, retention and research. Legislation is currently being drafted to include the institutes of technology in the funding responsibilities of the HEA, and it is planned that the new model will, in time, also apply to them.

The new funding model is also likely to incorporate a strategic innovation fund with additional funding allocated to higher education by the exchequer. Proposals to manage this additional funding are being developed by the HEA, with plans to phase in the revised model in 2006. It is proposed that the fund will be allocated to institutions on the basis of performance, linked to their strategic development and national priorities. These priorities were recently set out by the Minister for Education and Science Mary Hanafin TD and include 'the need for increased participation and improved access, the need to encourage a greater flexibility of course offerings to meet diverse student population needs in a lifelong learning context and the need to promote the quality of teaching and learning' (Ministerial speech, Government Buildings, 25 April 2005).

The issues in community-based access funding are fewer than those for either students or institutions, as the amount of funding available through community structures is limited principally to the €1.89m allocated each year from the Millennium Fund. As noted earlier, most of this funding is allocated in the form of a grant to individual students. Other funding to tackle educational disadvantage is available through programmes such as the Educational Equality Initiative (EEI) and the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme. As the objectives of these funds are considerably wider in scope than the Millennium Fund or the others identified in this review, they will not be explored in this document.

Since the Millennium Fund is largely allocated to students, the majority of issues arising have been examined in the section on financial support for students. In examining the impact of the funding for the community as a whole, three main points emerge.

Firstly, although the objectives of the Millennium Fund enable community organisations to support the retention of students from the local area in further and higher education, there is no dedicated funding at community level for more holistic access programmes. A number of community organisations have, nevertheless, been able to develop comprehensive programmes in places like Dundalk, Clondalkin, Blanchardstown, Northside, Finglas/Cabra, Ballyfermot, Roscommon and Limerick (PAUL partnership). These programmes have been supported by other state funding, including the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme, and it appears that the small size and particular objectives of the Millennium Fund have limited its development into a much more rounded, community-based response to widening access.

Secondly, there is a strong sense of undeveloped potential in community-based initiatives to achieve equity of access to higher education. It is through community structures that students and their families can interact and work together with principals and teachers in schools, further education centres, higher education institutions, and adult and community education groups. Examples of such networks include the Cork Learning Forum and the Clondalkin Partnership, and others are developing. A striking feature of the community-based approach is the extent to which personal, face-to-face interaction can support access to education. Many of the participants in the review gave examples of this and emphasised the ease with which members of the community could pass on information, help with applications and encourage students to face the potentially intimidating features of going to college. The Millennium Fund evaluation (Phillips and Eustace, 2005) makes a convincing argument for a major strategic role for partnerships and

communities in widening access. The report highlights the important role of partnerships and community groups in bridging the transition between primary, secondary and post-secondary education. This finding endorses the view of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education (2001) that regional consortia are particularly well-placed to develop successful access programmes using local school networks. The Millennium Fund evaluation also found that the impact of the fund was enhanced in those areas where groups of organisations were collaborating together.

Thirdly, although the development of access programmes for disadvantaged school-leavers from disadvantaged backgrounds within higher education institutions has been on a school-by-school basis, there is a growing realisation of the need for outreach and pre-entry initiatives to be area- or region-based. In this context, a UCD study recommended an increase in partnership with the community:

Outreach activity should be focussed firmly on the communities, particularly in the case of the Dublin link communities, and involve a meaningful partnership with the schools, parents and all other interested parties, notably the area-based partnership companies and others subscribing to programmes such as RAPID. (Hurley, 2004, p.26)

This recommendation led to the establishment of a collaborative community-based outreach initiative between UCD and NUI Maynooth, supported by the HEA. The areas benefiting, however, are more dependent on funding from the higher education institutions involved than from the community sector itself. This also applies to many initiatives at community level which support progression to higher education for mature students.

Over the past five years in particular, funding to achieve equity of access has increased significantly. European Social Funding has made a considerable contribution, with over 26m available each year to support the top-up grant, the Disability, Millennium and Student Assistance Funds. The current national development plan also supports equity of access and although it will end in 2006, it is likely that priority attached to access will continue over the coming years.

Recent surveys indicate that the numbers of students from under-represented groups in higher education is increasing (Fitzpatrick Associates and O'Connell, 2005; AHEAD, 2005). However, some clear signals have emerged from this review that the funding available could be used more effectively and that the means of allocating funding is not always transparent or user-friendly, particularly for students. There are indications that the existing grant schemes are not adequate and that Millennium and Student Assistance Funds are being used to supplement these. Decisions on which students receive financial support vary, and costs such as childcare and equipment are not formally recognised in funding criteria. In most cases, students who fail a year lose all financial support; when applied universally, such an approach can be overly harsh. There is no adequate national service in place to assess the needs of students with a disability, their rate of participation varies widely from college to college and they are still significantly under-represented in the student population. Mature students are still a small minority in most colleges. We still have a significant way to go in opening doors for socio-economically disadvantaged students, including the Traveller community and the emerging new groups of refugees, migrant workers and their children.

Success to date in building capacity and core services in higher education institutions for a more diverse student group has been mixed. With funding diverted from the HEA block grant, the universities have developed strategic initiatives to promote access. The institutes of technology have not, however, had the same experience and consequently have suffered an obvious lack of progress in core services and support for students from under-represented backgrounds. There is also evidence of a lack of essential resources at local level to administer funding effectively. There has been insufficient recognition of the need for guaranteed baseline funding to provide core services to students. In addition, the allocation of funding on a yearly basis only means that it is difficult for institutions to plan strategically. Competition between the institutions does not encourage partnership or collaboration between them or with other partners.

Community-based funding to achieve equity of access has been limited in scope, with only one, relatively small, source available, namely the Millennium fund. The size and objectives of the fund have meant that, in practice, a large proportion of the money is allocated in the form of grants to students and it is only with the support of other, larger funding programmes such as the LDSIP that area partnerships have been able to develop community-based access programmes. There seems to be considerable potential in whole-community and region-based responses to achieve equity of access.

Although the lack of financial support is by no means the only barrier to achieving equity of access, adequate resources are essential in ensuring that all the members of our society can avail of the educational opportunities that many of us take for granted. In formulating recommendations for this review it was decided that each one would first be discussed with all the relevant agencies, in particular the Department of Education and Science, to ensure that each had a realistic chance of being implemented. During the consultative process, several people referred to the many recommendations that have been made to date and have not been implemented. Hence, a strong preference for practical, achievable recommendations emerged. The following recommendations have been framed with this in mind and propose actions that are steps along the way towards a final desired outcome.

1 Comprehensive and accessible information on financial support should be made available to students, parents and communities, through development of the existing booklet and a range of other formats.

As a starting point, the booklet on financial support for students should be updated annually and made widely available to schools, further education centres and communities. The information in the booklet should be comprehensive, user-friendly and also be available in a range of other accessible formats, such as a website with options for making enquiries and some online application facilities. The development of the website should be informed by good practice in other countries, including the Aim Higher website in the UK. The availability of the booklet, website and other information formats should be regularly advertised in the public domain.

2 A comprehensive study should be made on the cost of going to college for students from diverse backgrounds.

Throughout this review, evidence has emerged that the current grants for students attending higher education are not adequate and the Student Assistance and Millennium Funds are largely being used to counteract this. To date, there has been no comprehensive study on the cost of going to college for diverse groups of students. It is now proposed that such a study be made and should examine costs in a range of courses for a broad cross-section of students, including those with no financial support from their family, mature students and students with a disability. The findings of this study should then inform the future approach to the student grant schemes.

3 A proposal to financially support students in part-time education should be developed.

Financial support for part-time students should be introduced as a means of increasing the participation of mature students in higher education. The National Office should develop and cost a proposal to provide grants for fees and maintenance support to eligible part-time students. The initiative would form part of the mainstream student fees and grants schemes and link in where appropriate to work-based initiatives such as One Step Up. The proposal would be based on the new credit-based system for courses

and students would be means-tested for eligibility. Key partners in developing the model would be the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the higher education institutions, the NQAI, HETAC and FETAC.

4 Grant support for students should include provision for childcare, equipment and certain disability-related costs.

The National Access Office and the Department of Education and Science should examine ways in which the maintenance grant schemes can assist with childcare, equipment costs and with specific disability costs which do not fall within the remit of the Disability Fund. In the case of childcare, the National Access Office should also examine how crèche places in higher education institutions could be allocated to students as a non-cash element of the support available. The involvement of other government departments with responsibility for childcare programmes and funding support will be essential to develop a new approach. Such departments include Health and Children, Justice, Equality and Law Reform, and Social and Family Affairs. The new approach should be based on a realistic assessment of the needs of students with childcare commitments and those with disabilities, and, in the case of equipment costs, on a range of courses. The approach should be informed by policy and practice in other countries.

5 A review system should be put in place so that students failing a year do not necessarily lose grant support.

Students from under-represented groups have a high likelihood of failing a year of their course, because of commitments such as childcare or the need to earn money through part-time work. Students with a disability often need more time than others to complete the curriculum of one academic year. It is not proposed that the existing policy be changed in full, but rather that a mechanism for reconsideration of particular cases be developed, drawing on policy and good practice in other countries.

6 Guidelines on local funding should be agreed and implemented so that decisions on which students receive funding are clear and transparent and not subject to local variation.

Community and college administrators, facilitated by the National Access Office, should together review and agree guidelines for the Student Assistance and Millennium Funds to ensure that there is a consistent and fair approach nationally, so that students in some communities and colleges are not disadvantaged in comparison with others. In addition to agreeing guidelines for each fund, ways of ensuring the most effective interaction and use of each should also be addressed. The findings from the Millennium Fund evaluation (Phillips and Eustace, 2005) would be of assistance in this project. When the guidelines are drawn up, a timescale for implementation should also be agreed.

7 A model for a regionally-based service should be developed to ensure that all students enrolling in higher or further education have access to a needs assessment service.

At present, an assessment of need is a mandatory requirement if students wish to obtain financial support through the Disability Fund. There are inadequate disability assessment services for students in the country at present, with the majority of provision available only in universities. An adequate service should be put in place that is underpinned by recent legislation and good practice abroad. The model should be developed in consultation with all relevant agencies, including the National Council for Special Education which has responsibility for developing similar services in early childhood, primary and second-level education.

8 Each higher education institution should develop a plan to achieve equity of access that evaluates the impact of funding to date on a quantitative and qualitative basis and sets future targets for under-represented groups.

Access initiatives and programmes have been in place in higher education institutions for up to nine years now. There is a sense that many practitioners now know what works and what activities have the maximum impact in widening access for each of the under-represented groups. An evaluation of access programmes is being completed by the National Office and this will be a useful guide to institutions in their own internal evaluations and in developing their access policies and targets. The National Office would provide guidance and advice on good practice in this regard. Such development would provide clear indicators of progress and also build a strong case for access funding for institutions.

9 Access funding for higher education institutions should be allocated equitably by being clearly linked to institutions' access policies and practice.

Enhanced funding arrangements in higher education institutions are needed if substantial further progress on access is to be made. The review of targeted initiatives to improve access (HEA, 2004c) found that officers in HEA-funded institutions wish to see a much closer connection between the resources that are made available through the scheme and the results achieved. Qualitative and quantitative indicators of progress as well as national and institutional targets for each under-represented learner group should be developed and agreed between the institutions and the National Access Office and used by the HEA to allocate funding in future years. The HEA and National Office should also be able to draw on comprehensive data and evaluation on student numbers, targets and information on what works best in access initiatives. Such an approach is currently being considered as part of the HEA review of recurrent funding and will have even further relevance when the institute of technology sector is funded through the HEA.

10 A whole community approach to equity of access should be promoted and developed.

There is a need to develop a good model of practice in holistic community initiatives to achieve equity of access. A pilot project should be initiated to explore and develop such a model. The project should get

underway in one urban and one rural area, and should include students, representatives of the community and parents groups, and all educational institutions in the area. The project would be evaluated before the end of the three-year period.

Proposed implementation timetable

	Recommendation	Completion date
1	Comprehensive and accessible information on financial support should be made available to students, parents and communities, through development of the existing booklet and a range of other formats.	June 2006 and ongoing
2	A comprehensive study should be made on the cost of going to college for students from diverse backgrounds.	September 2006
3	A costed proposal to financially support mature students in part-time education should be developed.	June 2006
4	Grant support for students should include provision for childcare, equipment and certain disability-related costs.	June 2007
5	A review system should be put in place so that students failing a year do not necessarily lose grant support.	October 2006
6	Guidelines on local funding should be agreed and implemented so that decisions on which students receive funding are clear and transparent and not subject to local variation.	September 2006
7	A model for a regionally-based service should be developed to ensure that all students enrolling in higher or further education have access to a needs assessment service.	October 2007
8	Each higher education institution should develop a plan to achieve equity of access that evaluates the impact of funding to date on a quantitative and qualitative basis and sets future targets especially for under-represented groups.	September 2006
9	Access funding for higher education institutions should be allocated equitably by being clearly linked to institutions' access policies and practice.	March 2007
10	A whole community approach to equity of access should be promoted and developed.	January 2009 (3-year project)

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Focus group meeting of students

Thursday 2 June 2005

Students

Asan, Arun (Galway-Mayo IT)

Boylan, Philip (TCD)

Browne, Anne (St. Patrick's, Drumcondra)

Dermody, Roisin (UCD)

Donohoe, Robert (TCD)

Gallagher, Lorraine (National College of Art and Design)

Golden, Ashling (UL)

Goucher, Angela (NUIM)

Groarke, Pamela (NUIG)

Hayden, Annie (NUIM)

Kane, Sinead (UCC)

Kelly, Carina (Galway-Mayo IT)

Leonard, Anne (NUIG)

McKinley, Tonya (TCD)

Mulligan, Robert (DCU)

Mullin, Sue (TCD)

Quinn, Fintan (St. Patrick's, Drumcondra)

Stapleton, Patricia (TCD)

Walsh, Hugh (UCD)

Wheeler, Seth (St. Patrick's, Drumcondra)

Also in attendance:

Archibald, Ben (Union of Students in Ireland)

Fychan, Heledd (Union of Students in Ireland)

Garvey, Marie (Mater Dei Institute of Education)

Lowe, Tina (AHEAD)

O'Brien, Ann (NUI Maynooth)

Focus group meeting of access officers and practitioners
Monday 20 June 2005

Fitzell, Paula, Access Officer, Athlone IT
Galvin, Aine, Director of Access, UCD
Hoey, Pat, Disability Officer, DIT (now Head of Disability Services, DCU)
Kearney, Patricia, Disability Officer, Athlone IT
Lee, Sally, Mature Students Officer, TCD
Lennon, Nuala, Access Officer, Waterford IT
Murphy, Ronan, Mature Student Advisor, UCD
O'Brien, Ann, Access Officer, NUIM
O'Grady, Mary, Head of Disability Services, UCC
Quinlan, Carmel, Mature Students Officer, UCC
Ryan, Rosario, Access Officer, IT Blanchardstown
Treanor, Declan, Head of Disability Services, TCD

Representatives were nominated by AMA (Network of Access Officers), DAWN (Disability Advisors Working Network) and NIMSO (Network of Irish Mature Student Officers).

Individuals/institutions/agencies who submitted a written response to the discussion document

Area Development Management (ADM) Limited	Irish Council of Trade Unions (ICTU)
Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD)	Limerick Institute of Technology
Athlone Institute of Technology	Mary Immaculate College, Limerick
Carlow Institute of Technology	Monaghan Institute of Further Education & Training National College of Ireland
Centre for Adult and Continuing Education, University of Cork	National College of Ireland
Clondalkin Partnership	National Disability Authority
Coláiste Mhuire, Marino	National Learning Network and City of Dublin VEC (joint submission)
Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)
Deansrath Community College	National University of Ireland, Galway
Disability Advisors Working Network (DAWN)	National University of Ireland, Maynooth
Donegal Local Development Company	Network of Irish Mature Students Officers
Dublin Institute of Technology	OAK Partnership
Dundalk Institute of Technology Student Services	Offaly Outreach Education Project
Enterprise Ireland	Office of Social Inclusion, Department of Social and Family Affairs
Equal Ireland	Research Project on Counselling Needs of Non-Traditional Students (TCD, UCC and Athlone IT)
Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)	Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
John Hayden, former Chief Executive Officer, HEA	St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra
Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)	Tipperary Institute
Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown	Trinity College Dublin
Institute of Technology, Tallaght	University College Cork
Institute of Technology, Tralee	University College Dublin
Irish Association of University and College Counsellors	Waterford Institute of Technology
	Women's Education Research and Resource Centre (WERRC), UCD

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ASSISTANT SECRETARY	Jennifer Gyax - <i>Recurrent Grants</i>	Cliona Buckley	
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