



# EDUCATION FUTURES

Submission from Education Futures to the HEA and DFHERIS in response to the National Access Plan 2022 -2026 Consultation Paper, April 2021

## **About Education Futures**

Education Futures is a national coalition of Trade Unions, Students' Unions and others seeking public funding for a quality higher education system in the Republic of Ireland. The national campaign steering group is made up of Student Unions and Trade Unions active on third level campuses across Ireland. They are:

- **Fórsa trade union**
- **TUI** (Teacher's Union of Ireland)
- **USI** (Union of Students in Ireland)
- **SIPTU** (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union)
- **IFUT** (Irish Federation of University Teachers)
- **ISSU** (Irish Second Level Students' Union)

## **Overview**

Education Futures view the Consultation Paper as a largely positive document outlining some of the constructive approaches that have been taken to addressing the some of the challenges facing groups in their efforts to access higher education. However it is acknowledged by all that there remains a valid perception that the costs associated with accessing higher education remain prohibitive for many. This situation has deteriorated over the COVID-19 period as students have not had the opportunities that have been traditionally open to those to engage in part-time work to meet some of the costs of part-taking in higher education.

## **Costs**

The contribution charge and the costs associated with accommodation for those living away from home make up the majority of the cost of attending college. The Zurich Cost of Education Survey 2020 [The Cost of College in Ireland 2020 | Zurich Ireland](#) put the costs for the average student of completing a BA at between €18 and €34k depending on whether the student is living at home or away.

The removal of the contribution charge and controls on the costs associated with renting or using student accommodation for students would significantly address these costs. In doing so there would be reduction on the requirement for some of the other supports available to groups identified in the paper.

## **Access Services**

The Access Offices serve the targeted groups, that they are in contact with, exceptionally well. Some institutes and TUs have the means to reach out to the widest range of targeted groups including pre- entry but provision of these services in not universal. A priority should be to address this. It is the view of the Education Futures group that the visibility of the access offices needs to be enhanced across the higher, further, and indeed the secondary education sector. Locally the access offices need to be correctly positioned within existing structures to have meaningful impact on policy, practice and pedagogy. It is critical that Access Officers are decision makers at a sufficiently senior level to ensure that Access is embedded across all functions of third level institutions.

An expanded and fully resourced Access Service in conjunction with the School Liaison Officers, should include a pre-entry outreach service to liaise with, and nurture enduring relationships with schools, both primary and secondary, FE Providers, community organisations, visiting Teachers, School Completion Programme, to work in a long term, sustainable way to: This practice has been established in some of the larger institutions for many years where have the Access Linked Schools Programme that provides pre-entry supports to second level DEIS schools, Progression Scheme in FE Colleges which provide additional links for students with QQI qualifications but this practice is not consistent across all higher education because funding and resources are not currently available to them. All Access Officer need to establish closer relationships with their community partners but the lack of time and resources has meant that this is not currently what it has the potential to be. We need to invest in our Access to Education Services to make sure that there is a consistent approach across all higher education institutions and to:

- Establish and co-ordinate a network of DEIS Schools and contacts in all IoTs and TU's
- Develop long-term, sustainable and targeted regional Access programme by building coherent local pathways from further education and to raise awareness of alternative entry routes to higher education; (HEAR, DARE, CAP)
- develop regional and community partnership strategies via social inclusion initiatives for increasing access to higher education from hard to reach groups. This was an objective of the last National Access Plan, and funding followed through the PATH initiative but the funding is fixed-term. The issue is that Developing and maintaining regional partnerships and strategies take time and is a long term strategy so it needs to be resourced long term.

This would require specialist qualified outreach staff to support the existing Access Officers, Disability Officers, Learning Support Tutors and School Liaison Officers.

### **From Further to Higher Education**

Clearer pathways need to be established and mainstreamed for those wishing to progress from FE to HE. On completing apprenticeships students should have opportunities to continue their education, on a part-time basis, where necessary, with statutory and financial supports that will allow them to continue with their education while remaining in their employment. The National Access Plan does not promote a culture of lifelong learning or address many of the needs that mature students face.

We welcome the challenge of continuing to embed a whole-of-institution approach whereby responsibility lies with all members of staff but that this is only achievable with training for all staff, such training needs to be planned and resourced.

### **Other Reports and Reviews**

We don't feel that there's a requirement to list off the various reports and reviews underway addressing funding, grants etc across further and higher education. Consideration needs to be given to addressing the outcomes of these reports / reviews in a holistic manner as the failure to do so will result in mechanisms being established to address barriers to entry that have been established as a result of accepting recommendations contained in separate report / reviews.

### **Equality of Access and Equality of Conditions**

While equality of access is acknowledged as being key more focus needs to be put on equality of conditions for all once in the higher education system.

### **Recommendation from Education Futures**

- End the Student Contribution Charge
- Ensure adequate affordable student accommodation for all students living away from home
- Further develop the Access Offices
- Promote lifelong learning, particularly and in the first instance, to those who are already engaging in tertiary education
- Provide additional training and supports to all working within education so that they may properly communicate the 'whole of institution' approach to students engaging in third level education, promoting the student's understanding of their place in, and the value of, higher education
- Link the outcomes of recent reports and reviews and establish one whole plan
- Develop, with the Student Representatives, a set of 'conditions' below which no student would be expected to operate.

This submission was made by Education Futures to the HEA on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June, 2021