



Ibec Submission to National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2022 – 2026)

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Introduction

Ibec welcome the opportunity to participate in the consultation on the development of a new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2022 – 2026).

In an increasingly knowledge intensive society, access to skills development opportunities in higher education is becoming more and more important for Ireland's social and economic progress. The wellbeing and social returns of higher education for the individual are well documented - higher education can broaden career horizons, lead to higher lifetime earnings and is linked to positive mental and physical health and wellbeing. Education has the power to break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage reducing income inequality and building communities that are more resilient to trends such as digitalisation, automation and globalisation.

At the same time, Ireland requires a robust pipeline of graduates with strong foundations in problem solving, critical thinking and innovation skills to tackle some of the most pressing challenges facing communities and businesses today. Addressing issues such as climate change, sustainability, digitalisation and globalisation will require diversity of experience, skill and thought that can only be achieved by ensuring equal opportunities to engage in higher education regardless of background, socio-economic status, gender, disability or ethnicity and race.

Education is a major steppingstone towards employment and an enabler of positive outcomes in the workplace. For those transitions to be successful, higher education must continue to adapt to cater for the broader needs of society and economy. Widening participation and access to education and skills development will be an imperative of building back better post-COVID and for responding to changes in the world of work. The next National Action Plan therefore comes at a critical time for promoting an inclusive recovery, preventing the further polarisation of skills in the economy and protecting against growing inequalities. There is no one size fits all pathway to higher education. A holistic approach to building inclusion is needed which goes beyond financial aid to consider retention, achievement and how to give students the best possible chance of success through a flexible education space that is more adaptable to and supportive of their individual needs.

Key messages from Ibec for the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2022 – 2026) are:

- Foster a culture of inclusivity in higher education
- Embed lifelong learning in higher education by mainstreaming flexible delivery
- Develop multiple access points and strong pathways to enhance the permeability of higher education
- Implement a sustainable funding model for higher education

1. Foster a culture of inclusivity in higher education

Ireland has the highest level of tertiary education attainment in the EU at 42.8% of the population, compared to the EU average of 29%. However, while the current National Access Plan has made progress in increasing the participation of marginalised groups in higher education, this is from a very low base and the participation rate for some groups remains far below that of the overall population.

Frequently cited barriers to accessing higher education include the cost of higher education such as tuition fees, supplies and accommodation and a lack of financial support; caring responsibilities and a lack of access to affordable and appropriate childcare; lack of familial and cultural capital; and low self-confidence often linked to age, previous education attainment and literacy and numeracy skills.

These barriers have a disproportionate impact on groups including people with disabilities, people from minority ethnicities including members of the Traveller community, migrants and people from socioeconomic backgrounds with historically low participation rates. For example, accessing affordable childcare is a particular challenge for women in the Traveller community. These groups also face particular barriers that need to be taken into consideration. For example, depending on the nature of their disability, students with disabilities may face barriers in the accessibility of campus facilities and learning resources.

A starting point for building a more inclusive and diverse education system is increasing the number enrolling in higher education opportunities. However, inclusivity also requires ensuring that the individual has the best chance possible to succeed. This requires more individualised supports that adapt and follow a person through their education career, e.g. such as peer-supports, mentorship, career guidance and financial supports.

There is a strong need for quality career guidance to support learners to make informed choices on relevant education programmes appropriate to their personal circumstances and enhancing learning outcome. High quality, research informed, career guidance can help to reconcile the needs of the individual with needs and changes in the labour market, and make a positive contribution to supporting employment and economic opportunities. Career guidance services should support learners to understand why they should learn, what they should learn and how should they learn. The recommendations from the Independent Review of Career Guidance Tools and Information (2019) need to be implemented in full, and without further delay, to achieve this ambition.

Building inclusivity also means opening up opportunities within higher education to underrepresented groups. Students from more affluent backgrounds continue to dominate high-points courses such as medicine, finance and engineering. Gender-stereotyping and other complex cultural issues must also be combatted to encourage e.g. more women to participate and graduate from STEM-related courses.

Beyond enrolment, the full learner experience needs to be considered to build a more inclusive education environment. This means addressing accessibility in buildings and the school environs, learning resources, technologies, curriculums, pedagogies and work experience. While entry and access to higher education is a vital first step, continuing participation must be a critical success factor for the next National Action Plan.

The next National Action Plan needs to include ambitious targets and supports for aforementioned groups. Data monitoring will be critical for monitoring the impact of the

strategy and should cover the whole student experience including enrolment, graduation, education outcomes etc.

2. Embed lifelong learning in higher education by mainstreaming flexible delivery

Developing flexibility in the higher education is essential to widening participation and increasing engagement with lifelong learning. The future of work and an ageing workforce means that the skills a person has entering the labour market will no longer last a lifetime and regular contact with the education system will be necessary to keep skills up-to-date.

Ireland has set a target of achieving a 15% participation rate in lifelong learning by 2025, and while the EU's target for lifelong learning was a target of achieving 15% by 2020. Prior to COVID, Ireland had a lifelong learning rate of 12.6%. Above the EU average of 10.8%, but far below leaders such as Sweden (34.3%), Finland (29.05) and Denmark (25.3%).

Traditional on-campus, full-time education programmes may not be suitable for everyone, particularly those who need to balance education with employment, caring and family responsibilities. Greater opportunities to engage in part-time, online, blended and other flexible learning options will be important to ensuring everyone can take part in upskilling and reskilling.

Participation in lifelong learning in Ireland is not equal, despite its increasing importance. Data from the Adult Education Survey shows that highly educated professionals were almost twice as likely to have participate in lifelong learning compared to those in skilled trade.

Participation is particularly low among older adults, women, those who look after the family or home and those who do not drive. Frequently identified barriers to lifelong learning include access, cost, no available courses, care and home responsibilities and poor health. Low literacy, low self-esteem and not placing any value on lifelong learning can disincentivise individuals to engage with lifelong learning.

A culture of lifelong learning needs to be embedded in the fabric of higher education. A greater awareness of the value and importance of lifelong learning must be promoted. An appetite to engage in lifelong learning must be instilled in all learners regardless of background. The aforementioned barriers need to be considered in the design of more flexible options for learning to allow people to connect with the system across their lifetime.

While distant and online learning cannot replace the college experience, the COVID crisis has demonstrated the potential for more hybrid learning opportunities. We need to maintain the momentum and learn from the crisis by mainstreaming flexibility in the system by offering short and part-time courses and options for online, distance and blended learning, and expanding opportunities to earn transferable micro-credentials.

The increasing use of digital and technology platforms is opening up education opportunities to a wider group of people. Harnessing digital technologies can target harder to reach individuals, encourage greater links between enterprise and education providers to support employability and support learners to make informed career and learning opportunities.

3. Develop multiple access points and strong pathways to enhance the permeability of higher education

Alternative access points need to be created to provide additional routes for students to higher education. More coherent pathways need to be developed that meet students at their learning point and provides clear direction and an easily navigable route to higher education. Access points and pathways for progression need to be enhanced between education institutions, courses and education levels.

Further education is a valuable option for skills provision for learners but can also play an important role in the progression of learners to higher education. The profile of further education as a possible route needs to higher education needs to be raised among all stakeholders. Partnerships between further and higher education institutions need to be encouraged and guided by existing best practice.

To build a culture of lifelong learning it is important to recognise the skills that an individual develops over their lifetime as a base for their future education and training, whether these are skills developed through formal and informal education, life experience, or work-based learning. Building a coherent approach to the recognition of prior learning across the higher education sector would facilitate a more navigable system for learners and increase visibility of RPL, encouraging more people to participate in education that is reflective of their individual needs. A greater focus on modules and credits would also support the recognition of prior learning and transferability between course programmes, allowing students to avoiding repeating material or dropping out of higher education.

Building the foundations for lifelong learning starts in early childhood education and continues through primary and second level education. The next National Access Strategy must seek to smooth transition between second level and tertiary education, by providing guidance and assistance in applications, while also pursuing early interventions in primary and secondary school to promote and raise awareness of higher education as an option for future learning.

A lack of awareness around accessing higher education and the different avenues available is a challenge for learners, particularly for those whose families and communities do not have the experience of participating in higher education in Ireland. Information about higher education should be easily navigable and include information around programme content and expected outcomes to support learners in their decision making. Quality career guidance can raise awareness and demystify the process for learners.

4. Implement a sustainable funding model for higher education

Underinvestment can act as a barrier to for the further development of a high quality and equitable higher education system. Compared to Ireland's EU counterparts, public expenditure on tertiary education still remains below the EU average, despite the growing number of students. Cuts to core third-level funding during the 2008 economic crisis have yet to be reversed. The COVID crisis has further exacerbated the difficult and uncertain funding environment facing higher education. Without the implementation of a sustainable funding model for higher education, it will be challenging to commit to the strategic investments needed to create a more inclusive education system.

Despite the abolition of third level fees more than three decades ago, financial barriers to higher education have created a system where one in seven young people in the country's most disadvantaged areas progress to higher education, compared to almost 100% for affluent suburbs. Insufficient funding in the face of increasing student numbers creates challenges for the provision of supports and services that are necessary for developing a more inclusive higher education system and ensuring the best outcome for individuals regardless of their background. To ensure equitable access into the future, a significantly higher level of sustained investment is essential. Financial supports should be prioritised for students most distanced from the education system and those most in need.

A move to a more cohesive whole of education offering has the potential to streamline the system and allow for longterm strategic planning and investment in students most in need of support. Ongoing research on an economic review of funding options must be expedited and thorough consultation on the findings with all stakeholders must take place.

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About Ibec

Ibec is Ireland's largest lobby group and business representative. We campaign for real changes to the policies that matter most to business. Policy is shaped by our diverse membership, who are home grown, multinational, big and small and employ 70% of the private sector workforce in Ireland. With 36 trade associations covering a range of industry sectors, 6 offices around Ireland as well as an office in Brussels. With over 240 employees, Ibec communicates the Irish business voice to key stakeholders at home and abroad. Ibec also provides a wide range of professional services and management training to members on all aspects of human resource management, occupational health and safety, employee relations and employment law.

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