

## Submission 2.20 Hibernia College

Hibernia College is a blended learning, private higher education college dedicated to providing access to flexible, high-quality graduate, postgraduate and professional education employing cutting-edge technology.

Hibernia College was founded in 2000, with a vision to both disrupt and reinvent teacher education in the Republic of Ireland. Our aim was to provide the highest quality teacher training opportunities and to harness emerging technologies to provide a blended learning offer for self-funded students.

Since those early days, Hibernia College is now a trusted partner for teacher training delivery in the Republic of Ireland. Many of our 10,000+ alumni occupy senior positions in the school system and Hibernia College consistently scores highly in terms of quality and outcomes.

Hibernia College's success depends on the quality of its senior leadership, professional education staff and its administrative and support teams, and the choice that it offers students to engage in a world-class training environment, supported by contemporary content that is updated continuously.

Headquartered in Dublin and with a support office in Westport, Hibernia College employs almost 100 full-time staff and almost 600 part-time contractors to support almost 2,000 full-time students and over 3,000 CPD students. Hibernia College is now a first-choice higher education institution amongst students and prospective students in the Republic of Ireland.

Hibernia College does not receive any government grants or subsidy, yet the total cost of training as a teacher with Hibernia College is cheaper due to our 'access from anywhere' model.

### **CONTEXT**

Hibernia College welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the development of the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education.

Hibernia College has also contributed to the submission made by the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA). The HECA submission focuses on the key questions of the National Access Plan 2022-2026 Consultation paper and provides a brief context of the value of equity of access to higher education for individuals from a disadvantaged background or with a disability.

Hibernia College fully endorses the HECA submission so therefore we will not respond directly to the nine questions posed in the consultation document. Instead we will focus on areas of particular interest to Hibernia College, namely:

How Blended Learning Increases Access

Universal Design for Learning

Student Grants (SUSI)

Opportunities Presented by Covid-19

### **HOW BLENDED LEARNING INCREASES ACCESS**

For over twenty years, Hibernia College has been exploring new and innovative ways to enhance the way in which students of Hibernia College learn in virtual and physical spaces. Our academic programmes are based on a philosophy of education that seeks to combine advanced digital expertise with the development of the broader professional and academic skills that are required of graduates for success in contemporary society. These skills provide graduates with the ability to search out and exploit information and enhance their creative and leadership capacities.

Our learning environment for students is designed so that the virtual and physical spaces operate as an integrated ecosystem; a symbiotic relationship exists between online content, online discussion fora, online synchronous tutorials and face-to-face on-site workshops. This ensures that there is a robust constructive alignment between content, teaching and learning strategies and the assessment processes implemented across programmes.

The model has been developed to improve the overall student learning experience and create sustainable approaches to teaching and learning by:

Creating a framework for course design that, if followed, guarantees higher-order learning takes place and learning objectives are explicitly addressed

Ensuring the creation of truly engaging e-learning content

Drawing on the full range of pedagogic tools available to create a richer learning experience

Encouraging a move away from a dependence on tutor-led learning to create independent learners

Enabling learners to acquire lifelong learning skills by equipping them for the knowledge-based society

Blended Learning approaches provide many advantages over traditional on-campus approaches for students from under-represented groups. Many such students have lifestyles that make attending onsite difficult. For example, for students who have caring roles, who have disabilities including mobility difficulties or who must work to support themselves and their families, blended learning allows them to study remotely and continue to earn/care as appropriate.

Accommodation costs have become a bigger barrier to access than tuition fees. Blended Learning can eliminate or reduce accommodation costs and therefore serve to widen participation among students who otherwise could not access further or higher education. Similarly, blended learning can eliminate or reduce travel costs.

While Hibernia College was already using a blended learning model when the Covid-19 pandemic arose in 2020, we introduced additional online elements including online interviews, online assessments and online oral examinations. That experience proved successful and offers further flexibilities to remote learners that we believe will contribute to widening participation in education.

## **UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING**

Hibernia College is committed to providing support to all students to enhance their journey and to afford them the best possible chance to complete their programme of study successfully. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) aims to assist learners with a diversity of learning needs who wish to achieve on the programme but where challenges may be foreseen. In accordance with CAST guidelines (CAST, 2018), the blended learning model at Hibernia College adheres to the principles of UDL by incorporating multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement into our teaching, learning and assessment. Hibernia College adopts the principles of UDL in all of its programmes so that a diversity of learners are engaged across the lifecycle of the programme and their needs are anticipated.

Providing multiple means of engagement taps into learners' interests, challenging and motivating them to learn. Providing a range of materials and activities with which learners engage affords opportunities for reflection, critical thinking, analysis, self-direction and the ability to take responsibility for learning.

Hibernia College supports the wide utilisation of UDL as a means to broadening access. Benefits include:

A reduction in the need for, and time required to arrange, individual accommodations

The proactive design supports a more diverse student population

A greater opportunity for learners to more fully demonstrate knowledge

UDL helps remove physical barriers to educational materials; for example, providing alternative accessible textbooks to students with disabilities. However, UDL also works to remove intellectual barriers. UDL allows design of classroom lessons that are beneficial and inclusive of all learners.

### **STUDENT GRANTS (SUSI)**

The exclusion of students studying at private institutions such as Hibernia College from the state student grant (SUSI) system is unjust and a barrier to access to higher education. Hibernia College strongly supports the principle that the 'money should follow the student' and this should apply to all students on QQI-accredited programmes regardless of the type of institution they are attending. This is not a request for our institutions to receive public funding, rather it is a request that our students would receive public funding.

A related issue is that the SUSI grant is currently only available to students in full-time study. As stated previously, lifestyle challenges such as finance, being a carer or having a physical disability can make it difficult or impossible in some cases for students to attend full-time. The extension of the SUSI grant to part-time and blended learning has the potential to greatly improve access among these groups of students.

### **OPPORTUNITIES PRESENTED BY COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

We note that the consultation paper poses a question relating to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic but did not ask about the opportunities. As noted earlier, Hibernia College can cite many positive opportunities that arose from contingences originally put in place as a response to Covid-19 but that can offer longer-term opportunities that will increase access. These include:

Reduced travel costs

Reduced accommodation costs

Introduction of more flexible approaches such as online entry interviews, online examinations

Improved Life-Work-Study balance for students and staff