

Submission 4.40 ASTI

Opening observations

The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (2011) identifies widening access as both a key priority and a challenge. A priority because it is a social and economic imperative: a challenge because of sustained increase in demand coupled with increasing diversity of learners. Ireland is not unique in this regard: globally, there is unprecedented social demand for access to higher education. As noted in the Foreword to the Consultation Paper, “as a society we can acknowledge and celebrate the enormous strides in broadening access to higher education.” Ireland’s higher education attainment rate – 52.6% for 30-to-34 year olds – is now among the highest in the EU. Wise policy choices in the past sustained this expansion, most notably the introduction of free second-level education in 1967, the establishment of regional technical colleges, and until the last decade or so, sustained investment in higher education. These investment decisions were not made in isolation but rather were, sequentially, dimensions of a wider national project for economic and social development. Arguably, we are at a similar pivotal moment in terms of widening access and securing financial sustainability in the higher education system.

Wider policy context

Financial sustainability of higher education

Before referring to the policy space most relevant to the ASTI, namely the transition of school-leavers to higher education, the ASTI wants to draw attention to wider policy issues which are of relevance to the next Access Plan. Chief among these is the continuing failure of the Government to address the funding crisis in higher education. Five years after its publication in 2016, the Report of the Expert Group on the Future Funding of Higher Education literally remains ‘on the shelf’.¹ Other reports have warned of serious and irretrievable implications for the future sustainability of some third-level institutions in the absence of investment.² Given these grave warnings, and notwithstanding the digital shift and the possibilities for widening access, it is difficult to envisage how a second Access Plan will translate ‘on the ground’ in the absence of decisions re future investment.

Costs to families, including student contribution

It is difficult to discuss access issues without addressing the costs imposed on families and individuals by the under-graduate fee or student contribution. Introduced in 2011, the contribution is currently €3,000 per year and represents the second highest third-level fees in the EU. While 40% or so of students receive some form of assistance via the SUSI grant scheme, all students are impacted by the exorbitant rental costs, high costs of public transport and overall high costs of living. Proposals for addressing this issue are contained in the 2016 report.

Quality of students’ learning experience

Another policy concern of ASTI is the impact of current under-funding on quality. High student: staff ratios have direct implications for the quality of the learning experience. The 2016 QQI report elaborated on this situation and noted that when scaled up to a macro level, the impact of increasing student–staff ratio potentially has much wider implications. Similar concerns are expressed about staff overload and how impending retirements and lack of promotions is exacerbating the already heavy imbalance between senior and junior members of staff in departments. ³ Moreover, this constrained funding environment is already impacting on the attraction of Ireland as a destination for international students. Again, it is hard to envisage the realisation of the aspirations of the next Access Plan if well-documented problems of quality are not addressed.

Dynamic factors impacting on social demand for higher education

Finally, while the overall vision of the current national access plan - to ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population - remains valid, it should be underpinned by a statement acknowledging ongoing demographic change, including an ageing population; trends in international migration; the wider EU project of achieving the European Education Area by 2025; the digital transition and future changes in the nature of work and labour markets.

Transition, access and inclusion – systemic issues in second-level

There a number of systemic processes at work in second-level education which impact on transitions to higher education. Some of these are more amenable to intervention than others. Cumulatively, such interventions do have impact and should be supported by both the Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Several of the interventions below are already identified in the National Action Plan for Education, 2016 and its subsequent iterations.

Meeting the needs of disadvantaged students in all schools

Evaluations of DEIS have confirmed that achievement gap between students in DEIS and non-DEIS schools is narrowing. ⁴ The implementation of new measures for identifying DEIS schools will also be important.⁵ However, what is of enduring concern to the ASTI is the unwillingness of the Department of Education to adopt a more nuanced or ‘tapered’ approach to ensuring that schools with high numbers of disadvantaged students but which are not in DEIS. Such an approach was recommended by the ESRI in 2015. ⁶ Given that it is accepted that the majority of disadvantaged students are not in DEIS schools, the Department’s unwillingness to implement the ESRI’s recommendation is all the more difficult to accept. The ASTI is strongly of the view that participation rates of disadvantaged students in higher education will not improve until the needs of all disadvantaged students are prioritised irrespective of their school’s status. The

influential biennial OECD PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) repeatedly underlines that equity is at the heart of successful education systems and students' achievement outcomes. It is therefore of concern that differences in achievement of Irish 15-year olds are more pronounced within schools rather than between schools.⁷ The imperative for a 'tapering' approach, as recommended by the ESRI, can no longer be ignored

Resource the career guidance service

As noted above, Ireland has one of the highest transition rates to higher education in the EU. While this is a national achievement to be proud of, there are trends which are of concern. Chief among these is the inadequacy of supports available to students for making informed decisions for post-school choices. ESRI research has documented the post-school transition process and the importance of career guidance for making key decisions about life after school.⁸ Students are broadly positive about the guidance they receive but feel it is overly centred on higher education entry. They would like guidance provision to be made available at an earlier stage and to have more time for individual sessions with the guidance counsellor. Moreover, clear social class differences are evident in young people's decision-making processes. Disadvantaged students are more reliant on school-based guidance service in terms of decision-making. The ASTI has repeatedly called for the full restoration of guidance posts to pre-2009/austerity level.

It is also worth putting on record that a report commissioned by the then Minister for Education and Skills, Joe Mc Hugh, on aspects of career guidance in Ireland also remains 'on the shelf'. Ironically, the background to this review was a recommendation in the National Skills Strategy 2025 for a review of guidance services, tools and careers information. Under-resourced guidance counselling services in schools cannot meet the ambition for a whole-school approach to career guidance. The failure to adequately invest in this service means that students do not get the one-to-one and small-group service that works best in guidance practice.

One of the outcomes of inadequate career guidance in schools is low progression rates in some course areas. While the most recent HEA progression data found that 85% of all new entrant under-graduates progressed to 2nd year, there was significant disparities between course levels.⁹ Non-progression rates were up to 27% at Levels 6 and 7 compared to 11% at Level 8. This disparity is largely attributed to students being both under-prepared for the demands of the course, especially in terms of mathematical achievement/skills, but also in terms of having incomplete information on the course content and potential career paths. ¹⁰

Supporting students with special educational needs

Significant progress has taken place since 2017 in the model for allocating additional supports to schools to meet the needs of students with special educational means. This is a positive development in the system. However, two areas of implementation have not been addressed and are impacting on the capacity of schools to meet students' needs. In the first instance, no national training programme has been provided for teachers despite the requirement for

changes to pedagogical practices. The failure to roll out a national training programme for all teachers is deeply problematic as the new model prioritises classroom teaching over the withdrawal of SEN students for one-on-one/small group

tuition. ASTI-commissioned research in 2019 found that while 60% of teachers appointed to Special Education Teacher (SET) role had a relevant qualification, less than 20% of overall profession had such a qualification.¹¹ Another issue of concern to the ASTI is the fact that insufficient time is assigned within the additional allocated hours to Special Needs Co-ordinators. This is deeply dysfunctional for schools given that the national prevalence average for SEN is 20% of the overall student cohort. Schools struggle to realise the goal of inclusive classrooms and inclusive learning communities and undoubtedly this impacts on SEN students' experiences, their ambitions for their post-school lives and their overall sense of wellbeing.

Moving beyond linear pathways

At the same time, it is clear that we can no longer think solely in terms of linear pathways from school to higher education. The questions of pathways and choice are central to the NCCA's advisory report on senior cycle education. Similarly, the development of a Level 5 and Level 6 pathways, as set out in the new FET strategy, will provide choice and progression for school-leavers.¹² The changes to the CAO system whereby students can indicate both FET and HE preferences is critical in creating both parity of esteem and giving students choice. Equally, it will be critical to ensure sufficiently diverse pathways from FET to HE in order to provide real choices to school-leavers and provide additional avenues for access to higher education.

Admission policies to higher education

Admission systems to higher education are the key point for determining which students go into which type of institution. They allow access to a smaller or larger number of students and also shape participation by social background. However, the admission system is neither simply the transition point between upper secondary schooling and higher education nor simply a matter of procedures and regulations. Typically, national admission systems are seen as a dynamic interplay between three factors: how the schooling system is organised, how higher education institutions recruit students, and how prospective students make choices about where to go.¹³ In the Irish context, all three dimensions are explicit in the CAO admission system. The latter is increasingly acknowledged as having a detrimental 'backwash' impact on the senior cycle curriculum and on the nature of students' learning experience. It is also a route which does not take into consideration the complex array of barriers which specific categories of students' experience, in particular, Traveller children, children from migrant backgrounds and ethnic minorities such as Roma children. Within the ASTI, there is growing momentum for a review of the CAO-model because of its impact on the curriculum and its effectiveness as an admissions system. It is interesting that a word-search for CAO in the HEA's consultation document has no results.

Recently, in the context of the accredited grades model arising from the pandemic, ASTI has looked at the possibilities of open access systems as alternatives to the CAO. Open access

means that all students have the opportunity to attend a higher education institution regardless of their previous schooling, grades, or skills. The rationale is that it promotes equity by removing barriers to enter higher education. However, both the OECD and the EU caution that removing selection barriers at third level does not necessarily create equity because widening participation means providing access to students who may not be as well prepared, on average, as previous student cohorts for the cognitive/academic demands of the chosen course. In Ireland, regardless of the sector or level that a student enters, students with lower Leaving Certificate examination points are less likely to progress to the following academic year. 14 Hence the importance of the alternative entry routes currently in operation by third level institutions. The ASTI recommends that the HEA further investigate open access models in order to provide a knowledge base for inevitable future policy discussions on the role of the CAO on the second level curriculum.

Increasing diversity in the teaching profession

Teachers serve as role models to their students in myriad ways, including guiding young people in terms of developing their aspirations and plans for learning and careers after school. Given the increasing diversity of our society, it is important that teaching as a profession become more representative of the population. 15 There is also evidence from the literature on educational disadvantage on the need for schools to have teachers who come from lower socio-economic groups and other marginalised communities. There are a number of initiatives in place which require to be extended to larger numbers of potential student teachers. The national Teacher Supply Action Plan has also identified the importance of diversity. A specific concern of the ASTI is that the costs of the two-year Professional Master of Education, introduced in 2014, is actually reducing diversity in the profession because of its cost – typically ranging from €11,000 to €16,000 for the programme.

Conclusion

In this submission the ASTI has focused on those systemic aspects of second-level education which impact – directly and indirectly – on post-school transitions and access to higher education. Not only are these issues identified in the research as problematic, current education policy and national action plans contain actions to address these issues. It is now time to address these outstanding issues in order to address equity issues but also to improve overall post-school options for young people.