

Submission on the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2022-2026)

On behalf of:

Cavan Ógra Fianna Fáil

Offaly Ógra Fianna Fáil

Kilkenny Ógra Fianna Fáil

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The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2022-2026) represents a significant opportunity for the Government to improve the lives of young people from low- and middle-income backgrounds at a critical time in the post-pandemic recovery.

Cavan Ógra Fianna Fáil is delighted to have the opportunity to engage with this process. We have elected to focus our submission on two areas we view as being particularly relevant to the aims of the consultation, being the provision of Student Accommodation and the issues facing Graduate Entry Medicine students.

On the issue of student accommodation, we believe that the principle of centralising responsibility for as many aspects of higher education as possible within a single government department should also apply to student housing, and in the pages that follow we set out our proposal to vest authority for this hugely important issue in the Higher Education Authority.

Graduate Entry Medicine remains an extraordinary financial burden for students wishing to pursue a career in Medicine, and is simply out of reach for a significant number of people. Within this submission, we have identified recommendations around extending the Free Fees Initiative and SUSI supports to EU students studying on GEM courses, which we believe is of huge importance to ensuring Graduate Entry Medicine is accessible to people from all socio-economic backgrounds.

We hope this submission provides a useful basis for addressing the issues on which we have focused therein.

Mise le meas,

Michael Smollen

Cavan Ógra Fianna Fáil Policy Officer

1 Student Accommodation

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2 Graduate Entry Medicine

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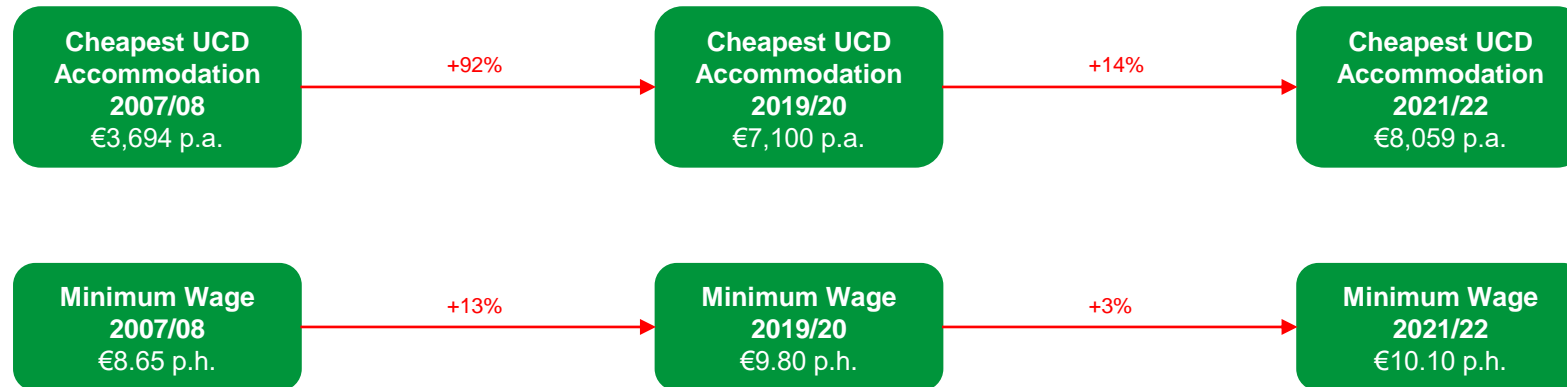
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Student Accommodation

Students from areas outside the main urban centres face challenges in attaining third level education which students from urban areas do not. For students from areas outside the main urban centres, the cost of living away from home (and specifically cost of accommodation) is the main expenditure in attaining a third-level education, and can be the deciding factor between advancing to higher education and not. We fundamentally believe that at the core of the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education should be the principles that:

1. The total cost of third-level education, including academic costs and living expenses, should be affordable to all students;
2. No student in the State should be forced to choose an inferior course within commutable distance of their home due to being unable to afford the cost of living away from home.

As outlined, the cost of accommodation is the most significant outlay for rural students in Ireland and have seen significant increases in recent years. Consider the below comparison between the increases in UCD accommodation costs versus increases in the National Minimum Wage over the same period:



Transferring responsibility for Student Accommodation to the Higher Education Authority

The vast disparity between increases in the cost of the single largest expenditure item for students compared to the minimum wage, which working students typically earn to support their living expenses, is simply unsustainable. Universities should not have the option to increase charges for on-campus accommodation in order to meet increased expenditure. Nor should students be competing with working people and families on the general rental market. The reason the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (“DFHERIS”) was established was the belief that higher education was being neglected by the Department of Education and Skills (“DES”). Similarly, student accommodation is lost in the myriad of issues the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (“DHPLG”) must tackle and is hence towards the lower end of the priority list. Indeed, from a cursory viewing of whodoeswhat.gov.ie it is completely unclear who within DHPLG is responsible for student accommodation. We believe that responsibility for the provision of student accommodation should be transferred from DHPLG to DFHERIS and then vested in the Higher Education Authority (“HEA”). We believe the HEA should have the following powers and responsibilities with respect to student housing:

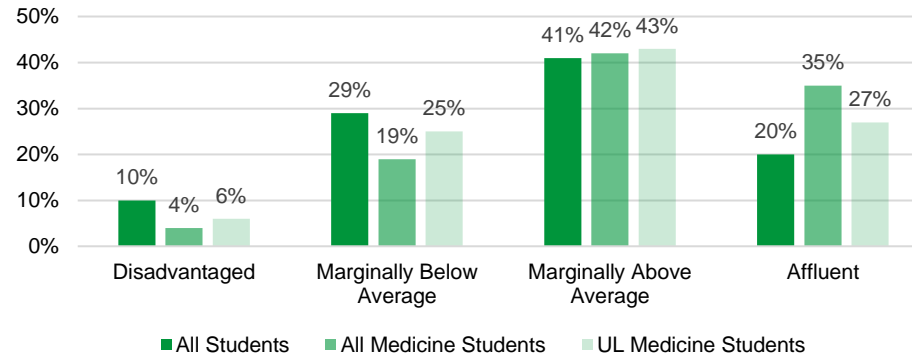
- Responsibility to report on the number of students requiring housing in each higher education institution (“HEI”) in the State, the number of beds on-campus and the number of off-campus student accommodation beds nearby.
- Responsibility to project the number of students requiring housing in each HEI over a 20-year forecast period, and plan accordingly for the delivery of these requirements working with public and private partners.
- Power to direct the construction of on-campus housing in all HEIs.
- Power to set prices which may be charged by all HEIs for on-campus accommodation.

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Graduate Entry Medicine



2018/19 Enrolments by Socioeconomic Background (%)



Source: <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/socio-economic-data-and-maps/socio-economic-distributioncomparisonstool-2018-19-enrolments/>

2017/18 Higher Education Enrolments	
Background	Mean Points
Disadvantaged	368
Marginally Below Average	401
Marginally Above Average	422
Affluent	446

Source: <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/socio-economic-data-and-maps/lc-points-socio-economic-background-histograms/>

Extending the Free Fees Initiative to Graduate Entry Medicine

Four universities in the State offer dedicated Graduate Entry Medicine (“GEM”) courses – UCC, UL, RCSI and UCD. In the 2020/21 academic year, a total of 1,646 students were enrolled in these courses, of which 948 were EU students and 698 were Non-EU students. GEM offers a path to a career in medicine for a wide range of people, such as those unable to secure the required CAO points for a variety of reasons, including socio-economic factors. The graph above sets out the socio-economic background of ‘All Students’, ‘All Medicine Students’ and ‘UL Medicine Students’ (used as this is the only exclusively GEM medical school in the State).

It is eminently clear from this graph that Medicine, particularly at direct-entry undergraduate level, remains out of reach of many people from low- and middle-income families. Every effort must be made to address this and improve equity of access to Medicine. We believe a key measure which can vastly improve the accessibility of access in the immediate-term is to extend the Free Fees Initiative to GEM courses for all EU students, thereby reducing fees payable by GEM students to the standard student contribution charge of €3,000. We estimate that the annual cost to the exchequer if the HEA were to adjust the funding provided to universities through the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (“RGAM”) to ensure no change to overall total funding in the event this measure were implemented would be c.€12m.

Within the ‘National Access Plan 2022-2026 Consultation Paper’, the HEA have identified that only 4% of Medicine students in Ireland are from a disadvantaged background, compared to 10% of students in the wider population. This is not a surprising or unexpected statistic. The State has committed significant investment towards improving the educational outcomes of students from disadvantaged backgrounds since the establishment of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (“DEIS”) Scheme, however the attainment gap between students depending on their socioeconomic status remains stark. The table above sets out a summary of the mean CAO points achieved by students who enrolled in higher education in the 2017/18 academic year, stratified by socio-economic background.

Current Funding Model

Total fees for EU students (incl. student contribution charge) range between €14,750 p.a. (UCC) to €16,290 p.a. (UCD). This can be funded by the student through their own (or their family’s) funds or through a bank loan. Currently, Bank of Ireland are the only institution offering GEM loans. Students can borrow up to €15,000 per academic year at 6.5% APR, with no repayments of capital or interest for the duration of the 4-year course. Interest does accrue over the 4 years, the maximum repayment term is 10 years, and a parental guarantee is required. Under the current funding model anyone without either €60,000 savings or a parent able and willing to guarantee a loan of €60,000 is immediately disqualified from entry to a GEM course in the Republic of Ireland. If we want the medical profession in Ireland to be open to the best people from all backgrounds, and if we are serious about equity of access to higher education and highly skilled careers, this fundamental inequality must be addressed. DFHERIS and the HEA must recognise that studying GEM is fundamentally different to simply studying a second degree in any other field of study and extend fully the Free Fees Initiative to GEM courses for all EU students.

Graduate Entry Medicine

The table opposite sets out a summary of the number of students, current total fee income and new cost to the exchequer in the event the Free Fees Initiative were extended to cover all EU students studying GEM courses.

- 'No. of Students' represents the number of EU and Non-EU students in each academic year.
- 'Current Total Fees' represents the total fee income from EU and Non-EU students in each of academic year.
- 'Additional Cost to Exchequer' represents the additional cost to the exchequer in the event the HEA were to adjust the funding provided to universities through the RGAM to ensure no change to overall total funding in the event the Free Fees Initiative were extended to cover all EU students studying GEM courses.

The overall new annual cost to the exchequer represents value for money for a variety of reasons, including:

- From the perspective of equity of access, tuition fees of in the region of €15,000 - €16,000, in addition to living expenses, are a significant barrier to entry for students from low- and middle-income backgrounds. An outlay of €12m p.a. will make Medicine vastly more accessible to 1,000 of the best people in society, regardless of their financial situation.
- In media interviews, GEM students have outlined that despite their desire to remain living and working in Ireland, the financial burden of repayments of c.€850/month for 10 years makes relocating to the USA or Australia the only feasible option to earn enough to repay their loan.
- The burden of the significant financial obligations of studying GEM place significant stress on students, and the requirements to engage in significant amounts of paid work outside of college hours in order to support living expenses and academic costs leads to sub-optimal academic performance in many cases.

Extending eligibility for SUSI to Graduate Entry Medicine

We propose that eligibility for SUSI grants be extended to GEM students on the same basis as for 'first degree' undergraduate students. Owing to the fact GEM courses are deemed 'second degree courses' by DFHERIS and the HEA, students are not eligible for SUSI grants. Even if the Free Fees Initiative is extended to GEM, the student contribution charge of €3,000 and living costs near universities will continue to put GEM beyond the reach of many students if SUSI eligibility remains unchanged.

In the 2015/16 academic year, just 10% of Medicine enrolments were in receipt of a SUSI grant, compared to 44% of all undergraduate enrolments. This illustrates the need to improve accessibility to Medicine.

International Comparisons

- In England and Wales, total fees are £9,250 p.a., of which £3,715 is paid by the NHS and £5,535 can be covered by a non-means-tested loan from Student Finance England. In addition, partially means-tested maintenance loans of up to £9,000 p.a. are available, alongside a grant of £1,000 per year from the NHS to cover living costs.
- In Scotland, special status exists for Scottish students pursuing the Scottish Graduate Entry Medicine ("ScotGEM") degree. Students have their fees covered by the Scottish Government on a non-means tested basis, and students can apply for a means-tested maintenance loan from Student Awards Agency Scotland ("SAAS"). In addition, students from the UK and Ireland are offered a ScotGEM "return of service" bursary, a grant worth up to £16,000 in total, in exchange for working in NHS Scotland for up to four years.

	No. of Students		Current Total Fees		Additional Cost to Exchequer	
	EU	Non-EU	EU	Non-EU	EU	Non-EU
UCC						
Fees per Student			€14,750	€47,170	€3,000	€47,170
Year 1	39	41	€575,250	€1,933,970	€458,250	€0
Year 2	40	48	€590,000	€2,264,160	€470,000	€0
Year 3	33	39	€486,750	€1,839,630	€387,750	€0
Year 4	39	43	€575,250	€2,028,310	€458,250	€0
Total - UCC	151	171	€2,227,250	€8,066,070	€1,774,250	€0
UL						
Fees per Student			€15,456	€50,094	€3,000	€50,094
Year 1	94	52	€1,452,864	€2,604,888	€1,170,864	€0
Year 2	90	54	€1,327,500	€2,547,180	€1,121,040	€0
Year 3	90	48	€1,327,500	€2,264,160	€1,121,040	€0
Year 4	96	53	€1,416,000	€2,500,010	€1,195,776	€0
Total - UL	370	207	€5,523,864	€9,916,238	€4,608,720	€0
RCSI						
Fees per Student			€16,080	€57,500	€3,000	€57,500
Year 1	30	57	€482,400	€3,277,500	€392,400	€0
Year 2	27	63	€434,160	€3,622,500	€353,160	€0
Year 3	30	57	€482,400	€3,277,500	€392,400	€0
Year 4	32	51	€514,560	€2,932,500	€418,560	€0
Total - RCSI	119	228	€1,913,520	€13,110,000	€1,556,520	€0
UCD						
Fees per Student			€16,290	€55,140	€3,000	€55,140
Year 1	77	23	€1,254,330	€1,268,220	€1,023,330	€0
Year 2	77	23	€1,135,750	€1,084,910	€1,023,330	€0
Year 3	77	23	€1,135,750	€1,084,910	€1,023,330	€0
Year 4	77	23	€1,135,750	€1,084,910	€1,023,330	€0
Total - UCD	308	92	€4,661,580	€4,522,950	€4,093,320	€0
Total - Overall	948	698	€14,326,214	€35,615,258	€12,032,810	€0

Source: University College Cork / University of Limerick / Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland / University College Dublin