Submission 4.13 Engage in Education

What aspects of equity of access to higher education currently work or do not work from a student perspective?

Students report that what works currently are the HEAR and the DARE schemes. Additionally, the students mentioned that the SUSI grant works well as it allows students from some disadvantaged circumstances to access higher education.

'For me personally, coming from a low-income family made the possibility of going to college scarce, organizations like Engage in Education and SUSI are the sole reason it is possible for people like me to pursue their dreams and move up the economic ladder. It also gave an extra safety net and community of capable people who I could turn to if I was ever in a pinch.' (STUDENT)

However, on the other hand some students report that although the SUSI grant is available this is not the case for everyone from disadvantaged circumstances. Some students reporting that they are from low-income families and disadvantaged circumstances yet still having to cover the cost of their student fees and other expenses as they are not in receipt of the SUSI grant.

Students also reported how the different schemes within colleges were effective at reducing financial stress. 'I think it is good how some higher educations have a monthly payment system for people who can't pay large amounts of money at one time this can result in less stress on students and their families.' (STUDENT)

Another important point made by students is in relation to the Access policies. Students report that the access policies need to address each level of education.

'The policies need to address the equity of access to higher education from pre-school, through primary school, secondary school and further education'. (STUDENT)

As well as this, students report that it is necessary to strengthen the relationship and communication between families, schools and higher education institutions in order to support student's aspiration, engagement and achievement.

What is the biggest challenge for students in accessing higher education?

A common thread amongst students as the biggest challenge in accessing higher education is the rising of costs for tuition fees.

Additionally, students mention that the biggest challenge is getting the adequate points in the Leaving Cert. Especially, now with the new predictive grade system.

'The biggest challenge for students is always the points in the Leaving Certificate. In these days especially, competing with predictive grades is increasing the points needed for the course which makes it harder to get into courses.' (STUDENT)

Other students explain that the biggest challenge is specific to each individual case. For instance, it depends on the environment the student has grown up in and whether other members of the individual's family and peers have attended college. Often, it comes down to

the student's expectations of themselves based on their environment. Students may believe access to higher education is simply not possible for them and other times they may be inspired and encouraged to attend third level by being in an environment of others who have attended and help them to believe it is possible.

'Attending third level college was not an idea for me leaving secondary school, nor was any form of education until I became a mature student and had surrounded myself through voluntary work with professionals that inspired me'. (STUDENT)

'Being from a place like Limerick, especially Moyross, I think the biggest problem for students accessing higher education is that they don't have high expectations for themselves. Many people my age are the first person in their family to ever attend college in the first place, once you come to realise that there are people and organisations who will back you in your pursuit of higher education - that's when people really start to believe that they can'. (STUDENT)

What can make a difference for students accessing higher education?

Students mention how having supports throughout their school years in both the school and home would benefit them greatly in giving them the belief, skills and competency to access higher education.

'Early intervention with not only the student and secondary/primary schools but also the students home life and external agencies such as youth clubs etc. The compass project with Engage is an idea with massive potential in my own opinion and bring higher level students from certain areas and backgrounds into these areas and schools to give their experience to the young people is a prompt that some kids never knew they might need. If I had an Engage in Education and their staff supporting me in secondary 10 years ago, I can confidently say I would have entered third level direct from leaving certificate instead of waiting 5/6 years later to realise it did not matter where I was from, how affluent my family were or the lack of resources I received from my secondary'. (STUDENT)

As well as this, other students mention that as some of them have not yet been on campus due to the impact of COVID-19 and college closures that a re-orientation day to help them adjust to life on campus would be beneficial.

'I think, in these times, a "re-orientation" day would make a big difference for students like me entering my 2nd year of higher education after a pandemic. As someone with only an online experience of college so far, I feel that I do not have much feedback to give in relation to what would make a difference as I am yet to experience college that is back to normal and on campus.' (STUDENT)

How has Covid-19 impacted on students e.g. academic, financial, health, college experience and how can we address these impacts?

Academic

Students report that academically many have done very well with assignments and in online exams as they are 'open book'. However, they feel that this will need to be addressed when

returning to the old structure in place with perhaps a flexible timetable and through continuous assessment.

'Academically, many students have thrived with online exams and assignments however, when they experience real in-house exams, I think we will get a shock as most online exams would have been "open-book". I think colleges can address these impacts by maybe allowing a more flexible timetable so students can get jobs and to ease us into exams, they could have regular "class-tests" with us'. (STUDENT)

Financial

Students report that no longer having access to library books puts them at a disadvantage. Students from lower income families would not have been able to purchase books that they may have otherwise loaned from the college.

Additionally, online learning from home and the closure of colleges due to COVID-19 has significantly amplified digital poverty for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Before students could have relied on college supports like the library, computer rooms and the free WIFI available in the colleges. Unfortunately, many students were at an immediate disadvantage due to not being able to access adequate supports like technology and a secure WIFI connection.

'Financially, is a complex discussion as not only does it make it harder due to having to secure a proper laptop/computer for your work, but you must also ensure an adequate internet provider is paid.' (STUDENT)

Many students reported having difficulty securing employment in the pandemic. This was especially hard for students who also had to complete college placement and find a suitable job that would allow them to work around their hours of placement. What was also a factor for some students was the fact that they could not work due to COVID 19 while on placement as they would pose a risk of transmission. This created serious financial pressure for students as some had minimal to no income.

'Financially, this is an area I struggled in due to the course I am undertaking. I am required to attend multiple practice placements. When on placement I cannot work as I pose a risk of transmission, it's been difficult and stressful with minimal income coming in and have had to rely on savings to fund myself'. (STUDENT)

College experience.

Covid 19 has significantly impacted student's college experience. Students mention how with colleges closed they had to switch to learning from the home environment and online classes. Students felt that they missed out on the support of face to face learning. Additionally, students also missed out on the social aspect of college and being able to learn and experience college life with peers.

'COVID-19 has really impacted us all in a big way, for me I didn't even get to graduate secondary school and was launched into a very unfamiliar and new sense of a "college lifestyle" I have rarely seen the campus and felt very alone at times, as I'm sure many people have as well.' (STUDENT)

Students commonly report the impact of COVID-19 has only brought light to the already existing challenges. Especially for students from lower class families who may not have the same supportive home environment as their peers.

'COVID_19 as a brilliant worker of Engage has told me, did not create the barriers we have been met with, they have only enhanced and made the challenges more complex as well as having brought them across the bord in a sense to most students in some form, but more so to the lower class. In comparison to affluent students, the house space and structure in a lower-class student's home is more chaotic in most senses and finding the time and space to complete assignments, interact adequately in team calls and lectures, find time for personally developing your knowledge such as reading etc. and finding the supports at home are at opposites ends of the scale.' (STUDENT)

As well as this, the lack of resources available to students was also challenging. For instance, studying from home without the use of the library, its resources and being able to study and do assignments alongside peers.

'Doing lectures and work isolated at home is extremely challenging also due to the lack of resources such as the college library for help, peers to bounce work off to ensure you are on the right track with it and the environment to keep you motivated and focused'.

Health

All of the above factors have played a significant role on Mental Health.

Students describe having to attend college lectures online from their homes as being a challenge with little to no support for how they are feeling.

'Mental health wise a lot of students have really taken a hit, it's hard to pull yourself out of bed to simply sit on a laptop for hours on end, and it hurts that there's no real response to students regarding this sort of feeling'. (STUDENT)

Students also mention feeling isolated from their peers as having an impact on mental health.

How can we address these impacts?

Students mention that acknowledgement and empathy for their situation and the challenges they face would help to address these impacts.

'I think the best way to help students during these uncertain times is simply to cut us a little bit of slack. Some of us are barely 18 and just scraping by a very scary experience and I think it's important to keep that in mind.' (STUDENT)

Students also explain that counselling services would be helpful to them as well as support to students who are learning online.

'In order to address these issues, number 1 is to provide free counseling services for students to cheer them up during the pandemic. Secondly, higher education institutions must provide support for new students who are new to online learning'. (STUDENT)

Other students have praised the work of Engage in Education in addressing the impacts of COVID 19.

'The way to address these in my opinion is simply only possible on an individual basis with students through working with them such as Engage do. To tackle all the main issues, the third level educational bodies and the workings in which they carry out their responsibilities to students would need to be regulated and accessed by a governing body and financial authority to understand the depth in which they have failed to meet the needs of students and the untold agreements that are made with external agencies to send students into a less than adequate learning environment for unpaid and unmonitored placement for other elitist organisations.' (STUDENT)

'Engage in Education & similar agencies work outside the ear space of the educational bodies of the students in a safe and trusting environment they have established for their work which in my opinion is the only way the inequality will be broken down as these types of agencies are supporting the future world changing students in getting to positions where we ourselves will have the title and qualification to challenge the failings of these educational figures and institutes.' (STUDENT)