

Submission 4.34 [Irish Rural Link](#)

Overview

Irish Rural Link (IRL) is the national network of rural community groups, representing over 600 groups and thousands of individuals committed to socially, environmentally and economically sustainable rural communities.

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education. The development of this new Plan comes at an important time as third level and other higher level education institutes put measures in place to support students return to campuses and on-site classes and lectures across the country. The development of the new Technological Universities is also welcome, which IRL sees an opportunity for people living in rural areas easier access to more courses.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a lot of difficulties for students, in particular for those from lower-socio economic backgrounds, those living in rural areas, those living in Direct Provision as well as for other migrant and disadvantaged communities. Access to and challenges these cohorts of people face in higher education were certainly exemplified during the pandemic.

For people living in rural areas, it is more often the case that they need to move away from their home and local community to access higher education, especially if they take up a course in Dublin or one of the other cities. This adds extra cost for families especially in terms of high rents and high cost of student accommodation. For lower-income families living in rural areas, this is a barrier for students accessing third-level, even if the student receives the SUSI grant.

We welcome that some Local Link transport services run scheduled services to some higher Education Institutions during the academic year, allowing students to remain living at home helping reduce the cost to families. However, this service is not available everywhere and other challenges still exist for many people with disabilities, migrant or those living in Direct Provision as well as for women and lone-parents, who have childcare responsibilities, looking to return to education.

The number of students from disadvantaged areas accessing higher education still remains far below what it needs to be. The new Plan must ensure that the barriers that continue to prevent access to higher education are removed and supports are in place prior to and post entry.

Following some of the questions posed in the Consultation paper, below are recommendations that IRL would like to see actions taken as part of this new Plan. Irish Rural Link, Moate Business Park, Clara Road, Moate, Co. Westmeath Tel: 090 6482744 | Fax: 090 6481682 | email: info@irishrurallink.ie | Web: www.irishrurallink.ie 3

What should our overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022-2026?

The Department of Department of Further and Higher Education, Research,

Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland for 2022 – 2026 must be one that is inclusive of everyone regardless of gender, disability, ethnic background, socio-economic background, geography. A whole educational and Government approach to delivery of an inclusive education system is undertaken and every effort is made to

ensure all barriers, physical and financial, to accessing higher education are removed for those who are furthest from the education system.

Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan? How do we ensure that vulnerable members of our society are included?

In the current National Access Plan, there are target groups set out. There must now be ambitious targets set out in the new Plan to increase the number of students from disadvantaged and marginalised groups who want to access higher education. These include, students from low-income and lower socio-economic backgrounds, people with disabilities, traveller community, migrants, people living in Direct Provision, young people in care, people engaging with homeless and addiction services, women and lone parents returning to education or work, long-term unemployed, and those who have or will lose their job as a result of the pandemic, climate change and digitalisation and need to reskill. Barriers that these cohorts currently face must be removed and this will need to involve a whole of Government approach. The DFHERIS must collaborate and work with all Government departments to identify current barriers and implement solutions. For example, engage with the Department of Transport and the National Transport Authority (NTA) on the role Local Link bus services plays in transporting students from rural areas to higher education institutions. Also, exploring the transport and other needs of Traveller and Roma community and those living in Direct Provision to access higher education and putting in place joint solutions and supports.

How can pre-entry and post-entry activities be developed? And How can a whole-of-education approach to widening Participation in higher education be achieved?

There are a lot of activities and measures that still need to be developed prior to entry to higher education and this needs not just a whole-of-education approach but also a whole-of-Government approach. With just 10% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and 55 students across the whole higher education student population from extreme disadvantaged backgrounds accessing higher education in the 2018/2019 academic year (DFHERIS Consultation Paper, 2021), this falls far short of what an inclusive and equitable higher education system should be. Likewise, while there has been an increase in the take up of higher education studies by Irish Travellers, 48 new entrants in the 2019/2020 academic year compared to 26 in 2013/2014, it is still nowhere near the target Ireland should be aiming for. Irish Rural Link, Moate Business Park, Clara Road, Moate, Co. Westmeath Tel: 090 6482744 | Fax: 090 6481682 | email: info@irishrurallink.ie | Web: www.irishrurallink.ie 4

The correlation between education level and poverty is well documented and this is highlighted in the annual SILC¹ figures. In 2019, households headed by someone with primary or lower secondary as the highest level of education attainment were more at risk of poverty, (41%), experienced two or more deprivation factors (42.6%) or living in consistent poverty (16.6%). This compared to households headed by someone with a third-level degree or more living in consistent poverty of 0.8% (SILC, 2019)².

1 SILC – Survey on Income

2 CSO (2020) SILC 2019 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2019/povertyanddeprivation/>

For many students from a disadvantaged and traveller background, they could be the first in their family to go to college or take up a higher education course and it is also a key step to breaking the cycle of poverty often felt for generations by families. Measures to improve the uptake of higher education needs to begin early in the education sector but there are also social welfare elements that need to be explored.

Primary Education Level

Beginning at primary education level, there are measures that must be taken to support the progression of students through different education levels. The long waiting list for students to be assessed for learning difficulties, disabilities and other challenges at primary school level continues to prevent students accessing the support needs early in their education. For students from higher income families, they can often bypass the waiting list and pay for private assessments. Also, they are also able to afford extra private tuition and grinds if needed and at both primary and second level. This is not an option for low-income families, delaying them getting the right support and in turn delaying their progress, putting them at a disadvantage.

Secondary Education Level

There is a role for secondary schools to work with students and their families from disadvantaged, ethnic and traveller backgrounds and students with disabilities to provide the necessary supports to help students not just complete second level education but also to access higher education. Extra Career Guidance is needed for these students and extra encouragement by all teachers in helping them to recognise their potential. Career Guidance Councillors must be equipped with helping to engage these students more in the pathways available to access third level and provide guidance on completing CAO applications, what courses may best suit them, financial supports available and extra supports that may be available in college or universities. This may involve extra one-to-one sessions with students and even with family members. Irish Rural Link, Moate Business Park, Clara Road, Moate, Co. Westmeath Tel: 090 6482744 | Fax: 090 6481682 | email: info@irishrurallink.ie | Web: www.irishrurallink.ie 5

Community Education

Community Education is a microcosm of the entire education system – it spans the whole process of the development of the person that enables learners to progress, either on a personal level or into employment or further education or a combination of all. It is about presenting equality of opportunity, a fact reflected in the Programme for Government, which outlines the latter as one of its key tasks and what this new Plan aims to do.

Community Education reaches those who are furthest away from the education system and the labour market. It is very often a second chance education for those who had a bad experience in school or have been gone from the education system a long time and want to return to the workplace. The community education model offered by providers delivers a meaningful route to personal development, giving participants the skills and confidence to continue progressing to the next level of education and on to economic independence.

Unfortunately, the current levels of investment in the Community Education sector is insufficient to deliver the quality services that are necessary to reach the most marginalised learners. Just 1.8% of the SOLAS annual budget was allocated to supporting community

education provision in 2019[1]. Community Education providers are at a critical point in their existence due to the lack of core and consistent funding[2]. While the community education funding is channelled through SOLAS (via ETBs), IRL are aware that many providers do not receive any funding through these channels. As a result of this, they are also excluded from key data gathering exercises and initiatives such as the National FET Learner Forum thereby not providing an accurate reflection of what is happening in the sector.

SOLAS Annual Report, 2019

[2] AONTAS research in 2017 identified 12 unique funding streams, representing 8 government departments, only one of which was Department of Education (FinALE, 2017).

If the new National Access Plan is to achieve its targets and ensure better access for disadvantaged and marginalised cohorts of people, the underfunding of resources and supports at primary and post-primary level must be addressed. Better recognition of the role Community Education providers plays in the overall education system and very often being the first step for many on the path to higher education. Increased investment and more structured funding streams for all its providers is needed to ensure that it can continue to play this important role and improve access to higher education for the most marginalised learners.

Post Entry

During Higher Education

It is important to have measures and supports in place for students from disadvantaged and marginalised students once they are in higher education and throughout the Irish Rural Link, Moate Business Park, Clara Road, Moate, Co. Westmeath Tel: 090 6482744 | Fax: 090 6481682 | email: info@irishrurallink.ie | Web: www.irishrurallink.ie 6

duration of their course. Ensuring that they complete their higher education course is just as important as them gaining entry.

Access to employment

These students may also need extra assistance in engaging with the workplace and employers on completion of their course. Unfortunately, students, regardless of their level of education and qualifications, can often be overlooked for job vacancies because they have a disability or from a disadvantaged or lower-economic background. This is very discouraging for these students after putting in a lot of effort to get to and complete higher education. It also sends out a very negative signal to other people with disabilities, people from disadvantaged areas or marginalised groups of people, creating a sense of feeling of 'what is the point' of getting a higher education.

Third level institutions must work closely with potential employers and that students gain employment on merit and their ability to do the job.

How can pathways between further education and training and higher education be better developed?

As we transition to a net-zero carbon and more digitalised society, there are many jobs and sectors that will no longer exist. It is important that there are stronger links between further education and training and higher education and people can move from one to the other more

smoothly. With many people having lost or will lose their jobs in the midlands region as a result of ending of peat harvesting, workers will need to be upskilled or reskilled. While local ETB's are engaging with Bord na Mona workers on this, there is also a role for higher education to support these workers to progress to higher qualifications, if needed, to ensure job security into the future. Further education and training and higher education must work more closely so life-long learning is available for employees to transition smoothly into new sectors and be equipped with the necessary skills to take-up employment quickly with little or no time being without a job.

How can other social inclusion initiatives outside of the higher education sector be harnessed to support equity of access objectives?

There are a number of social barriers that impact and often prevent on people from disadvantaged or marginalised cohorts from accessing higher education.

Social Welfare Payments

Often the timing between someone moving from one social welfare payment to another can affect their eligibility to take up a course in a higher education institution. Also, they may need to be in receipt of a payment for a certain length of time before they are eligible to take up a course. This may not always coincide with the start of the academic year meaning a person may need to wait a full year to start a course. However, they risk losing their payment if they do not take up employment, even if it is only temporary. This can often discourage people taking a course in higher education and prevent Irish Rural Link, Moate Business Park, Clara Road, Moate, Co. Westmeath Tel: 090 6482744 | Fax: 090 6481682 | email: info@irishrurallink.ie | Web: www.irishrurallink.ie

people from moving off social welfare payments into secure and sustainable employment.

Childcare

Access to and affordability of childcare is one of the main barriers for women and lone parents from taking up higher education. For those from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds it can be an even greater challenge. While the free hours under the National Childcare Scheme helps in some way, it is not enough to cover the cost of childcare as many would need a full day of childcare to fit into their studies. More financial support is needed for those who are marginalised to help cover cost of childcare.

Transport

For students living in rural areas, they often have to move away from home to take up higher education. The extra cost of this to household incomes, especially those on low income can often mean incompleteness of their college course. We welcome that some Local Link transport services have developed scheduled routes to nearby higher education institutions during the academic year, which allows students to remain living at home and reduce the financial pressure on families. However, IRL would see closer links between DFHERIS and the NTA on establishing these routes across the country and making them more regular.

Also, for people living in Direct Provision, the lack of transport is often a barrier for them to take up higher education. Engagement with the NTA and possibly Local Link providers to arrange transport for those living in Direct Provision and looking to access higher education is needed.

Affordable student accommodation

For many living in rural areas, they often have to move away to attend college. This adds extra cost to household incomes, especially for those on low income. The lack of and high cost of accommodation for both student accommodation and in the private rental sector can often prevent students from attending higher education. We welcome the new regulation that student accommodation will now be able to be paid on a monthly basis but these costs still remain too high for low-income households.

Engagement with the wider housing sector is needed to ensure there is an ample supply of affordable accommodation for students close to higher education institutions.

What challenges has Covid-19 presented in relation to an inclusive higher education system and how can they be addressed?

The Covid-19 pandemic brought to the fore the many challenges that disadvantaged and marginalised students were already facing in higher education. Irish Rural Link, Moate Business Park, Clara Road, Moate, Co. Westmeath Tel: 090 6482744 | Fax: 090 6481682 | email: info@irishrurallink.ie | Web: www.irishrurallink.ie

Lack of high-speed broadband

For students living in rural areas and who had moved home during the pandemic were faced with the challenge of accessing their course work online due to the lack of high-speed broadband. It was a real challenge in many households where there were a number of people using the internet at the same time, with parents often having to log-off work if students had class or an exam.

Access to study space and technology

Having a quiet place or even a desk to study as well as a laptop or computer was a problem for students from disadvantaged or marginalised backgrounds. Often they had to share with other family members and for those living in Direct Provision, overcrowded or traveller accommodation, these challenges were heightened.

Loss of Engagement

It was more difficult to engage with students during this time. The face-to-face supports that are sometimes available on campus were more difficult to engage with online. Also, as mentioned above the lack of study space or for mature students who may have had caring responsibilities it was difficult to log on to lectures and classes.

Ensuring that these students return to college in the new academic year must be a key priority for higher education Institutions and extra supports put in place to help students settle back to on-site learning.

Loneliness and Isolation

The increase in loneliness and isolation throughout the pandemic for younger people was very prevalent but doesn't receive the same attention as for older people. Again, accessing online services during the pandemic was not always possible for students from marginalised and

disadvantaged backgrounds. This was also true for young people in rural areas where they may no longer have a network of friends but also were unable to meet up with friends outside 5km.

Extra counselling and mental health services are needed now to help students adjust to campus life again and address any difficulties they experienced during the pandemic.

Conclusion

The new Equity of Access to Higher Education Plan must set ambitious targets to ensure that higher education is truly available to all and set out measures to address the many barriers and challenges people with disabilities, people from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds, people from the traveller and Roma community and people living in care, Direct Provision and other migrants as well as women and lone parents, face when trying to access higher education.

While access requires a whole-of-education approach, starting as early as primary level to identify learning needs of students, it also needs a whole-of-Government approach to ensure Irish Rural Link, Moate Business Park, Clara Road, Moate, Co. Westmeath Tel: 090 6482744 | Fax: 090 6481682 | email: info@irishrurallink.ie | Web: www.irishrurallink.ie 9

the many social and economic barriers are removed. Lack of robust broadband and public transport system, affordable childcare and affordable accommodation are just some of the barriers faced by disadvantaged and marginalised students. To not be able to access or stay in higher education because one or more of these barriers are preventing them to do so is unacceptable.

Supports are also needed to help students complete their higher education and ensure that they can gain quality and sustainable employment on completion of their course and not judged on a disability they may have or on their address.

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated many of the challenges these students face on a day-to-day basis. Extra supports must now be implemented to ensure these students remain on in higher education when on-site classes return in the new academic year.

Every effort must be made to improve access to higher education for all and this new Plan must ensure that a change in narrative does happen and that every person in this country has the same equal and equitable opportunities available to them when it comes to accessing higher education.