*ncadsu*

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

- The DARE scheme does help to balance out the inaccessibility of the Leaving Certificate and CAO systems, but it doesn't do enough to make higher education accessible to students with chronic illnesses. The Leaving Cert Applied is also not always an accessible option to people with health issues that impact attendance. Without a Leaving Certificate or equivalent, potential students are left unable to pursue qualifications in the disciplines they are interested in, which can lead to further deconditioning of health as they wait to be able to apply as a mature student.

- The "free fees" initiative not being extended to part-time students is an issue.

**What can make a difference for students accessing and completing higher education?**

- More involvement from Access Offices within Open Days for colleges, information sessions from Access on open days **or** more information being provided to students while in secondary school through guidance counsellors, college information events, etc. More information needs to be provided on a national level on learning support services, reasonable accommodations that can be provided through colleges, financial supports, disability services, etc. A national webpage compiling all of this information so that it's readily available to students would ease the pressure of students having to search for this information on individual college websites pre-entry.

- Many disabled students are faced with having to provide evidence of disability to avail of certain support services within their college or university. The process of accessing these supports should not be reliant on evidence of disability or providing official documents from healthcare providers.

  - The length of time it may take many students with disabilities to get a formal diagnosis can heavily impact their ability to be able to provide evidence of disability and avail of these support services.

  - **The cost** of a formal diagnosis in Ireland is unaffordable for most, especially students. Students may be referred to a specialist to get a formal diagnosis, and once they reach the point of assessment, they are locked out of treatment due to the cost of assessments.

- There is a lack of support for those with literacy issues within higher education. Programmes within secondary schools that prepare students for academic language,

or programmes within colleges & universities that assist students in things like literacy, academia, numeracy, etc would greatly benefit many students.

- Many students who come from youth programmes, HEAR/DARE, etc. would have experienced a high level of 1:1 care while in those programmes or in secondary schools. Once they have reached higher education (usually with the support of someone from their youth group, school, etc), they lose that 1:1 support. The introduction of more 1:1 support systems that are not peer-support systems would benefit many students who require a greater level of care and support than others, such as students with disabilities, students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, those accessing higher education through access programmes, etc.

- The option of pre-recorded lectures and remote access to lectures makes engaging with courses and modules so much easier for those with disabilities and chronic conditions and needs to be kept post-COVID.

- Support for programmes that enable staff and student leaders on campus to understand diversity.

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

- COVID has greatly affected students' mental health. Enhanced mental health services across the Island would greatly aid students in both their mental health and in their academic success.

- COVID has also greatly affected students financially. Additional funding to the SAF, or more points throughout the year where students can apply to the SAF would greatly benefit many.

- The digital divide is still quite apparent, and while the funding for the Laptop Loan Scheme made a significant difference for students, connectivity is still a significant issue for many. Issues with connectivity are an issue, or the cost of connectivity is an issue for many.

- A lack of study/workspace has been a real issue for many students. Students need affordable accommodation with access to study spaces separate to living/bedroom spaces. As well as this, students who share homes with families need accommodation that gives them access to private study and work spaces.