



National Access Plan 2022-2026

Submission to the Higher Education Authority



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1. Introduction

Social Justice Ireland welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the public consultation on a National Access Plan 2022 – 2026. The new National Access Plan will be vital to delivering on the strategic goal of the inclusion for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

2. Policy Context

Access to appropriate education and skills development from early years to adulthood is one of the key public services that enables participation in society, public life and the labour market. The potential impact of digital transition on the labour market makes access to education and training throughout adulthood a priority. The focus of our education system must be to ensure people are engaged and active citizens and have the necessary critical and creative skills to navigate an ever-changing employment environment, can adapt to transitions as they occur and participate fully in society.

3. Overall Vision

The overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022-2026 should be one of both equity of access and equity of outcomes for students from all backgrounds. The National Access Plan should be aligned with the skills needs as we move towards a green economy, higher levels of performance and innovation, expansion of research, and better access for students at a disadvantage and improving lifelong and flexible learning opportunities to make Ireland's education and training service one that serves all stages of the life cycle and can support adults to upskill and reskill in an accessible and timely manner.

4. Target Groups

It is important that the programmes aimed at supporting students in disadvantage and lifelong learning opportunities are one of the priority areas for 2022-2026. In terms of access, the socio-economic background of new enrolments to higher education remains remarkably static over more than a decade. Of new entrants in 2004, 5.7 per cent came from a semi-skilled background and 5 per cent from an unskilled background. In 2017 new entrants to higher education from these backgrounds made up 5.5 per cent and 4.8 per cent respectively. A further challenge is the fact that socio-economic disadvantage follows a student throughout the education system with younger graduates from more affluent areas earn more per annum on average than their peers from disadvantaged areas¹. Even when controlling for different factors, graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds earn more than €600 less after graduation than others. The focus must remain on reaching the targets set for those students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, due to the limited progress made since 2004. An expansion of access routes could considerably improve the new entrants from this cohort, and from other underrepresented groups.

Access routes should be expanded to target underrepresented groups, for example those students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, students with a disability, students who are members of the Irish Traveller community, students who are members of the Roma community, students who are in care or who have recently left care, students from direct provision and first time mature students. The recent Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education contains a broader view of access and recognises the need to support traditional and non-traditional routes to higher education. This broad view of access is pertinent when it comes to dealing with the issue of early school leaving. Approaches in the area of adult literacy and lifelong learning and how they can provide pathways to further and higher education are important in this context.

¹ <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2020/06/HEA-Graduate-Outcomes-Survey-Class-of-2018.pdf>

5. Funding

Full-time enrolment in higher education has increased by almost 33 per cent in the last decade to 186,890 students and numbers are projected to reach 222,514 by 2030². An increasing population of school-leavers demands that considerable investment is required to ensure that the higher education sector in Ireland can continue to cope. However public funding for higher education in Ireland has been decreasing since 2009 despite steadily increasing enrolments both full- and part-time. The Parliamentary Budget Office, in a recent report on tertiary Education Funding in Ireland³, estimates that funding per undergraduate student (full-time, part-time, remote and FETAC) enrolled in 2019 was 50 per cent lower than in 2008. The report presents a clear and detailed outline of the challenges facing the sector. The report recommends that any increases in State funding are accompanied by the recommended administrative reforms. Crucially it recommends that funding be sourced from sustainable revenues to prevent a repetition of the cuts to funding seen during the last economic and fiscal crisis.

The higher education sector will require increased public investment and long-term sustainable Government funding to ensure that it can deliver what is expected of it in terms of human capital and engaging with society. Little if any progress has been made on the issue of funding for the higher education sector, despite the publication of two separate reviews into the issue. The final report of the Expert Group on Future Funding of Higher Education in Ireland⁴ recommended three funding options for consideration by Government: (i) a pre-dominantly state-funded system; (ii) increased state funding with continuing upfront student fees; and (iii) increased state funding with deferred payment of fees (student loans). The report concluded that an additional €1 billion in annual funding would be needed by 2030 in order to sustain and improve provision of higher education in Ireland, with €600m of this required by 2021. Four years after the publication of the report there is still no strategy for the future funding of higher education in Ireland. Substantial changes to the funding model are required, and regardless of what funding model or option is chosen, a significant increase in State funding will be required.

Despite increases in funding in recent Budgets there will not be an additional €600m invested in the sector in 2021. An estimation of the value of the higher education sector to the economy found that every €1 invested generates a return of approximately €9. Yet despite all of the reports and the economic evaluations, we are no closer to developing a strategy to fund the sector. A long-term, sustainable and fully resourced funding strategy for the sector must be the key priority for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Without certainty regarding funding, the necessary reforms and innovations required in further and higher education will not succeed.

6. Developing skills pathways

High quality education and training accessible for all is one of the best investments a society can make but it does not come for free. Achieving good educational outcomes requires appropriate spending⁵. Adequate and continued investment in pathways and access routes to higher education are required. A variety of access routes and pathways from adult education, lifelong learning,

² <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/projections/projections-of-demand-for-full-time-third-level-education-2018-2040.pdf>

³ https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBudgetOffice/2019/2019-11-25_an-overview-of-tertiary-education-funding-in-ireland_en.pdf

⁴ <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Higher-Education/Higher-Education-Role-Value-and-Scale-of-Higher-Education-in-Ireland-Discussion-Paper-1-.pdf>

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/dp139_en.pdf

apprenticeships, traineeships and further education to higher education is essential to ensure Ireland can meet the challenges that automation and adaptation pose to the future of work. A recent report from the European Commission found that the transition from education and training to work and then from one job to another is crucial and requires continuous upskilling and reskilling of the adult population⁶. Comprehensive investment strategies in education and training, which cover all stages of life, bring the highest social and economic returns.

The pandemic has had a major impact on the delivery of education and training, particularly in the area of apprenticeships and vocational training. Although there may be a temptation to focus on the online delivery of lifelong learning and education and training due to the impact of the pandemic, this would be detrimental to achieving our education and training ambitions. The crisis provided a powerful test of the potential of online learning, and it also revealed its key limitations, including the prerequisite of adequate digital skills, computer equipment and internet connection to undertake training online, the difficulty of delivering traditional work-based learning online, and the struggle of teachers used to classroom instruction⁷. An OECD study found that in addition to basic digital skills, online learning requires autonomy and self-motivation. Users of online learning are primarily highly educated adults with strong digital skills and some courses show completion rates as low as 10%. The study concludes that for or online learning to represent a valuable alternative to face-to-face instruction, it needs to tackle issues of inclusiveness to ensure all adults (including those with lower digital skills, limited access to IT and lower self motivation) can benefit. It also needs to provide high-quality reskilling and upskilling opportunities that can translate into sustainable employment opportunities for job seekers.

Education and skills development is one of the key policy tools available to us as we deal with the economic and social fallout of COVID-19, offering the opportunity to mitigate some of the worst impacts of what will be an uneven recovery. Continuous investment in higher education, skills development, adult learning and lifelong learning are the best policy tools available, allowing investment in human capital and ensuring we can manage these transitions.

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/dp139_en.pdf

⁷ <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/the-potential-of-online-learning-for-adults-early-lessons-from-the-covid-19-crisis-ee040002/>

Social Justice Ireland is an independent think-tank and justice advocacy organisation of that advances the lives of people and communities through providing independent social analysis and effective policy development to create a sustainable future for every member of society and for societies as a whole.



Acknowledgement

The work is partly supported by the Department of Rural and Community Development via the Scheme to Support National Organisations and Pobal.



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