

Submission 4.03 [Society of Saint Vincent De Paul](#)

SVP welcomes this opportunity to engage with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) in the consultation process for the new National Plan for Equity of Access 2022-2026. The Society of St Vincent De Paul (SVP) is the largest charity of social concern in Ireland with over 10,000 members in 1200 local Conferences. The Society's mission is to provide friendship and support to those experiencing poverty and social exclusion, to promote self-sufficiency and to work for social justice.

In this submission we will include specific issues experienced by the National Action Plan target groups; mature students, lone parents, lone parents who are mature students, students with a disability, students from the Traveller community and students who experience a socio-economic disadvantage. We will also propose recommendations to the current challenges faced by these groups, in accessing, participating, and progressing through the higher education system. It will also highlight the need for a whole of Government approach to tackling the issue of educational disadvantage, it is only then that we will have a higher education system that is fully inclusive of all groups in Irish society.

It is recognised that equity problems in education cannot be solved by actions taken at third level only, or by an exclusive focus on educational opportunities. Equity in access to higher and further education is broadly social, cultural, geographic, and economic and not just educational. Research conducted by McCoy and Smyth indicated that even with the abolition of fees in 1996, social inequalities in access were greater in 1998 than at the beginning of the 1980s, highlighting that despite targeted interventions, people coming from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to enter higher education.[1]

In our experience, there continues to be other marginalised groups who are excluded from Higher Education and not included as part of the target groups in previous Access Plans. For example, SVP supports students who are on a Stamp 3 residency permit. They cannot access the SUSI grant and therefore have limited opportunity to access higher education. The new Access Plan should consider exploring whether the target groups need to be expanded to ensure we are supporting all those who experience marginalisation and discrimination and wish to access higher education.

2. SVP enabling access to third level education

A key focus of our work in SVP is tackling educational disadvantage and last year we spent over €5.3 million helping children, young people, and second chance learners access education. We operate a successful Bursary scheme which enable students' access Higher and Further Education courses. We know from our evaluations of the scheme that it has transformed the lives of many students who would not have been able to attend college otherwise.

SVP members enjoy a privileged position of trust in the many homes they have been invited into (Pre-Covid 19 pandemic). They continue to support households during this challenging time in a

variety of other ways, with the level of need at its greatest since the last recession.

Approximately, 45,000 calls were received from January 2021 until the end of March 2021, this is the highest number during the first quarter in any year during the past decade. Requests for help included help with food and energy bills as well an additional difficulty this year, was the cost of ensuring children and young people had the necessary IT equipment for online learning.

In 2019, 12.8% of the population were living below the poverty line (at risk of poverty) of €14,723 per year or €275.72 per week.[2]SVP knows that it is the children in these households who are not progressing to higher level as these families simply do not have enough to afford essentials such as food, clothing and heating, and other ongoing costs. Households who experience disadvantage experience more than just financial hardship. Families in these situations present with additional health problems, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, poor living standards, a sense of hopelessness which all directly affect their positive engagement with education.

SVP actively supports access to education in all parts of Ireland, both urban and rural. There are now eight regional educational committees set up which directly work with students wishing to access third level education. A sample of the type of help offered is provided here to give an insight into the scale and scope of SVP's engagement in this area. The information provided here is not representative of the full scale of SVP investment in time, commitment, and ongoing financial support, it merely sketches an outline of members efforts in this sphere.

In the South-West (Cork& Kerry), approximately €150.000.00 was provided to assist over 100 students in 2019 to attend third level. The type of help offered was in the form of financial assistance for living expenses such as rent, IT equipment, books, and basics such as help with food and heating costs. This SVP education committee has on-going contact with various colleges regarding reduction in fees, on behalf of some students, and at times lengthy communication with the SUSI office. The group is proactive in its dealings with relevant agencies, negotiating yearly travel tickets with Bus Éireann on behalf of clients. In the West (Mayo, Galway & Roscommon), 92 students were supported to attend third level. Approximately €118,000.00 was paid by the education committee to ensure students could pursue their educational aspirations. The SVP East region, which comprises the counties of Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow spent approximately €600.000.00 in the 2019 academic year supporting 381 applicants to access and participate in third level education. The type of financial support offered includes top-up financial help for fees, rent, equipment, and text- books. An evaluation of one of the bursary schemes in 2019 showed that all successful participants were also in receipt of the SUSI grant. This clearly highlights the inadequacy of the SUSI grant to cover the costs involved in attending third level education.

These SVP Education Committees have formed purely to concentrate on supporting access to further and higher education and have protocols, including rewarding students who successfully complete their courses, using staggered payments and insisting on seeing proof of continued attendance. The committees have cultivated positive relationships with second and third level institutions. In some of the more complex cases which have required significant support a multi-agency case management approach has been adopted which has been highly effective.

3. Barriers preventing students from accessing Higher Level Education

3.1 Financial Barriers

SVP Members have a deep interest in improving the life chances of low-income households through education. They continue to meet with more families and individuals wanting to improve their life chances through education but the cost's involved is increasingly becoming a barrier.

Higher Education participation is an important policy objective in Ireland.[3] However, Ireland has seen persistent social inequality in higher education participation with low-income households being one of the named groups in Irish society not to participate in higher education at levels experienced by their more advantaged peers. The HEA's Spatial and Socio-Economic profile[4] of the Higher Education Population highlights these inequalities in the 2017/18 academic year. It shows that at a national level 20% of college places are taken up by students from the 15% wealthiest families. In contrast, the students from the 15% most disadvantaged families hold only 10% of places. In practical terms, this means that on average, for every 10 students from affluent areas, there are only five from the most disadvantaged – a ratio of two to one. These are worrying statistics as it shows our third level education system does not fully reflect the diversity found in the rest of the population.

Income inadequacy is the major obstacle preventing low -income households sending their children to higher education. The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice's research into the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) clearly shows that many households living on social welfare payments are unable to have a standard of living which meets their physical, psychological, and social needs. The MESL research for 2019 revealed that despite social welfare payments gradually moving closer to adequacy in the past number of years, payments are still inadequate for many, with specific households experiencing long term "deep inadequacy" meaning "consistently inadequate income, doing without what is required to meet basic needs, to take part in normal activities, and to participate in society." [5] The MESL research revealed that deep inadequacy is exclusively found in households headed by one adult (such as single working-age adults and lone parent households, the vast majority of which are led by women) and households with older children.[6]

Also, Child Benefit is withdrawn from a young person on their 18th birthday even if they are still in second level education. This sudden and drastic drop in a family's income causes much disruption and distress and does not contribute to a positive approach to continuing learning. The Student Contribution Charge, which now stands at €3,000.00 is a barrier to entry for those on low incomes who are not eligible for the full grant.

The cost of attending higher living is a barrier for households on low incomes. The DIT Campus Living Guide outlines conservative estimates for monthly expenditure, excluding fees, for a student living away from home at €1,352.[7] Student grants do not come close to covering costs, even at the highest rate of €658.00 per month. The HEA Eurostudent Survey Report[8] highlights that while the average income of students has increased since the last survey in 2016, so too has the average level of expenditure. For almost all groups of students, expenditure exceeds income and as a result, these students are reliant upon external supports to fill this gap. This is particularly problematic for the household's SVP support, many of whom are reliant on social welfare or low paid employment as their only source of income. The overall average monthly income for all students was €915, and the average monthly expenditure of all students on living costs and study costs combined was €1064. Approximately 29% of the total student population said they were experiencing serious financial problems compared to 36% in the previous survey. Such findings deepen our understanding and highlight the challenges that persists for students, particularly students from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds.

The ongoing housing crisis has impacted low- income households disproportionately, this has an effect on those wishing to pursue their educational aspirations. The ESRI have shown that people on low incomes, as well as those in the private rented sector, and those in Dublin and the Mid-East region, have been disproportionately impacted by increasing housing costs between 2006 and 2016.[9] They found that households in the bottom quarter of the income distribution spent an average of 40% to a half of their income on housing, with 75% paying more than 30% of their income on housing.[10] In the latest Eurostudent survey report[11] accommodation is the largest single expenditure for students, and accounts for almost 40% of all expenditure, the average spend on accommodation was €415.

Current supports including the 1916 Bursary are for fulltime students and limited to the number of people it can award too, clients of SVP continue to state that the SUSI application and other systems such as the 1916 Bursary can be difficult to navigate.

An SVP report, 'Working, Parenting and Struggling?[12], found that lone parents in Ireland with third level education are three times more likely to be in employment, but 1-in 5 lone parents could not access formal education due to cost. This was the third highest rate among all EU-15 countries. A similar proportion of adults in two parent families reported financial barriers to formal education. An ESRI Report showed that financial concerns to attend higher education affected all socio-economic groups, however, young people from manual backgrounds were more likely to indicate financial reasons for not applying.[13]

Also, an ESRI publication 'The sooner the better I could get out of here: barriers to higher education in Ireland (2011), it highlights that learners and their families will make decisions on their educational opportunities based on rational behaviour and choose programmes based on their perceptions of costs involved, benefits gained, and potential success.[14] Therefore, the current target groups in the national access plan will not be able to participate fully in higher education, compared to their more advantaged peers due to persistent financial barriers. Systematic changes are required to remove barriers to their access, engagement, and success in education.

The financial barriers to higher education for students that SVP engage

with broadly concern:

Inadequate incomes from social welfare payments and/or low paid employment

No financial support from SUSI to take part in part-time courses

The inadequacy of the rates of SUSI maintenance grants for full time courses to cover costs, and the need for additional financial support towards the cost of accommodation, daily living expenses, books, course materials and transport

Not eligible for the full rate of SUSI

Unable to access financial support through SUSI as marginally over the income threshold

Deemed to be ineligible for SUSI as do not satisfy nationality and residency criteria

The lack of appropriate financial support towards services such as childcare.

SVP have provided a detailed submission[15] on the above issues regarding SUSI to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and have suggested that attention be given to the recommendations outlined in the document.

Current systems for students financing are unsatisfactory and require urgent reform. SVP believes that this review constitutes an opportunity to develop a more coherent and ambitious framework of financial supports.

SVP-Submission-on-SUSI-Review-April-2021.aspx

Recommendations SVP recommends that the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice's (VPSJ) research is used by the HEA to support evidence-based policy formulation (Goal 3) as it offers a richer, more holistic, and realistic lens through which to understand just how inadequate incomes impact on the target groups identified accessing higher level education. Increase social welfare rates, secondary benefits and child income supports to ensure these payments reflect the cost of living. Consider a more responsive, tapered approach for those families whose income just exceeds the current income thresholds limits for the Maintenance Grant. Ensure that second level school students maintain their access to Child Benefit until they leave school. Household that has an income at or below the income threshold for the SUSI special rate (€24,500) should qualify for the SUSI special rate. Income thresholds, including the threshold for the special rate of SUSI, need to be reviewed to reflect average incomes and poverty thresholds and should be indexed in line with these benchmarks on an annual basis. Reduce the non-adjacent grant rate distance to 24km so that more students qualify for the higher rate of grant. Eligible payments for the Special Rate should include all long-term Department of Social Protection payments when calculating reckonable income. The Student Grant should be calculated on net income rather than gross income, considering childcare and other household expenses.

An increased national budget specifically for the Adult Guidance Se

3.2 Inadequate career guidance and counselling in schools and through lifelong learning

Since September 2012, guidance counselling provision has experienced an overall cut to service provision of the order of 27.6%, 30% in DEIS schools and a catastrophic 53.5% reduction in one-to-one counselling.[16] The latest IGC survey (2020) found that 10.6% of full-time qualified guidance counsellors in second level schools are not practising at all, while at the same time 22.4% of schools report using unqualified internal staff to deliver guidance counselling, equating to 6.4 hours per week.[17]

While SVP have welcomed the restoration of 500 guidance posts in recent budgets, a full restoration needs to be implemented for all pupils to have the necessary skills and information needed to progress to higher education if they so wish, and also to ensure they choose the course most suitable for them. SVP are very concerned about the students who drop out of college after their first year.[18]

Career Guidance in schools needs to be on a one-to-one basis if it is to be truly effective. In many household's SVP members visit, there is a lack of knowledge and awareness from parents about higher education opportunities or how to apply for grant applications. This is why effective career guidance in schools is most important. Finding out about the whole person's circumstances, not just their career aspirations would prevent so many students dropping out

of courses who are unable to progress in for a variety of reasons. Career guidance and guidance counselling also needs to be part of the school culture beginning in first year.

Most career guidance now takes place through class work and small groups. This results in students not having the time or opportunity to discuss their career options in any depth with informed professionals. One to one discussion takes more time than is available which means that there is a large cohort of students which simply do not get access to sufficient information and guidance to make appropriate choices. This missed opportunity has life-long consequences. Also, while we welcome the introduction of additional career guidance hours in schools, there is limited resources available for general counselling which also has lifelong consequences in many instances for students.

Learners who need the most support to make post-school choices are the group most likely not to request help, in the experience of SVP members through home visitation. The Guidance Services need to be resourced sufficiently to afford time with learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds as well as their parents. A possible way the guidance service could engage with parents is through the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL). Guidance Counsellors need to build a relationship with the parents and inform them of all the options that are available regarding funding and support for those on low incomes. For this to be successful guidance counsellors need to have a good understanding of not just the supports available to low- income families, they also need to have a good awareness of how best to engage hard to reach groups such as Travellers, Migrants, lone parents, and parents that are long term unemployed. SVP have expressed a strong sense that the lack of educational capital in disadvantaged homes make it more difficult for young people to progress to further and higher education which continues the cycle of disadvantage.

Career Guidance teachers must also clearly and systematically inform senior cycle students about HEAR, as soon as the students begin Leaving Certificate year (in September). Guidance Counsellors should be adequately resourced with the time to support individuals to make HEAR applications as well as CAO applications.

SVP are also very concerned from the findings of an ESRI report that PLC students do not have sufficient access to adequate career guidance while they are studying.[19] That research also found that PLC students were more likely to be from less educated family backgrounds.[20] PLC students need to have access to career guidance, as typically students who enrol in these courses wish to progress on to employment, third level or further and higher education. Students need assistance with these choices, particularly if they do not have family members with knowledge of the education sector.

Recommendations An increased national budget specifically for the Adult Guidance Service to manage the impact of Covid-19 on low- income households. Career Guidance for students needs to be adequately resourced, in order for it to have a meaningful impact. The Department of Education need to ensure that career guidance teachers in schools have the necessary time and resources to give one-to-one guidance to students. Increase the provision of Home School Community Liaison teachers in DEIS schools and expand the scheme to non-DEIS

schools Increase awareness in communities experiencing disadvantage of the adult guidance service available through local ETBs.

3.3 Barriers to accessing Part time Education.

We support households that fall under all of the target groups- Travellers, students who are socio-economic disadvantaged, mature students, lone parents, and students with disabilities. In their discussions with our members, they have all stated that the fact they cannot access the SUSI grant to access part-time education is a major barrier for them. Funding is provided for full-time students undertaking primary degrees but not for those undertaking part-time courses. There is an inherent contradiction, therefore, between the recognised need to promote flexibility and diversity in the higher education system and the financial disincentive to part-time participation in the current fee and grants scheme.

Very often part-time study is the only viable option for someone with work and family responsibilities; however, a disincentive exists in that they are subject to tuition fees. This creates unfairness and unequal participation of some groups in education. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) statistics from 2016/17 academic year show that 87% of part-time undergraduate new entrants were mature students while only 9% of full-time undergraduates' new entrants were mature students.[21]

Part-time students are currently not able to avail of the same supports despite the National Access strategy recommendations. The Higher Education Authority set up an advisory group to consider part-time and flexible higher education in 2012, which, recommended that by 2016, 'full equality of provision and support will have been achieved in higher education for all students, regardless of time, place or pace of study'.[22] However, this is still not the case.

3.4 Barriers for Lone Parents accessing Higher and Further Education

To address the low participation of lone parents in education there are bursary schemes which potential students can access as well as the Student Assistance Fund. While these initiatives are welcome, it does not support sufficient numbers of lone parents in Ireland, of which there are 218,817, 86.4% are lone parent mothers.[23] Also, it does not fundamentally challenge the stratification within higher education itself.

Lone parent families are the cohort most likely to experience poverty in Ireland and the group most frequently helped by SVP. They are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Ireland who experience high levels of poverty and marginalisation. Lone parent households, with one or more children aged under 18, had consistent poverty rates of 24.6%, and the highest deprivation rates, in 2016, at 50.1%.[24] Many lone parents who seek support from SVP have expressed their interest in attending higher education on a part time basis but the fact they cannot receive the SUSI grant is a major barrier. Lone parent participation in education has decreased by approximately 20% between 2011 and 2016.[25]

Student parents are more prevalent in part-time (44%) than in full-time Higher Education (10.5%).[26] It is an important and critical issue that managing finances, studying, and caring responsibilities are carried out by lone parents with limited recognition that they are doing the same work as families with two parents who can share the finances and workload.

Living Costs

While the living costs are high for all learners while attending higher education as outlined above, the cost-of-living estimates for lone parents are extensive, and include personal care and personal costs, as well as costs associated with running a household (household goods, services, insurance), but also as savings and money put away for contingencies. For example, the VPSJ research highlights that the reasonable living expenses of one adult and one infant child is estimated to be €1344.60 compared to €553.00 for a student living away from home attending DIT (excluding the costs of rent, housing, and childcare).[27]

Childcare

In 2017 Maynooth University commissioned an Independent Review to Identify the Supports and Barriers for Lone Parents in Accessing Higher Education and to Examine Measure to Increase Participation.[28] The report found that another major barrier facing lone parents interested in pursuing education is the lack of affordable, accessible, and quality childcare, including early years and out-of-school care. The parents who SVP support continue to cite this as a major barrier. It is particularly evident in the lack of adequate childcare facilities situated on campus.

Access to childcare impacts greatly on the degree to which lone parents and all parents can engage in education, training, or employment. The cost of childcare is repeatedly highlighted as a major issue, given that costs in Ireland are high in comparison to other EU countries. Ireland spends just under 0.2 per cent of GDP (0.25 per cent compared to GNI*) on pre-primary education compared to an OECD average of 0.8 per cent of GDP.[29] Early Childhood is the stage where education can most effectively influence the development of children and help reverse disadvantage. Further to the cost and supply of childcare facilities, it is also a problem for many parents, given that lectures often begin earlier or finish later than the opening times of their childcare provider. In many cases, research identifies extended family as the principal support for lone parents in Higher Education. This creates further inequities of access for certain groups within the lone-parent cohort, such as those from a migrant background who may not have extended family members in their country of residence.

The National Childcare Scheme represents a significant step forward in combatting the poverty traps that created a barrier to lone parents accessing employment or education. However, the maximum subsidy a parent can receive during term time for a child in first class and upwards is €64 per week towards childcare. With most after-school care costing about €120-€140 a week, low-income parents will have to contribute more than €60-€80 a week. This situation creates stress and financial worry for a lone parent who is considering going back into education. Also, Child Benefit is used as reckonable income in the assessment for the National Childcare Scheme. Including Child Benefit in the means test impacts those on lower incomes and could result in them being eligible for a lower subsidy. Child Benefit is not assessed as means to access any other payment or service in the State and represents a significant shift in public policy and practice in this regard.

Housing Supports

A further finding from the Maynooth report highlighted the complexity of the supports and schemes lone parents need to navigate to establish which income support offered them the best option of support for their studies. This creates further barriers for lone parents. In many instances their housing need is tied in with their educational entitlements. They can opt for the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) which can be claimed with the Rent Supplement payment,

but which does not have the maintenance element of the Student Maintenance Grant, or continue on the One Parent Family Payment, have access to the Maintenance Grant but be excluded from help towards rent via the Rent Supplement payment.

“My worry is failing. To stay on social welfare would kill me after putting four years into myself and for the money I have spent, the tears that I have cried. That would kill me completely” (SVP research participant ‘The Hardest Job in the World, 2014)

Recommendations Expand eligibility of SUSI to part-time students to provide financial support to flexible, mature, and part-time learners. Estimated cost: €50 million for maintenance grant. Address the anomaly by which lone parents and people with a disability in receipt of Rent Supplement and DA/OFP/JST, who want to take up education or training are not eligible for SUSI maintenance. Government should increase investment in ECCE to meet the OECD average by 2023. Address the barriers to employment and education in the National Childcare Scheme for parents with children who require afterschool care.

3.5 Low Self-Belief

A lack of self-belief and limited previous scope of opportunity has been cited often by SVP members as factors which result in many low-income families feeling that education is "not for them". It is felt that this deep marginalisation stems at times from parents' own negative school experiences. This alienation by parents from education perpetuates the sense that "they're not good enough". This perception of feeling is often picked up on and internalised by their children.

It is clear that much needs to be done to combat low expectations and a lack of self-belief that education is not for everyone. Ensuring that primary and post-primary schools have the necessary investment and resources to provide a quality educational experience for all students, irrespective of household income is important in this regard. SVP members are very aware of the up-front and year-long costs of education which are beyond the capacity of families living on inadequate incomes and can lead to low-income families seeing education in a negative light.

“Parents are going to moneylenders rather than tell their child they cannot go on the school trip (SVP Member, Finding from School Costs Survey 2018)

Our members have also consistently highlighted the benefits of community education for some of the families they support. They have provided numerous examples of where this experience was positive for an individual and resulted in them continuing on to pursue further and higher education. Aontas has found that success in FET for people who are considered ‘distant’ from the labour market, such as those who are long term unemployed, requires initial positive learning experiences which often stem from low pressure non-accredited courses, allowing the acquisition of soft skills and building confidence.[31] However, community education has consistently suffered from a lack of sustained investment which impacts on learners being able to access such courses.

Recommendations Increase investment and resourcing in DEIS and non DEIS schools, so that all children and young people can avail of free primary and secondary education. Enhance working practices between access officers/offices and all post-primary schools, not just schools classed as being disadvantaged. Ensure that access offices are appropriately resourced with sufficient numbers of access officers on permanent contracts to carry out their work in colleges and communities. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science provide a sustainable, multi-annual funding model for independently managed community education.

4. Students living in Rural Areas

The SUSI non-adjacent grant rate was changed from 24km to 45km in Budget 2011 which has had a significant impact on households which SVP support ability to access higher level education. It has not only had an impact financially on students, but it also does not take account the location of a college in relation to the transport infrastructure in place for a student in an area, meaning that it has had a more serious impact on rural communities. The new National Access Plan should be mindful of this when considering if additional target groups should be included in the new plan. This is because there may be students living in rural areas who would not necessarily fall under one of the target groups but are experiencing disadvantage due to where they are living in rural Ireland.

“We have found that students travel to third level in Sligo or Athlone if they must stay away from home, because accommodation is cheaper. Otherwise, they have to commute 80km to Dublin or 55km to Maynooth for the duration of their course” (SVP Member North East Region)

Over 80% of students from Cavan, Mayo, Wexford, Longford, Roscommon, Monaghan, Leitrim, Laois and Offaly travel more than 45km to go to college and are therefore eligible for non-adjacent SUSI rate.[33] Cullinan et al. (2013) examined the impact of travel distance on higher education participation, they showed that travel distance has a negative impact on the likelihood of school leavers from lower-socio economic backgrounds proceeding to higher education.[34] In relation to travel distance to the nearest Higher Education Institute, the paper found that while travel distance was not an important determinant of participation on average across the whole population of school leavers, greater distances were associated with lower participation rates for school leavers from lower social classes. For every extra 10 kilometres of travel distance, the likelihood of participation decreased by 2.7%. Thus, for a school leaver living 50 kilometres from a Higher Education Institute, their probability of higher education participation is lowered by 13.5% than if they lived next to the Higher Education Institute. This is most likely because the greater travel distances result in a range of higher direct and indirect costs and the impact of these distance-related costs on participation is likely to be more pronounced for those on lower incomes. According to Speiss and Wrohlich (2010),[35] ‘transaction costs’ tend to increase as distance to a higher education institution (HEI) increases, and this is associated with a lower likelihood of participating in higher education. These transaction costs include direct financial costs such as rent and travel, indirect financial costs such as the costs that could have been saved from living at home such as food.

5. Covid-19 and Online Learning

As we hopefully move on from a challenging and stressful past year and a half, we have to acknowledge and address the issues faced by all students, particularly students who continue to experience disadvantage while having to access learning online. We know that the pandemic has exacerbated existing educational inequalities[36] and measures need to be introduced now to combat and target those inequalities in higher education through the new access plan.

SVP carried out an online survey among Conference Presidents on 'Access to online learning during Covid-19' in February 2021. Some of the findings from the survey include that since March 2020, 49% of Conferences surveyed had direct requests for help with digital devices. Approximately 75% of Conferences surveyed provided help with food vouchers to free up household income for online learning costs. The most common type of support provided was help with the cost of laptops/tablets and broadband.