

Submission 4.02 [Teachers' Union of Ireland \(TUI\)](#)

The TUI represents teachers, lecturers and staff (19,000+) in Education and Training Boards (ETBs), voluntary secondary schools, Community and Comprehensive (C&C) schools, Youthreach, institutes of technology and technological universities and those working in out of school services.

As noted by the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 “as a country we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by increasing levels of participation in higher education”. The TUI believes that higher education (HE) should be available, as a public good, to all who want it. Traditionally some groups have been significantly under-represented amongst the HE student body. Social inclusion means that there must be equity of access. The TUI has long campaigned for the rights of those under-represented groups and continues to do so.

Background

Ireland has an internationally acknowledged, high-performing education system and a respected teaching profession (Teaching Council, 2010; OECD, 2013; DES, 2018a; OECD, 2015a; NAPD, 2016; Comhairle na nOg, 2017; Growing Up in Ireland, 2017; IPSOS MRBI Trust in the Professions Survey, 2017; Boyle, 2017; Boyle, 2019; Scanlon & McKenna, 2018; EU Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018; Kantar Millward Brown, 2018; EU Commission, 2018; EU Commission, 2019a; EU Commission, 2019b; Social Progress Initiative, 2018; United Nations Development Programme, 2018, Irish Survey of Student Engagement 2018; HEA, 2019a; Coolahan, 2017; Eivers, 2019; CSO, 2019; McKeown et al., 2019; CSO, 2020; OECD, 2020; Eurofound, 2020; McNamara et al., 2020; Clark & Kavanagh, 2021) despite spending relatively little on education (OECD, 2015b; SJI, 2018, NERI, 2018, OECD, 2019a; UNDP, 2019) and experiencing historic underinvestment (DES, 2018b). Indeed, citizen satisfaction with the education system in Ireland is the highest of any of 22 European countries studied by Boyle (2018) whilst parent satisfaction with the Irish education system was the second highest out of fifty-six countries in Clerkin et al. (2020).

It is also worthwhile noting that 2019 data (OECD, 2019b) shows that both citizen satisfaction with the education system, and the economic return to the taxpayer of investment in education, are both extraordinarily high in Ireland compared to international norms. An Ipsos MRBI survey in 2019 found extraordinarily high levels of public trust in teachers, much higher than for journalists, Gardai, civil servants, politicians, business leaders, social media influencers, bankers or even the “ordinary person in the street” (Irish Times January 31st, 2019). ESRI (2020) found very high levels of trust of young people in the Irish education system.

Ireland has a very young population (Eurostat, 2015; Government of Ireland, 2019; DCYA, 2020). In 2008, we had the second highest proportion of 10–14-year-olds in the European Union (CSO, 2009). The high birth rate in Ireland (CSO, 2017; Eurostat, 2017; Government of Ireland, 2019) indicates that the population of young people is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future.

“Full time enrolments in third level institutions have grown substantially over the past 10 years rising from 138,319 in 2007 to 183,642 in 2017, an increase of 32.8 per cent” (DES, 2018c: 4). The latest projections are that numbers in higher education will peak at up to 242,000 in 2031 (DES, 2018d).

The proportion of full-time academics to students in higher education in Ireland was 19.88:1 in 2013/14 but 20.78:1 in 2016/17 (parliamentary answer by Minister Bruton 14th Dec 2017).

In this context, it is not sufficient to suggest that a world-class child centred society can be achieved with inadequate resources of time, money or personnel.

Access to Third Level for Traditionally Under-Represented Groups

The six main target groups identified by the National Plan are:

entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education.

first-time mature students.

students with disabilities.

part-time/flexible learners.

further education and training award holders; and

Irish Travellers.

As will be seen below, the IoT/TU sector has a well-deserved reputation for supporting a much higher proportion of students from these target groups than the traditional universities. However, we should all aim higher.

Transition to Higher Education

Responsibility for supporting effective transition to higher education must be shared across the various levels of education and resourced accordingly. To this end, the TUI believes that the following merit particular consideration as actions that could be undertaken at third level.

Induction and Foundation Programmes

Third level colleges currently provide some induction programmes to support the transition to higher education, but to a limited number of students and in a limited number of contexts. A broader range of such programmes should be available to all students throughout the first year in college and should address areas such as language skills, study skills, research skills and ICT skills. In addition, foundation modules in specific subject areas (e.g., science subjects, maths, and a language) should be provided for students who may need support in making the transition to third level studies. In tandem, tutorial style support should be strengthened and expanded, especially in the first year at college, providing greater opportunities for networking in small, more supportive groups and promoting easier access to academic staff and their advice or support.

Provision of General Initial Courses Leading to Specialism

There is a growing tendency for students to enrol in highly specialised courses upon entry to third level. Often this requires intense engagement with highly specialised material or subject matter in the first year of study, for which some may not be adequately prepared. Provision of broad-based programmes in the first year and, therefore, delaying specialisation until the second year may have merit in some instances, especially for courses of three or more years duration. Such an approach would facilitate a longer 'transition period', in which the student could become familiar with the demands of third level and explore what subject specialism would best fit their interests and aptitudes. The TUI accepts the fact that this approach may not be feasible where courses are of shorter duration (less than three years) and geared to very specific labour market skills. In such instances it urges that the induction and tutorial support be strengthened considerably as very often the students who take courses of shorter duration are those who need most support.

Appropriate Supports to Facilitate Completion

In addition to students who enter higher education under access programmes, a significant number of entrants to third level colleges, particularly to the Institutes of Technology and Technological Universities, initially undertake courses at Levels 6 and 7 on the National Qualifications Framework. Many of these students, in addition to induction support and foundation programmes, may require considerable and sometimes customised support to enable them to complete. Higher education institutions need to be resourced adequately to provide and continue these supports. The absence of such supports will simply guarantee on-going and unnecessary attrition rates. Pastoral supports such as guidance counselling services in both post-primary and tertiary institutions are vital here. Supports for students with disabilities are also essential.

Progression Pathways

A major objective of public policy is that a culture of life-long learning be fostered and facilitated. Central to this is the clear identification of and proactive promotion of multiple progression paths into and within higher education. However, Ireland continues to rely heavily on direct progression to third level from post-primary education to populate colleges and universities. To date, insufficient progress has been made in relation to mapping and formalising alternative routes. In particular, the TUI believes the recognition of prior learning including experiential learning and routes from post-primary and the workplace, through further education to higher education need to be further developed. The TUI hopes that the soon-to-be published NCCA report on Senior Cycle Review may be useful in this matter.

Review of Current Access Programmes

There are many excellent access programmes working in HE/FE and in community settings. However, it would be helpful if the best aspects of each could be utilised by all. Hence, the TUI calls for a review of all the programmes to ensure that all can learn from each other. Such a

review must also take account of the inadequate funding that is currently available to all access programmes. Funding needs to be significantly increased.

The Points System

The points systems and associated dilemmas commanded little public debate in the past number of years. As a selection mechanism for higher education, a points system is arguably fit for purpose and has, at least, the appearance of fairness, transparency and consistency. However, the current points system, the external selection mechanism for entry to third level, now exercises a significant and distorting influence on how the post-primary curriculum is experienced. A focus on points, as opposed to student aptitude or preference, too often determines subject choice and constrains teaching and learning. Many policy makers and political leaders have been muted on this issue, leaning on the recommendation of the Points Commission (over eleven years ago) that the points system should be retained as it is the 'fairest', most equitable and transparent method of selection for third level. This delayed open and frank dialogue on the escalating negative affects on the teaching and learning environment and the formation of young people. It deflected conversation away from a very unhelpful outcome of the current system - the crude allocation of people into occupational slots and career trajectories that in many cases were unsuitable and not in keeping with natural aptitude and interest. Furthermore, it prevented on-going examination of a system that supported, albeit unintentionally, the emergence of manipulative practices in the alignment of points to courses in particular colleges, making access to some courses unduly and unnecessarily competitive. Finally, but not least, it rendered inconspicuous how blind and indifferent a points system can be to the corrosive effects of socio-economic and inter-generational educational disadvantage on the attainment levels at Leaving Certificate of a significant minority of the Second-Level cohort – students who do not even get to the start-line in the "points race", so-called. Therefore, recent focussed attention by the Minister for Education and Skills and other key commentators and a general openness to exploring the desirability of and possibilities for change is welcome. The TUI believes a rethink of the points system is not just desirable, but somewhat overdue and deserving of immediate action. It supports the recent announcement by Minister Harris of a combined CAO system for HE, FE and apprenticeships.

The TUI favours a number of ideas and, in particular, suggests:

- Weighted points in Leaving Certificate subjects related to the discipline to be studied in third level, this weighting to be applied by the Higher Education Institute in accordance with a national protocol
- Reduced number of bands within each grade at Leaving Certificate (referred to as reducing granularity of points by some), combined with random selection in some instances
- Threshold entry requirements for each undergraduate area (set by HEI in accordance with a national protocol), combined with supplementary testing and/or random selection and expansion of supplementary routes in some instances.

Senior Cycle Review

As noted above, the TUI hopes that the forthcoming report on Senior Cycle review will provide useful guidance in relation to progression pathways for students. It will also hopefully provide greater visibility for vocational educational routes and courses thereby supporting students from under-represented groups to progress to FE and HE.

Apprenticeships

The TUI strongly welcomes the greater focus on the value of apprenticeships recently and particularly welcomes recent announcements by Minister Harris of an expansion of apprenticeship places. It is also noteworthy that apprenticeships now extend up to level 10 on the NFQ. As part of this long sought and positive development the IoT/TU sector is playing a key role in supporting young people to access HE whilst also working in a paid job.

Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL)

In post-primary, third level, and further and adult education settings, TUI members engaged in ERTL for extended periods since March 2020. For many members, ERTL continued throughout this academic year.

ERTL has been demonstrated to involve enormous, unsustainable educational, technical and workload challenges. Due to a range of issues, some students experience very significant difficulty in continuing to engage in education once it has been removed from the physical setting of the school, college or centre. The importance of the shared classroom environment and of the personal relationships and interactions at the heart of good educational practice cannot be overstated and their loss cannot be replaced. TUI members witnessed the impact of economic pressures on student engagement, not least in the great difficulties faced by some families and households in adapting their homes into suitable learning spaces in spite of their best efforts. The lack of appropriate devices and broadband access, both for educators and students, presented and continue to present severe limitations on what is possible, as do the lack of training and technical support. Learning resources, lesson plans and teaching strategies must be replaced or rewritten creating massive workload issues. All educational interactions become more time-consuming and more likely to need repetition and reinforcement. Feedback and assessment take place in new settings and formats, many needing to be newly created and taking significantly more time and work by educators. ERTL proved to be particularly challenging for under-represented student groups.

Investment in the Education System

It is important to note that in 2019 Ireland only spent 0.9% of GDP on tertiary education, compared to 1.4% in the OECD (OECD, 2019a). The ratio of students to teachers in Irish tertiary education is also very significantly above both the OECD and EU averages (OECD, 2020d). The funding deficit, even aside from anything to do with Covid-19, will get worse in coming years as, student numbers are estimated by the DES to rise by almost thirty thousand in tertiary education in the next ten years (DES, 2018d).

Even without an increase in student numbers over the next decade, the third level budget is forty percent (approximately €100 million) off where we were ten years ago (Irish Times, January 23rd, 2020). The Cassells report made clear that €600m was needed by 2021. The TUI would like to acknowledge the positive comments that Minister Harris made at a recent Education Futures seminar in relation to not wanting yet another committee to discuss the problems outlined in the Cassells report and that progress needed to be made on the issue in 2021. According to the then CEO of the HEA “the scale of the funding challenge for higher education is enormous” and that spending on tertiary education in Ireland in 2013 was only three-quarters that of the OECD average (conference speech, Graham Love, June 13th, 2018). OECD/EU (2017) notes that student numbers in higher education are expected to grow 30% in the next fifteen years. It notes that state funding of HEIs was 76% of their total funding in 2007/08 but was only 51% of their total funding in 2015/16.

Exchequer funding of higher education is a true investment with a large return. OECD (2019a) has found that the public net financial returns of a man attaining tertiary education is \$369k in Ireland, compared to an average of \$148k in the OECD and \$165k in the EU23. The equivalent figures for women are \$143k in Ireland, \$77k in the OECD and \$90k in the EU23. Investment in public goods such as tertiary education also has large public support. For example, a two-to-one majority of the public would prefer Government to spend money on public services rather than more tax cuts (Sunday Independent / Kantar MillwardBrown poll December 16th, 2018). Despite this CSO (2020) found that Between 2007 and 2016, real expenditure per student at third level education decreased from €10,806 in 2007 to €7,089 in 2016, a drop of 34.4%.

Investment in the further education and training sector also needs to be addressed. Priorities in the Programme for Government can only be adequately addressed if accompanied by additional funding. Areas such as Youthreach, adult literacy, post-leaving certificate programmes etc have for too long been a ‘Cinderella’ of the system.

As noted by Clarke, Kenny and Loxley (2015: 11), the third level sector “as a whole experienced a 29% reduction in funding (€385,688,801.00) from 2007 to 2014. When the funding is disaggregated per sector the cuts experienced were; IoTs 32% (-170,719,711.00), Universities 26% (-€200,610,172.00) and Colleges 24% (-€14,358,919.00). During the same period staffing numbers in the public sector were reduced by 10% (32,000).”

Covid-19

The current pandemic has clearly shown the extraordinary lengths staff and management in all sectors of the education system will go to support their students. However, it has also shown the level of historic under-investment that the system is trying to cope with. The TUI welcomes the funding which the DE, and DFHERIS, has put into the system. However, more will clearly be needed as the pandemic continues into late 2021. The issue of technology and the digital divide is just one example. Providing laptops to students is a start but does not resolve the problem of

the digital divide and it does nothing to solve the difficulty of poor access to broadband services especially in rural areas.

In April 2021, the TUI carried out a survey of its third level members. Key findings of the survey of over 1,500 members included:

71% do not believe that the enhanced teaching/staffing allocation provided as a result of COVID-19 has been sufficient to meet requirements

95% said their work is somewhat or significantly more difficult compared to twelve months ago

From a list, respondents identified 'More physical space', 'Smaller class groups' and 'more teachers' as what they would most like to see to counter the workplace risk of COVID-19

52% do not believe that most students have the required ICT facilities to participate in remote learning should schools be required to close for a period

All the above have a particular influence on students coming from higher education access under-represented groups.

All Irish society is acutely conscious of the impact of COVID-19 and its attendant losses in life, health, and employment. We must guard against losses in the social and cultural fabric that binds our nation together. In which connection, the work of TUI members, both in education and as trade unionists, is vital. Indeed, the crisis highlights the centrality of public service and collective effort to any well-ordered society. The TUI earnestly hopes that those newly awakened to this reality do not soon forget it. For our part, we pay tribute and thanks to fellow public servants, in healthcare, policing and education most particularly, and indeed to all workers engaged in the provision of essential services. TUI members have risen magnificently to the challenge of maintaining education of the highest standard. Education is our greatest equalising and unifying endeavour and in the face of enormous difficulties our members have continued to inspire curiosity and imagination, to release potential and to unfold opportunities and possibilities. The TUI will beware of any complacent, or indeed malign, assumption by Managements or Government that the extraordinary efforts made by school staff in response to the emergency form a template for future work. We will ensure that our no-precedent stipulations, and the written assurances from Government, Departments and Managements to the same effect, will be honoured. ERTL was indeed only an emergency measure. This has been acknowledged by the Minister for Education in her address to TUI Congress in April 2021.

National obsession with third level progression

Any reform of Senior Cycle must cater for all students and their unique talents. At present, the range of levels across all Senior Cycle programmes caters for a wide breadth of academic ability. The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) facilitates students who may not otherwise have remained in school while the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), with its practical elements and second components, fosters key skills. Future reform must not marginalise or exclude any cohort of learners; it must be inclusive in nature.

It is worth highlighting that the excessive focus on CAO points is not a flaw of the current Senior Cycle itself. As noted above, it is an unfortunate by-product of our national obsession with progression to third level, an obsession that distorts the true meaning of education and invites unfair and invalid comparisons between schools. This creates particular difficulties for the LCA programme.

Benefits of Higher Education

According to the CSO (2018), Ireland has higher than average rates of third level attainment, and they have increased significantly between 2005 and 2015. In 2015, 52% of Irish 25–34-year-olds had completed third level education, compared with the OECD average of 42%. Overall, levels of third level attainment for Irish 25–64-year-olds have increased from 29% in 2005 to 43% in 2015 (OECD figures are 27% to 35% respectively). Entry rates (the proportion of people who are expected to enter third level during their lifetime) are also significantly higher in Ireland than across the OECD as a whole (81% vs 59% OECD for a Bachelor's Degree).

CSO Statistics (CSO, 2018) show that graduates from Irish higher education institutions experience relatively high rates of employment. In 2011, a CSO study noted that the unemployment rate for higher education graduates was 7%, and this compared with 18% for those with a post-Leaving Certificate qualification and 14% with a higher secondary education. Similarly, the employment rate for higher education graduates was 81%, compared with 64% for those with a post-Leaving Certificate qualification and 65% for those with higher secondary education only. Based on 2016 Q4 CSO Quarterly National Household Survey data, the unemployment rate for those with higher education was 3.7%. The figure was 9.2% for those with an upper secondary education and 12.7% for those with a lower secondary education. As with the OECD as a whole, Irish graduates have lower unemployment and higher employment rates than those without a third level qualification; and employment rates for graduates are in line with OECD averages (CSO, 2018). The same CSO report (2018) found that the earnings advantage for third level education in Ireland was higher than the OECD average in 2015: on average third level graduates in Ireland earned 66% more than those with just an upper secondary education, compared to a differential of 60% across the OECD.

In a study in Ireland, Indecon (2019) found that the estimated net graduate premium (to the individual) of an undergraduate degree is €106,000 (€118k male and €96k female). The additional net graduate premium (over and above degree) for a taught Masters is €40k (Male €36k, female €44k) and €116k for a Ph.D. (€118k for a male and €115k for a female). For a representative student completing a full-time undergraduate degree the net Exchequer benefit is estimated at €62,000 (male €75k, female €51k), on average per graduate.

Distinctive Features of the IoT/TU Sector

According to Erskine, S. & Harmon, D. (2020: 11), “Institutes of Technology appear to be more willing to recognise competences and experiences outside of education than Universities in admitting students to their programmes.” Erskine, S. & Harmon, D. (2020: 55) also notes

that “students in Institutes of Technology appear to get along better with their teaching staff than students in Universities. Similar patterns emerge for part-time students over full-time students, and for postgraduates over undergraduates”.

DES (2019) has stated that in 2017 there were 16,649 part-time students in university, and 23,452 part-time students in IoTs. Hence part-time students are significantly more likely to attend the IoT/TU sector as universities have 1.33 times the number of students overall compared to the IoT/TU sector (HEA, 2017). Part-time education is an important entry point to HE for students from under-represented groups especially mature students.

According to Liston et. al. (2018), IoTs have more male entrants than female (in contrast to the situation in the universities). Guidance education is important before and during all stages of education. On average 14% of students do not progress from one year of their course to the next. The rates are especially high in Level 6 and Level 7, and in the IoTs. However, there is no statistical difference in non-progression in the IoTs vis-à-vis the universities when you adjust for the more diverse student population in the IoTs. The strongest predictor of non-progression is prior educational attainment. Access to comprehensive guidance support, in school/FE/HE and community settings, can reduce the levels of non-completion of HE courses by students.

HEA (2019c) has found that 15% of graduates from IoTs attended DEIS schools compared to just 8% of university graduates. 7% of IoT graduates attended fee paying schools compared to 13% of university graduates.

According to Thorn (2018), the IoTs have 22% of their students registered as flexible learners (part-time, distance and e-learning) compared to 17% for the universities. The distinction comes in terms of socio-economic class: 31% of students in the institutes come from the non-manual, semi-skilled or unskilled group compared to 21% in the universities (Thorn, 2018).

As stated in Phulphagar & Kane (2020: 2)

“Over half of students enrolled in Institutes of Technology receive a SUSI grant...while between 35% and 45% of students in universities receive a SUSI grant.”

HEA (2019b) has found that 100% of universities have many more ‘affluent’ students than ‘disadvantaged’ students. In the case of the IoTs the same figure is just 29%.

Collins et al. (2020: 16) stated that

“Academics in the non-university sector do more teaching than their counterparts in the university sector. While academics in the non-university sector in Ireland spend less time on

research than their counterparts in the universities, they outperform the European average for their sector in this regard.”

This means that staff in the IoT/TU sector have less time to provide one-to-one support to students.

According to HEA (2017), there were 222,618 enrolments in higher education in Ireland in 2015/16. Universities had 1.73 times the staff of the IoT sector despite having only 1.33 times the number of students.

Recommendations

The TUI would like to make the following recommendations to the HEA:

The size of SUSI grants, and eligibility criteria for same, should be significantly expanded. The TUI welcomes the current ongoing review of SUSI.

Exchequer funding of higher education must be dramatically increased.

Funding models must take account of the unique role the IoT/TU sector plays in higher education access.

Greater recognition of, and visibility of, the FE sector is vital due to the essential role it plays in supporting under-represented groups to access levels 5 and 6 of the NFQ, and also frequently then accessing levels 7 and 8 of the NFQ.

Additional staffing of guidance services in schools, FE colleges, HE institutions and in the Adult Guidance Service would be helpful.

The Points System needs to be reformed.

More progression pathways should be recognised.