

Trinity Green Campus Education Subcommittee: Working to remove roadblocks to education faced by students in Direct Provision (Student Group)

As highlighted in the 2018 Progress Review of the National Access Plan, we can observe improvements in accession to higher education amongst socio-economically disadvantaged students. However, progress seems to be much slower amongst 'extremely disadvantaged' backgrounds, with only 55 students from this demographic accessing higher education. Thus, in our vision, a greater emphasis on students from Direct Provision, who are part of this group, is crucial in order to achieve a more equitable education system overall. Further, access to education is crucial amongst this group as, by their very nature, they are more likely to experience social exclusion and marginalization.

Amongst the many barriers that stop asylum seekers from accessing or completing higher education, financial burdens are huge, with the TU Dublin Cost of Living Guide (2019/20) estimating monthly accommodation and cost of living for students coming in at €1,352 nationally, excluding fees. Although ameliorated through the removal of international fees and the introduction of the Student Grant Scheme for Asylum Seekers, this remains a big problem. Particularly, the former can be improved by extending non-EU fees, the Student Grant Scheme and (should they meet all the criteria) any other maintenance grants to asylum seekers who have not met the requirement of being in the country for 3 years. The costs associated with acquiring the necessary technology (e.g laptops) to partake in higher education also remains a problem. The schemes already put in place by the government have been helpful, such as the doubling of the SAF funding, but they need to be extended to cover all marginalized groups.

Further, accommodation remains a big problem, especially since Direct Provision centers are located so remotely. Extremely long commutes that make students wake up at unbearable hours are a strong disincentive for students in Direct Provision who may be considering higher education. We hope that as the government works towards re-structuring or abolishing Direct Provision, that they consider the importance of accommodation located close to educational centers and universities. In the mean time though, we urge that the 'as-the-crow-flies' qualifying measure should be reconsidered, as it discriminates against students in rural areas, such as those living in Direct Provision centers, where roads are less direct. Exemptions and decreased rates for students in rural areas should be implemented more generally. A free travel card for grant recipients would also go a long way.

Another noticeable pre-entry barrier is formed by the lack of information and guidance that individuals in Direct Provision have with regards to accessing higher education. This is currently our subcommittee's focus as it has been raised by various stakeholders. Especially, those who have not experienced secondary education in Ireland, are unaware of higher education options and support as well as navigating systems such as the CAO. While we are currently focused on improving the spread of information for scholarships in Trinity, it would be extremely helpful for the government to provide some form of workshops and subsequent personal guidance and support to inform people in Direct Provision about the higher education system in Ireland and the grants and supports that they are eligible to request. A lot of this work already falls upon officers in the IRC, thus, greater support and funding for this branch of the organization could be hugely beneficial.

The effectiveness of removing these barriers, however, could be hindered if efforts aren't made to provide asylum seekers with the support necessary to attain a good level of English. Not only is this crucial for their social inclusion, but equally so in their efforts to access higher education. This area is often left to community organizations and NGO's and thus, doesn't ensure an equal opportunity for all asylum seekers to learn the language. A state-led program that provides asylum seekers with English lessons and practice is a crucial pre-step in their access to higher education.

Lastly, these supports, when implemented need to be extended to all protection applicants, including those with a Stamp 4, 'permission to work' status. This includes the already implemented changes to fees and changes to PLC courses.