



**Ibec submission to
Higher Education
Authority on the
National Plan for Equity
of Access to Higher
Education 2014-2017.**

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- **Financial Services Ireland**
- **Food and Drink Industry Ireland**
- **ICT Ireland**
- **Telecommunications and Internet Federation**
- **Irish Medical Devices Association**
- **PharmaChemical Ireland**
- **Retail Ireland**
- **Small Firms Association**
- **Industrial Products.**

Submission on a new National Plan for Access to Higher Education.

Ibec Submission

October 2014

Introduction

Ibec welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the development of a new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education for 2014-2017. The development of a higher education system in which no competent person is denied a place because he or she comes from a disadvantaged background is driven by both social and economic imperatives.

Clearly, the higher education system fulfils a vital role for society and individuals that extends well beyond the utilitarian one of satisfying enterprise's needs for skills or research. However, as Ireland's business organisation, Ibec is arguing that the implementation of an effective access strategy is essential for maximising the potential of Ireland's human capital.

Investing in the future is one of Ibec's key business priorities. In its recently launched campaign, ***An Ireland that works***, Ibec has called for an increase in effective investment in education and skills and a sustainable funding model for the third-level sector. It also calls for the implementation of a co-ordinated strategy for further education and training, and a modernisation of the second-level curriculum so school leavers have core employability skills. These seemingly disparate policy issues are all closely linked to the access agenda.

Before commenting on detail of the consultation paper, it is worth highlighting the progress that has been made in been made in the two previous national plans for promoting equity of access to higher education developed in the HEA (2005 and 2008. Participation by target socio-economic groups increased from 27% to 30% of those from non-manual worker backgrounds and from 33% to 36% for those from semi and unskilled worker backgrounds (including late and mature entrants).

This progress may seem particularly slow. However, it should be acknowledged that differences in higher education participation are also a symptom of social inequalities that are outside the direct control of higher education institutions (HEIs) and the HEA.

Improving access to higher education continuum must be also be viewed as part of an education continuum. The origins of successful access outcomes can be traced as far back as the the quality of early childhood education and the inculcation of an appetite for learning throughout the system.

Proposed goals for consultation and development

The consultation paper proposes four main goals for the next National Access Plan. The four goals proposed are:

- To promote access for disadvantaged groups to higher education.
- To put in place coherent pathways from second level education, from further education and other non-traditional entry routes to higher education.
- To increase progression and completion by target groups.
- To support evidence-based policy formulation

Ibec supports these goals but would also argue that the challenging of promoting 'access' is closely related to that of stimulating an 'appetite' for higher education, particularly amongst certain socio-economic groups.

The consultation paper put a number of key questions to stakeholders.

1. Despite progress, some groups are not accessing higher education to the same degree as other groups. Why do you think this is and what supports your view?

As the consultation paper points out, the impact of family background and social disadvantage on educational outcomes alone, while important, can only partially compensate for early disadvantage

It was instructive to note the amount of media attention around the consultation paper which focused on the contrast between much higher participation rates in the farming sector compared with manual and lower skilled workers. This prompted a well-rehearsed and divisive debate which suggested that participation was based on the ability of farmers and the self-employed to access third level grants and free fees.

Whatever about inconsistencies within the design of the grant assessment system, this debate missed an important point. While access is obviously closely related to financial means, there are other important dimensions around cultural norms and aspirations of different socio-economic groups.

Historically Irish citizens have valued education highly. However there are areas within Irish towns and cities, characterised by varying levels of disadvantage, where educational aspirations are not shared to the same extent. There has already been useful research in this regard¹. We need to broaden this research to explore why certain socio economic groups outside the more obvious middle class catchment areas, are well represented in higher education.

There are also certain groups, such as people with disabilities, that face particular challenges. Again, the higher education system cannot address this challenge in isolation. The role of other factors and agencies also need to feature as part of longer term solutions. There needs to be a co-ordinated approach for people with disabilities to address the training and education (in some cases) and access to employment to ensure they have the same opportunities to for higher education places and compete for jobs in the labour market.

¹ HEA (2010), Hidden Disadvantage? A Study on the Low Participation in Higher Education by the Non-Manual Group

A fully integrated approach to education, training, including conversion training and employment, needs to be formulated in line with the Action Plans for Jobs/Pathways to Work which specifically includes people with disabilities.

Recommendation 1: HEA to commission further qualitative research to understand the disparities between participation rates between different socio economic groups

Recommendation 2: Ensure that the new National Plan for Access to Higher Education is aligned with the National Disability Strategy implementation plan

2. With regard to the roles of other stakeholders, how can the HEA and higher education institutions most effectively support increased access?

Ireland's education and training system has, in the past, operated in relatively disconnected silos. This has increased the risk of system failures in the transitions between primary, secondary, further and higher education, which all have an impact on access. For example, premature specialisation and a negative first year experience can lead to an unsuccessful transition between second and third level education and low student retention. By broadening access routes we can avoid inflated point requirements and the artificial and premature specialisation which follow.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) and the HEA have a responsibility to provide greater leadership on broader education issues such as the development of an effective early childhood education system, literacy and numeracy strategy, junior cycle reform, second level guidance, ongoing secondary curriculum reform, the importance of a cohesive further education and training (FET) sector and reform of the third level entry system. HEIs have the analytical capacity and competence to highlight the importance of these reforms and their impact on higher education access.

For example, research by Heckman² and others shows educational inequalities occur earlier in the system. This reinforces the value of cognitive and social stimulation for young children in reducing inequality and promoting economic growth. Early childhood development is a key determinant of subsequent performance and motivation at all levels of education. Investment at this stage is comparatively more successful at addressing educational disadvantage than later interventions. Levels of early childhood education in Ireland are relatively low by comparison with other European countries and though this may appear to be outside the scope of this consultation, HEIs have a responsibility to provide leadership on an issue which is critical to their access agenda.

HEIs have committed to to broaden entry routes under the Transitions Project. This could give clarity to students on course content and learning outcomes. Additionally, as part of the first year experience there is a need to develop essential, transferable skills in ICT, Academic English and maths through peer assisted learning programmes or 'Learning to Learn' in third level modules.

To meet the needs of diverse learners with diverse schedules, it is important that a range of programme delivery methods are offered. This will help reduce costs and improve flexibility of access, but will also require significant preparation in advance by those delivering the programmes. As important is the flexibility around when courses are delivered and examined – it does not always suit to have strict adherence to an academic year and so flexibility is also required in this regard. This is particularly the

² <http://heckmanequation.org/>

case for disadvantaged students and students with disabilities. The learning from course provision under Springboard should be helpful in this regard.

Previous research also indicates that in the past, particularly for males from lower non-manual backgrounds, the pull of the labour market was an important process underlying their non-participation in higher education. As the economy moves into recovery, this trend could re-emerge.

Recommendation 3: HEIs and HEA should provide leadership to other levels of education system by highlighting the potential impact of ongoing reforms on improving access.

Recommendation 4: HEIs should improve supports to first year students, particularly in the transferable and 'learning to learn' skills

Recommendation 5: HEA should incentivise a flexible programme delivery methods

Recommendation 6: Business organisations should work with higher education on campaigns such as College Awareness Week in highlighting the employment opportunities associated with higher education to traditional non-participants.

3. Section four proposes four main goals, with a larger number of associated actions, we would welcome your views on these. In your view, which actions should be prioritised and are there other goals/actions that need to be included?

Ten years ago, the OECD stated³, 'We do not believe that with the economic and fiscal realities facing Ireland it will be possible to develop the globally competitive tertiary education system and research capability that it seeks by relying on state funding alone. We have therefore reached the conclusion that a policy to charge fees to students pursuing first degrees should be re-introduced.'

Since then student fees have been the subject of a highly politicised debate. The opposition to fees, much of it based on the grounds of social equity, has not helped the access agenda. Ireland has *de facto* student fees – the so-called 'student contribution' will reach €3,000 in 2015.

More recently the Government established a group that has been charged with identifying and considering the issues relating to long term sustainable funding of higher education which is due to report at the end of 2015. This appears to be an exercise in 'kicking the can down the road'. The main policy options were set out five years ago by the Department of Education⁴ and the case for an income contingent student loan system remains compelling on both economic and social grounds.

The most persuasive argument for introducing cost-sharing is the absolute need for additional revenue for third level education. A significant increase in third level students has led to critical budgetary pressures which are not easily resolved in light of competing priorities for the use of public funds.

It can also be argued that those who benefit should contribute to the costs of higher education which is never, in fact, 'free'. Even in countries where private contributions

³ REVIEW OF NATIONAL POLICIES FOR EDUCATION: Review of Higher Education in Ireland EXAMINERS' REPORT, September 2004

⁴ <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Policy-Options-for-New-Student-Contributions-in-Higher-Education-Report-to-the-Minister.pdf>

are low, higher education is paid mostly by taxpayers, whether or not they benefit from it. As the OECD has pointed out, **the equity objective is not free tertiary education but a system in which no competent person is denied a place because he or she comes from a disadvantage background.** Public savings from individual contributions can be channelled to improve equity of access.

Ibec supports the concept of top-up fees and income contingent loans. This is in line with the OECD's recommendation to the Irish government in 2004. The loans reduce the liquidity constraints faced by individuals (insurance against inability to repay) and improve progressiveness of the overall system – lower public subsidy for graduates with higher private returns.

This obviously begs a number of questions around how the level of the top-up fee is set, how the loan fund is capitalised, what body provides the loan, how are loan repayments collected, what is the rate of interest charged, what is the repayment period etc. However, given the wealth of international evidence on this issue, it should be possible develop a system that is sustainable, equitable and broadens access.

Re-introduction of fees must be undertaken in the context of a sound means-tested student grant system. The major components of such a system should:

- Ensure that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are fully supported during their time in third level education. An often overlooked aspect of the 'fees debate' is that living expenses are the single biggest barrier to accessing third level education in Ireland.
- Should have a transparent and fair means-tested element to ensure that the system provides support to those who need it most. Ensuring transparency and fairness will require the use of more comprehensive indicators of socio-economic disadvantage. These should be developed as part of the design of the scheme.

Recommendation 7: The Government should introduce an income contingent student fees and loan system with a transparent and fair means-tested element to ensure that the system provides support to those who need it most.

4. What actions should be taken to ensure that there is more consistent representation from under-represented groups across all fields of study, e.g. programmes leading directly to the professions.

Previous HEA commissioned research⁵ indicates that groups who did not progress to higher education 'had negative constructions of the advice received at school. Guidance was variously absent, only focused on certain groups of students (such as the 'honours' class), narrowly focused, or directed away from higher education. Some felt they would have liked more help in actually evaluating the range of post-school options, rather than just supplying information.

'Furthermore, parents did not have experience of higher education, while siblings and peers were also not necessarily familiar with the higher process and choices therein. Hence, they were far more reliant on the supports and encouragement available from their school and these supports played a much more significant role in the choices made by these young people.'

⁵ HEA (2010), Hidden Disadvantage? A Study on the Low Participation in Higher Education by the Non-Manual Group

While it is unfair to suggest the question posed above implies that programmes leading directly to the professions are in some ways superior, it does prompt a consideration of the standing of vocational education compared to academic education. While the Irish FET sector has to work out its own response to improving FET and its standing in Irish society, higher education has an important role in this area.

For example, FET has a critical function in providing access and progression routes for individuals to continue their studies at institutes of technology or universities. The higher and further education sectors should work together to develop regional networks which include employers, public employment services and enterprise development agencies and higher education institutions by providing clearer and better local education pathways. The introduction of the 'earn and learn model' through advanced apprenticeships (up to level 10) across a broad range of professions, as recommended by the Government's Apprenticeship Review Group, also has the potential to improve the representation from under-represented groups across all fields of study.

Recommendation 8: The Department of Education should conduct a comprehensive review of secondary school guidance to including an assessment of the effectiveness of the current delivery model.

Recommendation 9: SOLAS and HEA should develop a more detailed engagement framework around the implementation of the FET strategy, including the introduction of joint advanced apprenticeships

5. Section five of the document proposes a number of quantitative targets and indicators to support monitoring progress on access. Are there other targets or indicators you think should be included and, if so, how should these be measured?

Setting targets for under-represented groups in higher education is a key element of national access strategies. However, there is also an inherent danger in an approach where 'the measure becomes more important than what is being measured'. Highly granular quantitative targets can lead to unintended consequences and a 'box-ticking' culture which does little to improve access overall.

Recommendation 10: The suggestion in the consultation paper that the exploration of opportunities for data sharing for the purposes of policy formulation with stakeholders such as the CAO, SUSI and SOLAS should be implemented as soon as possible.

6. What qualitative indicators also need to be considered to measure performance in increasing equity of access to higher education?

As the Consultation Paper suggests a more comprehensive understanding of the reasons why students do not participate in higher education and the various scenarios and interplay of factors that may lead them to take this decision is required. The Higher Education System Performance report also highlights a rise in non-progression rates for students from target socio-economic groups, in particular those undertaking awards at levels 6 and 7. The two issues are obviously closely connected and warrant further research

Recommendation 11: HEA should commission research to increase our understanding of the reasons for higher rates of non-completion among particular groups and the most effective measures necessary to address this.

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