


SIPTU Submission to National Access Plan **2022-2026**

18th June 2021





**Fairness
at Work
and
Justice in
Society**

The Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) is Ireland's largest trade union, representing 180,000 members who work in or have retired from a broad range of industries across the private and public sectors. SIPTU is focused on attaining and retaining decent terms and conditions for all workers, together with the conditions for fairness and equality in society to allow everyone achieve their potential. Access to education plays a crucial role in broadening opportunities, at both the individual and societal levels. SIPTU welcomes the chance to contribute to the Higher Education Authority's consultation process on improving access to higher education. The key issues that SIPTU believes need to be addressed in this area are set out below.

The lasting impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

The corona virus pandemic has led to a shut-down of society and much of the economy for over a year. Third level education was propelled online, as on-site teaching was largely ruled out by public health experts. Secondary level students have also spent a protracted period learning from home. As the vaccination programme expands, students are hoping for a return to education on campus in the autumn. However, hybrid or blended learning, involving face-to-face interaction combined with digital tools and platforms, will remain a standard feature of third level education in the future. Clearly, the introduction and/or ongoing deployment of blended learning and/or new ways of working that could impact on terms and conditions of employment, needs to be negotiated with the relevant trade union.

The experience to date has raised concerns about a digital divide between those who have access to high-speed broadband and computer equipment and those who do not and has highlighted variations in digital skills among learners. A recent paper has found that "one-in-six students come from areas with poor broadband coverage, with large disparities by geography and by HEI (Higher Education Institute)....students from the poorest broadband coverage areas are more likely to be socioeconomically

disadvantaged"¹. SIPTU urges government action to deal with uneven internet connectivity across the country and specific funding to help individuals who are experiencing technology difficulties.



There is a risk that vulnerable students may be put off going to third level education or may be demotivated or at risk of dropping out based on feelings of isolation and loneliness during lockdown. SIPTU stresses the need for adequate supports, such as IT training, catch-up classes and access to free guidance and counselling services for students who are struggling so that they are equipped with digital know-how and resilience and can engage in learning in a way that best meets their needs.

Participation of target groups in Higher Education

Overall enrolments in Higher Education increased by 7,194 to 235,697, comparing the academic year 2018/19 and 2019/20². However, the National Access Plan 2015-2019, which was extended for two years to 2021, targeted an increase in Higher Education participation among specific groups.

Disadvantaged Groups

An improvement in the rate of participation in Higher Education among groups classified as socio-economically-disadvantaged was recorded in the progress report from 2018³. The original targets were increased to 32% for non-manual and 40% for semi/unskilled manual worker groups respectively because of the gains that were recorded up to 2016/17⁴. However, an Equal Access Survey found that full

¹<https://educationaltechnologyjournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41239-021-00262-1> p1

²<https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/data-for-download/2019-20-enrolment-data-for-download/> and <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/data-for-download/2018-19-enrolment-data-for-download/>

³<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/12/HEA-Progress-Review-NAP-2021.pdf> p18, NAP target for 2019 for non-manual worker group 30%, progress review outcome 27% from 2016/17;

NAP Base data from 2012/13, 23%;

NAP target for 2019 for semi/unskilled manual group 35%, progress review outcome 36% from 2016/17; NAP Base data from 2012/13, 26%

⁴Ibid

time new entrant respondents from non-manual, semi and unskilled socio-economic groups hovered at around 20/21% between 2016/17 and 2017/18⁵. The figures need to be updated to assess the current picture. SIPTU believes the scale of ambition should be augmented in the new National Access Plan given the significant disparity that continues to exist between students from relatively poorer backgrounds compared to those from well-off households.

Recently published data from 2018/19 shows that there are 4.9 students from disadvantaged areas to every 10 students from affluent areas in Higher Education. Courses which promise higher incomes such as finance, banking, and medicine are dominated by relatively wealthy students. 19% of students attending childcare courses, which have lower



pay prospects, come from disadvantaged areas⁶. The Irish Times analysis of 'Feeder Schools' shows that in 2020: "Of the 10 schools sending the highest rate of students to high-points courses (courses at State universities, teacher training colleges and other colleges such as the Royal College of Surgeons), six were fee-paying⁷, and four were non-fee paying". This reality shows that money matters when it comes to getting ahead to Third-Level education in Ireland. SIPTU believes the issues of low-pay; precarious work; the crisis of supply and affordability in housing; access to affordable public services like healthcare; the excessive cost of childcare must all be tackled to improve peoples' prospects of ultimately accessing Higher Education.

The calculated grades system which was put in place because of the Corona virus pandemic appears to have brought about progress as regards progression from DEIS or disadvantaged schools: "In 2020, 6,662 or 63.5 per cent of Deis students progressed to third-level, an increase of 746 students who secured a place in 2019, when 57 per cent of Deis students progressed⁸. Lessons must be learned from the Ireland's recent experience of reconfiguring the Leaving Certificate process. Overall, the race for CAO points appears to favour relatively wealthier students with resources. SIPTU recommends a comprehensive examination of Higher Education places to determine whether more are needed to ease competition. Proactive supports to help students stay in Higher Education and complete their studies are also required. There should also be more emphasis on alternatives to Higher Education, through Further Education and Training and apprenticeships, which can provide good job prospects and offer a pathway to Higher Education at a later stage (see below).

Mature Students and part-time/flexible learning

Targets for the participation of mature students in Higher Education had not materialised at the pace anticipated nor did involvement on a part-time/flexible basis when the government's progress report emerged in 2018⁹. SIPTU believes that all necessary measures should be put in place to provide good employment prospects for workers, including through skills-development in response to changes in technology, society, the economy, and climate change. For many adults who are working and/or combining caring responsibilities, the option of returning to third level education for necessary upskilling or to change career to a sustainable path can only be considered if course provision is available on a flexible basis¹⁰.

A review of part-time education from 2012 noted that there were fewer part-time courses than full-time ones in Higher Education and that the range of subject areas covered was also narrower, with science and information technology less common than the social sciences, business, and law¹¹. In

⁵<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/01/Higher-Education-Authority-Key-Facts-Figures-2017-18.pdf> p23

⁶<https://hea.ie/2020/12/07/new-hea-data-provides-in-depth-insight-into-the-socio-economic-profile-of-our-universities-and-institutes-of-technology/>

⁷<https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.irishtimes.com%2Fnews%2Feducation%2Fmore-students-from-deis-schools-progressed-to-third-level-in-2020-1.4450533&data=04%7C01%7C%7C08562cdf73b44895af9108d92b62da96%7Cb47628df374d4176b661a9858753cbac%7C0%7C0%7C637588525835571584%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyWljoic4wLjAwMDAilCJlQjoiV2luMzliLjB1I6ik1haWwLlCJXVCi6Mn0%3D%7C1000&data=t%2FYTgZXLGkFGTqGWWkj7Whlk%2BmPUov1HHQtiz1hhEs%3D&reserved=0>

⁸ibid

⁹<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/12/HEA-Progress-Review-NAP-2021.pdf> p18

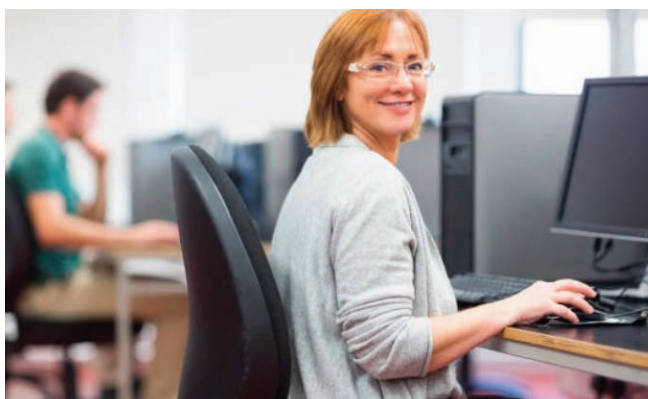
NAP target for 2019 for full time mature students to higher education, 16%, progress review outcome 9% from 2016/17; NAP Base data from 2012/13, 13%;

NAP target for 2019 for full time and part-time/flexible (combined) mature entrants to higher education 24% progress review outcome 16% from 2016/17; NAP Base data from 2012/13, 19%;

NAP target for 2019 % of students studying on a part-time or flexible basis (undergraduate and postgraduate), 22%; progress review outcome 19.8% from 2016/17; NAP Base data from 2012/13, 22%;

¹⁰<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/Part-time-And-Flexible-Higher-Education-in-Ireland.pdf>

2017/18, 17% of all enrolments (undergraduate and postgraduate) in Higher Education were part-time compared to 17.4% in 2012/13¹². 8% of full-time undergraduate new entrants were mature (23 years of age or over on), while 83% of part-time undergraduate new entrants were mature in



2017/18. This compares with 13% and 90% in 2012/13¹³. This lack of movement and slippage represents significant unrealised potential. The issue needs to be re-evaluated and addressed under the new National Access Plan 2022-2026. There should be more ambitious targets for part-time/flexible education and for the participation of mature students to match the need for lifelong learning in an economy that is increasingly knowledge-based.

Unlike the CAO system for full-time study, there is no currently streamlined process to apply for part-time and flexible-learning courses in Higher Education. The development of a central application systems for both part-time and full-time higher education would help prospective students navigate the range of options that are available to them¹⁴. SIPTU believes an expanded range of part-time courses should be provided in Higher Education and a simplified, user-friendly application process should be put in place.

The Key Issue of Cost

Most full-time undergraduate students in Ireland do not have to pay tuition fees for publicly funded third-level courses. However, the student contribution or registration fee, which covers the cost of student services and examinations, stands at a maximum of €3,000 per annum for undergraduates. The programme for government says the rate will not be increased but there is no commitment to its reduction. A European Commission report from 2018 showed Irish first-time undergraduate students in Ireland face among the highest student fees out of 38 participating countries (including 28 EU Members States), covering 43 higher education systems – only England and Wales were higher¹⁵. Financial obstacles represent a significant barrier to accessing third level education. SIPTU believes the gradual reduction and abolition of the student contribution fee is a goal that should be pursued to boost participation. This should also apply to apprenticeship places which are charged on a pro rata basis, depending on the amount of time spend in an Institute of Technology.

The issue of financial affordability is also key to enable part-time/flexible learning. The 2012 review identified that the lack of financial support for part-time students was a major barrier to expanding part-time participation in Higher Education¹⁶. Since then, the Springboard+ programme, which offers free and subsidised courses in Higher Education, has adapted to cater for part-time students who are in employment, although applicants on a qualifying social welfare payment continue to be prioritised for limited places¹⁷. There is an expectation that, for 2021, 10,000 places across 250 courses will be offered¹⁸. SIPTU advocates a further expansion of the model in the years ahead to provide more opportunities for workers, the unemployed and returners to upskill and reskill in areas of skills-need, without facing the obstacle of cost.

Some low-income part-time and full-time students may be able to access the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) if they are experiencing financial difficulties while studying¹⁹. However,

¹¹Ibid p28

¹²<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/01/Higher-Education-Authority-Key-Facts-Figures-2017-18.pdf> and <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/HEA-Key-Facts-and-Figures-2012-13.pdf>

¹³<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/01/Higher-Education-Authority-Key-Facts-Figures-2017-18.pdf> p26

¹⁴<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/Part-time-And-Flexible-Higher-Education-in-Ireland.pdf> p29

¹⁵<file:///C:/Users/Imulligan/Downloads/ECAE18001ENN.en.pdf> p9-10.

¹⁶<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/Part-time-And-Flexible-Higher-Education-in-Ireland.pdf> p27

¹⁷<https://springboardcourses.ie/eligibility>

¹⁸<https://hea.ie/2021/01/21/springboard-course-call/>

the reality remains that most students who want to study part-time in Higher Education must finance this out of their own pockets. The Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), which provides maintenance and/or fee grants, is only available for full-time undergraduate courses²⁰. Part-time and full-time students can claim tax relief at 20% on tuition fees (including the student contribution). However, this is subject to a maximum claim of €7,000 and there is a disregard of €3,000 for full-time courses and €1,500 for part-time courses²⁰. There are limited circumstances in which postgraduate students can get some financial support through the student grant system for tuition fees²¹.



The call for tuition fees to be waived for first-time, part-time undergraduate students in Higher Education who are on means-tested social-welfare or unemployment payments dates as far back as the White Paper on Adult Education in 2000. In 2004, the OECD recommended equal treatment for part-time and full-time students in respect of fees and maintenance grants²². SIPTU believes the current piecemeal and incomplete approach should be replaced by a common policy to reduce and ultimately eliminate tuition fees for part-time courses and to give part-time students access to the SUSI grant system. The cost implications for the Exchequer of such a shift may be invoked as a deterrent but should be weighed against the considerable costs of inaction. The link between educational attainment and job opportunities has been widely established in academic literature and 'the cost of failing to intervene will be even greater, such as welfare dependency, increased social unrest and crime, poor physical and mental health, and insecure housing'²³.

Progression from Further Education to Higher Education

The National Access Plan progress report from 2018 recognised that progression to Higher Education by holders of further education qualifications was also behind the ambition set out, reaching 7.3% in 2016/17 compared to the target of 10% for 2019²⁴. The progress review from 2018 noted that: 'challenges remain in establishing transparent supporting structures for building coherent pathways from FET to HE'. It further stated that: 'More work is needed in advancing progress in relation to the development of access and foundation courses by higher education institutions for delivery through further education institutions. While it is a stated national policy, it does not appear to be a policy that is being aspired to across the sector'²⁵. SIPTU suggests the new National Access Plan should review progress in this area and make proposals for improvement.

There were 179,058 learners enrolled in FET courses in 2019; 131,097 of them partially or fully completed their course(s). 86,847 of these learner completions were certified. 45,177 (30.8%) of learners had a lower secondary education or below when enrolling in a FET course. One third of all enrolments were aged under 25²⁶. SIPTU believes there is further scope to increase participation among older cohorts and those with low educational qualifications. This would give more people a platform from which to further develop their skills, perhaps ultimately up to Higher Education should they so wish.

The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Simon Harris, has signalled that a single portal should be in place for the 2021/22 academic year to allow students apply for higher and further education options at the same time, helping to build parity of esteem. The prospect of a 'common credit system' to allow students transfer from courses in further education to higher education has also been indicated²⁷. SIPTU welcomes these initiatives and calls for their implementation as soon as possible.

¹⁹<https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/student-assistance-fund/>

²⁰<https://www.revenue.ie/en/personal-tax-credits-reliefs-and-exemptions/education/tuition-fees-paid-for-third-level-education/how-do-you-calculate-the-relief.aspx>

²¹https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/third_level_education/fees_and_supports_for_third_level_education/postgraduate_student_grant.html

²²<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/Part-time-And-Flexible-Higher-Education-in-Ireland.pdf> p26 and 27

²³<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/Part-time-And-Flexible-Higher-Education-in-Ireland.pdf> p10

²⁴<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/12/HEA-Progress-Review-NAP-2021.pdf> p18

²⁵ibid P13 and 14

²⁶https://www.solas.ie/70398/x/1ba83e5971/15429_solas_facts_report_2019_web.pdf p1

Apprenticeships

SIPTU has long been an advocate of expanding the apprenticeship model in Ireland, including to childcare, the hospitality industry, administration, and the green economy²⁸. Combining on-the-job and classroom training is a prominent feature of education in countries such as Germany and Denmark which operate successful 'dual systems'. Earning and learning can be an attractive model for many in building a career. Higher Education through Universities and Colleges should not be seen as the only route to meaningful qualifications.

A Review group on Apprenticeship Training was established in 2013 which was followed by the development of 35 new apprenticeships in areas such as finance, engineering, biopharma and logistics²⁹. SIPTU welcomes this expansion and the publication of the Action Plan for Apprenticeships which sets a further ambitious target to reach 10,000 new apprenticeship registrations per annum by 2025³⁰. Reaching this target will require resources and promotion. The previous target to achieve 31,000 cumulative new apprentice registrations by the end of 2020 fell short, with the actual number at 25,815 registrations³¹. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on the economy and employment, particularly in sectors such as aviation and hospitality, which may restrain the capacity of employers to recruit apprentices in the short-term³². SIPTU is adamant that the target envisaged for a minimum of 750 apprentice registrations per annum by the end of 2025 through government departments, local authorities and state agencies should be fulfilled³³.



Furthermore, SIPTU contends that the appropriate pay levels for apprentices should be set in consultation with the relevant trade union(s) for the sector, and not just by the employer.

Further work required to boost Lifelong Learning

The definition of lifelong learning used by Eurostat encompasses: "all purposeful learning activities, whether formal, non-formal or informal, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences. The intention or aim to learn is the critical point that distinguishes these activities from non-learning activities, such as cultural or sporting activities". However, the data covers only formal and non-formal learning (not informal) of adults aged 25-64.

While Ireland's rate of 12.6% was above the EU average of 10.8% in 2019, many peer countries were far ahead, for instance, Sweden (34.3%), Finland (29%), Denmark (25.3%), France (19.5%), the Netherlands (19.5%) and Luxembourg (19.1%)³⁴. In quarter four 2019 there were 381,000 persons engaged in lifelong learning in Ireland, up by 46,700 from 2018. 71% were third level graduates; almost a quarter (23%) had either upper secondary or Further Education and Training (FET) qualifications. 25-34-year-olds and 35-44-year-olds making up the bulk of participants. The majority were in employment, predominantly in full-time employment³⁵. SIPTU recommends a targeted review to learn from best practice abroad and to identify further initiatives that could be taken to boost lifelong learning to match the best performing countries in Europe. In this context, action to improve the recognition of prior learning across Further Education and Training and in Higher Education should be accelerated.

²⁷<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/single-portal-for-cao-and-further-education-aims-to-tackle-academic-snobbery-1.4460639>

²⁸https://siptu.ie/media/publications/file_17722_en.pdf

²⁹<https://apprenticeship.ie/>

³⁰[file:///C:/Users/Imulligan/Downloads/132640_00c012f4-531c-4578-b8bb-179db4351939%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Imulligan/Downloads/132640_00c012f4-531c-4578-b8bb-179db4351939%20(1).pdf)

³¹ibid p9

³²ibid p11

³³ibid p28

³⁴https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Adult_learning_statistics&oldid=480618

³⁵https://www.regionalskills.ie/imagelibrary/regional%20skills%20-%20national/publications-/lifelong-learning-among-adults_q4-2019.pdf p3

Funding/Investment for Third Level

A report by the Parliamentary Budgetary Office from 2019 estimated that 'funding per undergraduate student (full time, part time, remote and FETAC) enrolled in 2019 was 50% lower than in 2008. While total undergraduate student numbers have increased by 50% since 2008, funding has not recovered and remains 6% below 2008 levels³⁶.

Notwithstanding additional funding provided in July 2020 by the Department to deal with the Covid 19 crisis, the Irish Universities Association has highlighted that 'real financial challenges remain in 2021 as the significant loss of non-Exchequer income streams materialise and the additional COVID-19 related costs continue to be incurred³⁷. SIPTU calls for the trend of under-investment in Higher Education to be urgently reversed to protect education standards and enable institutions grow and develop for the future.

The Cassels report on financing Higher Education signalled the need for an annual investment on 2015 levels of €600 million in core funding by 2021, and €1 billion by 2030. Three ways of generating this income were identified: (1) increased public investment in core funding while abolishing the student contribution charge and ensuring free tuition fees for part-time and full-time students; (2) increased state investment while retaining the student contribution charge and (3) state spending would be supported by a student loans system whereby upfront fees would be abolished for all and repayment would only commence once a graduate's income reached a certain threshold³⁸. SIPTU supports the first of these alternatives, i.e. publicly funded Higher Education, and is frustrated that successive governments have yet to definitively adopt this approach. The Cassells report has been referred to the European Commission for an economic evaluation, the results of which have been awaited since the second quarter of 2020³⁹. Minister Simon Harris has indicated that a final report will be released in the next few months⁴⁰. SIPTU is calling on the government to act without delay to underpin long-term and sustainable funding for Higher Education.

Conclusion

SIPTU is calling for new targets and measures to increase the participation of socio-economically disadvantaged groups, part-time/flexible and mature students in the new National Access Plan 2022-2026 for Higher Education, thereby strengthening employment prospects and lifelong learning. The key issue of cost must be addressed through the reduction of student fees and wider measures to ensure adequate income and a sustainable cost of living in the economy. Links between Higher Education and Further Education and Training, and Apprenticeships, should be improved to promote skills development throughout the population. Action is needed to tackle the digital divide which has come into focus during the Covid 19 pandemic. The funding of Higher Education sector should be placed on a long-term, sustainable footing.


³⁶https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBudgetOffice/2019/2019-11-25_an-overview-of-tertiary-education-funding-in-ireland_en.pdf p3

³⁷https://www.iaa.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/IAA_Budget2021_Submission.pdf

³⁸<https://www.education.ie/en/publications/policy-reports/investing-in-national-ambition-a-strategy-for-funding-higher-education.pdf> p6 and 7

³⁹<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2019-06-20/107/>

⁴⁰<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/third-level-funding-ducked-and-dodged-for-too-long-says-harris-1.4530141>

A diverse group of young adults, including men and women of various ethnicities, are walking down a set of stone steps outdoors. The scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal color. In the center, a teal rectangular box contains the text "Fairness at Work and Justice in Society" in white, bold, sans-serif font.

**Fairness
at Work
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Liberty Hall
Dublin 1

Tel: 1890 747 881

E-mail: info@siptu.ie

www.siptu.ie

