

**SVP response to the Consultation Process on updating the Higher  
Education Authority Act 1971**



**Society of St. Vincent de Paul**

**Social Justice and Policy Team August 2018**

## Introduction & SVP Perspective

SVP is Ireland's largest charity of social concern and action. 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. SVP has long been of the view that education is the ultimate enabler out of poverty and for decades many of its members have, and continue to be, actively involved in supporting people, at all stages of the life cycle, to access education. We welcome the opportunity to contribute our views to this consultation process.

SVP works closely with thousands of students to support their access to further and higher education, and strongly believe that equality of opportunity, progression and outcome must be the central goals of our higher education system.<sup>1</sup> For an individual, having a job maximizes their life chances and builds self-confidence. Higher education allows individuals better opportunities to secure employment and is the best predictor of earnings over time. The estimated lifetime earnings for someone with a higher education qualification is significantly higher than for someone without.

SVP recognise that accessibility and affordability are key problems within the current system. In the 2017/17 academic year UCD under-graduate population totaled almost 17,000 students. Only 28.5% of the population represented students from marginalised groups.<sup>2</sup> The HEA's own statistics clearly indicate what groups are not progressing to third level.<sup>3</sup> Marginalised and vulnerable groups, such as lone parents, Travellers and migrants face additional barriers accessing higher education in addition to the barriers faced by those on low incomes.

The increase in the student contribution to €3,000 and cuts and changes to the maintenance grant have put higher education further out of reach for many students. In addition, state investment in higher education has declined 38% from €2bn in 2009 to €1.3bn in 2016.<sup>4</sup>

In response to the current inadequacies and the belief that education is a route of poverty, SVP has established an education bursary scheme which help low income students with the cost of fees as well as accommodation, transport, books and materials. Without this support many students simply would not be able to take up a place at college.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.svp.ie](http://www.svp.ie) SVP Submission to the JOC on Education and Skills Funding of Higher Education in Ireland

<sup>2</sup> <file:///E:/Widening%20Participation%20Committee%20Annual%20Report%202016-17.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [HEA-Progression-Report-2018-FINAL.pdf](#)

<sup>4</sup> <http://hea.ie/2018/06/13/iiea-conference-on-the-funding-of-higher-education-13th-june-2018/>

## What should be the key functions of the Higher Education Authority?

It remains the case that some groups in Irish society are not represented in the higher education population in line with their representation in the population more generally. The 2017 statistics from the Higher Education Authority show that, in Dublin 17, Darndale, the rate is just 15% of young people who progress onto higher education. In Dublin 10, Ballyfermot, it is 16%. In the North Inner City, Dublin 1, the rate is 23% and in the South Inner City, Dublin 2, it is 26%.<sup>5</sup> These figures are low in comparison to more affluent parts of Dublin where the figure rises to over 90%.<sup>6</sup>

SVP members assert that it is lack of finance which has the largest influence on families accessing 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.<sup>7</sup> SVP recommends that the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice's research is used by the HEA to support evidence-based policy formulation as it offers a richer, more holistic and realistic lens through which to understand just how inadequate incomes impact on marginalised and low income groups and their inability to access higher education.

SVP members who visit families in their homes frequently report one key issue, that if addressed, would enable more disadvantaged individuals and groups access higher education: The expansion of SUSI to part-time students. This is particularly relevant to lone parents.

Research carried out by UCD *Fish in Water: Is Mature Student Access to Irish Higher Education experienced equally and fairly?*<sup>8</sup> This research clearly highlights the need for funding to be made available for part-time study. The research examined the profile of the students who registered to access courses for mature students in an Irish university. The familial and marital status of the access participants highlighted that over half the students (58%) are single and even greater proportions (63%) are not parents.<sup>9</sup> These patterns suggest that part-time access is not family-friendly and is not attracting parents or those with familial responsibilities. This is hardly surprising, as the courses are all part-time and students cannot claim any financial support or assistance while on the programme. This highlights

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<sup>5</sup> <http://hea.ie/2017/11/20/hea-chief-executive-says-colleges-need-to-keep-focus-on-targeting-disadvantage/>

<sup>6</sup> [www.socialjustice.ie](http://www.socialjustice.ie) Choices for Equity and Sustainability Securing Solidarity and the Common Good 2016

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.budgeting.ie/rural-budgets/expenditure-budgets.html>

<sup>8</sup> Cited in <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/How-Equal-Access-to-Higher-Education-in-Ireland-Research-Papers.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/How-Equal-Access-to-Higher-Education-in-Ireland-Research-Papers.pdf>

the inequity of current policy on part-time education, which does not fund students who need to attend higher education on a part-time basis. Lone parent families are the cohort most likely to experience poverty in Ireland and the group most frequently helped by SVP. Census data shows that lone parent participation in education has decreased by approximately 20% between 2011 and 2016. The decision by the Department of Education and Skills to extend eligibility to the Student Assistance Fund to lone parents studying part-time in August 2017 and the availability of additional scholarships to disadvantaged and non-traditional students was welcome. However, the number of students covered by these scholarships is relatively small. It also does not address the root causes of why lone parents are not participating in education.

### **What role should the Minister have in relation to regulation of the Higher Education Sector?**

The Department of Education & Skills should assume a more active responsibility for the governance and oversight of the Higher Education Sector. The Higher Education Sector need to be accountable for the delivery of an inclusive education system that is more representative of the whole of society. Specific targets that are in place through the Access Plan to increase the numbers of disadvantaged groups in higher education, need to be more closely scrutinised by the Minister. In addition, the Minister should extend additional supports and investment to the HEA to ensure it can carry out its functions.

Consideration should be given by the Minister towards equality proofing all legislation underpinning the education sector.

### **Are there any other relevant issues which you wish to comment on?**

SVP recommends that human rights and equality proofing be integral to legislation governing the Higher Education Authority. All equality proofing should be overseen by a taskforce comprising relevant stakeholders, including representatives from civil society working with marginalised groups. The HEA should include an equality dimension to their strategic objective (similar to advancing gender equality in Irish Higher Education). A strategic framework for equality within the HEA would be enhanced by moving beyond the nine grounds of equality legislation and incorporating a specific statement on socio-economic status.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The sector is viewed by many stakeholders as unfit for purpose due to rising student numbers, lowering of quality outcomes and a serious deficit in funding. This is coupled with cuts to the Maintenance grant which means many students are unable to take up a place at college. The gap in educational attainment and qualifications between socio economic groups has not been bridged despite three National Action Plans on Equity in Third Level. SVP understand that the HEA is responsible for the governance and regulation of the higher education system and the advisory body to the Minister for Education and Skills. However, SVP are concerned that without increased investment in the third level education system, it is the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups who will not be able to access education. SVP recommends the Department of Education and Skills to commit to a publicly funded higher education and implement the Cassells Report recommendations in relation to capital and current expenditure and student financial support.

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