



Society of St. Vincent de Paul

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## STATEMENT OF STRATEGY 2021-2023

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SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FURTHER AND  
HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE

**December 2020**  
**SVP Social Justice and Policy Team**

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## 1. SVP Introduction and Context

The Society of St Vincent De Paul (SVP) is the largest charity of social concern in Ireland with over 11,000 members in 1200 local Conferences. 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 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 education system. Education is fundamental to the creation of an individual's life options and, as such, is a major factor in the response to poverty and the risk of poverty. This has become all the more important and pressing as a result of the severe economic impact on households due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Learning online has now become how the majority of current students access education. The initiatives announced to facilitate this change, such as the introduction of ICT grants for third level students have been warmly welcomed by students that SVP support. However, our members have highlighted the lack of consistency among some third level education providers while promoting and availing of those grants for low income students.

SVP recognise that accessibility and affordability are key problems within the current system. In response to the current inadequacies, SVP have established regional educational bursary schemes which help low income students with the cost of fees as well as accommodation, transport, digital equipment, books, and materials. Without this support many students simply would not be able to take up a place at college. It is this on-the-ground experience and expertise that informs SVP's submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Statement of Strategy 2021-2023.

This submission will outline a number of challenges faced by the clients we support while accessing further and higher education as well as the policy measures that impact those students. We also highlight a number of recommendations that would ensure that our education system is fully fit for purpose and accessible to all who wish to avail of it.

*SVP Members have a deep interest in improving the life chances of low-income households through education. They continue to meet with more families and individuals wanting to improve their life chances through education but the cost's involved is increasingly becoming a barrier.*

*"So, I thought when you are not earning you should be learning..... so I went back to education and it just completely changed my life. I done a PLC, which then led me on into college, and I hope to further that and get a Master's degree. I love it"*

*(It's the Hardest Job in the World, SVP Report 2014, Lone Parent).<sup>1</sup>*

## **2. An Inclusive Education System**

Approximately 1 out of every 4 people across the country can be classed as a student.<sup>2</sup> This gives us an idea of the importance education plays for so many people. However, we continue to see persistent social inequality in education at all levels, with low-income households being one of the named groups in our society who are significantly underrepresented.

The HEA's Spatial and Socio-Economic profile<sup>3</sup> of the Higher Education Population highlights these inequalities in the 2017/18 academic year. It shows that at a national level 20 per cent of college places are taken up by students from the 15 per cent wealthiest families. In contrast, the students from the 15per cent most disadvantaged families hold only 10per cent of places. In practical terms, this means that on average, for every 10 students from affluent areas, there are only five from the most disadvantaged – a ratio of two to one. These are worrying statistics as it shows our third level education system does not fully reflect the diversity found in the rest of the population.

The report also highlights that affluent students dominate high-points courses such as medicine, finance, and engineering. By contrast students from disadvantaged areas are more likely to study courses in childcare, sport, and secretarial studies. This has clear implications for a person's earning potential in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://issuu.com/svp15/docs/it\\_s\\_the\\_hardest\\_job\\_in\\_the\\_world/1?e=25010855/71719025](https://issuu.com/svp15/docs/it_s_the_hardest_job_in_the_world/1?e=25010855/71719025)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Strategy-Statement/action-plan-for-education-2019.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [Higher-Education-Spatial-Socio-Economic-Profile-Oct-2019.pdf \(hea.ie\)](#)

Lone parent families are the cohort most likely to experience poverty in Ireland and the group most frequently helped by SVP. They are a group of people who experience multiple disadvantages in Irish society and access to education is a part of that. Lone parent participation in education has decreased by approximately 20% between 2011 and 2016.<sup>4</sup> An SVP report, *'Working, Parenting and Struggling?'*<sup>5</sup>, found that lone parents in Ireland with third level education are three times more likely to be in employment, but 1-in 5 lone parents could not access formal education due to cost. This was the third highest rate among all EU-15 countries. A similar proportion of adults in two parent families reported financial barriers to formal education.

Research carried out by UCD, 'Fish in Water: Is Mature Student Access to Higher Education experienced equally and fairly?'<sup>6</sup>, it 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 a greater proportion are not parents. These patterns suggest that part-time access is not family-friendly and is not attracting parents or those with familial responsibilities.

Many lone parents who seek support from SVP have expressed their interest in attending higher education on a part time basis but the fact they cannot receive the SUSI grant is a major barrier. An Irish study (Murphy & Inglis, 2000) found that part-time fees were a particular disincentive for many mature student applicants who did not take up places.<sup>7</sup> This mirrors findings of research conducted by Maxwell *et al.*, (2009), they found a "lack of and/or affordability of childcare, insufficient part time learning opportunities and consequent lack of funding and compatibility with caring responsibilities as the principal barriers for women accessing education".<sup>8</sup>

The Higher Education Authority set up an advisory group to consider part-time and flexible higher education in 2012, which, recommended that by 2016, 'full equality of provision and support will have been achieved in higher education for all students, regardless of time, place or pace of study'.<sup>9</sup> It is disappointing that those recommendations have not been fully acted upon.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.cso.ie/en/databases/Census2016Profile4-Households and Families. Family Units in Private Households 2011 to 2016 by Type of Family Unit, Number of Children, Economic Status of Reference Person and Census Year. CSO Statbank](http://www.cso.ie/en/databases/Census2016Profile4-HouseholdsandFamilies/FamilyUnitsinPrivateHouseholds2011to2016byTypeofFamilyUnit,NumberofChildren,EconomicStatusofReferencePersonandCensusYear)

<sup>5</sup> [https://issuu.com/svp15/docs/working\\_\\_parenting\\_and\\_struggling-\\_1?e=25010855/71456122](https://issuu.com/svp15/docs/working__parenting_and_struggling-_1?e=25010855/71456122)

<sup>6</sup> <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/How-Equal-Access-to-Higher-Education-in-Ireland-Research-Papers.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Study on the Costs of Participation in Higher Education 2009

Published by the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, Higher Education Authority

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Study on the Costs of Participation in Higher Education 2009 Published by the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, Higher Education Authority

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.hea.ie> HEA 2012b, p33

### **3. An Affordable Education System**

In order to achieve greater equity of access to education, the Irish state provides financial aid, mainly in the form of maintenance grants, to individuals in full time education. McCoy et al (2010b) found that those from lower social classes who participate in higher education are heavily reliant on the provision of grants from the state.<sup>10</sup> In McCoy et al. 'Hidden Disadvantage?' financial concerns to attend higher education affected all socio-economic groups, however, young people from manual backgrounds were more likely to indicate financial reasons for not applying.<sup>11</sup> SVP welcomes the commitment of Minister Harris to review the student grant system and acknowledges the increased funding for student grants in Budget 2021.<sup>12</sup> However, given the high number of students currently accessing third level education it will not go far enough to support low income households participation into further and higher education.

The amount payable under SUSI to recipients has remained the same since 2012. Student grants were cut by 4% in 2011, and again by 3% in 2012. The difference between 2011 and 2016 rates were on average €184.50 per person in receipt of the grant.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, from April 2011 until April 2019 the CSO Consumer Price Index indicates inflation of 4% on the cost of consumer goods and everyday households costs.<sup>14</sup>

The financial costs incurred while accessing further education and training courses can also be a barrier for low income households. SVP members have reported course fees can cost up to €1,000 depending on the course materials needed for Post Leaving Certificate students. This is unfair, particularly as students deemed to be from low income household tend to enrol in PLC courses.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2015-07/BKMNEXT146.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.esri.ie/system/files/media/file-uploads/2015-07/BKMNEXT146.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/fbee9-minister-harris-announces-government-approval-for-review-of-the-student-grant-scheme/>

<sup>13</sup> [http://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Pre-Budget-Submission\\_compressed.pdf](http://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Pre-Budget-Submission_compressed.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> <https://statbank.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/Statire/SelectVarVal/saveselections.asp>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.esri.ie/pubs/RS61.pdf>

## 4.SVP Education Bursary Scheme: Student Survey<sup>16</sup>

*“The bursary made education accessible for me”*

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*“The bursary supported me massively and I would have been lost without it. Especially in Year 4 when my SUSI\* grant was revoked, and I would not have been able to complete my studies without it”*

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*“A huge impact because it meant I could focus more time to my studies instead of spending many hours working part time to fund myself”*

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***It is important to note that the majority of participants surveyed were also in receipt of the SUSI grant. This clearly shows that the SUSI grant levels need to be reviewed and increased to reflect the cost of living.***

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<sup>16</sup> Students were surveyed for the purposes of the SVP/BOI Education Bursary Scheme in 2020. As well as this particular bursary, SVP operate a number of Regional Bursary schemes in the Republic of Ireland. Amounts awarded are from €1,000 up to €5,000.

## 5. Recommendations

### Strategic Goals:

**Goal Number 1: Advance the Further and Higher Education System so that it is accessible for all learners, particularly those at risk of educational disadvantage.**

**Goal Number 2: Ensure the student body entering, participating in, and completing Further and Higher Education reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population.**

### Strategic Actions:

- **Make SUSI fit for purpose:** Increase funding and review SUSI eligibility criteria so that financial costs are not a barrier to participation in education.
- **Develop a new Action Plan** to follow the National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 with ambitious targets that ensures the Further and Higher Education system reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population.
- Implement the recommendations of the Maynooth University <sup>17</sup>report on supporting access to third level for lone parents.
- **Extend eligibility for the SUSI grant to part-time students** studying in publicly funded further and higher education and training institutions to provide financial support to mature and part-time learners.
- **Promote and highlight accessible and relevant information to learners wishing to access Further Education and Training courses.** Ensure learners have the necessary information, knowledge, and guidance options available to them to make informed choices about their educational aspirations.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/supports-barriers-lone-parents-accessing-HEd.pdf>



## 6. Concluding Remarks

Education and the holding of educational qualifications is now the currency for employment, and it is the lack of such qualifications that are major contributors to poverty and social deprivation. The third National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015-2019)<sup>18</sup> vision is to ensure that the student body entering into, participating in, and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. SVP recommends that this vision is carried forward into a new plan and ambitious targets implemented so that anyone who wishes to access education can do so.

Concerns surrounding accessibility and affordability are tangible barriers for low income households wishing to access education. While there are really useful supports such as the SUSI grant, they do not go far enough. As long as low income students have to pay significant costs to attain an education, while working alongside their studies to cover basic necessities, third level education will never be a welcoming environment for them. It is therefore imperative that the current financial barriers to education for students affected by socio economic disadvantage are removed.

We welcome the invitation to submit our views, recommendations, and experiences of supporting students access to Higher and Further Education. We look forward to working with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in ensuring that the strategic goals of providing an accessible and inclusive Further and Higher Education sector is fully realised.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Plan-for-Equity-of-Access-to-Higher-Education-2015-2019.pdf>