

Opening statement on the future funding of higher education to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

I am delighted to be addressing the Joint Committee today. Here I would like to highlight a number of key issues relating to access to higher education, the funding model and the need for mental health supports.

Recent years have seen a very significant increase in participation in higher education but inequalities by social background remain in the proportion entering higher education, attending a university and accessing certain fields of study (such as medicine and finance). ESRI research indicates that this inequality is largely a result of differences in exam performance at Junior and Leaving Certificate levels. So ensuring equality of access is predicated on the provision of supports much earlier in the school career rather than just at the point of the CAO application process. Access to adequate school-based guidance is also crucial. All students rely heavily on their parents' advice in educational decision-making but parents from more disadvantaged backgrounds do not have the insider knowledge of higher education to assist their children in navigating entry. As a result, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more reliant on their teachers, tutors and year heads for advice and guidance, highlighting the importance of adequate funding for a whole-school guidance approach from early in second-level education.

However, financial issues do play a significant role too. Maintenance costs emerge as a more important potential barrier to participation than fees but have not featured significantly on the policy agenda. ESRI research has shown that student maintenance grant levels have fallen far below other comparators such as unemployment payments or average income, leaving students to rely heavily on part-time employment and direct and indirect support from their families. This poses challenges for those from low-income families and for students trying to balance working and studying. Furthermore, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to base their choice of higher education institution on being able to live in the parental home, potentially limiting their horizons.

Any future funding model for higher education will need to address both the sustainability of funding for institutions and the level of supports for students themselves. In Ireland, there is a significant wage premium attached to having a degree – higher than in many OECD countries – so there is a case that graduates should make a contribution to the costs of their education. Colleagues at Maynooth University have concluded that an income-contingent loan system would be more equitable than the current system by requiring repayment from the more advantaged groups who access higher education and by not recouping payment from graduates until they reach a certain income threshold.

Such a system would need to maintain student grants for more disadvantaged groups and set these at an adequate level to meet their needs.

My final point relates to the need for mental health supports for young adults in the wake of the pandemic. The Growing Up in Ireland study reveals a very significant increase in the proportion classified as depressed for both men (to 31 per cent) and women (to 55 per cent). The disruption to higher education played a part in this, with over half of students finding it hard to study during the pandemic. Mental health difficulties were reduced where students had regular contact with, and support from, their institutions. These results highlight the importance of accelerated rollout of high-quality broadband, and support for higher education institutions in incorporating remote learning, feedback and assessment into existing courses. The scale of the mental health difficulties found highlights the need for community-based and institution-based supports for students as a matter of urgency.

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