

“A Student is a Student is a Student”:
a Position Paper on
Part-Time/ Flexible Study
in Irish Higher Education

Executive Summary

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The 2012 HEA report, “Part-time and flexible HE in Ireland – Policy, practice and recommendations for the future”, began: “Now, more than at any point in our recent history, there is a compelling economic and social case for new initiatives to raise levels of education and skills among adults in the wider population”. It recommended full equality of provision and support in HE for all learners, regardless of mode or duration of study by 2016.

Since then, there have been welcome, if piecemeal, developments¹. These acknowledge the need to be addressed in order to make part-time/ flexible HE more accessible, including to a more diverse range of students. HEIs are committed to making part-time/ flexible learning a viable option and many ‘local patches’ have been created in efforts to achieve this.

However, fundamental issues remain unaddressed at HE system-level and HEI-level. This has resulted in low levels of participation: part-time students have remained at 17% of enrolments in public HEIs since 2012/13, remote students have increased from 1% to just 3% in that same period². This falls short of national targets for the part-time/ flexible cohort³ and has consequences for attempts to boost lifelong learning. Ireland’s 12.6% lifelong learning rate⁴ does not yet fulfil either national nor European ambitions⁵.

Challenges associated with part-time/ flexible HE were examined by the IUA Part-Time/ Flexible Subgroup. The resulting Position Paper was endorsed through a sectoral consultation process and the IUA and THEA Registrars/ Vice-Presidents Academic Groups.

To meet these challenges, the Irish HE sector calls for a systemic reimagining of how mainstream HE can be effectively delivered in a more coherent and flexible manner, based on the following principles and appropriate resourcing. The sector commits to working with government on this.

¹ E.g. Part-time/ flexible student eligibility for the Student Assistance Fund, the Fund for Students with Disabilities and the PATH 1916 Bursary Fund; Springboard+ – see page 3; Human Capital Initiative projects)

² 2017/18: <https://hea.ie/statistics/>; in 2018/2019: part-time students were 19% of all public HEI enrolments (unclear whether this includes remote students as remote is no longer listed as a mode category).

³ 22% by 2019 in National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 and Progress Review of National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021; 25% by 2021 in HE System Performance Framework 2018-2020

⁴ 2019: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=sdg_04_60&plugin=1

⁵ 15% by 2020 target in EU’s ET 2020 Framework; 15% by 2025 in National Skills Strategy 2025 and HE System Performance Framework 2018-2020; 18% by 2025 in Future Jobs Ireland 2019

This approach would move away from the outdated systematic approach of ‘othering’ part-time/ flexible students from ‘traditional’ full-time students; moving towards Universal Design for Learning, guided by the fundamental idea that ‘a student is a student is a student’.

This reimagined approach would support Ireland’s competitiveness in responding to this area of growing demand; driven by rapidly changing demographics and workplaces, reshaped economies and labour market skill needs, and by the wider benefits for all of high quality lifelong and lifewide learning. It would provide transformative opportunities for a more diverse range of students who have commitments that mean they cannot participate in full-time education, including people working full-/ part-time or actively searching for work who have up-/ re-skilling needs and people with disabilities or caring duties.

- **Principle 1:** The state will equitably fund all students by volumes of accredited learning, expressed in terms of ECTS, at state-funded HEIs in the provision of student fees, grants, capitation and other financial supports⁶.
- **Principle 2:** The state will equitably fund public HEIs for students who are undertaking volumes of accredited learning, expressed in terms of ECTS, and underpinned by existing conventions and quality assurance mechanisms, irrespective of the mode or duration of study.
- **Principle 3:** State-funded HEIs will recognise all students equitably in relation to delivery of academic programmes, services and supports, irrespective of the mode or duration of study.

In order to realise this principle-based approach, fundamental issues to be addressed at system-level and HEI-level are highlighted below. These can be broadly grouped by (i) definitions and data, (ii) funding practices, and (iii) student supports.

(i) There is no single definition of the part-time/ flexible cohorts across national policy documents. Varied understandings have implications for data collection and national datasets. A Principle 1-based approach would negate the need for the current rigid (yet inconsistent) student definitions by mode, helping to enhance common understanding and approach.

⁶ This currently includes, but is not limited to: Free Fees Scheme; tax relief scheme; SUSI student grant: fee grants and maintenance grants; social welfare payments; BTEA.

The lack of a robust evidence base on the part-time/ flexible student profile presents challenges in identifying what is required to support this student cohort's access, progression and retention. While data is now obtained through the Equal Access Survey, a Principle 1-based approach would be more robust in addressing these challenges.

(ii) The core state funding model is still built around an outdated 'traditional' picture of a much smaller and less diverse student population. Students are defined rigidly by mode which doesn't align with the 21st century student experience. In reality, the distinction between modes is blurred: part-time students take a wide range of number of ECTS, while some full-time students are on a reduced number of contact hours. With surging demand for flexible HE for purposes such as up-/ re-skilling, a Principle 1-based approach would enable systematic realignment in order to future proof for Ireland's needs.

Only students on full-time programmes are eligible for the Free Fees Scheme, SUSI and the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA), irrespective of the number of ECTS being taken. This effectively disincentivises part-time/ flexible study. Potential student cohorts, including those pinpointed as National Access Plan priority target groups, are locked out of the system, due to the core barrier of fees. Others commit to full-time due to affordability when part-time/ flexible programmes would be more appropriate to their needs. A Principle 1-based approach would enable the state and HEIs to provide greater and more flexible opportunities for all, including a more diverse range of students.

More autonomous, nimble funding structures have resulted in higher proportions of part-time students at postgraduate level (41%) than at undergraduate (14%)⁷. A Principle 2-based approach would incentivise a more sustainable and coherent system, including the potential to mainstream successful features of Springboard+ across all HE programmes. Currently, Springboard+ is restricted to a limited number of student places across a limited range of HE programmes, while there are high levels of student success and graduate employability⁸ across all HE programmes. Its annual calls and discrete conditions and funding create additional administration burden for all state and HEI actors involved.

⁷ 2018/19: <https://hea.ie/statistics/>

⁸ HEA Graduate Outcomes Survey, Class of 2018: 80% were working or due to start a job, 13% were engaged in further study, 4% were unemployed, 3% were engaged in 'other' activities.

(iii) Part-time students are included in the core state funding allocation model on an FTE pro-rata basis, based on the number of ECTS being taken. However, it is not feasible for HEIs to offer student services and supports, campus infrastructure, systems and processes, etc. on a pro-rata basis. Many have fixed overhead costs that remain the same for each student, irrespective of mode or number of ECTS. A Principle 2-based approach would help to address this, maintaining and enhancing the quality of HE offerings.

HEI student services and supports are stretched to cater for current demand, having been significantly affected by the reduction in core state funding. Moreover, they tend not to be uniformly and adequately accessible by part-time/ flexible students, as many are typically open during 'normal working hours' as a result of challenges associated with provision outside of this. Under a Principle 3-based approach, the sector commits to striving to support student success and enhance the student experience, mainstreaming flexibility for the benefit of all students.