

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

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1. Introduction

This paper sets out issues and challenges associated with the provision of part-time/ flexible study in Irish higher education, and also proposes a set of principles (Section 1.2) to inform the development of a more coherent, systematic and viable approach in order to meet national and European ambitions and support our competitiveness.

This work was carried out by the IUA Part-Time/ Flexible Subgroup, made up of senior, cross-sectoral representations of stakeholders (see full membership on Title Page and Terms of Reference in Appendix 1). This position paper was further developed through consultation sessions, aimed at seeking detailed input, feedback and endorsement from a range of perspectives across higher education institutions (HEIs) and other stakeholders in an effort to represent the position of the sector on part-time/ flexible study in Irish higher education (see Section 1.1 and Appendix 4).

The EUA's Trends 2018 report noted a growing demand for flexible higher education across the European Higher Education Area. Demand for lifelong learning is being driven by changing demographics, present and future skill needs of the labour market and the evolving workplace, not least due to digitalisation. HEIs also want to enable lifelong learning for its broader value and good to society, helping citizens to develop a love of learning – lifelong and lifewide.

A range of national and European policy reports in recent years have set targets for part-time/ flexible provision in Irish higher education and lifelong learning (see Section 3). In 2012, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) published the report, "Part-time and flexible higher education in Ireland – Policy, practice and recommendations for the future"¹. It 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 in Ireland*". The first of the report's recommendations for the future is overarching: by 2016, full equality of provision and support will have been achieved in higher education for all learners, regardless of mode or duration of study.

¹ <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/Part-time-And-Flexible-Higher-Education-in-Ireland.pdf>

Whilst this goal has not been achieved, the Irish higher education sector is ready to work with government to respond to meet national and European ambitions and support our competitiveness. Through its principles (Section 1.2) the sector recognises the need for parts of the system to adjust to realise these ambitions, and the challenges that will present themselves in doing so. While there have been some welcome changes which hopefully indicate a change in trajectory of provision for part-time/ flexible students, fundamental issues and systematic factors remain unaddressed, continuing to create barriers which result in relatively low levels of participation in part-time/time study and lifelong learning (see Section 4). As detailed in Sections 7.3 and 7.4, the funding model has largely remained in keeping with the traditional picture of higher education while the profile of students has evolved (see Section 5), meaning that part-time/ flexible provision is not available to those who need it most. Many potential students are unable to get past the first and highest barrier of fees, where those on full-time programmes are eligible for the Free Fees Scheme, SUSI grant, etc. Put simply during the consultation process, *“part-time/ flexible students are eligible for higher fees and fewer supports”*.

As a result of the above policy context, and in line with their own strategic plans, many HEIs are developing innovative approaches to make part-time/ flexible study an option for students and have already achieved considerable positive impact across a range of niche areas in a range of local contexts. Local patches, and indeed some national patches, have been created across the sector in efforts to respond to the needs of this growing student cohort. An approach based on the set of principles proposed (see Section 1.2), guided by the fundamental idea through Universal Design for Learning that “a student is a student is a student”, would move away from the “othering” approach to non-full-time provision and would bring with it more efficiency and effectiveness across the sector.

Any redesign of the system would need to be adequately resourced, particularly as student services and supports are already significantly stretched to cater for current demand. The availability of student services and supports is subject to resources, and most have been significantly affected by the reduction in state funding in the past decade. Those available tend not to be uniformly accessible by part-time/ flexible students, disadvantaging these cohorts further (see Section 6).

In 2012, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) published the report, “Part-time and flexible higher education in Ireland – Policy, practice and recommendations for the future”². It 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 in Ireland”*. The first of the report’s recommendations for the future is overarching: by 2016, full equality of provision and support will have been achieved in higher education for all learners, regardless of mode or duration of study.

The Subgroup advocates a whole-institution approach to mainstreaming inclusion that recognises and values diversity, ensuring that the teaching and learning environments, student supports and approaches, campus infrastructure, systems and processes, are designed around the needs of all students, and not on any assumption of a “traditional” student population (Kelly & Padden, 2018).

1.1 Developing the Position Paper

Recognising issues and challenges associated with the provision of part-time/ flexible study in Irish higher education, the IUA Access Steering Group (ASG) for HEIs requested the formation of a Part-Time/ Flexible Subgroup to consider these, with a view to informing the development of a more coherent, systematic and viable approach. The IUA Part-Time/ Flexible Subgroup is made up of senior, cross-sectoral representations of stakeholders, including from Universities, Institutes of Technology, HEA, CAO, NFETL, Ibec and USI (full membership on Title Page).

While the work of the Subgroup originated in an equity of access and widening participation context, the creation of viable part-time/ flexible study policies and practices would open up opportunities for a broad range of students who could benefit from more responsive higher education provision (see Section 5.2).

In the process of providing a report to the ASG on Phase 1 of the aims of the Terms of Reference (Appendix 1), the Part-Time/ Flexible Subgroup held six meetings since late 2018 to discuss key issues, attempting to tease out many of the multiplicities of understanding that

² <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/Part-time-And-Flexible-Higher-Education-in-Ireland.pdf>

exist around the subject of part-time/ flexible provision. In taking the time to coalesce around these complex issues, we may not have finalised all of the aims of Phase 1 as laid out in the Terms of Reference. This paper, however, outlines the key issues identified and illustrates many of the discussion points in working towards them.

From this, the Subgroup suggest that the set of principles proposed in Section 1.2 would provide a viable approach to inform any future redesign of the system.

Upon the recommendation of the ASG, an earlier version of this paper, then a discussion paper, was presented to and received feedback from the IUA Registrars group and the THEA Registrars group. In order to develop this into the current position paper, there was a further recommendation to hold in-depth consultation sessions. Three such sessions were held, in Galway, Cork and Dublin, aimed at seeking detailed input, feedback and endorsement from a range of perspectives across HEIs and other stakeholders (see Appendix 4).

This current version of position paper incorporates input and feedback received throughout this process in an effort to represent the position of the sector on part-time/ flexible study in Irish higher education.

1.2 Vision for the Future: Set of Principles

On the basis of this process, and in light of the policy and demographic context (further detailed in Sections 3-5), the Subgroup now wishes to propose the following set of principles. This set of principles is intended to help inform a viable and coherent approach to the development and provision of part-time/ flexible study in Irish higher education. This approach would move away from the “othering” approach to non-full-time provision, guided by the fundamental idea that “a student is a student is a student”. Such was the extent of consensus on this that, from the first meetings of the Subgroup, “A Student is a Student is a Student” became the working title of this paper.

- **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 supports³.
- **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 study⁴.

2. Definition of Part-Time/ Flexible Students

As per the Terms of Reference (Appendix 1), the Subgroup examined and made efforts to agree on a definition of part-time/ flexible students. Extensive discussion revealed multiple and varied references to and understandings of these cohorts across the sector.

This is also reflected in national policy documents (for example, National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019⁵, HEA’s System Performance Framework 2018-2020⁶), across which no single, common definition can be found. Although they may have different interpretations and imply different meanings in different contexts, terms such as part-time/ flexible/ remote/ online/ modular/ lifelong learning appear to be used interchangeably. Whilst this paper does not define “part-time” student, our consultation with the wider sector supports the position that there is no distinction in the need for provision, assessment, supports or services for a student who is studying full-time, part-time, flexible, online, remote or other. The distinctions in the identities of these students are systemic.

Within its Policies And Guidelines Governing Academic Programmes at UCC, HEA Definition of Full and Part-time students are listed as follows: “Full-time students are

³ This currently includes, but is not limited to, the Free Fees Scheme, tax relief scheme, SUSI: fee grants and maintenance grants, social welfare payments, and BTEA/ BTEO.

⁴ Including, but not limited to, those referenced in Section 6.

⁵ <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Plan-for-Equity-of-Access-to-Higher-Education-2015-2019.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/higher-education-system-performance-framework-2018-2020.pdf>

students who are attending day programmes, extending over at least a full academic year and devoting their whole working time to their academic studies as far as is known; Part-time students include all students - other than full-time - who are attending programmes of university standard extending over at least a full academic year.”

When referencing full-time provision, national policy documents tend to refer to students, whereas when referencing part-time/ flexible provision, learners and students tend to be referred to interchangeably. This paper deliberately and exclusively refers to students without that distinction, again guided by the fundamental idea that “a student is a student is a student”.

Where different interpretations exist, often depending on the requirements of discrete funding streams, a common thread that can be found is the “othering” of part-time/ flexible students as distinct to full-time students. This has an impact on how part-time/ flexible students are treated within HEIs and in the system as a whole.

As outlined in Section 7 of this paper, the Subgroup discussed these terms at length as part of its own efforts to define these cohorts. The Subgroup identified some of the variables used to characterise part-time/ flexible students, often in perceived differentiation from the full-time student body. These included, but were not limited to:

- number of ECTS;
- number of contact hours;
- duration of programme;
- mode of study;
- rationale for study;
- on a programme delivered during “normal working hours” or in the evenings/ at weekends.

During the Subgroup discussions and consultation process, the complexities attached to using such variables was repeatedly noted. Examples of the current realities of being a student were shared (more in Section 5), e.g. some students registered as part-time are on a full-time load of 60 ECTS at undergraduate or 90 ECTS at Master’s level in any one academic year; part-time students can be found on programmes with a wide range of duration; some students

registered as full-time are on a reduced number of contact hours. In the absence of a clearly defined approach to part-time/ flexible students, Appendix 3 shows that these anomalies are often not shown on HEI's student systems. The "*myth of the full-time student*" was also challenged, with it being noted that many full-time students are also working, some even full-time hours.

As can be seen in Section 7.1 and Appendix 3, it emerged that there is significant variation in the data collected regarding part-time/ flexible students, both within and between HEIs. Therefore, presumably, there is significant variation in the data reported in returns to the HEA. As such, the lack of clarity and consistency in definitions used across the sector has implications for national data sets and for the allocation of funding to HEIs for these cohorts of students.

Such was the range of nuances and discrepancies around these influencing factors, it became clear that any single definition would not fully represent the diversity of the part-time/ flexible student cohort. It could be said that the closest the Subgroup came to agreeing a definition was that such a student is "not a full-time student". The Subgroup therefore advocated developing a set of principles (Section 1.2) rather than a definition of part-time/ flexible students.

3. Policy Context of Part-Time/ Flexible Study

A range of national and European policy reports in recent years have set targets for part-time/ flexible provision in Irish higher education. In line with the National Higher Education Strategy to 2030⁷, HEA's System Performance Framework 2018-2020⁸, the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019⁹, and the Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021¹⁰, HEIs are committed to widening participation and diversifying their student populations. This includes part-time/ flexible students, one of the priority groups set out in the National Plan for Equity of Access (or National Access Plan, as it is otherwise known).

⁷ <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Strategy-for-Higher-Education-2030.pdf>

⁸ <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/01/higher-education-system-performance-framework-2018-2020.pdf>

⁹ <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Plan-for-Equity-of-Access-to-Higher-Education-2015-2019.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/12/HEA-Progress-Review-NAP-2021.pdf>

The National Access Plan sets a target for 2019 of 22% of students studying on a part-time/ flexible basis. As indicated in the Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021, “while the target in the National Access Plan remains a challenge, it is recommended that this target is maintained. There is evidence that the rate of progress is accelerating and reaching the target will be assisted by initiatives ... and wider investment in flexible provision.”

As fundamental issues remain unaddressed at system-level and HEI-level, the Irish higher education sector endorses this call for wider investment in flexible provision in order to enable the delivery of these targets. The HEA’s System Performance Framework 2018-2020 sets a target to increase the numbers of higher education entrants studying on a flexible basis (i.e. part-time and remote, as reported by HEIs in returns to the HEA) by 25% by 2021 (from a 20% baseline in 2016/17). As the HEA’s 2012 recommendations have not been achieved, the economic and social case for part-time/ flexible higher education has become even more compelling in the intervening years. Systemic barriers continue to result in relatively low levels of participation in part-time/ flexible study. While the actual numbers of flexible (i.e. part-time and remote, as recorded by the HEA) enrolments in public Irish HEIs have grown over time, this is in the context of overall student numbers growth. Proportionately, part-time students have remained steadily at just 17% of all enrolments since 2012/13, with remote students increasing from only 1% to 3% in that time¹¹.

This position has been augmented from a labour market perspective by government emphases on the need to boost lifelong learning and professional development. The National Skills Strategy 2025¹² sets a target to increase lifelong learning to 10% by 2020 and to 15% by 2025, which is also included as a target in the HEA’s System Performance Framework 2018-2020. The National Skills Strategy also includes an Action (4.1) to promote lifelong learning, referencing the need for funding models for education to incentivise providers to deliver on the wide spectrum of lifelong learning needs. The Irish higher education sector endorses this call for appropriate approaches to funding that support different types of part-time/ flexible

¹¹ 2017/18: <https://hea.ie/statistics/>

¹² https://www.education.ie/en/publications/policy-reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf

provision and access by, and retention of, potential lifelong learners in order to enable the delivery of these targets.

Future Jobs Ireland¹³ 2019 also sets a target to increase Ireland's lifelong learning rate to 18% by 2025, and included a focus on flexible working arrangements. The €300 million Human Capital Initiative¹⁴ includes the provision of upskilling and reskilling through lifelong learning as a key area of focus.

The need for the increase provision of higher education on a part-time/ flexible basis, to a wide range of students, is likewise included in a number of recent European policy documents, notably the New Skills Agenda for Europe¹⁵ (2016) and the Agenda for the Modernisation of European Higher Education Systems¹⁶ (2011). The OECD (2018) has also set out a roadmap for “inclusive growth”, highlighting the need to ensure opportunities for all, including to lifelong learning¹⁷. One of the benchmarks in the Europe 2020 Strategy and one of the targets under the strategic framework for European cooperation and training (ET 2020) was that, at European level, there should be at least a 15% rate of lifelong learning (25-64 year-olds) by 2020.

The Irish higher education sector is ready to work with government to meet national and European ambitions and support our competitiveness. This paper sets out issues and challenges associated with the provision of part-time/ flexible study in Irish higher education, and proposes a set of principles (Section 1.2) to inform the development of a more coherent, systematic and viable approach.

However, issues and challenges associated with systematic factors, which demonstrate a disparity between policy and practice, some of which are discussed throughout this paper, have and will continue to create barriers, resulting in relatively low levels of participation in part-time/time study and lifelong learning.

¹³ <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Business-Sectoral-Initiatives/Future-Jobs/>

¹⁴ <https://hea.ie/skills-engagement/human-capital-initiative/>

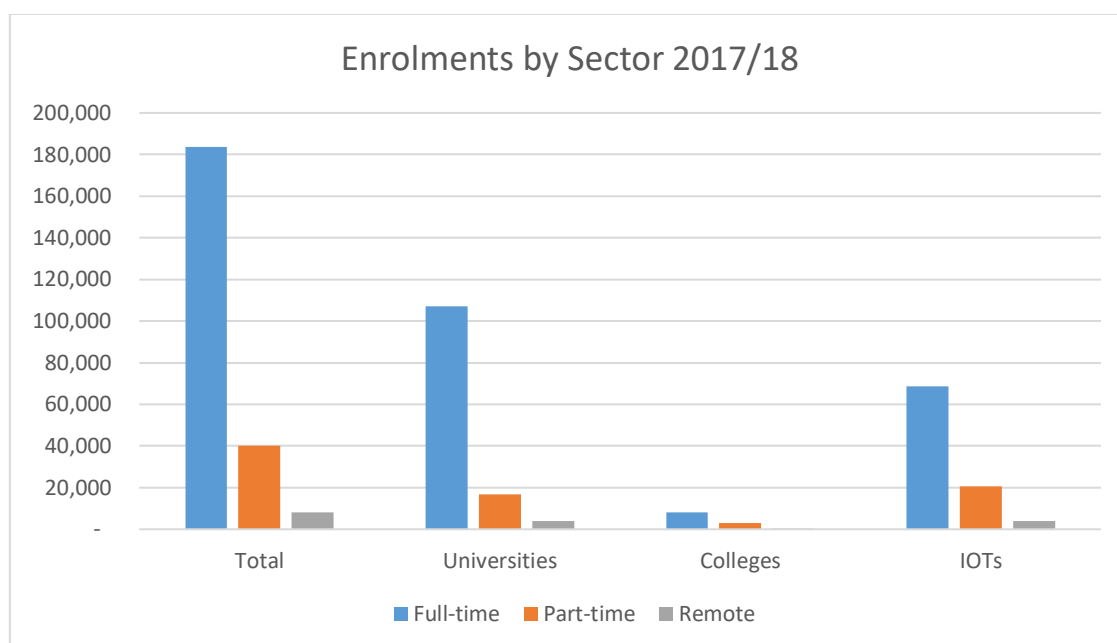
¹⁵ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0381>

¹⁶ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2011:0567:FIN:EN:PDF>

¹⁷ OECD (2018), *Opportunities for all: OECD Framework for Policy Action on Inclusive Growth*, OECD Policy Brief, May 2018 <http://conv.zaccess.io/ddb14088-bfa5-4aba-9cfe-0b3e176e507e.d.html>

4. Participation of Part-Time/ Flexible Students

Currently, part-time/ flexible students represent approximately one in every five students in Irish higher education. While the actual numbers of flexible (i.e. part-time and remote, as recorded by the HEA) enrolments in state-funded Irish HEIs have grown over time, this is in the context of overall student numbers growth. Proportionately, part-time students have remained steadily at 17% of all enrolments since 2012/13, with remote increasing from 1% to 3% in that time¹⁸. It would appear that the 2012 changes to the HEI funding model, resulting in higher allocations in respect of weightings being applied to part-time students, have had little effect on participation of these cohorts.



Source: HEA Key Facts and Figures 2017/18

More detailed analysis within particular fields of study or institutional settings may reveal useful information which could be of assistance in identifying good practice. For example, the Subgroup would welcome datasets which would help us build a clearer understanding of the profile of students participating on part-time/ flexible programmes. While datasets such as those obtained through the Equal Access Survey have long been available for students on full-time programmes, the HEA has only recently begun collecting similar data on the characteristics of part-time/ flexible students. This development is welcome as a lack of

¹⁸ <https://hea.ie/statistics/>

information on the student profile – for example, in terms of ethnicity, disability and students’ lone parent status – has presented difficulties in identifying what supports and services are required by part-time/ flexible students in order to ensure their progression and retention in higher education (more in Section 6). Currently, the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability’s (AHEAD) research¹⁹ indicates that in 2017/18 students with disabilities enrolled in full-time studies represented 7.3% of the total full-time student cohort but in the same period, there were only 1.4% studying part-time, indicating that there are a lack of opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in higher education outside of full-time mode.

One initiative which does appear to have had an effect on the overall numbers of part-time/ flexible students in Irish higher education is Springboard+. The primary objective was “to help unemployed people to remain as close as possible to the labour market by accessing part-time flexible higher education and training opportunities to upskill or reskill in areas where sustainable employment opportunities may arise as the economy recovers”²⁰. The HEA Evaluation of Springboard for the period 2011-2016 shows an average of over 6,000 students participated in Springboard each year during the first five years of the initiative²¹.

Some of the factors which may explain the relative success of this initiative, in particular from the student perspective, are discussed in Section 7.4 below. The technical design of Springboard+ is welcomed by HEIs as it integrates well with data systems and makes it easier to report on. However, it poses a number of challenges from the HEI perspective. Due to its parallel nature, discrete funding and conditions, it places an parallel administrative burden on HEIs. Due to the uncertainty of multiannual funding, it presents HEIs with challenges to integrate outreach, recruitment, staffing and services and supports for students with other mainstream provision which act as a barrier to sustainability of measures. The Irish Higher Education sector considers that there is significant potential to mainstream the student-friendly conditions, which have made Springboard+ an effective and attractive model for

¹⁹ AHEAD (2018), Report on Numbers of Students with Disabilities Studying in Higher Education in Ireland in 2016/17:

<https://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/Numbers%20of%20Students%20with%20Disabilities%20Studying%20in%20Higher%20Education%20in%20Ireland%202017-18.pdf>

²⁰ HEA, Springboard Call for Proposals, January 2011.

²¹ HEA (2016), Developing Talent, Changing Lives: An Evaluation of Springboard+, 2011-16, Dublin <https://springboardcourses.ie/pdfs/An-Evaluation-of-Springboard+-2011-16.pdf>

part-time students, across all higher education disciplines beyond the limitations of the current model.

Given that from a student perspective, changes to the funding criteria for part-time/ flexible students have been restricted to those on Springboard+ or other labour market activation initiatives, it is perhaps not surprising that the overall picture has not changed substantially. While these limited changes are welcome and hopefully indicate a change in trajectory of provision for part-time/ flexible students, fundamental issues in this area remain unaddressed, and are discussed in Sections 7.3 and 7.4 below.

In 2018, Ireland's lifelong learning rate was 12.5%, just above the EU average of 11.1% (Eurostat²²). The provisional results for 2019 show Ireland's lifelong learning rate as having dropped slightly to 12.2% and the EU average at 11.2%.

5. Descriptions of Part-Time/ Flexible Students

The traditional picture of a full-time higher education student has been a school-leaver, while a part-time/ flexible student has been someone working full-time, on a programme delivered outside of "normal working hours" in the evenings/ at weekends. However, the world of work and education has transformed dramatically, and the profile of higher education students, no matter the mode, has evolved. Distinctions as to how programmes are being delivered have never been more blurred. All students, irrespective of mode, duration or numbers of ECTS now, and have for many years, commonly engage in blended learning through the use of VLEs as a platform for learning along with access to online library resources. The current distinctions between full and part-time students are old world constructs which are outside the realities of national and European policy and outside of the need of HEIs and the students themselves.

However, as the funding model has largely remained in keeping with the traditional picture, part-time/ flexible provision is not available to those who need it most. Many of those, as we repeatedly heard throughout the consultation process, are unable to get past the first and

²² https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=sdg_04_60&plugin=1

highest barrier of fees, where those on full-time programmes are eligible for the Free Fees Scheme, SUSI grant, etc. (more in Sections 7.3 and 7.4).

5.1 Traditional and Current Cohorts

Some of the more frequently encountered descriptions of part-time/ flexible students, as raised in the Subgroup's discussions, are listed below. There are different combinations and variations on how these categories are described, depending on the HEI's programme delivery models.

- Students on blended learning programmes: spanning full-time and part-time cohorts, the Subgroup also considered the needs of students engaging in blended learning, where the educational approach is to combine online materials and opportunities for digital interaction with traditional physical classroom methods. For some elements of the programme, the physical presence of both teacher and student is required, while for other elements the student can control the time, place or pace of learning. The reality is that most full-time traditional programmes are now delivered in this way, with students expected to interact with the teachers and with their peers both in classroom and remotely. There would appear to be significant variation in how HEIs define and report in returns to the HEA various categories of students engaged in blended learning practices across different programmes.
- Evening/ weekend on-campus students: in this category, modules and lectures are delivered in the same way as full-time programmes, the only distinction being that they are delivered outside of "normal working hours". Such programmes are offered by many HEIs, with significant cohorts of students in some institutions studying in this mode. HEIs appear to vary significantly in how these students are defined and captured in returns to the HEA.
- Online: this category also addresses full-time and part-time cohorts, where students take classes online instead of in a physical classroom. This can facilitate students whose schedules makes it difficult to attend classes, those who prefer studying at their own pace or for whom distance from the campus makes attendance at the physical campus an issue. Some HEIs offer dedicated suites of online programmes, with their students widely dispersed both nationally and internationally.

- Part-time students on traditional on-campus full-time programmes: this category of student is possibly the easiest to define and report in returns to the HEA, insofar as the data collection methods for these programmes are well developed and used in the same way by all HEIs, based on the pro-rata accumulation of ECTS.

5.2 “New” and Potential Part-Time/ Flexible Cohorts

The EUA’s Trends 2018 report²³ noted a growing demand for flexible higher education across the European Higher Education Area. Demand for lifelong learning is being driven by changing demographics, present and future skill needs of the labour market and the evolving workplace, not least due to digitalisation. HEIs also want to enable lifelong learning for its broader value and good to society, helping citizens to develop a love of learning – lifelong and lifewide.

In this light, this paper sets out issues and challenges associated with the provision of part-time/ flexible study in Irish higher education, and proposes a set of principles (Section 1.2) to inform the development of a more coherent, systematic and viable approach in order to meet national ambitions and support our competitiveness. A future redesign of the system, based on the proposed set of principles (Section 1.2), would allow for a re-imagining of how mainstream higher education provision can be delivered in a more flexible manner.

This would make higher education a more viable option for many “new” and potential cohorts, many of whom are pinpointed as priority groups in a range of national policy documents (for example, the National Access Plan 2015-2019²⁴, HEA’s System Performance Framework 2018-2020²⁵), National Skills Strategy 2025²⁶, Future Jobs Ireland²⁷). These include, but are not limited to:

- Upskilling/ reskilling opportunities for those in or seeking employment.
- Lifelong learning opportunities for all.

²³ <https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/trends-2018-learning-and-teaching-in-the-european-higher-education-area.pdf>

²⁴ <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Plan-for-Equity-of-Access-to-Higher-Education-2015-2019.pdf>

²⁵ <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/higher-education-system-performance-framework-2018-2020.pdf>

²⁶ https://www.education.ie/en/publications/policy-reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf

²⁷ <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Business-Sectoral-Initiatives/Future-Jobs/>

- National Access Plan priority groups, including students with Disabilities (see Sections 4, 7.3)
- Subgroups among and across the priority groups identified by the National Access as experiencing difficulties participating in higher education and requiring particular support, including:
 - lone parents;
 - teen parents;
 - some people from ethnic minorities.
- Carers/ those with caring responsibilities.
- Those in precarious and/ or seasonal work.

6. Student Services and Supports

There are a wide range of student services and supports made available in HEIs, depending on the scale of the institution. While these services and supports are available to all students, typically many of these services are available during “normal working hours”, with some additional opening around peak times in the academic year. As such, they tend not to be uniformly accessible by part-time/ flexible students. As we heard during the consultation process: *“adequate service provision is a problem for many of these students. Often, part-time/ flexible students are on campus at different times than the full-time cohort. In many cases, this means that basic services, like catering facilities and even building heating, are not available as they would be to the full-time cohort.”* Also, *“part-time/ flexible students being on the periphery of many HEIs when it comes to the provision of teaching is not helpful”*. In recommending the adoption of the Principles of Universal Design for Learning, the Subgroup also advocates a whole-of-institution approach to mainstreaming inclusion that recognises and values diversity, ensuring that student services and supports, teaching and learning environments, campus infrastructure, systems and processes are designed around the needs of all students, and not on any assumption of a “traditional” student population (Kelly & Padden, 2018).

The demands placed on the higher education system have grown incrementally, where it was originally designed a long time ago to accommodate a much smaller and less diverse cohort of students. The Department of Education and Skills has projected that the (full-time) student

population in higher education will grow further by nearly 40,000 additional students by 2030²⁸. Developing different modes of provision and services to support this demographic surge in student numbers will become even more urgent.

In the meantime, local patches have been created across the sector in efforts to respond to student needs. A coherent approach, such as based on the proposed set of principles (Section 1.2), across the sector would engender greater efficiency and effectiveness. This would need to be adequately resourced, particularly as student services and supports are already significantly stretched to cater for current demand. The availability of student services and supports is subject to resources, and most have been significantly affected by the reduction in state funding in the past decade.

Discussions during the consultation process often centred on the lack of feasibility for HEIs to offer student services and supports on the basis of a student's mode or on a pro-rata basis as per a student's number of ECTS, for example. Many services have fixed overhead costs that remain the same for each student, irrespective of full-time or part-time/ flexible status. Developments towards online supports and evening/ weekend on-campus services (for example, UCC offers 24/7 Canvas VLE supports) are beneficial to not only part-time/ flexible students, but to all students who may not be able to come to campus to engage with supports and services for a variety of reasons. Additional staff, including technical staff to support online students would be required to further develop this in line with current and growing demand. Emerging roles, e.g. educational technologists, will be required to support the delivery of part-time/ flexible programmes.

There are challenges associated with the provision of teaching and support staff outside of "normal working hours", on-campus and off-campus. Employment contracts would be required to cater for the requirements of working with the part-time/ flexible student cohort, e.g. recognition for outside of "normal working hours" evening/ weekend work, shift allowances, quantifying number of hours in online teaching, etc). There would also be timetabling implications for HEIs. We heard during the consultation process that *"pay and*

²⁸ <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/projections/projections-of-demand-for-full-time-third-level-education-2018-2040.pdf>

support for staff working with the part-time/ flexible student cohort is often complicated, which adds a layer of invisibility to this cohort in the HEI”.

As mentioned in Section 4, there is a lack of data to help us better understand the profile of students participating on part-time/ flexible programmes. For example, while the AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability) report on numbers of students with disabilities studying in higher education in Ireland in 2016/17²⁹ shows significant increases in the numbers of students with disabilities who study part-time, and advocates part-time study as a more sustainable option for many students with disabilities, the broader datasets regarding part-time/ flexible participation remain poor. This presents challenges for HEIs in ensuring a robust evidence base to deliver appropriate services and supports for part-time/ flexible students.

While some student services and supports are central in a HEI, others are dispersed. Others still are subcontracted to external parties, meaning responding to the needs of part-time/ flexible students would have tendering/ procurement implications. Services that are typically available include, but are not limited to:

- Academic and learning support services: HEIs typically provide support for student learning through centres for teaching and learning, libraries, etc. Services are more developed in some HEIs/ campuses where supports can be focused on students with learning difficulties, and many others also offer such services such as academic writing and maths support.
- Access and disability support services: whilst some variation exists in the services offered, these offices promote and support entry into higher education by students from under-represented groups, through a series of outreach initiatives and dedicated post-entry supports, including assistance with admission procedures, accessibility, examination supports, guidance about navigating teaching and learning processes.
- Campus security: the provision a safe campus and security staff to ensure same are critical to the student experience.
- Careers service: provides information and advice on issues relating to career choice, further studies and/ or employment opportunities. Services typically involve career

²⁹ <https://ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/Rates%202016-17%20-%20ONLINE.pdf>

advice, job search techniques, CV preparation, interview skills, applying for jobs and identifying further study opportunities.

- Hospitality: catering and access to hot food and drinks are core issues for part-time/flexible students.
- Information technology: IT support, photocopying and printing are usually only available during “normal working hours”.
- Library services: while many library services are available remotely and online, the physical buildings and collections operate during defined opening hours, during which library staff will also be available. Despite best efforts to respond to student needs, particularly at peak times in the academic year, certain library services will inevitably remain less accessible to part-time/ flexible students. The same issues apply for part-time/ flexible students regarding access to academic, tutoring and other academic support staff, despite the best efforts of these staff.
- Sports facilities: many HEIs have extensive sports spanning a range of activities.
- Student health services: most HEIs offer a range of professional physical and mental health care such as on-campus doctors/ nurses, a safe and supportive environment where students can come and talk with qualified professionals about issues affecting mental or emotional health. Pastoral support is also available in most institutions.
- Students union: represents the student body in areas such as education, social events and equality related issues.

7. Subgroup Discussion Points

“It is time to start thinking of doing away finally with the idea of full-time and part-time...then we will have only ‘students’ and the question will be ‘how many credits are you taking?’ Part-time and flexible higher education in Ireland Policy, practice and recommendations for the future, HEA. (2012)

This Section summarises the main discussion points raised by the Subgroup in its work to date. These discussions have highlighted that there are currently gaps in the provision of programmes for part-time/ flexible students, gaps in the funding model, gaps in the data on their participation and profile, and consequently gaps in our collective understanding of these cohorts.

As set out in the Report from the Irish Higher Education Consultation on the Discussion Paper on Part-Time/ Flexible Study, HEIs recognise these as issues and have continued to operationalise provision on a localised basis. However, response to demand for provision is dependant on the funding and staffing resources required. Some HEIs outlined concerns about how to operationalise the Principles set out in this paper. However, all HEIs endorsed the Principles for a more integrated systemic response to supporting current and future provision.

7.1 Data Collection by HEIs

The Subgroup investigated data collection practices and systems for part-time/ flexible students, with specific consideration of the National Access Plan priority groups. Following the first meeting of the Part-Time/ Flexible Subgroup on 5 November 2018, members were asked to compile details of their HEI's current data collection practices and systems. This information was subsequently presented and discussed at the second meeting of the Subgroup on 11 December 2018 (see Appendix 3).

It emerged from this exercise that there is significant variation in the data collected regarding these students, both within and between HEIs, and therefore in the data reported in returns to the HEA. As such, the lack of clarity and consistency in definitions used across the sector has implications for national data sets and for the allocation of funding to HEIs for these cohorts of students. This point was reflected in the HEA's 2012³⁰ Report which outlined similar that the context of provision for these students would benefit from the inclusion of "data and targets for part-time education should be based on more precise and standardised definitions"

However, while significant differences exist between localised data collection practices and systems, the Subgroup noted that there are commonalities regarding what HEIs would like to do differently in terms of collecting, housing and reporting this data. The emerging clarity on definitions will shape how we collect data.

³⁰ <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/Part-time-And-Flexible-Higher-Education-in-Ireland.pdf>

7.2 Equal Access to Student Services and Supports

A range of legalisation sets out the equality obligations and frames the provision of education to students with disabilities. The Education Act 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998) outlines a definition of disability, which is retained in the Disability Act 2005 and the Equal Status Act (2000-2015) respectively. The latter Acts place requirements on educational institutions in relation to how services are delivered and specify that it is unlawful to discriminate in relation to admissions, access to any course, facility or benefit provided, any other term or condition of participation, the expulsion of a student, or any other sanction against a student³¹.

Furthermore, ‘Reasonable Accommodations’ for people with disabilities is described as the service provider’s responsibility, who must take appropriate measures to enable people with disabilities to use the service on an equal basis with others³². Where measures are considered to impose a disproportionate burden, the costs of the accommodations and the scale of the service provider may be taken in account.

As noted in Section 6 above, most student services operate on a “normal working hours”, both for core academic services and mainstream student supports as well as on-campus commercial services such as catering. This has obvious consequences for students who need to avail of such services outside these hours, and who may never or rarely attend classes on campus. If part-time/ flexible students are no longer to be “othered”, and to be seen as mainstream in the same way as other cohorts, HEIs will need to move towards a system of “universal service design” suitable for all students.

7.3 Funding for HEIs

It emerged from Subgroup discussions that there appear to be differences in how HEIs receive state funding for part-time/ flexible students. The state funding received is influenced by a number of factors including the funding stream through which different cohorts of students are funded, whether the HEI is a University, Technological University or an Institute

³¹ <https://www.ihrec.ie/your-rights/i-have-an-issue-with-a-service/i-have-an-issue-about-education/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.ihrec.ie/your-rights/i-have-an-issue-with-a-service/discrimination-in-relation-to-services/what-is-disability-in-relation-to-services/what-is-reasonable-accommodation/>

of Technology, as well as the mode and NFQ level of the programme. How this funding reaches part-time/ flexible students in the provision of services, etc. is at the discretion of the HEI.

While further clarity would be welcome, the basic parameters of the core state funding model for HEIs appear to be as follows:

- Part-time students are included in the HEA's core funding grant through the RGAM model on a pro-rata basis (based on the number of ECTS), with the same subject weighting as full-time students on these programmes. This is despite it not being feasible for HEIs to offer student services and supports on the basis of a student's mode or on a pro-rata basis as per a student's number of ECTS (see Section 6).
- In the case of Institutes of Technology, distance learning students are funded on a pro-rata basis, on the same weighting as full-time students on similar programmes. In the case of Universities, distance learning students are included in the allocation model with a proposed weighting of 0.5 for 2019, up from 0.4 in 2018³³. The intention is to include these on a pro-rata basis with effect from the 2020 grant allocation.
- Therefore, limited funding is received for any students on part-time programmes in the way that they are counted in the core funding model, disadvantaging these cohorts throughout the higher education system.
- The exceptions to this are when students are enrolled on parallel programmes, usually with a labour market activation focus such as Springboard+, where discrete funding schemes with different conditions apply. In these instances, the funding is allocated on a competitive, annual basis for a limited number of places across a limited range of programmes.

An overview of current HEA funding arrangements for part-time/ flexible students was provided to the Subgroup by the HEA (see Appendix 2). It has proved difficult to provide precise references to the funding parameters outlined above as these are not published on the HEA's website.

³³ Review of the Allocation Model for Funding Higher Education Institutions.
<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/HEA-RFAM-Final-Report-for-Publication.pdf>

Subgroup and consultation discussions flagged that National Access Plan priority groups are more likely to need the opportunities afforded by part-time/ flexible provision of higher education. In that light, it is welcome that the Department of Education and Skills has recently made it possible for part-time students for the period 2017-2019 to avail of the Student Assistance Fund (post-entry funding, managed by the HEI, for students experience unexpected financial difficulties, based on defined eligibility criteria). Similarly, the Fund for Students with Disabilities (post-entry funding, managed by the HEI, for students with particular needs as a result of a disability) has recently (2018) been extended to part-time students.

While these are welcome from the perspective of equity of access, the extension of these discrete funding streams to these particular cohorts does not address the core funding issues regarding part-time/ flexible students. In order to achieve existing national targets on part-time/ flexible student participation and lifelong learning, fundamental changes will need to be made to the current design of the higher education system at state-level and HEI-level. Without this, as was summarised during the consultation process, the message to part-time/ flexible students is: *“we want you but don’t want to recognise full implications”*.

7.4 Funding for Students

We repeatedly heard throughout the consultation process that fees are the first and highest barrier to part-time/ flexible study. Part-time students (irrespective of the number of ECTS being taken) are not eligible under the free-fees scheme, meaning that their student fee can be significantly higher than the €3,000 per annum charged to eligible full-time students. The Student Support Act 2011, which acts as the basis for SUSI to operate, outlines that it is possible to “prescribe a course that does not require attendance by a student on a full-time basis to be an approved course.”

As mentioned in Section 5, the traditional picture of a part-time/ flexible student as someone working full-time and studying on a programme delivered in the evenings/ at weekends – with the perceived implication that they can afford to pay – has evolved. There is huge variation in the experience of being a higher education student in the 21st century. The “new” and potential part-time/ flexible cohorts listed in Section 5.2 cannot necessarily afford fees.

Through its Principles in Section 1.2, this paper supports more inclusive approach to funding all students.

Indeed, we heard during the consultation process that many students are theoretically full-time but their circumstances mean that they would be better served as part-time/ flexible. However, for reasons of affordability, these students must commit to full-time provision. Moreover, part-time/ flexible students are not eligible for a SUSI grant. Student grants are available exclusively to those studying on a full-time basis and leading to a major award, at NFQ Levels 6, 7 and 8. Despite the national policy commitments to increase the numbers of part-time/ flexible students and lifelong learning, core funding arrangements for these cohorts remain dissuasive, although there have been some welcome developments in discrete initiatives.

The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) scheme is restricted to those engaging in full-time education programmes leading to a major award (again, irrespective of the number of ECTS a part-time student is taking). The Part-Time Education Option (PTEO) through Department of Employment and Social Protection (DEASP) currently allows students to retain Jobseeker's Allowance or Jobseeker's Benefit and attend a part-time day or evening course of education or training. However, students are expected to show that they are actively looking for and willing to take up work and that the course is likely to improve their chances of getting a job. In addition to this, there is the added restriction of being expected to accept a job offer if one is made, even while participating on the course.

As noted in Section 7.3, an additional ring-fenced investment of €2 million in 2017/18 and 2018/19 has enabled the extension of the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) to part-time students. No further announcement has been made to extend this funding beyond that timeframe and, at the time of writing, there was no data available of the impact of this funding on the number or retention of part-time students. It should be noted that this fund is only available to students once they have entered higher education and already paid their fees, with no guarantee as to whether any student will be eligible or for what amount. Information provided by HEIs to the HEA suggests that, as a proportion of all students supported by SAF, a very low number of part-time students have availed of the fund thus far, i.e. less than 3%.

The widening of eligibility for PATH 2 (1916 Bursary) funding to part-time students for the period 2018-2020 is a welcome development. However, of the 200 bursaries available, only 4 were awarded to part-time students across the country.

Despite the limitations of some of these initiatives, the consultation process evidenced that HEIs welcome the recognition of the need to fund a broader range of students beyond just that of full-time. Another welcome development is the Human Capital Initiative³⁴ which includes the provision of upskilling and reskilling through lifelong learning as a key area of focus. It will create innovative opportunities, and will need to be considered as the landscape evolves.

When compared to the above, the Springboard+ funding model is less restrictive. A labour market activation programme, Springboard+ provides free higher education programmes for people who are unemployed or who wish to re-enter the labour market. Those in employment can also avail of the opportunity, paying 10% contribution towards the programme fee. The Springboard+ model likewise allows students to retain social welfare payments, unlike the Back to Education Allowance. More recently, Springboard+ now also provides opportunities for those who have been out of the work environment due to childcare or other caring obligations and require upskilling or reskilling to return to the workforce. However, the Springboard+ initiative poses challenges from the HEI perspective due to its parallel nature, discrete funding and conditions, and limited number of places across a limited range of programmes which HEIs compete for on an annual basis.

Given that Springboard+ has proven to be an effective and attractive model for part-time students, the Subgroup considers that there is significant potential to mainstream these student-friendly conditions across all higher education programmes. This would result in a much broader range of part-time/ flexible learning opportunities to priority groups targeted through the National Access Plan, as well as to those broader “new” and potential cohorts (see Section 5.2), many of whom are pinpointed as priority groups in a range of national policy documents, including in relation to upskilling/ reskilling opportunities for those in or seeking employment and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Such mainstreaming would

³⁴ <https://hea.ie/skills-engagement/human-capital-initiative/>

also remove the need for the additional parallel administration of Springboard+ by HEIs, and indeed by the HEA.

7.5 Accessing Information and Applying for Part-Time/ Flexible Options

The barriers faced by potential students in accessing information and applying for part-time/ flexible programmes was a major topic of discussion for the Subgroup and throughout the consultation process. In the absence of a single-entry point, potential students are often asked to fill out multiple and varying forms, and repeatedly asked to disclose information as part of their applications within and across HEIs. Potential part-time/ flexible learners need to be recruited and may not tolerate onerous or lengthy selection challenges. As they typically are making the application independently and unlikely to have guidance available to them, the system needs to be intuitive and welcoming. There is also widespread duplication of application processing activity.

This is in comparison to the Springboard+ and the CAO's Advanced Entry systems (for applicants transferring from further education to higher education, years 2, 3, 4), which offer flexible, user-friendly portals for applicants and HEIs. The Springboard+ website, for example, offers information on the availability of programmes, entry criteria, how to apply and how students are funded. The Subgroup noted that this illustrates the need for a single-entry point where persons wishing to study on a part-time/ flexible basis can easily find the information they need. If part-time/ flexible learning is to be mainstreamed, the successful features of the Springboard+ and CAO's Advanced Entry systems could valuably be integrated into the portals already used by students. As well as the advantages such an approach would provide for students, it would also help reduce existing duplication of efforts across the higher education sector.

Such a portal could also include details on the recognition of prior learning, which is often of particular interest to those seeking to study on a part-time/ flexible basis. Lack of consistency of practice and resources across HEIs regarding RPL can create further barriers to potential part-time/ flexible students. Career guidance must also seek to drop barriers. As was expressed during the consultation process: *“There is often a heavy focus at the guidance counselling stage on full-time programmes, rather than a recognition of the part-time route and how the part-time route might still get a student to their desired end”*.

7.6 Part-Time/ Flexible Postgraduate Students

The added value of a postgraduate qualification to both graduates and the state is evidenced in the Impact Assessment of Irish Universities³⁵. In the case of many HEIs, the different funding structures at postgraduate level, from both student and institutional perspectives, mean that part-time/ flexible postgraduate arrangements are much more widely available than at undergraduate level. This improved availability of part-time/ flexible postgraduate opportunities translates into much higher proportions of part-time students at postgraduate level (40%) than at undergraduate level (13%), according to the data published in the HEA's Key Facts and Figures 2017/18 report³⁶. Furthermore, when comparing these 2017/18 figures to the HEA's data published for 2010/11³⁷, the overall proportion of part-time postgraduate students has grown twice as fast over those years as the proportion of part-time undergraduate students (8% compared to 4%).

It should be noted, however, that SUSI grants for postgraduate students are only available for full-time programmes (see Section 7.4). The same criteria are applied by the state (both DES and DEASP schemes) to postgraduate students as to undergraduate students, although a limited amount of PATH 1 funding is currently destined for participants in the Postgraduate Masters in Education programmes across the country.

As evidenced above, the greater autonomy of HEIs to manage financial arrangements at postgraduate level, and the greater flexibility inherent in postgraduate study, shows that demand for part-time/ flexible learning can be stimulated when the correct conditions are in place for both students and providers. This reinforces similar evidence provided through the success of the Springboard+ programme, as discussed in Section 7.4 above. It can therefore be assumed that a more flexible funding model for undergraduate studies could also lead to greater participation by part-time/ flexible students.

³⁵ https://www.iaa.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Delivering-for-Ireland_An-Impact-Assessment-of-Irish-Universities_summary-report-2019.pdf

³⁶ <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/01/Higher-Education-Authority-Key-Facts-Figures-2017-18.pdf>

³⁷ <https://hea.ie/resources/publications/hea-key-facts-figures-1011/>

7.7 Students Engaged in Learning Which Does Not Carry ECTS

The Subgroup acknowledges the wider benefits of higher education opportunities which do not carry ECTS, in that they encourage lifelong learning and can act as a catalyst for students to later engage in accredited learning and qualifications. While such programmes were discussed by the Subgroup, it was agreed not to include them within the scope of our work at this time.

8. Conclusion

In exploring the current model of provision of part-time higher education, this paper has addressed realised that a commonality of barriers to participation in Higher Education for all students who do not study on a full-time basis. Through its principles, which have been endorsed by the Higher Education sector, this paper sets out a need for change in this provision and outlines what challenges stakeholders must overcome to realise national ambitions.

As we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, the knowledge intensive part of economy will be crucial in accelerating the recovery. The higher education sector is a key player in this regard and calls for a more coherent, systematic and viable approach, on the basis of the three principles and guided by the fundamental idea that ‘a student is a student is a student’, to develop part-time/ flexible provision. This will support the access by, and retention of, a broader range of potential lifelong learners for the benefit of Ireland’s economy and society.

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Appendix 1: Terms of Reference of the IUA Part-Time/ Flexible Subgroup

Reporting to the IUA Access Steering Group (ASG) for HEIs, this Subgroup will consider the issues of part-time and flexible education in higher education, with a view to informing the discussion, shaping future developments, and advising HEIs and policy makers.

Aims

Phase 1

- Investigate data collection practices and systems for part-time students, having regard to the equity target cohorts, and align with relevant developments, such as geocoding;
- Share good practice and develop models of provision;
- Examine and agree on the definition of part-time/flexible study;
- Examine the application processes used for part-time/flexible study, including RPL, with a view to developing a plan to mainstream part-time flexible applications.

Phase 2

- Plan how best to provide mainstream and supplemental student supports, including pre-entry guidance, referral, and in-course supports for part-time students under the principle of 'a student is a student';
- Investigate approaches to ensure the availability of required staffing with consideration for the impact of Employment Control Framework;

- Examine the options for funding part-time study with particular consideration for in the context of widening participation and prioritising students challenged by personal circumstances, including contributions from the State, DEASP, employers including through the National Training Fund, SUSI, and students.

Appendix 2: Overview of Current HEA Funding Arrangements for Part-Time/ Flexible Students (provided to the Subgroup by the HEA)

HEA Block Grant

- Part-time students are included in the HEA's funding allocation model for Universities and Institutes of Technology on a pro-rata basis and receive the same subject group weighting as students on full-time courses.
- The funding model also recognises students on online or distance learning courses.

Student Assistance Fund

- In 2017/18, SAF was topped up by an additional €1m for the support of part-time students who are lone parents or members of the other access target groups.
- For 2018/19, this ring-fenced allocation of €1m was made available again.
- The criteria for use of this additional funding remain the same as those applying to full-time students.

Fund for Students with Disabilities

- The Review of the FSD published in 2017 recommended the extension of the Fund to support students on part-time courses.
- As part of the 2018 allocation, HEIs were invited to begin preparation for the inclusion of students on part-time courses under the Fund and were advised to use their allocations to assist students on part-time courses on a pilot phased approach.

Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH)

- The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) is a dedicated fund committed to increasing participation by under-represented groups in higher education.
- As one of the target groups identified in the National Access Plan, part-time flexible students are covered by the three strands that make up PATH: Teacher Education initiatives; 1916 Bursary Fund; and community/regional partnerships.
- In relation to direct funding, part-time/flexible students are eligible to apply under the 1916 Bursary Fund (annual bursary of €5,000 per year for duration of course).

SUSI

- Courses that are part-time or that are less than two years in duration are not approved for the purposes of the SUSI student grant.

Appendix 3: Summary of Sample HEI Data Collection Practices and Systems

HEI	How are data collected?	What data are collected and housed?	Limitations of current data systems?	Ideal system/ what could be done differently?
IT Carlow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collected through a variety of sources: CAO, PAC, Direct Entry through Banner, Online Application forms (IT Carlow website), External bodies (HEA Springboard ams platform), Paper Applications, external online application forms, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Large amounts of data in relation to students, and as the years go on the breadth of data being collected grows, below is the list we currently return to the HEA, from March this will include full details of SUSI grants and Entry basis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The current system is not flexible enough to account for changes in the requirement of students, for example, in one academic year a student can only be registered on one programme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educampus have spent time collating the design and data requirements for the IoT sector, this document details the requirements of the sector as a whole, IT Carlow participated fully in this discussion (could possibly provide a sample copy).
DkIT	<p>(Part-Time Only)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collected via part-time courses online applications system (“Quercus”) and through p-t application forms. Will have all applications made via online portal over the next 12 months. All students are ALSO registered on to Institute’s student records system (“Banner”). This capture all requisite data for returns to the HEA. The two systems (Quercus and Banner) are not integrated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student Name, Student Address, Student DOB, Student Contact Details, Student Previous Educational Record, Student Employment Details (if appropriate), Applicable Course, Payment Details. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No integration between various IoT IT systems i.e. Quercus, Banner, Agresso. Duplication of application processing activity continues to occur. Customer/ Applicant data entry screens somewhat dated (especially with Banner). Admin staff find the system user unfriendly. Expensive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a National Applications Portal Group. Create a Part-Time Courses Applications Workflow (hard to be completely definitive when creating an applications workflow to capture every possibility so allow some flexibility to adapt at the Institute level). Roll out a single applications workflow portal with payment module (including instalment payments) for higher education system. Existing examples of common application portals include CAO and Springboard. Ensure the Portal captures the necessary applicant/ student data required by the HEA. Create an Admin Users Group that regularly solicits feedback from system users.

<p>NFETL/ IT Tallaght</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IT Tallaght use both paper and online applications. • Online system is not linked to Banner so all applications made online must be entered into Banner. • Facility does enable all paperwork to be uploaded and easy communication with students all payments are made through the online system. • Banner online facility was tried a few years ago but it was not robust enough to link Payments to registration and so could not be used. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full student details (name, DOB, address, contact details, previous qualifications, etc.) – all information held in Banner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having an online system that does not link into Banner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seamless for students. • Links registration, payments, achievement. • Readily enables recognition and recording of credits from other accredited achievements that are being integrated into current programme.
<p>DCU</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designation as full-time or part-time is dependent on the programme on which the student is registered. • For example, if registered on an undergraduate programme whose academic structure has 60 ECTS in the academic year, he/ she will be recorded as full-time. This will apply even to students repeating part of the year where they might only be taking 10 ECTS. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A further designation used in DCU is distance, i.e., students of the Open Education unit, taking courses through online, distance learning. In the case of distance education, no distinction is made on the student registration on the full-time status of the student based on the credit load (and if that constituted full-time or part-time). (In practice, these 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No accumulation of module credits at registration level, so if a student is registered manually, they can be over- or under- registered for the required number of credits. Currently there is no validation alert on the system to flag this. • No automatic FTE calculation for students held within our student registration system; this would provide the best indication of the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clearly defined and approved description of a part-time student and a mechanism on SIS to support the implementation of this within the curriculum and registration process. This would eliminate some of the issues with the current system and processes. • Ideally the mode of study of a programme (full-time/ part-time/ flexible, etc.), and a FTE calculation of student credit load automatically calculated within the student information system would give the university insight into the number and breadth of part-time/ flexible time study in each year. A basic calculation, which provided an "estimated time to

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •A full-time Master's programme will have 90 ECTS over one year. An academic structure which has students taking less than 90 ECTS in a single year - typically 40/ 50 in a year – will be treated as part-time. •Some programmes recorded as continuous programmes. These programmes do not have defined credits on the academic structure therefore a student can register for any number of credits/ modules within an academic year. These students register as continuous/ modular with no distinction as to whether they are full-time or part-time. (In practice, these are more flexible versions of a part-time registration.) 	<p>students are part-time students in that almost without exception, they are taking less than a full-time load of 60 ECTS at undergraduate or 90 ECTS at Master's in any one academic year.)</p>	<p>degree to which students are carrying a less than full-time load.</p>	<p>completion", based on the current rate of progression would also be helpful. This would monitor average/ percentile times to completion.</p>
<p>UCC</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data is collected via PAC and CAO for PG and UG students. This data is subsequently loaded to the student records system. • Also operates a system to support direct applicants and this is used mostly by Adult and Continuing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biographical and information incl. Leaving Certificate Scores to High School Transcripts for students applying from the US. Deferral, withdrawals and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System has served the university well but UCC is now actively considering modernising the system to support strategic goals and in particular the launch of the inaugural academic strategy. The current system does not have any 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UCC currently focused on the data value map for data users and the persona needs of key users across the university which includes all of our key constituents; academic staff, administrative staff and students. This work addresses data integration and acquisition challenges inside UCC and ways to improve delivery.

	<p>Education applicants and Non-EU UG Degree applicants.</p>	<p>leaves of absence are maintained on the system.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For students admitted and subsequently registered and examined, UCC maintains the core academic records including sub-module, module and programme year results. • Fee Account which includes details of all charges, bursaries and payments. • University scholarships awarded during the student journey are also recorded on the system. 	<p>workflow automation and beyond point-to-point integration it has limited integration capabilities. Much of data reporting is done through a data warehouse and third-party reporting platform.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While the current system has data acquisition shortfalls, the quality and accuracy of the data held on the system is high. The primary issue is unlocking value from the data through integration, visualisation and data driven action and interventions. UCC is actively working on initiatives to build a more data-driven operating model. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SUSI files and processing of same are particularly onerous and again a more streamlined solution for validating and returning records should be engineered.
<p>UCD</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part-time registrations are collected from online application systems through InfoHub. Those on accredited programmes are also registered to the university's Banner system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biographical details – no data on SEG and inconsistent data on prior educational levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems can run parallel to each other and there is some duplication of effort. Record is initiated by applicant so there can be anomalies or errors in the names and details recorded. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One Part-Time Portal that is easy to use and accessible. Potential part-time learners need to be recruited and may not tolerate onerous or lengthy selection challenges. As they typically are making the application independently and unlikely to have guidance available to them, the system needs to be intuitive and welcoming.

Appendix 4: Report from the Irish Higher Education Consultation on the Discussion Paper on Part-Time/ Flexible Study

Introduction

Recognising issues and challenges associated with the provision of part-time/ flexible study in Irish higher education, the IUA Access Steering Group (ASG) for HEIs requested the formation of a Part-Time/ Flexible Subgroup (see Appendix 1: Terms of Reference) to consider these, with a view to informing the development of a more coherent, systematic and viable approach. The IUA Part-Time/ Flexible Subgroup is made up of senior, cross-sectoral representations of stakeholders, including from Universities, Institutes of Technology, HEA, CAO, NFETL, Ibec and USI (full membership on Title Page).

While the work of the Subgroup originated in an equity of access and widening participation context, the creation of viable part-time/ flexible study policies and practices would open up opportunities for a broad range of students who could benefit from more responsive higher education provision.

In the process of providing a report to the ASG on Phase 1 of the aims of the Terms of Reference (Appendix 1), the Part-Time/ Flexible Subgroup held six meetings since late 2018 to discuss key issues, and teased out many of the multiplicities of understanding that exist around the subject of part-time/ flexible provision. In taking the time to coalesce around these complex issues, the Subgroup produced a discussion paper which outlines the key issues identified, illustrates the discussion points in working towards them and suggests a set of principles which would provide a viable approach to inform any future redesign of the system.

Upon the recommendation of the ASG, this paper was presented to and received feedback from the IUA Registrars group and the THEA Registrars group. There was a further recommendation to hold in-depth consultation sessions. These were held, in Galway, Cork and Dublin, aimed at seeking detailed input and feedback from a range of perspectives across HEIs and other stakeholders (see Appendix A).

Format of Consultation Sessions

Each of the three consultation sessions were structured to include:

- A presentation on the policy context of part-time/ flexible provision in higher education;
- A briefing on the content of the discussion paper;
- Plenary discussions;
- Breakout groups for focussed discussions.

The discussion paper was distributed in advance of the sessions, along with an agenda for the day. The sessions were each recorded by two rapporteurs who took notes on proceedings.

Within the focussed discussions, each breakout group was presented with the set of four principles as set out in the discussion paper and discussed each of them individually, with the specific questions:

- a) Does the group endorse each principle?
- b) What would your own HEI need to do to implement the principle as set out?
- c) What changes need to happen at national level to make the principle operational?

Outline of Discussions

Each of the breakout groups had a nominated person to feedback to the plenary afterwards. Elements of these discussions are set out below, as recorded through the notes of the rapporteurs and of the breakout group feedback sessions.

Principle 1: State bodies will not distinguish between full-time and part-time/ flexible students at state-funded HEIs in the provision of student grants or financial supports through the DEASP or other financial supports directed at students in higher education.

- *The cost of participation in higher education for part-time/ flexible students is actually greater than for full-time students.*
- *Part-time students pay more fees and receive less support.*
- *In directing certain financial supports to part-time/ flexible students (SAF, FSD), there has essentially been an acknowledgement by government that there is a “need” to be addressed yet it has failed to address core funding (student grants, HEI grants).*

- *Operationally and academically, a student is a student and treated equally but in terms of access to supports, they are not always given equitable access as a full- time student may be given – there is a disparity here.*
- *Fees are the biggest and first barrier most students face, regardless of mode, duration of programme.*
- *We need to have some consistent way of defining the numbers...*
 - *Based on student headcount, i.e. registered students?*
 - *Only on formal accredited programmes, or more inclusive re informal non-accredited?*
 - *What effect will this have on HEI capacity?*
 - *What effect will this have on HEA funding?*
- *RPL is not facilitated through state support system for students, but supports are there for full-time courses; inherently inefficient and not supportive of students.*
- *Can SUSI guarantee student grants for a larger fixed amount of ECTS, to allow for slower progression/ repeats, etc., rather than dropping out and “losing” the investment to date...?*
- *The assumption of the current model of provision is that part-time students are full-time workers and evening students and could hence afford. But, as society and the workplace has evolved and will continue to evolve, the profile of part-time students has changed. The system needs to move with this.*
- *We need a system that facilitates part-time/ flexible study/ lifelong learning. One which encourages (potential) students and encourages HEIs to make provision available.*
- *The messages coming from the existing provision is that demand is there from students (and will continue)– supply will be created if conditions allow. However, currently, funding model limits it. And part-time/ flexible students are disadvantaged in this system.*
- *HEIs share government ambition for Ireland to become a leader in lifelong learning. The evidence suggests that it improve the fortunes of all of our citizens, future needs of economy and society. It’s good for our competitiveness too. However, if we don’t improve the availability of high quality part-time/flexible opportunities then Ireland will lose out to other countries who are providing options in this space.*

Principle 2: The state will equitably fund public HEIs for volumes of accredited learning, expressed in terms of ECTS, underpinned by existing conventions and quality assurance mechanisms, irrespective of the mode or duration of study.

- *Services for students costed pro-rata (i.e. a student studying 5 credits v one taking 120 credits – both will require software licences, registration and other services whose costs are not pro-rata).*
- *Lack of clarity on where funding attached to part-time/ flexible students go within the HEI. How do part-time/ flexible students access services?*
- *Research (which is not fully funded/ self-funding) is drawing money away from teaching, which exacerbates the challenge.*
- *Students aren't supported when they need to repeat a course. Government should consider the cost of part-qualified students not reaching their full potential (loss of earnings, DEASP claims) vs the cost of providing flexibly in funding to support students to complete studies.*
- *Part-time/ flexible students cost more pro-rata than a full-time student. Fixed overhead costs remain the same for each person, irrespective of full-time or part-time/ flexible basis.*
- *Resourcing new and additional students is not about spreading existing thin finance even thinner, but about properly resourcing growing need and demand for lifelong learning – demographics, workplace and skills needs of the (present and) future.*
- *Local patches are being provided as solutions across the sector, trying to respond to student needs. A coherent approach across the sector would bring with it more efficiency and effectiveness.*
- *Government sets targets to improve lifelong learning rates – in context of need to fuel the economy and skill focused workplaces of the future (reskilling, upskilling, not least digitalisation). Irish HEIs want to work with the government to achieve these targets. However, very challenging due to many systematic factors. There is a gulf between policy and practice whereby many barriers exist – disparities – alignment;*
- *HEIs welcome the Springboard+ initiative. We should look at learnings that can be incorporated into mainstream delivery. There have been marginal increases in the overall part-time/ flexible graduates as a result of the initiative. There are challenges for HEIs in this model (parallel systems with annual calls are not sustainable) which*

might go some way to explaining the relatively small numbers, particularly in certain types of HEIs.

- *Some cohorts of part-time/ flexible students are not specifically detailed in any National Access Plan priority group..*

Principle 3: State funded HEIs will not make a distinction between students on such grounds as the mode or duration of study.

- *The funding which is earmarked for Access & Disability within the Core Allocation Grant/ RGAM is directly received by Access & Disability services in some HEIs and not by others. Is it possible to explore a sectoral approach to this as this funding needs to be accessible to part-time/ flexible students?*
- *Local patches are even developed within HEIs themselves to best accommodate the needs of part-time/ flexible students. The sector is trying to respond student needs but a coherent approach across the sector would bring with it more efficiency and effectiveness.*
- *Huge variation in experience/ reality of being a student. There are myths around this – many full-time students are also working (perhaps even full-time hours). There are also many part-time students taking 60 ECTS whilst some full-time students are on reduced hours. With the complexity of situation, seems unfair to distinguish so ruthlessly and in effect discourage engagement in part-time/ flexible study.*
- *Part-time/ flexible students being on the periphery of many HEIs when it comes to the provision of teaching is not helpful.*
- *Is it possible to develop a single application through the CAO? In the lifecycle of a standard and non-standard entry student, how many barriers are there – how many forms and applications must they fill out and how many times do they have to disclose? Would one single form that captures all possible data needed by all be a better system?*
- *More resources need to be put into the area of prior learning, and how it is or is not recognised by HEIs. Prior learning tends to feature at entry to full-time programmes but is less evident after that. A cohesive national framework for tertiary education which explicitly lays out these transition zones is required. The student needs to know how they move from one step to another. The National Framework of Qualifications does this only to a certain degree and only at a more macro level.*

- *There is often a heavy focus at the guidance counselling stage on full-time programmes, rather than a recognition of the part-time/ flexible route and how it might still get a student to their desired end. There are often barriers to accessing information on CPD, upskilling.*

Principle 4: State funded HEIs will treat all students equally in relation to delivery of services and supports, including to part-time/flexible students as an identified target group in the National Plan for Equity of Access.

- *Part-time/ flexible students currently pay more and receive less: how do we move away from this situation? What can be done on campus as well as at system level?*
- *Many students are theoretically full-time but their circumstances mean that they would be better on a part-time basis, but for reasons of affordability cannot do that. Using “extenuating circumstances” as a way around this, but this is not suitable.*
- *Are part-time/ flexible students a “poor relation” or a “cash cow”?*
- *Adult students need a learning space where their lived experience is recognised, and is built on.... Sitting with 500 18-year olds in a lecture theatre may not be the best way to do this.*
- *Most part-time/ flexible students can’t commit to full-time because of other responsibilities and they are being penalised to try and make a difference through education.*
- *Consider the staffing and contracting issues: new contracts would be required to cater for the requirements of working with the part-time/ flexible student group (i.e. recognition for outside of “normal working hours” evening/ weekend work, shift allowances, timetabling, quantifying number of hours in online teaching, etc).*
- *HEIs can’t offer supports on pro-rata/ volumes of accredited learning basis – you either offer supports or you don’t. 24/7 online support and evening/ weekend on-campus services are beneficial not only to part-time/ flexible students but all students who may not be able to come to campus to engage with support services. Additional technical staff (on-campus and off-campus and available outside of “normal working hours”) are required to support online students;*
- *How funding reaches part-time/ flexible students in the provision of services, etc. is at the discretion of the HEI. Is this is always achieved with the most student-centred approach?*

Revised Set of Principles based on Consultation Process

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 supports.

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.

Appendix A: Attendees

The consultation sessions were attended by a range of higher education professionals, including the following roles:

- Lifelong Learning staff
- Academic Services staff
- Registrar
- Senior Lecturers
- Heads of Department
- Access Offices staff
- Disability Services staff
- Admissions Offices staff

The following HEIs were represented:

- Cork Institute of Technology
- Dublin City University
- Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art and Design Technology
- Dundalk Institute of Technology
- Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology
- Institute of Technology Carlow
- Institute of Technology Sligo
- Institute of Technology Tralee
- Letterkenny Institute of Technology
- Mary Immaculate College
- Maynooth University
- NUI Galway
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland
- Royal Irish Academy
- Trinity College Dublin
- TU Dublin Blanchardstown
- TU Dublin City Centre
- TU Dublin Tallaght

- University College Cork
- University College Dublin
- University of Limerick
- Waterford Institute of Technology

Appendix 2: Consultation Agenda

- 11.00am: Welcome and Introductions**
- 11.05am: Presentation:** The Policy Context of Part-time/Flexible Provision in Higher Education
- Presentation:** “A Student is a Student is a Student”: A Discussion Paper on Part-Time/Flexible Study in Irish Higher Education
- 11.30am: Feedback from Plenary to the Discussion Paper & Presentation**
- 12.00pm: Break for lunch**
- 12.30pm: Breakout Group discussions on Principles outlined in Discussion Paper**
- Principle 1: State bodies will not distinguish between full-time and part-time/flexible students at state-funded HEIs in the provision of student grants or financial supports through the DEASP or other financial supports directed at students in higher education.
- Principle 2: The state will equitably fund public HEIs for volumes of accredited learning, expressed in terms of ECTS, underpinned by existing conventions and quality assurance mechanisms, irrespective of the mode or duration of study.
- Principle 3: State funded HEIs will not make a distinction between students on such grounds as the mode or duration of study.
- Principle 4: State funded HEIs will treat all students equally in relation to delivery of services and supports, including to part-time/flexible students as an identified target group in the National Plan for Equity of Access.
- 1.10pm: Summary from each Breakout Group on discussions to Plenary**
- 1.30pm: Final Responses from Plenary**
- 1.50pm: Summarising and Closing Remarks**
- 2.00pm: Close**