



Report of the
Consultation
Forum on the
Role, Value and
Scale of Higher
Education in Ireland
Royal Irish Academy
23 March 2015



Summary

At the request of the Cassells Expert Group on Future Funding Options for Higher Education, the Royal Irish Academy convened a consultation forum for senior academics in higher education. The purpose of the forum was twofold: firstly, to communicate and raise awareness amongst the academic community of the work of the Expert Group; secondly, to discuss and hear feedback from the academic community on the first set of issues under consideration—namely, meeting labour market needs, innovation, quality student experience and access.

In opening the session, the chair of the Expert Group, Mr Peter Cassells, stressed that what is needed is a shared understanding of the role and value of higher education (HE), and some level of agreement on implementation of funding options. The challenge however is to come up with implementable proposals for the future of HE in Ireland. That is not easy, given the current economic climate and the variety of demands placed upon government.

The forum discussions were structured thematically, with each of the four thematic areas benefitting from a scoping paper prepared by Dr Rory O'Donnell, director of the National Economic and Social Council. The four thematic areas considered were:

- 1 Meeting labour-market needs:** issues considered under this theme included: *the role of higher-education institutions in responding to employers' skills needs and developing the soft skills of students; getting the right balance between meeting employers' needs and nurturing the individual talents of students; engaged learning strategies; the goal of graduate employment; and the workplace as a centre of learning.*
- 2 Supporting innovation:** issues considered under this theme included: *how best to support foundation, targeted and applied research; the role and potential of humanities and creative-art disciplines in innovation; and the appropriate role of HE institutions in delivering innovation.*
- 3 Quality of student experience:** issues considered under this theme included: *student development; the quality of the student experience; the hollowing-out of the student experience; and the set of balances to be struck in the HE sector.*
- 4 Making access more equitable:** issues considered under this theme included: *access initiatives by HE institutions; key HE access requirements; recognition of experiential learning; and alternative access pathways.*

Introduction

On 23 March 2015 the Royal Irish Academy ('the Academy') convened a consultation forum at the request of the Expert Group on Future Funding Options for Higher Education ('the Expert Group'). The forum was opened by Professor Mary Daly, President of the Royal Irish Academy, who in welcoming the participants spoke of the Academy's role in facilitating and contributing to informed, public policy debate. Mr Peter Cassells, chair of the Expert Group, thanked the Academy for facilitating the discussion, and noted that the review of future funding requirements is not a mere technical exercise but is intended to contribute to a shared understanding of higher and other post-second level opportunities more generally e.g. further education, and to develop a level of agreement on the implementation of funding options, recognising that the status quo is not an option. The Academy forum is one of a series of consultations that the Expert Group hopes will contribute to the formulation and refinement of such options. The Expert Group will carry out its work in three phases:

- **Phase 1** focuses on what is being funded and what should be funded in higher and future education; a consultation document has been issued on this.¹
- **Phase 2** will consider if the current system is effective; a consultation paper on this phase will be issued in June 2015.
- **Phase 3** will assess further long-term needs based on analyses of phases 1 and 2, taking account of international practice and initiatives, and having regard to what would work in the Irish context.

The challenge is to come up with implementable proposals. This is not easy, given the macro situation. Ireland is coming out of a deep recession and needs to repair the economy, society and individual circumstances, and capacity building is required for all three. The public finances are still constrained, as are household budgets. While significant investment is required for HE and Further Education (FE), there will also be competing demands from other sectors. Accordingly, Ireland needs to think deeply both about overall improvement and future options.

¹ Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education, *The Role, Value and Scale of Higher Education in Ireland* (January 2015), <http://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Higher-Education/Higher-Education-Expert-Group-on-Future-Funding-for-Higher-Education-Discussion-Paper-for-Stakeholder-Consultation-.pdf> (accessed 16 Apr. 2015).

Context setting for the consultation forum

The forum discussions were structured thematically, with each of the four thematic areas benefitting from a scoping paper prepared by Dr Rory O'Donnell, director of the National Economic and Social Council. The four thematic areas considered are:

- Meeting labour-market needs
- Supporting innovation
- Quality of student experience
- Making access more equitable.

Dr O'Donnell introduced the discussion by reflecting on what HE actually does, noting its integrated perspective on economy, society and ecology, and its focus on individual and collective goals. The humanities and social sciences with their focus on interpretation, and causation—and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines—with their focus on the experimental method—each have distinctive contributions to make, but are now more closely related to one another. Innovation, instead of being viewed as a linear process, is best considered as a 'quadruple helix'.² The knowledge and capabilities of graduates must meet the advancing needs of the economy, society and public system. So we must undertake complex actions to address complex problems. Dr O'Donnell noted that HE must also address the following imperatives:

Economic growth and prosperity

- Ireland's economic development
- Economic impact of HE research and development
- Graduate employment and earnings;

Societal development

- Public finances
- Public and social services
- Skills for life and social outcomes;

² See *ibid.* iii: 'Instead of a linear process, which new scientific knowledge drives innovation in industry, there is increasing focus on the way four spheres—university, business, government and civil society—overlap and interact to address the complex economic, technical, social and environmental challenges that are now widespread ...'

Cultural life and civic engagement

- Artistic and creative practices
- Cross-fertilisation in problem-solving innovation
- Civic and democratic life.

As to the future scale of HE, the demographic patterns point to an increase of twenty-nine per cent in numbers by 2028. Labour-market projections suggest strong demand for graduates of both HE and Further Education and Training (FET). Even if the participation rate in HE falls as a result of the availability of FET alternatives, overall numbers will rise given the scale of current demographic growth. The knowledge and capabilities of graduates must meet the advancing needs of the economy, society and the public system, so there is an overall need to ensure high quality in both student experience and qualification.

Session 1

Meeting labour-market needs

Dr O'Donnell posited that the questions to ask ourselves with regard to the labour market are:

- In what ways could we enhance the employability of graduates?
- What should the disciplinary mix within HE be?
- How do career guidance and skills development fit with emerging labour-market demand?
- What is the balance between FE and HE?
- How do we build pathways to lifelong opportunities for learning?

Speaker 1: Dr David Foster, Director of Career Development and Skills, University College, Dublin (UCD)

Dr Foster spoke of the need in HE to impart employability (soft /transferable) skills to graduates, as well as academic and technical skills. There is a need for higher-education institutions to move beyond a career-guidance service and to recognise the importance of developing the range of transferable skills. There is a need to engage with students early in their academic courses and to put in place a plan for employment skills that would complement and be co-curricular with academic development.

A variety of mechanisms will help students make themselves more employable assets: skills development, volunteering, work-based learning, internships, career coaching and networking. Non-credit-based certification—career and professional-development modules undertaken together with academics and employers—has an important role to play. UCD offers a certificate in skills for working life and a certificate in work-based learning, both undertaken with employers.

All of this takes place in UCD within the context of *CareerEDGE: The Key to Employability* (the practical model of student employability devised by Lorraine Dacre Pool and Peter Sewell, 2007). This model brings together experience (work and life), degree-subject knowledge, understanding and skills, generic skills and emotional intelligence (EDGE) for the purpose of career development. Under this model, members of staff at UCD Career Development Centre see enhancing personal attributes and constructs as core to the success of work undertaken. They believe students in possession of heightened self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem are more likely to actively engage in the student experience through involvement in clubs, societies and sports, to volunteer, to adopt active and independent learning strategies, to be confident in career and life decision-making, and to develop skills and attributes employers seek

and which future leaders need. For example, there are week-long study visits to law and finance employers, and site visits, e.g. to Microsoft and Google. There is also an alumnus mentoring scheme for career and employability development.

Speaker 2: Dr Pat Phelan, Associate Registrar, University of Limerick (UL)

Dr Phelan noted that if HE does not lead graduates to an engaging job, it has fallen down on a central expectation of students and the families who support them through college.

The goal for graduate employment should be a great job for a great life. This outcome has the following attributes for employees (as per the 2014 *Gallup-Purdue Index Report*³):

- Workplace engagement
- Job satisfaction
- Intellectually and emotionally connected to their organisations and work teams
- Able to do what they do best
- Like what they do
- Have a mentor/supervisor/manager that cares about their career development.

The data shows that engagement with students from their first year, extracurricular college activity, mentoring, project work and placements all act as multiplier effects for achieving the desired outcome of workplace engagement.

To that end, UL pursues the Cooperative Education programme (CoOp), a paid eight-month placement from UL's network of employer links. UL seeks to produce graduates with the following attributes: knowledgeable, proactive, collaborative, responsible, creative and articulate.

UL also pursues a soft skills Engaged Learning Strategy with the following elements:

- Stream 1: engagement through broadening
- Stream 2: engagement for excellence
- Stream 3: engagement towards employability.

³ Gallup-Purdue, *Great Jobs Great Lives: The 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index Report, A Study of More than 30,000 College Graduates Across the U.S.* (Washington DC, 2014), <http://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/gallup-purdue-index-report-2014.pdf> (accessed 20 Apr. 2015).

Speaker 3: Dr Irene Sheridan, Head of Extended Campus, Cork Institute of Technology (CIT)

Dr Sheridan raised the issue as to whether there was in fact a system matching the demand and supply side of the graduate labour market. Were there effective transitions between HE and work? She referenced the 'hour-glass' shape of the labour market, where there was a divide between top-end jobs and jobs where technology-driven changes bring downward pressure on pay.

There are skills mismatches. In Ireland, less than one third of people with a master's degree went into jobs that warranted that level of qualification. Dr Sheridan noted that skills mismatches have the potential to be lifelong.

There are changes in the pattern of recruitment by employers. In the Eighties and Nineties employers recruited directly. Now recruitment is reactive and may be outsourced. Recruiters seek to pluck talent rather than grow it. That means that experience is the desired currency, and this poses challenges for equipping graduates appropriately for the labour market. Ireland must therefore invest well in its human, social and cultural capital.

Knowledge is generated in the workplace. Practitioner learning is very important, and the workplace is a valid and valuable centre for learning. This places a great onus on finding varied and variable placements for students. CIT works closely with industry in the development of employees. The REAP National Network for Enterprise Engagement is a valuable source for best practice, and the OECD Skills Strategy 2012 points the way towards developing an enhanced skill set. For the HE sector, it is vital to know what is needed by employers, to support the development of the appropriate skill sets, and to engage with industry and ensure efficient transitions.

General discussion

Following the presentations on 'Meeting Labour Market Needs', the following contributions were made:

- About ninety per cent of UL undergraduates avail of the CoOp employment programme, where UL secures work experience placements from its network of partnering employers.
- The division of HE into a two-pillar humanities and social sciences/STEM model gives no recognition to creative arts.
- The challenge for HE is not only to provide for the evolving needs of the labour market but also to foster the individual student's capabilities.
- Data reports a mismatch between jobs and qualifications. A considerable proportion of persons at work are overqualified for their jobs. Part of this problem arises because no specific qualifications are needed for entry to the bulk of third-level courses. There should be more focus on specific selection criteria.
- The HE system needs to be both responsive and flexible, but is there sufficient horizon scanning of labour-market trends by the HE system?
- Is there sufficient focus within HEIs on the development among their students of generic skills and soft skills so as to enhance their employability?
- The HE sector should not adopt a narrow instrumental approach i.e. simply producing outputs for the labour market. The issue is rather how HE prepares people for society, economy and work.
- A working group is currently considering how to reduce the complexity of the process for entry to HE. While selection is important, there is a case for delaying the final subject choice in college.
- It is difficult to determine the skills required by graduates for the 2030 labour market, but it is important to give students more opportunities via electives, with fewer choices at an early stage, and more choices at a later stage. What Irish HE must do is produce graduates and postgraduates who are flexible and who engage in continuous development.

Session 2

Supporting innovation

Dr O'Donnell introduced this theme, noting that the innovation process is changing, and is increasingly a quadruple helix, in which four spheres—HE, business, government and civil society—cooperate in a problem-solving way. The issue is whether the government's approach to research and innovation is in tune with the quadruple helix. This gives rise to the following questions:

- Have we rigorously analysed the contribution of research and innovation to the economy, society and public life, as compared to alternative options?
- Do inquiry, prioritisation, intellectual property, economy and society relate to each other?
- Are the main elements of the research system funded appropriately?
- Is performance measurement attuned to the diverse ways in which scholarship contributes to economic, social and cultural innovation?

Speaker 1: Professor Tom Brazil, Head of School of Electric and Electronic Engineering, UCD

Professor Brazil spoke about the 'UCD as a mini-city' proposal being prepared under the Smart Cities strand of the Horizon 2020 R&D programme as an example of quadruple-helix engagement. The project brings together four partners—IBM research, Dublin City Council, Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, and UCD—in an engagement with scientific, legal, environmental, social, business and human factors.

With regard to the issue of funding HE to support economic, social and cultural innovation, Professor Brazil made the following observations:

Currently there is a two-stranded system of research funding:

- The HE foundation (all disciplines)
- Targeted investments (as delivered, for example, through the government's National Research Prioritisation Exercise).

He asserted that it is not sufficient to cite government funding of academic salaries through the Higher Education Authority (HEA) as largely meeting the needs of the first strand. This is likely to lead to a low level of 'sole scholar'-type research and fewer PhDs, thereby reducing the likelihood of success in the European Research Council and Ireland's ability to respond to grand challenges, etc. What is needed is a significant programme of competitively awarded public research funding across all disciplines.

Professor Brazil cited the following as necessary ingredients for the HE system to drive innovation:

- Graduates educated by research-active academics in programmes with a strong focus on higher-level skills.
- A balanced portfolio of competitively awarded public research-funding schemes for foundation and targeted research.
- Interdisciplinary research should be encouraged, but it needs to be based on strength in individual disciplines.
- There is a need to be realistic about objectives: we should not force ‘innovation outcomes’ on research where they are not natural.
- Scientific research in engineering (e.g. in Germany, Silicon Valley) is a key ingredient in HE innovation for industry—Ireland has conspicuously failed to develop a strong capacity in this sector.

Speaker 2: Dr Richard Hayes, Head of Humanities, Waterford Institute of Technology

Dr Hayes spoke on the role and potential of humanities disciplines and research in innovation. He noted that HE has always been encouraging of innovation and that there is a compulsion towards newness. However, Dr Hayes argued that we are now looking at a new HE landscape where the potential for the humanities’ contribution to innovation diminishes. The future of institutes of technology would appear to be with the technological-university model. There is a focus on entrepreneurship, applied research and commercialisation, and on providing skilled workers for the economy. Notwithstanding the popularity of humanities disciplines with students, the humanities are largely excluded from this vision, in which innovation is pitched as solely for and of economic value.

The humanities—certainly in technological universities—will be relegated to a service role rather than being a core player. What seems to be emerging is a linear relationship between innovation (in the prioritised sectors) and the framework needed to support such innovation. State directives undermine the capacity for innovation. When HE is an arm of the state, the humanities disciplines are likely to feel marginalised. Students see educators as providers of a service. HE does not, at present, drive the creation of individual talent. There is also state mistrust of the HE institutions. Dr Hayes concluded by asserting the need for a future HE landscape that is “a free space of open inquiry, where what is valued is that openness and freedom where free-thinking and creative individuals who are the drivers of innovation can flourish”. He proposed that defining HE in terms of freedom and creativity will see Humanities play a more central role in the future definition of the HE landscape.

Speaker 3: Professor Christine Loscher, Director of Dublin City University's Health Technologies Research and Enterprise Hub

Professor Loscher addressed the role of HEIs in delivering innovation. She noted that HEIs educate students, create knowledge and contribute to the public good. Thus far, HEIs have contributed to innovation through R&D, patents and commercialisation.

Greater cooperation between HEIs was driven by the Programme for Research in Third-level Institutions; greater cooperation between HEIs and industry was driven by the supports offered through Science Foundation Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and the Irish Research Council (IRC); and greater supports and cooperation between HEIs and policy-makers was assisted by the IRC and the Health Research Board. In each case there was a mechanism/cultural driver—education was the enabler.

The current issue is how Ireland can best mobilise quadruple-helix innovation—i.e. business and civil society as well as academia and government—in a context of declining income for publicly funded HEIs and a rising student–staff ratio. These trends do not augur well for the long term.

Professor Loscher posed the questions:

- What is the mechanism for engaging with the business and civil society sectors to enable and enhance innovation across these sectors?
- Will innovation from these sectors necessarily be R&D driven?

General discussion on supporting innovation

In the ensuing general discussion on the theme of 'supporting innovation', the following points were made:

- There is a need for structures that will enable HEIs to engage with civil society. One suggestion was that the Enterprise Ireland Innovation Vouchers approach might be adopted to support such engagement with real-world issues.
- Is getting a job the only aim of education? What about the position of people graduating from college and owing substantial debt?
- There is a case for differentiating between teaching and researching careers in academia. Not all academics have the proficiency to be excellent at both.
- Any original research is in effect innovation. The aim of HEIs should be to produce students who are excellent knowledge producers.
- Innovation is about talent formation. There is a need for structures to support this objective, to release Keats' 'negative capability'.
- Much engagement between HEIs and civil society is not really quantified. There is a need to develop a mechanism to look at and map such engagement between the HE sector and non-governmental organisations.

Session 3

A high-quality student experience

Dr O'Donnell introduced this theme, noting that a high-quality student experience and qualification—reflecting research and scholarship across the humanities, social sciences and STEM—is the most important way in which HE serves its students, the economy and society. The following questions arise:

- Is quality threatened and in what ways is this evident?
- What is the level of staff engagement with students?
- Is there support for scholarship across disciplines?
- Are there opportunities for project work and presentations?
- Are the risks to quality sufficiently recognised?

Speaker 1: Professor Patrick Geoghegan, Dean of Undergraduate Studies, Trinity College, Dublin

In his presentation, Professor Patrick Geoghegan referenced the changing nature of the student body, citing the demographic changes in the number of international, mature and online students, etc.

Professor Geoghegan noted that the university experience is not just about preparation for getting a job but is also about individual development—the practice of active citizenship inside and outside class. For example, the belief in human rights among the student body comes not just from project work but from people met in studies, and through involvement in clubs and societies. Projects have to be rewarded by credits. Students hate group work because some team members contribute to a lesser extent than others, but even this—the process of engaging with and managing the under-performers—is a valuable learning outcome.

He raised the issue of trust, asserting that educators need to trust students. Professionally accredited, evidence-based programmes are best for doing this.

Government, in turn, needs to trust colleges. Colleges are not all the same, and should be treated on the basis of their performance.

It is important to have trust in admission policies. If colleges admit students only on a narrow basis, this does not inspire trust. HEIs should also trust their own staff. Educators know their own course best. Trust should trickle down the whole system.

Speaker 2: Dr Jen Harvey, Dublin Institute of Technology

Dr Harvey spoke on the quality-student-experience theme in her capacity as a representative of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education ('the National Forum').

Dr Harvey expressed wholehearted agreement with Professor Geoghegan on the holistic nature of the student experience, on the importance of HEIs recognising both formal and informal learning, on the importance of HEIs providing opportunities for engagement, and on the importance of HEIs supporting students' journey in the transition to work and to active citizenship.

The purpose of the National Forum is:

- To promote innovative, fresh thinking in teaching and learning for higher education
- To move from exemplars to national frameworks of excellence in teaching and learning, and from discrete projects to comprehensive change
- To transcend both collaboration and competition to raise national standards
- To establish Ireland as a place where HE teaching and learning is known to be excellent and held up as an international role model.

The National Forum's work plan has the following strands, all delivered within an overall context of innovation and enhancement:

- Partnership and collaboration
- Professional development
- Building digital capacity—including development of a digital road map for Ireland
- National learning-impact awards – to endorse, showcase and share outstanding practice and expertise in teaching and learning
- Scholarship in teaching and learning.

The National Forum seeks to learn from within the HE system in order to embed good practice there, to facilitate transitions into and out of HE, and to involve students in identifying transformative practices, improvements for professional development and innovation in teaching and learning for all learners across the sector.

Speaker 3: Dr Joseph Ryan, Registrar, Athlone Institute of Technology

Dr Ryan spoke of the set of balances to be struck in the HE sector between:

- Private gain and public good
- Individuals and society
- Freedom and accountability
- Learning, teaching and research
- Differing funding models.

He noted that the context is complex. Ireland is emerging from a deep economic crisis, and the Irish demographic is unique in the EU as regards anticipated demand for HE. There are also rising expectations on the part of students.

HEIs have to be both accountable and pragmatic, but, equally, students are more than conscripts to the workforce. There is a need for both formal and informal learning, for the imparting of both academic and soft skills. And there is a need for quality engagement with students.

Dr Ryan further noted that the EU High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, chaired by Professor Mary McAleese, recommends that 'Public authorities responsible for higher education should ensure the existence of a sustainable, well-funded framework to support higher education institutions' efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning.'⁴

Dr Ryan argued that a greater range of response from the HEI system is required. There is a need for institutional transformation, and yet each year there is a struggle to retain provision for soft skills in the institutional budget.

⁴ High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, *Report to the European Commission on Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe's Higher Education Institutions* (Luxembourg, 2013), 64.

General discussion on quality student experience

In the ensuing discussion on the 'Quality student experience' theme, the following points were made:

- It is important to try to get students to engage in surveys, so that there is valid data for analysing the student estimation of quality.
- Many people working in the HE sector are on hourly-worker contracts. This impacts on their availability to students and the range of supports they can provide for students. Academics need to be available to talk to students. Equally, students need to be available to talk to academics, but some students are working full-time to support themselves.
- There has been a hollowing out of the student experience. There is increasing intolerance and exclusion on campuses due, for example, to mental health pressures and to social-media pressures to conform.
- There should be parity of esteem between research and teaching.
- There should be recognition of the greater transaction cost of supporting a diverse student base.

Session 4

Making access more equitable

Dr O'Donnell introduced this theme, noting that equitable access to HE is a core part of the social contract, and is essential to ensuring that HE delivers maximally for our economy and society.

The issues arising:

- Are there lines of action that can help improve access?
- How to improve the quality of career information and support
- How funding is used by different institutions
- How to create more pathways to learning and work
- Are there risks to our ambitions for equitable access in an expanding system?

Speaker 1: Dr John O'Neill, Institute of Technology Tallaght (ITT)

Dr O'Neill outlined the locally based, locally focused access initiatives of ITT both for countering non-progression among mature students and for eighteen to twenty-three-year-olds not in a position to access HE via Central Applications Office (CAO) until they reach twenty-three (at which stage they are considered mature students).

For mature adults, ITT operates a certificate in preparatory study for higher education. This commenced in 2009. Each year seventy to one hundred mature students register for this ten-credit, National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) level-6 special-purpose award. It is free to participants, with funding provided by the Educational Training Board and South Dublin County Partnership amongst others. The core subjects are maths, information and communications technology, and academic English. There are electives of up to twelve hours in three to four subjects.

The programme is both successful and valued by participants. Over the last two to three years participants have begun completing their major awards. Participants are universally positive about their experience, and a disproportionate number of participants end up as prizewinners, top of their class, etc.

ITT is developing an equivalent preparatory programme for eighteen to twenty-three-year-olds, but stronger synergies are needed between providers for FET and HE to support participation.

Speaker 2: Ms Rosario Ryan, Director of Access, Maynooth University

Ms Ryan noted the diversity of the student body and that most HE access programmes were established in the 1990s. She cited Smyth and McCoy's 2011 work on using evidence for policy

development and the finding that there were both social-justice and economic imperatives for effective access programmes.

Ms Ryan noted that where you live, what your parents do and where you went to school is still very important. In that sense HE is not a public but very much a private good—many people will have no access.

The student-grants system promotes access for disadvantaged groups. National entry routes are identified. There are outreach and support mechanisms, but significant inequities remain.

Ms Ryan posited HE access requirements as:

- A national financial framework to support students is part of the answer, an important part, but not the only one
- A national approach making best use of the resources that we already have – requires approaches beyond the education system.
- A forum at national level where the main players have to engage
- Identifying and systematically addressing the barriers is key
- National funding policy should support our widening participation objectives and should be complementary rather than contradictory – part time students are not funded, foundation courses are not funded, key funds are declining despite more students than ever seeking to access them
- Protection of funding for the most disadvantaged
- HEIs to be regional support centres
- Fees and childcare issues to be addressed
- Progression of students with disabilities particularly from Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) schools
- Foundation courses and the inequity of funding
- Addressing the precarious nature of the student-assistance fund—more clarity on allocation in advance would be useful as well as more funds
- Focus supports on the most disadvantaged
- A loan scheme (if this is being considered) is likely to be inequitable in practice. If being considered it would need to be accompanied by a targeted grant scheme.

Access is a public good and there is a need to debate options and agree proposals to try to deliver a nationally cohesive programme that addresses the above-mentioned requirements.

General discussion

The following points were made in the general discussion on the 'Access' theme:

- There are undoubtedly issues with regard to the student assistance fund because of its annual uncertainty.
- There is a need to develop supports for disabled persons to participate part-time in HE.
- The eighteen to twenty-three age group is a welfare area where the Department of Social Protection serves as a controller rather than an enabler developing pathways to education.
- Seeing the visible manifestation of a range of identities in HEIs is itself an important enabling factor for access.
- Strong linkages between HEIs and second-level schools are a very good route to improving access.
- There is a need to develop recognition of experiential learning for access purposes.
- The potential of private educational institutions should be factored into the proposals for funding that will emerge from the Expert Group.
- There is a need for partnership on all of the issues arising—the players in the system should be required to work together at all levels.
- Funding for Traveller education has been withdrawn. As with eighteen to twenty-three-year-olds, this is not a Department of Education and Skills responsibility. Many government departments and agencies—notably the Education and Skills/Social Protection nexus—need to work in an integrated and holistic way to target deep-rooted intergenerational disadvantage, and to devise solutions to help academically inclined students access HE.
- There is potential to get objectives and commitments regarding access and funding into party manifestos for the forthcoming general election.
- Access is not about charity but about justice and economics.