



# **Part-time Fees Position Paper**

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## Introduction

AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation. It is a non-Government membership organisation. The mission of AONTAS is to ensure that every adult in Ireland has **access to appropriate and affordable learning opportunities** throughout their lives, thus enabling them to participate in the economic, social, civic and cultural development of Irish society. AONTAS has lobbied for the removal of fees and the introduction of maintenance supports for low income part-time students in higher education for over ten years.<sup>1</sup>

In the run up to the election the issue of part-time fees received a lot of media attention, thanks in large part to AONTAS' pre-election campaign 'Demand Your Right To Learn' which is calling for parity of esteem for part-time learners in higher education. Under the current system full time students attending third level institutions avail of 'free fees' while part time higher education students are required to pay. Each of the main political parties promised to address the issue of fees for part-time students in their election manifestos. AONTAS welcomes these commitments as the first steps toward ensuring equal access for all learners in higher-level education.

Fianna Fail, the main party in the new coalition government has made the following commitments regarding third level education in its Manifesto 'Now, the Next Steps':

*"In Government, we will:*

- *Further increase third level participation rates, with a **special focus** on those from **disadvantaged** areas.*
- *Introduce a **new system of means tested free fees for approved part-time courses**. Together with incentives for colleges to offer **more flexible and diverse course structures** this will enable **more people with work or family commitments** to avail of opportunities at third level"<sup>2</sup>*

In the run up to the general election 2007 AONTAS engaged in extensive consultation with staff, the membership and other relevant stakeholders including third level institutions and trade union representatives to inform a position paper on fees for part-time students in third

<sup>1</sup> Martin, M., et.al, (1996) *A Degree At Last*, AONTAS

<sup>2</sup> 'Now, the Next Steps: Fianna Fail Manifesto 2007', pp.126)

level education. The following document highlights the main themes emerging from the consultation, these include strong support for the introduction of free fees for part-time students and how this might be financed, a call to increase supports for disadvantaged and marginalised groups, viable alternatives if agreement on universal free fees cannot be reached and areas of work, which require further emphasis and consideration.

### ***Parity of Esteem for Part-Time Students***

According to figures from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) 34,000 students were in part-time third level education in 2004. Part-time enrolment constituted 13% of all undergraduate enrolment and 31% of all postgraduate enrolment in 2004/5.<sup>3</sup>

The practice of charging fees to part-time students has been largely condemned in the past. The European University Association has stated, "*The current system of charging fees appears to work against the stated national objectives to increase participation*".<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the OECD review position asserts that full-time and part-time students should not be treated differently.

AONTAS' recent consultation regarding charging fees to part-time students revealed unequivocal support from stakeholders for equality of treatment with their full time peers.

*"You could argue that it is completely untenable to have free fees for full-time students and not have them for part time students. There is no moral or other basis that you can argue against having free fees for part-time students. It would be socially more progressive than just giving it to full-time students"*.

*"The key policy issue for us is that if you treat full-time and part-time students differently you end up with all sorts of inequities. It is not so much the free fees it is the difference in treatment"*.

It was also suggested that charging fees for part-time courses restricts opportunities for up skilling within the workforce and therefore affects levels of income and participation in employment. In regard to this issue, AONTAS welcomes the commitments in the most recent Social Partnership Agreement to provide a dedicated fund "*to alleviate the fees in public institutions for part-time courses at third level by those at work who have not previously pursued a third level qualification*".<sup>5</sup> Potential earnings for those with a university level degree are 8-20% higher than those with non-tertiary education<sup>6</sup>. This commitment will prove vitally

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<sup>3</sup> *Higher Education: Key Facts & Figures 04/05*, HEA

<sup>4</sup> *Funding Fairness, 2006*, USI

<sup>5</sup> *Towards 2016* Pp. 88

<sup>6</sup> [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

important for improving employment opportunities for adults from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular.

*“The removal of part-time fees is part of the continuum for up-skilling the work force. We recognise that not everybody is going to go that far but we want the opportunity to access education to be given to those who are at work and haven’t had the opportunity in the past. We are focusing on people who are low skilled and are in lower paid jobs”.*

Removing fees would also benefit primary care givers who remained in the home either to provide childcare or eldercare and who cannot avail of free full time education but are prevented from accessing part-time education due to the financial costs.

*“One of the reasons we are interested in part-time education is because we think it will reach out to a cohort of people who missed the opportunity to go to third level at school leaving age but who could take advantage of the opportunity later in life”.*

This would also satisfy the commitment made by Fianna Fail to *“enable more people with work or family commitments to avail of opportunities at third level”*. Similarly, the Higher Education Authority, with funding from FAS and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, is currently developing a programme to accommodate people at work and others with caring responsibilities, which reflects the changing needs of part-time learners and their employers. The Modular Accreditation Programme (MAP)<sup>7</sup> will offer flexible up-skilling and learning opportunities for people without a prior third level qualification. The Programme will focus primarily on FETAC Levels 6 and 7. MAP has been successfully piloted in the Institute of Technology, Tallaght. AONTAS looks forward to monitoring the continued success of programmes such as MAP in the future.

### ***Financing Free Fees***

A number of alternative approaches were suggested during the consultation process for financing the introduction of ‘free fees’ for part-time students. One such approach involved a tax calculated at 1% similar in style to the ‘employment levy’.

*“You could argue that because this is an up skilling initiative you could have an up skilling tax. It should not be a big issue because the amount is very small. The current education budget is €7.8 billion euro, so a guesstimate of €150 million would probably cover part-time fees, which is a fairly tiny proportion of the overall spend”*

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<sup>7</sup> *Map Your Career: Modular Accreditation Programme* (2006) HEA

Another recommendation focused on increasing the employers' PRSI contributions and allocating a percentage to the National Training Fund, which would in turn cover the costs of the part-time fees.

Some responses to the issue of financing fees were more philosophical, for example:

*"It is a matter of looking at what is already available, looking at how it is being spent. There seems to be no shortage of funding available from the Exchequer for skills development but the emphasis isn't right at the moment. There are many ways to do this but it requires a commitment"*

*"The department is very concerned that they would agree to do something and the bill would end up costing so much more and that is the obstacle"*

Another stakeholder elaborated on the perceived reluctance of Government to address the part-time fees issue and highlighted the need to move away from the current rigid framework towards a more flexible funding system. Currently a third level institution receives funding for each full time student from the Department of Education and Science in advance. As a result third level institutions "have a very positive cash flow". Some institutions have made submissions to the Department of Education and Science suggesting that the Department provide funding for part-time students **after** the student has completed a module.

*"We have all the academic structures in place to allow students to do this but our problem is actually convincing the Government that it is safe to do it. The Government needs to understand how it can pay the Universities for these students who are progressing differently. We need to be driving people in a flexible and appropriate way towards a qualification and billing the state at appropriate points along the way".*

### **Greater Supports for Part-Time Students**

A strong and recurrent theme throughout the consultation process centred on the importance of providing adequate supports to part-time students in a flexible and responsive manner, including making part-time students eligible for maintenance grants. A recommendation from the 2005 HEA report suggested introducing financial supports for part-time students as a way of increasing participation. This initiative could also "link in where appropriate to work based initiatives such as One Step Up".<sup>8</sup> Removing fees was recognised as a vital component to widening access but is not considered the only obstacle to participation. Fees for part-time students are "one piece of the jigsaw" while comprehensive supports, including financial assistance are also required if the student is to pass through the system successfully.

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<sup>8</sup> Progressing the Action Plan: Funding to Achieve Equity of Access to Higher Education (2005) HEA, Pp.25

The National Access Office, which forms part of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Executive facilitates and monitors progress in improving access and educational opportunity for under-represented groups such as those who experience socio-economic disadvantage, those with a disability and mature students<sup>9</sup>. The Access Office is well placed to advance the agenda for greater supports for part-time students, particularly those from under-represented groups and has been working toward making progress in this area since its establishment in 2003.

A dedicated policy outlining supports for part-time students, including targets for lower socio-economic groups and backed by adequate funding would make it possible for Fianna Fail to deliver on their promise to “*further increase third level participation rates, with a special focus on those from disadvantaged areas*” as outlined in their manifesto.

*“Abolishing part-time fees would have an impact on increasing access for marginalised and disadvantaged groups but access is about more than just removing fees, it is also to do with the supports that are available for those who wish to pursue education, such as adequate maintenance grants, delivery, the motivation within the institution to accommodate individuals from non-traditional backgrounds, the number of courses available on a part-time basis, types of infrastructure and public service supports which are sadly lacking and which are a disincentive to people who want to learn, so we need a more holistic approach. There are a plethora of things, which need to happen which go beyond the fees issue”.*

A number of stakeholders argued the importance of adequate maintenance grants if adults from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular are to be encouraged into third level education as part-time students. “*The disadvantaged should be supported through a much better grants system*”.

It was also recommended that the qualifying criteria for maintenance grants be broadened to allow a greater number of low and middle-income students to benefit from the support.

### ***If part-time fees are not removed what are the alternatives?***

As mentioned earlier endorsement of the position to abolish part-time fees was overwhelming among stakeholders. However, if for any reason the new Government is unable to commit to abolishing fees for part-time students in third level education a number of alternatives are suggested below.

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<sup>9</sup> [www.heai.ie](http://www.heai.ie)

In the *Towards 2016 Partnership Agreement* “a targeted fund will be put in place to alleviate the fees for part-time courses at third level by those at work who have not previously pursued a third level qualification”<sup>10</sup>. It is not yet known if ‘alleviation’ of fees will amount to the full payment of part-time fees by Government and it excludes those who have already obtained a degree or equivalent level of education, however the clause in the Partnership Agreement could be used to open up the possibility of accessing third level education by disadvantaged or low skilled workers who would otherwise not have had the opportunity. AONTAS would recommend opening this scheme up to the wider public as a less advantageous alternative to the introduction of free fees for all part-time third level courses.

Among the majority of stakeholders consulted there was condemnation of ‘free fees’ for all full time students in third level education. There is also evidence to suggest opposition to free fees from the majority of third level institutions in Ireland<sup>11</sup>. It was repeatedly voiced that individuals who could afford to pay for third level education should be required to do so.

*“Universal free fees are bad public policy. There are plenty of people who can afford to and should contribute to their own higher education.”*

*“We oppose free fees because they are a socially regressive device. They are a crude way of distributing resources. They fail to target those most in need and involve a transfer from the many to the few. Free fees amount to a subsidy to that sector (the top socio-economic group), when in fact the funds to be allocated could be re-distributed much more selectively in favour of those least well off.”*

One stakeholder was supportive of free fees at third level (both part-time and full-time) “*on the basis that those who are privileged and benefit from attending third level institutions and who get better jobs as a result pay for their education through a fair taxation system, but that hasn’t happened*”.

On this basis, it was suggested that if free fees for part-time students are not removed, means tested fees for full-time students should be re-introduced in order to finance better grants and supports for those on low incomes.

*“We might move toward means tested free fees for full AND part time students. I suspect fees will come back for those who can afford to pay and we will get grants, a proper grants system for those who can’t. I would hope this could be the case in the lifetime of the next Government and we will lobby for it”.*

The stakeholder went on to suggest that if fees were re-introduced:

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<sup>10</sup> *Toward 2016 Pp.88, 7.9*

<sup>11</sup> *Irish Times Article, 01 June 2007*

*“By the next election there will be proof that moving on from universal free fees does two things: firstly it removes the growing imbalance in full-time University education which has increasingly become for the socio-economically advantaged and secondly it will result in part-time students moving successfully through the system”*

### **Other Comments**

As a result of comprehensive discussion regarding the supports, including financial assistance required by part-time students undertaking third level education, the issue of administering maintenance grants emerged as significant.

It was suggested that the Department of Education and Science and the Universities operating on the Department’s behalf should relinquish control of maintenance grants and the responsibility for their distribution should pass to the Department of Social and Family Affairs, and administered as a social welfare payment, for example through local post offices.

*“The Department of Education isn’t particularly good at figuring out someone’s holistic welfare position. Maintenance grants are a piece of social welfare. You are always looking at the same thing when you are trying to determine whether the State should give someone money. So it is bizarre to have the Department of Education do it. Universities are doing it some of the time as well. When we have hardship cases we look for money out of our own resources when we should be approaching the Department of Social and Family Affairs. It is not terribly joined-up Government.”*

### **Concluding Remarks**

- For a number of years AONTAS has lobbied tirelessly for the abolition of fees for part-time third level courses. Third level fees for part-time students must be removed as a matter of priority in order to provide parity of esteem with full-time students and to ensure greater access. AONTAS will vigorously pursue the implementation of the commitments made by the political parties making up the next Irish Government.
- Financing ‘free fees’ for part-time students should be undertaken through taxation or re-distribution of existing funding within the overall education budget.
- If the fees for part-time third level courses are not removed viable alternatives should be considered. Such alternatives might include the use of a targeted fund under the Partnership Agreement ‘Towards 2016’ or the re-introduction of fees for full-time



students. The additional revenue generated by this policy change should fund the creation of a better grants system.

- A comprehensive policy outlining greater supports for part-time students, with a particular focus on disadvantaged and marginalised adults and backed by adequate funding should be devised as a matter of priority.
- All financial supports for third level students should be regarded as social welfare payments and as such should be administered by the Department of Social and Family Affairs.