

**‘WITHOUT THE HELP...I WOULD HAVE DROPPED OUT’**  
 - EVALUATION OF THE 1916 BURSARY FUND FOR THE  
 MIDLANDS EAST NORTH-DUBLIN (MEND) REGION

Dr Sarah Sartori, Dilara Demir Bloom & Sarah Murphy, May 23



This evaluation of the 1916 Bursary Fund examines how the fund has impacted awardees in MEND higher education institutions; Dublin City University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Maynooth University and Technological University of the Shannon, Midlands from 2017 to 2021/22.

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Artist: The beautiful images throughout the report were created by graphic recorder and illustrator, Esther Blodau, and are a visual representation of this research in illustration [www.estherblodau.com](http://www.estherblodau.com)

This report was prepared and authored by Dr Sarah Sartori, Dilara Demir Bloom and Sarah Murphy for College Connect. Independent research consultant, Sarah Murphy, carried out all of the focus groups and was the Principal Investigator on this evaluation. The report has been peer-reviewed prior to publication. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors.

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## FOREWORD



Equity of access to, and participation in, higher education is at the core of the work of the Higher Education Authority (HEA). The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) was established in 2016 as a dedicated fund to support the delivery of the vision of the National Access Plan (NAP) by enabling innovative responses to support target groups' participation and retention in higher education. PATH funding commitments to date are more than €60 million and the fund has expanded to support five strategic areas. PATH 2 1916 Bursaries provide financial support directly to students thereby enabling participation and success by the most socioeconomically disadvantaged students who are the most significantly underrepresented in higher education.

The HEA welcomes the *Evaluation of the 1916 Bursary Fund for the Midlands East North-Dublin (MEND) Region*. It is important that policy interventions are evaluated so that future interventions are informed by evidence of what works and what needs to be improved. The findings of this evaluation are consistent with many of the findings of the NAP consultation process which took place in 2021. The impact of COVID-19, the cost of living, and the housing crisis have contributed to increased financial stress for students. It is evident from the student testimonials in this evaluation of the significant positive impact that the 1916 Bursary Fund has on recipients' ability to fully participate in higher education, with many recipients noting that the bursary meant they could afford accommodation, transport, food, internet and childcare. This is a positive finding and demonstrates the importance of the PATH 2 1916 bursaries to the achievement of the NAP vision.

This evaluation is an important contribution to the wider work underway to measure the impact of PATH including the external independent PATH (Strands 1,2 and 3) Impact Assessment which is currently in progress. The findings and recommendations emerging from all this work will inform the further development of access policy both at national level and in higher education institutions.

I would like to extend my warmest congratulations to Dr Sarah Meaney Sartori, Dilara Demir Bloom, Sarah Murphy, the College Connect team and all those involved for their work in conducting this evaluation. The work speaks to the NAP's student-centred goals of Inclusivity, Flexibility, Clarity, Coherence, Sustainability, and an Evidence-Driven approach. It places the student voice at the centre and provides a deep understanding of the daily challenges faced by students in higher education.

**Caitríona Ryan**

Head of Access Policy in the Higher Education Authority (HEA)

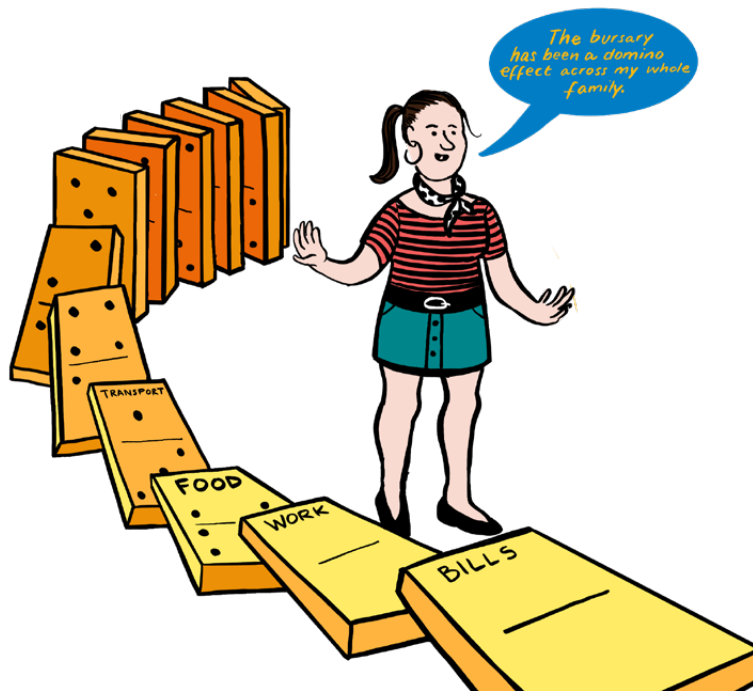
May 2023

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“

The bursary has been a domino effect across my whole family as it has supported me to be able to support my children in many ways, schooling, travelling, purchasing books for my studies. The fund has taken a lot of pressure off me financially which has helped with my own health and self-care, something I could not have lived without.”

– Survey respondent

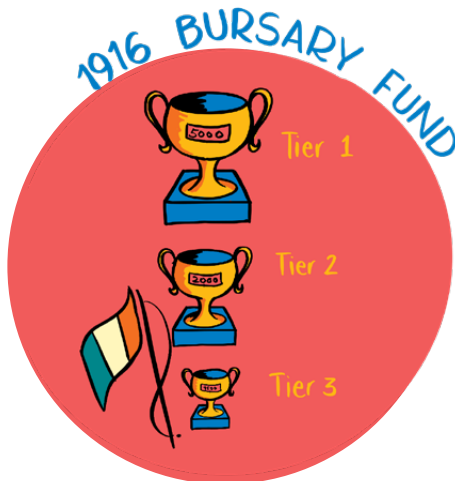


**INTRODUCTION** - This evaluation is carried out by College Connect; a six-year access to higher education project funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) under its Programme for Access to Higher Education – PATH Strand Three. College Connect, led by Maynooth University, supports access and widening participation of groups underrepresented in higher education in the MEND Cluster (Midlands, East, and North Dublin region). The cluster is made up of Dublin City University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Maynooth University, and Technological University of the Shannon, Midlands. The aim of the project is to empower and support additional non-traditional learners to access higher education.





The 1916 Bursary Fund (BF) is a targeted funding scheme under the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand Two, that aims to provide support for economically marginalised students from groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education (HE). This includes lone parents, carers, Travellers, Roma, ethnic minorities and refugees, QQI entrants, first-time mature entrants as well as socio-economic groups that have low participation rates in higher education such as those who have experienced homelessness, the care system, survivors of domestic violence, and those who have experience of the criminal justice system.<sup>1</sup>



The 1916 Bursary Fund was first announced by the Minister for Education and Skills on the 30th of December 2017 to commemorate the centenary of the 1916 Rising against British rule in Ireland, with the purpose of encouraging participation and success by students from sections of society that are significantly underrepresented in higher education.<sup>2</sup> Successful applicants can receive up to €5,000 per annum for the duration of their undergraduate degree to contribute to the associated costs of their education, and the 1916 BF has almost finished its 5th year of applications in 21 different third-level institutions across the country.<sup>3</sup> In the

academic year 21/22, the scheme was expanded to include bursaries at Tier 2 and Tier 3, which at the time of writing are valued at €2,000 PA and a €1,500 one-off payment respectively. Between 2018 and 2021/22, 2,082 people applied to the 1916 Bursary Fund in the four higher education institutions in the MEND Cluster, and MEND awarded 160 Tier 1 bursaries, 21 Tier 2 bursaries and 198 bursaries at Tier 3 for this period.

1. HEA. (2022), PATH 2 Guidelines.

2. HEA. 1916 Bursary Fund.

3. 1916 Bursary Fund. Participating Colleges.

**EVALUATION AIM** - The aim of this evaluation is to document the impact of the 1916 Bursary funding on successful applicants in the MEND Cluster over the four years since its inception 2018-2021/22. It also aims to assess whether the funding alleviated any of the financial stress associated with attending HE in one of the four MEND higher education institutions (HEIs), and to evaluate whether it has made a tangible difference to participants' retention and progression at third level. The funding application process is also considered in this evaluation, both from the perspective of applicants as well as the support staff involved in administering the Bursary Fund.

**EVALUATION APPROACH** – This research evaluation was carried out from November 2021-May 2022 and employed a survey, focus group (FG) discussions and interviews. **111 BF awardees** from all four MEND HEIs responded to the survey, **11 BF awardees** took part in FG discussions and **13 staff members** participated in both focus groups and interviews.



Graphic harvester and artist, Esther Blodau, was engaged to illustrate the chapters of this report, and to provide visual representation and illustrative interpretation of the key findings and themes.

The themes explored and presented in this evaluation report are; the perceived impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund that include, **being able to attend and remain in college**, having **less financial stress**, being able to afford things that supported study, including **childcare, Internet, travel, food, accommodation**. The more complex and multi-layered social benefits of the fund are also presented and include; **greater contact with the Access office** and continued supports, the ability to socialise more thus fostering an **increased sense of belonging**, having access to healthy food, nice clothes or a good laptop boosting **self-confidence and socialisation** or 'fitting in'. This evaluation also explores the application process to the 1916 BF from the perspective of awardees and staff and examines; the application process itself, including how awardees found out about the fund.

## FINDINGS

“Had I not been awarded the 1916 Bursary, I could not afford a sandwich at university for lunch to stay healthy, to buy a laptop for college, to pay heating and electricity bills, accommodation rent, travel costs, books and class materials and extra medical expenses. It would have been impossible for me to manage at college as my single mother receives disability. The help of the SUSI grant would not have been enough financial help in getting my higher education degree.”

– Survey respondent

The National Access Plan 2022-2028 determined two goals, the first of which is about increasing diversity in higher education and aspiring for a student body more representative of the general population.<sup>4</sup> The second goal seeks to establish more inclusive, universally designed higher education environments, that support student success and outcomes, equity and diversity.<sup>5</sup> Our evaluation of the 1916 Bursary Fund in the MEND Cluster between 2018 and 2021/22, indicates that the 1916 Bursary Fund is a significant resource that helps mediate some of the barriers associated with pursuing higher education and contributes to the success and retention in HE of students from groups traditionally underrepresented. Despite the fact that many BF awardees still face considerable financial pressures, our evaluation shows that the 1916 BF serves also to increase our understanding of the complexities of the financial, social and psychological challenges and the resources required to challenge socio-economic inequality and therefore to better support low-income and underrepresented students' progression and retention.



The key findings are summarised below:

**IMPACT OF THE 1916 BURSARY FUND** - The impact of the 1916 BF for most respondents was transformative. Over **96%** believe that they are **able to attend and remain in college** due to the fund; over **93%** believe that the fund helps them **to focus more on their study**; almost **99%** of survey respondents believe that **being able to afford things** that supported their studies, including **childcare, Internet, travel, food, accommodation** was the most impactful

element of the fund; over **96%** believe that they have less financial stress thanks to the fund; over **69%** believe that the fund enables them to be able to **socialise more and fosters an increased sense of belonging**.

“It enabled my son and I to secure accommodation outside of the antisocial environment we were in. My mental health was at an all-time low (before the fund). I am a different person thanks to this assistance.”

– Survey respondent

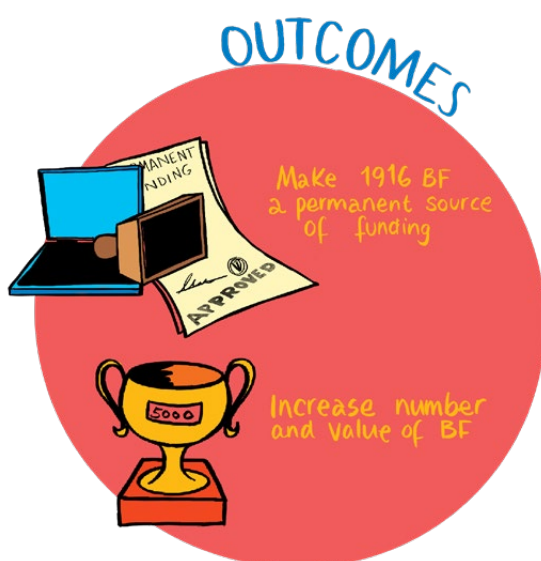
4. HEA. (Aug 2022), National Access Plan 2022-2028.

5. HEA. (Aug 2022), National Access Plan 2022-2028.

**THE APPLICATION PROCESS** – There are considerably more applications to the 1916 BF across the MEND Cluster than there are bursaries (2,082 applications versus 379 awards from 2017-2021/22), and it is important to take into account that the 2021/22 introduction of Tier 2 and Tier 3 to the scheme has increased the percentage of successful applicants considerably. Bearing in mind that this evaluation engaged with successful applicants only, the application process to the 1916 BF for most MEND awardees (70%) was found to be ‘very easy’ or ‘easy’, but those who found it difficult found it very difficult (32.4%) and these respondents needed help with the process. In terms of finding out about the fund, the vast majority found out about the BF through their **university website** or **social media**, **university email correspondence** or through a **support worker**, while only 9.6% found out through their school or further education college and only 2.1% found out through community organisations.

“I researched grants for many hours before finding a website that had this listed.”

– Survey respondent



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Seven recommendations are proposed based on this evaluation of the 1916 BF from the MEND Cluster. These recommendations are identified in participants’ accounts and survey responses, and supported through our literature and policy analysis and include:

- 1. Increase the number and value of 1916 Bursaries:** By recommending ‘more awards’, participants mean not only increasing the number of bursaries, but also increasing the number of awards at Tier 1 and increasing the value of these awards.
- 2. Simplify the application process:** Awardees highlighted the need for a unified application process, which is currently underway and coordinated by the Irish Universities Association, but also asked for a simplified process and made suggestions such as built-in templates and forms for referees providing verification for applicants.

3. **Streamline and make consistent the support system, both during the application process and upon receipt of the fund:** Participants highlighted a lack of consistency across the four MEND HEIs, and across the different years, in terms of payment dates and administration of the fund, information, and extra supports such as vouchers etc. In particular it is recommended that payments be streamlined so that payment dates are consistent and awardees can budget accordingly.
4. **Offer a clear and proactive appeals process:** Our research evaluation highlights some inconsistencies with the assessment process. We therefore recommend that the appeals process be clarified and promoted proactively by Access offices.
5. **Work to Destigmatise the 1916 BF:** Participants expressed shame around accepting the 1916 BF and worried about 'taking from others who might need it more'. We recommend that supports for priority group students be promoted and celebrated within the framework of equality, diversity and inclusion and sectoral commitment to the realisation of academic, personal and professional ambition.
6. **Carry out a review of the 1916 Bursary Fund to include public consultation:** This evaluation and its limitations point to the value of a full and national review of the 1916 BF. This would include conducting research on the current eligibility criteria and the potential impact to equity of access to HE of increasing bursary values and/or increasing the number of available bursaries.
7. **Embed the 1916 Bursary Fund as a permanent source of funding support:** The 1916 BF has been funded since 2017/18. As a targeted initiative aimed at improving representation at HE level for groups experiencing multiple disadvantages, we recommend that the 1916 BF be embedded as a permanent fixture of access to higher education.

## LIMITATIONS

Due to the small population and to protect participants' identities, there are no identifiers other than '*survey respondent*', '*focus group participant*' and '*staff focus group participant*.' This limits our ability to be able to separate out responses in relation to particular priority groups. Another limitation of the data set is the overrepresentation of females, who account for 85.5% of survey respondents. This may be partly explained by the fact that there is a national requirement that lone parents must account for 20% of awardees. There may also be a potential bias in the data relating to the application process, given that this evaluation engaged only with awardees, i.e., those whose applications to the fund had been successful. Finally, this evaluation engaged with awardees who were attending one of the four MEND HEIs at the time of this study, so there may be bias in relation to the impact of the fund on awardees' progression and retention.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>1916 BF</b>	1916 Bursary Fund
<b>AHEAD</b>	Association for Higher Education Access & Disability
<b>AONTAS</b>	Irish National Adult Learning Organisation
<b>CC</b>	College Connect
<b>BF</b>	Bursary Fund
<b>DCU</b>	Dublin City University
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Skills
<b>DFHERIS</b>	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
<b>DkIT</b>	Dundalk Institute of Technology
<b>EDI</b>	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
<b>HE</b>	Higher Education
<b>HEA</b>	Higher Education Authority
<b>HEI</b>	Higher Education Institution
<b>IUA</b>	Irish Universities Association
<b>MEND</b>	Midlands, East, and North Dublin region
<b>MSU</b>	Maynooth Students' Union
<b>MTU</b>	Munster Technological University
<b>MU</b>	Maynooth University
<b>MUSRESC</b>	Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee
<b>NAP</b>	National Access Plan
<b>PAR</b>	Participatory Action Research
<b>PATH</b>	Programmes for Access To Higher Education
<b>PI</b>	Principal Investigator
<b>QQI</b>	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
<b>RIA</b>	Royal Irish Academy
<b>SAF</b>	Student Assistance Fund
<b>SETU</b>	Southeast Technological University
<b>SUSI</b>	Student Universal Support Ireland
<b>TUS</b>	Technological University of the Shannon
<b>UCC</b>	University College Cork
<b>UCD</b>	University College Dublin
<b>USI</b>	Union of Students in Ireland
<b>VEC</b>	Vocational Education Committee

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# INTRODUCTION





“

I was homeless with no accommodation and working two jobs. I couldn't afford the DCU accommodation. Without the help, I would have dropped out of college.”

– Survey respondent

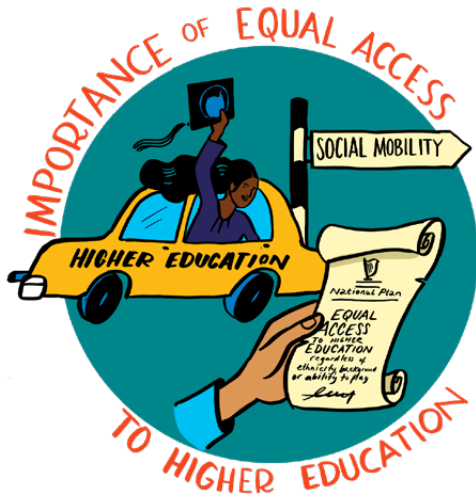
## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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This evaluation of the 1916 Bursary Fund is carried out by College Connect. College Connect (CC) is a six-year project aimed at increasing access to higher education, funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Led by Maynooth University, CC supports methods for widening participation for groups underrepresented in higher education for the MEND Cluster, covering the Midlands, East, and North Dublin (MEND) region. The cluster is made up of Dublin City University (DCU), Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT), Maynooth University (MU) and Technological University of the Shannon (TUS), Athlone Campus. The aim of CC is to empower and support learner groups underrepresented at third-level to access HE.

In this chapter, we will provide some background in relation to access to higher education in an Irish context, in particular in relation to the National Access Plans (NAP) and the Programmes for Access to Higher Education (PATH). We will also discuss the costs involved in attending university and aim to describe the Irish landscape in relation to university fees and grants. The 1916 Bursary Fund was established to provide critical financial support to Access students that experience additional obstacles in navigating the student journey, and to change the face of ‘who goes to college’ by prioritising groups who are significantly and traditionally underrepresented in Irish higher education institutions (HEIs). The concluding section of this chapter will discuss some of the strengths and the weaknesses of PATH initiatives, as we see them, in targeting educational inequity and set the context for the findings from our evaluation with 1916 bursary fund awardees from the MEND region.

## 1.2 BACKGROUND



Higher education can serve as an important vehicle for social mobility and social change, and promoting access to high-quality higher education for a diversified population is crucial in terms of establishing more equal societies.<sup>6</sup> Since 2005, there have been four National Access Plans for access to higher education, which uphold the belief that people should have equity of access independent of their economic background, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, disability or other circumstances.<sup>7</sup> The vision of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2022-2028, is to

ensure that the student body entering into, participating in and completing HE at all levels, reflect the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population.<sup>8</sup> At the launch of the new Plan,<sup>9</sup> the commitment to a truly inclusive third-level system, 'where neither your background nor experience has a bearing on your ability to attend or succeed in higher education,' was reiterated.<sup>10</sup>

However, specific categories of Irish society continue to be underrepresented in higher education including young people living in financial poverty and lone parents.<sup>11</sup> There are also categories of people whose participation rates in HE are particularly low or unknown, such as refugees and asylum seekers and young people living in Direct Provision.<sup>12</sup> In the academic year 2018/19, students registered with disability support services represented just 6.2% (15,696) of the total student population in higher education,<sup>13</sup> while the number of mature students in Irish higher education institutions (HEIs), makes up just over 10% of the HE student body. The number of declared Travellers in HE was just 60 in 2019<sup>14</sup> and the number of Roma is unknown. These numbers show that despite equity of access policies that aim to make higher education a space that represents the whole of society, while there has been an increase in the number of students accessing higher education in Ireland,<sup>15</sup> the diversity in the population is still not reflected in participation rates in higher education.

6. Walsh. (2018). *The Independent*.

7. HEA. (Aug 2022), National Access Plan 2022-2028.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. DFHERIS. (August 2022), New National Access Plan.

11. RIA. (2021), Equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

12. *Ibid.*

13. AHEAD. (2020), Launch of Students with Disabilities 2018/19 Report.

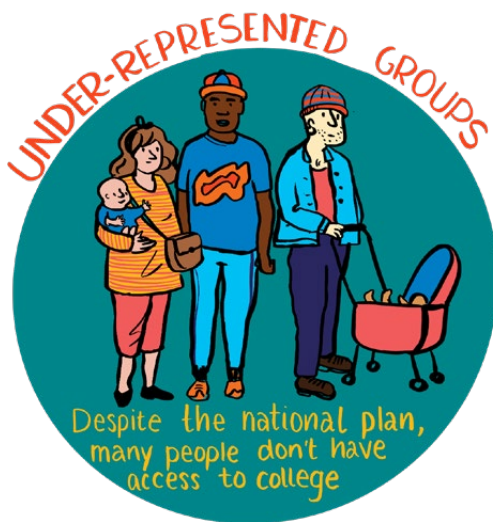
14. RIA. (2021), Equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

15. HEA. (Dec 2015), National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019.

## 1.3 UNIVERSITY COSTS & GRANTS

“I definitely wouldn’t have been able to complete it [undergraduate degree]. I didn’t factor in the costs that came up over the four years...just childcare and just I suppose, like, things that you need at the start of the year...and then printing wise, paper and ink.”

– Focus group participant



University tuition fees for undergraduates were abolished in Ireland in 1996, however, prior to this reform many low-income students already did not pay fees because they received a means tested grant covering both tuition costs and a contribution to their living expenses.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the Free Fees Scheme did not have the effects that were hoped for in terms of improving participation from students from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>17</sup> A separate ‘Student Registration’ fee, was introduced, which was hiked by 67% to €1500 following the financial crash in 2008.<sup>18</sup> This rose by

€250 in 2011 to €2,250,<sup>19</sup> and the retitled ‘Student Contribution’ in 2022 has typically cost €3,000 per student per annum,<sup>20</sup> though the current cost-of-living-crisis has seen the government introduce ‘one-off’ reductions to the contribution.<sup>21</sup> Prior to 2011, students applied to their local authority or Vocational Education Committee (VEC), for grants to help with the cost of accessing higher education, which in 2012 was centralised under the online system of application, ‘Student Universal Support Ireland’ or SUSI.<sup>22</sup>

16. Denny. (2010).

17. OECD. (2006). Review of National Policies for Education: Review of higher education in Ireland.

18. Trinity News (2008).

19. Freeman. (2011). *The Journal*.

20. Laszlo. (Nov 2021).

21. Noonan. (Sept 2022). *University Times*.

22. Merrion Street Website. (June 2012).

SUSI grants are divided into ‘Maintenance Grants’ that help students with their living costs, and ‘Fee Grants’ for students who do not qualify for the Free Fees Scheme and which can also pay the ‘Student Contribution.’<sup>23</sup> SUSI is dependent on income thresholds that take into account ‘total household reckonable income’ and must not exceed €24,500 for a ‘special rate award’ that includes university fees and a



contribution towards the cost of being a student of between €2575 and €6115, depending on the distance travelled to attend the university. SUSI has seen a steady downward trend in the number of grants being awarded, while correspondingly, numbers attending higher education continue to rise. In 2015, 85,000 students were deemed eligible for SUSI.<sup>24</sup> This fell by 7% to 79,000 in 2020,<sup>25</sup> and in 2021 the available figure is 71,500,<sup>26</sup> a decrease of almost 16% in just six years compared to the increase in overall student numbers in HE, which was more than 17% for the corresponding period.<sup>27</sup>

## 1.4 PROGRAMME FOR ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) is a dedicated fund, broken into five strands, committed to increasing participation of underrepresented groups in higher education. The fund, valued at over €40 million, was established by the Department of Education and Skills, now the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, in 2017 as a commitment to support the **National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019**.

**PATH 1** is focused on how to increase the diversity of the teacher body so that it reflects the body of students that teachers work with in Ireland.<sup>28</sup> **PATH 2**, the subject and primary focus of this report, is unique in that it is the only PATH programme based on direct financial support to underrepresented students through the 1916 Bursary Fund. **PATH 3** is set up to provide more infrastructure to support diverse student populations, through financing HEIs to increase their capacity for development of regional and community partnership strategies.

23. SUSI website. What grants are available?

24. Quinn. (Sept 2019). *University Times*.

25. Houses of the Oireachtas. (June 2021).

26. O’Kelly. (Oct 2021). RTE.

27. *Ibid*.

28. HEA. (Nov 2018). Report on PATH.

This is focused on HEIs increasing their capacity towards a more inclusive HE environment for all priority groups. **PATH 4** is especially for intellectually disabled student populations. **PATH 5** has multi-annual funding amounting to €1.35 million over two years from 2022 and is focused on building supporting infrastructure in HEIs to increase the participation and progression of Traveller and Roma students in HE. Figure 1, below, shows the 2021 funding framework and allocations for equity in higher education.

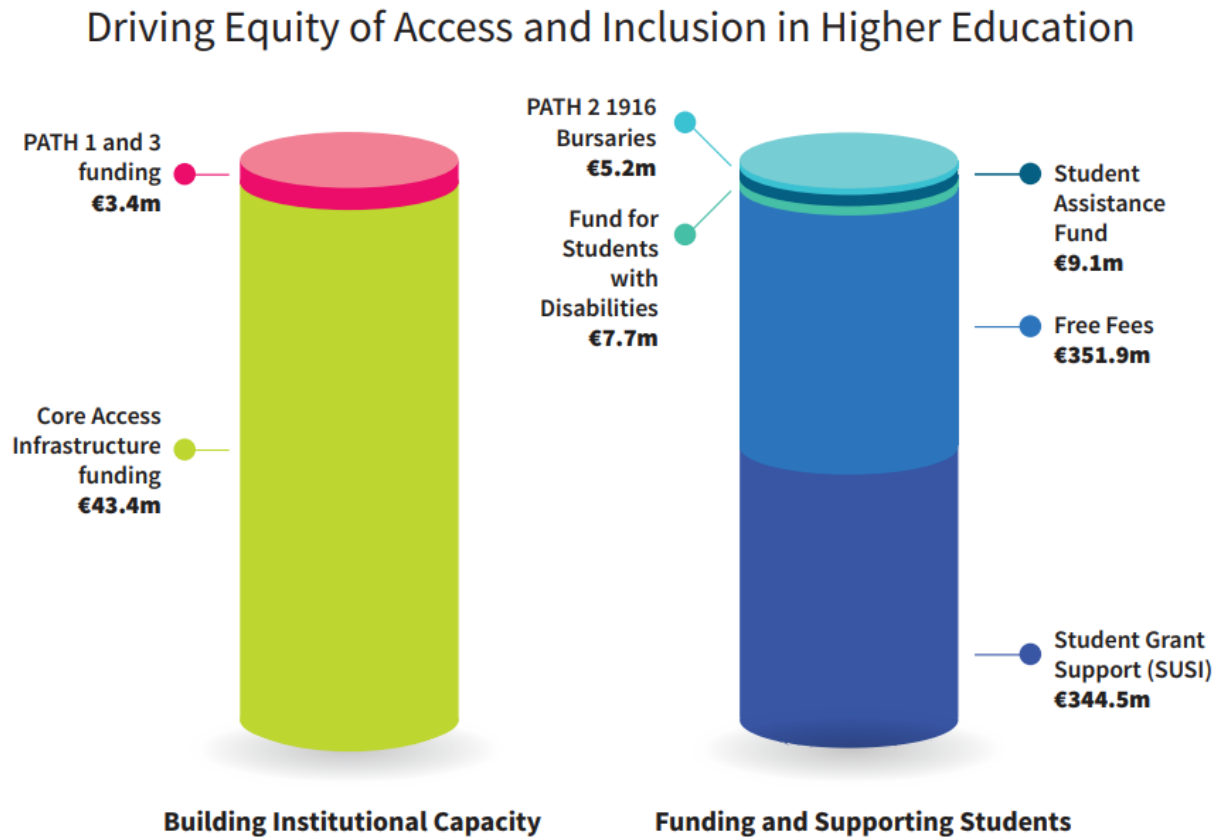
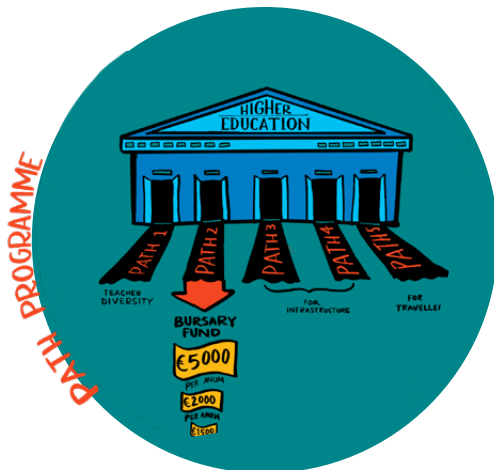


Figure 1 - Funding framework for equity in higher education (2021 allocations)<sup>29</sup>

29. HEA. (Aug 2022), National Access Plan 2022-2028, p.45.



**PATH 2** and **PATH 3** are synergically linked, in that funding for these PATH programmes is allocated to regional clusters of HEIs, whereas **PATH 4** and **PATH 5** funding is allocated to individual HEIs. The impetus for the creation of regional clusters, which were set out in guidelines in 2012, stemmed from developments internationally and the idea of developing ‘regions of knowledge’ that could maximise and leverage the expertise and resources of higher education.<sup>30</sup> A specific focus of each cluster, aside from ‘shared, coordinated academic planning’, is

a ‘regionally coordinated approach to transfer and progression pathways.’<sup>31</sup> Clusters were invited to submit proposals following a competitive call from the HEA for a defined number of bursaries for the three academic years commencing 2018/19 (PATH 2), and for projects to support the development of regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education by specified groups (PATH 3).

Cluster partnerships are however, not without challenges. Particularly in relation to ‘**interinstitutional differentiation**’; which refers to HEIs differing in important ways, with their own particular organisational structure, identities and politics,<sup>32</sup> and ‘**interinstitutional competition**’; in which there is extensive institutional marketing and often rivalry in attracting students, staff and cultural capital.<sup>33</sup> The mainstreaming of access and the development of funding streams in support of widening participation means that there is a competition in terms of being perceived as ‘access leaders’,<sup>34</sup> intensified by the pervasive ‘businessification’ of higher education, where programmes become ‘products’ and the university becomes a ‘brand’.<sup>35</sup> This inevitably impacts on cluster partnerships, while the provision of targeted funding on an ad-hoc basis, the effort and energy required of inter-institutional start-up projects, and the competitive basis of funding allocations, does little to mitigate these challenges.<sup>36</sup>

30. HEA. The Changing Landscape.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Finnegan, & Cervinkova. (2021). Connecting Communities and Higher Education.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Attewell & Newman. (2010).

35. Hodgins & Mannix-McNamara. (2021). *Societies*.

36. HEA. (Nov 2014). HEA Forward-Look Forum.

## 1.5 PATH 2 - THE 1916 BURSARY FUND



The 1916 Bursary Fund was launched to coincide with the commemoration of the centenary of 1916, that set Ireland on the road to independence after 700 years under British rule and underlines the Government's commitment to the type of equality of opportunity envisaged by the signatories of the 1916 proclamation. It forms part of the overall package of access measures to promote participation by under-represented groups in higher education and commits to providing financial support to students identified by clusters of higher education institutions as

being the most economically-disadvantaged from specified priority groups, and to complement existing student supports and access initiatives.<sup>37</sup> Some studies have found that bursaries can ease financial pressures during the transition to higher education and that they impact positively on students' perceptions of an institution and their commitment to succeed.<sup>38</sup> Others, have shown the effect on student mental health and well-being; one of the most important variables for student retention, progression and academic success.<sup>39</sup>

Eligibility for the 1916 Bursary Fund depends on the intersection of financial and educational disadvantage experienced across the life course.<sup>40</sup> The 1916 Bursary Fund is therefore distinguishable from other access initiatives, which attempt to disaggregate students in accordance with distinct categories, such as social class, ability, educational pathways, etc.<sup>41</sup>

**"I have a disability and chronic pain ...Since receiving the bursary I have been able to pay for more regular treatment which enables me to function better. The bursary has also allowed me to pay for after-school-care for my son while I attend university."**

– Survey respondent

37. HEA. (Dec 2015), National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019.

38. Hatt et. al. (2005), 111-126.

39. See Daniels et al. (2020), 741-751; Redmond et al. (2011); Forster et al. (2022).

40. SOAR Report. (May 2021), 9.

41. *Ibid*, 9.

Commencing in 2018/19, funding was provided for the award of 200 1916 bursaries in each of the three academic years. In February 2020, the Department of Education and Skills announced the rollout of the 1916 Bursary Fund for a further three years starting in 2020/21. With effect from 2021/22 academic year, a number of significant changes were made to the 1916 Bursary Fund that resulted in a substantial increase in the number and type of bursaries available, though not in the amount of money available to awardees:

- Provision for existing bursary holders to continue to receive bursaries to study at postgraduate level (€5,000 per annum)
- Introduction of a ‘second tier’ of bursary to be paid to students each academic year (€2,000 per annum)
- A ‘third tier’ consisting of once-off payments of €1,500 i.e., payable for one academic year only

In July 2022, DFHERIS announced an additional 50 Tier 1 bursaries for new entrants in the 2022/23 academic year bringing the total of Tier 1 bursaries to 253.

Since 2018, the MEND Cluster received 40 bursaries (10 bursaries for each HEIs) annually, which though led by DCU as the lead organisation on MEND PATH 2, were administered locally by each individual institution with cluster-level collaboration on application and selection processes. In **2021/22** MEND also awarded **21 Tier 2 bursaries**, and **198 Tier 3**, while in **2022/23**, the number of bursaries at **Tier 1 increased to 48** across the four HEIs, with **22 Tier 2** and **113 Tier 3** bursaries. Staff in this evaluation highlighted how the considerable work involved in administering the 1916 Bursary Fund impacted negatively on the effective functioning of Access offices, and other clusters similarly called for adequate resourcing and critical consideration of the role which Access practitioners and services play in the rollout and administration of the 1916 BF.<sup>42</sup>



42. SOAR Report. (May 2021), 5.



“When we talk about the impact on the student, one of the things I think we have to talk about is the impact on Access services in trying to implement these really administratively heavy and burdensome processes and what it takes us away from doing...the amount of time...spent last year in assessing those 237 unsuccessful applicants was time that they didn’t spend...working with students...because they were...basically acting as assessors...(for) 10 bursaries.”

– Staff focus-group participant

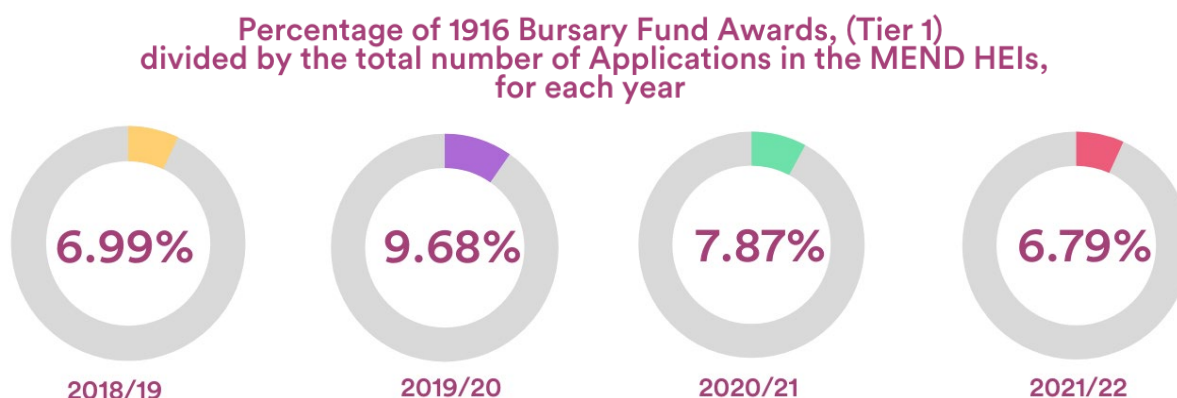
In 2019, the assessment of the PATH 2 pilot phase recommended that a common application form, timeframes and deadlines be developed by the HEI regional clusters, and that consideration be given to the establishment of a centralised application facility, in order to address the challenges encountered by students in making a PATH 2 application and to streamline eligibility screening processes. A National PATH Coordinator, Dr Declan Reilly, was appointed in 2021 and the process to manage the migration and integration of all clusters into the PATH Bursaries central application system was begun and piloted in 2022/23.

## 1.6 CONCLUSION

The uniqueness of PATH 2 and the 1916 BF, that places much needed funding directly into the hands of priority group students, is its key strength, and the recent changes to a centralised and national administration system should help negate some of the challenges associated both with the cluster approach to widening participation and the administrative drain on Access offices. However, the discrepancy between the number of applicants to the fund and the number of available bursaries is of concern in terms of the adequacy of the scheme to address need (Figure 2, below). This need is being exacerbated by recent and current crises, which are most impacting on groups already experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and we are already seeing the signs of a widening educational divide.<sup>43</sup>



43. O'Reilly. (June 2021). AONTAS.012



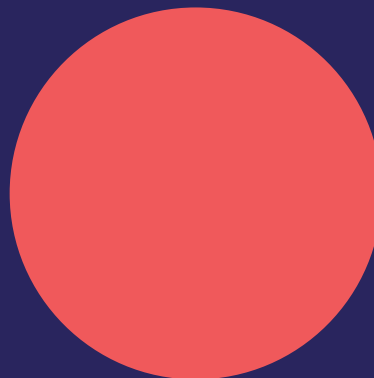
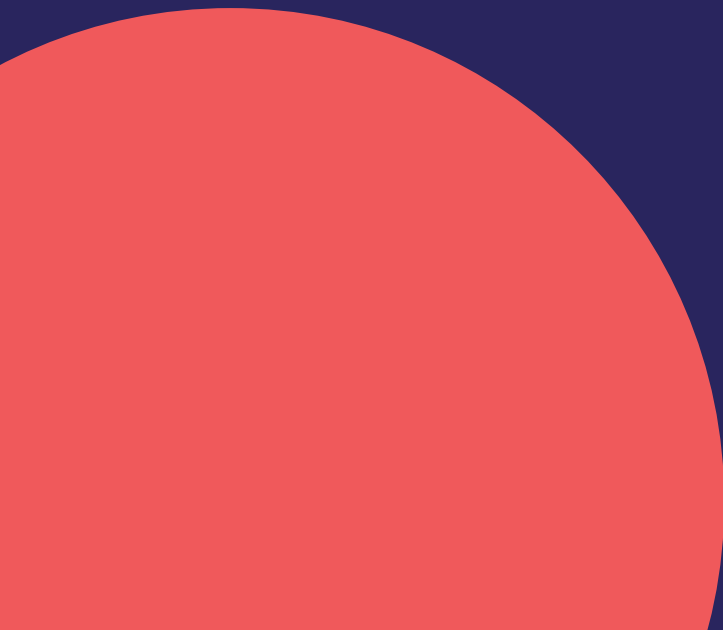
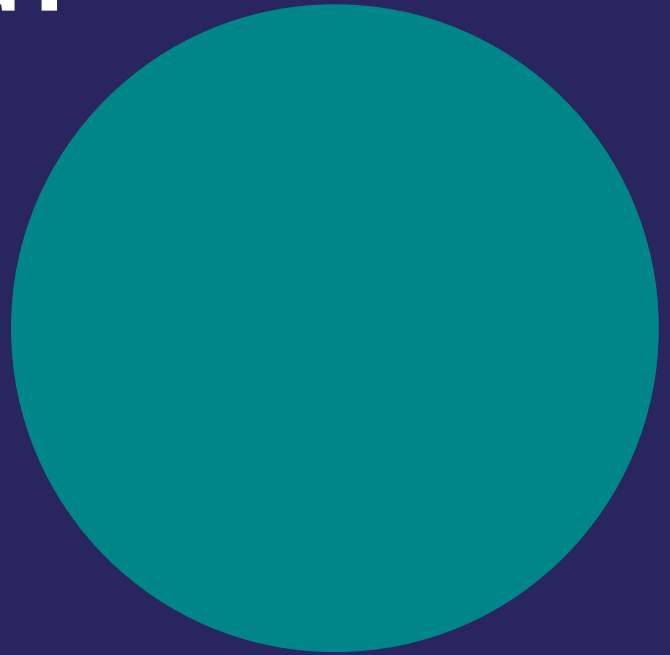
**Figure 2 - The percentage of successful applicants divided by the number of total applications per year**

By the same token, the limited number of available bursaries contrasted with the number of applications to the scheme, coupled with the necessity to prove multiple levels of disadvantage across multiple priority groups, has the undesirable effect of connoting the bursary as a ‘hunger games’ type ‘poverty competition’. This chimes with the shame surrounding the fund as described by some awardees in the Findings Chapter of this evaluation and to our mind warrants further consideration and a careful reframing of the 1916 Bursary Fund in a way that de-stigmatises. Suggestions as to how to achieve this are put forward in the Recommendations Chapter. Successful achievement of this would also mean reducing the competitive nature of the fund through increasing the number of bursaries to be able to meet the demand, and acknowledgement that one-off payments at Tier 3 are neither consistent nor adequate enough to sustain awardees through all the years required to obtain a higher education qualification.

The following chapter will describe the methodology for this evaluation, which sought to assess the impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund on awardees who participated in this research.



# METHODOLOGY



“

It (the fund) was a great...connection into communities, because a lot of the time they weren't aware that the bursary exists. Now over time, you find that most of them are waiting...like they might even be emailing you, 'any word on when it's opening?'

– Staff focus group participant

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

This evaluation has consisted of primary qualitative research in the form of an online survey together with semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The process has been embedded in a human rights framework and recognises the importance of qualitative research in evaluating social and educational supports in the context of marginalised groups, as it enables the research to engage directly with stakeholders to ascertain the perceived impact of services and supports.<sup>44 45</sup> This chapter details the methodology that was used in the evaluation, including a discussion of the research approach and ethical protocol, a description of the data collection methods, the participants in the evaluation and how we engaged them, as well as the use of arts-based methods to illustrate the report findings.

## 2.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

The research and community engagement process of the College Connect project is based on Participatory Action Research (PAR) frameworks.<sup>46 47</sup> PAR involves research partners, researchers and participants collaboratively leading and developing the project at all stages in an iterative cycle of research, reflection and action. The principle of PAR is that stakeholders are invited into participative relationships in which they are encouraged to engage in genuine collaborative leadership,<sup>48</sup> in any work on access initiatives or strategies relevant to their cohort.

44. Jarvie. (2012), 35-43.

45. Leko. (2014), 275-286. Lambert & Gill-Emerson. (2017).

46. Heron. & Reason. (1997), 274-294.

47. Thomas. (2000), 95-113.

48. Bland. (2017).



The research approach to this evaluation of the 1916 BF for the MEND Cluster, therefore involved initial consultation with staff in all four MEND HEI Access offices, who were involved in the administration of 1916 and/or providing support for awardees and applicants to the fund. A participant survey for 1916 MEND awardees was designed by College Connect in consultation with staff. The survey also incorporated input from the Irish Universities Association (IUA) who were

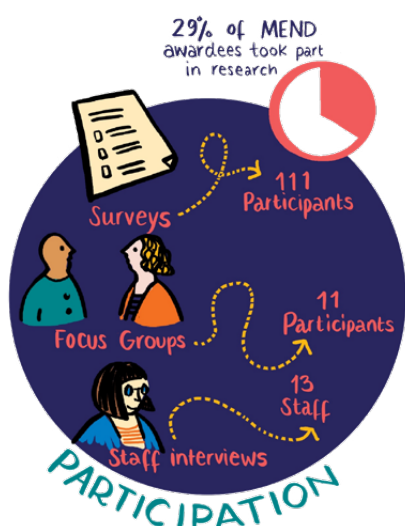
taking over administration of 1916, and from the SOAR Project (the Access Services of the South Cluster of HEIs – UCC, MTU and SETU), that had previously completed an evaluation of awardee experiences of the 1916 BF for the South Cluster.

External research consultant, Sarah Murphy, was engaged by DCU Access, as the Principal Investigator to the evaluation. Sarah worked alongside the central College Connect research team, who acted in both a support and an advisory capacity as well as facilitating communication with access staff who circulated both the invitation to participate and the survey to 1916 awardees. Participants were incentivised to take part, and survey respondents could enter a draw for a €100 voucher (one voucher per HEI), while focus group participants were given a €50 one-for-all voucher to thank them for their time. Flyers were designed by Maynooth Student’s Union Communications Officer, Tyran Lovett, using vibrant colours and messaging.

## 2.3 ETHICS

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were made aware that the research had ethical approval in place from Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Sub-committee (MUSRESC). The ethical principles guiding the evaluation included anonymity, confidentiality, the safety of participants, informed consent and freedom to withdraw from the study. Participants were also informed that should they experience any distress while taking part, that they could link in with the counselling service at their university, which was reiterated by the PI, Sarah Murphy, during each focus group.

## 2.4 METHODS



The fieldwork for this evaluation took place between November 2021 and May 2022 and consisted of three phases. In the first phase, a total of **13 staff**, (12 staff in the four MEND HEI Access offices and one community worker), were consulted with in relation to the evaluation and survey design and invited to participate in focus groups and/or interviews about the administration process of the fund.

In the second phase of the evaluation, **111 1916 BF awardees** in the MEND region engaged with the survey, and in the third phase, **11 1916 BF** awardees took part in focus groups discussions about the impact of the fund.

This section details the methods for each phase of the evaluation process.

### 1. Phase One - Consultation with staff and design of survey - November 2021-March 2022

In November 2021, two interviews and three focus groups were conducted with the staff from each of the four HEIs in the MEND Cluster. The numbers of participants in focus groups ranged from two to five people, and in total 13 people were consulted via interviews and focus groups. These included 12 members of staff from the participating four HEIs and one employee from a community organisation. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, all consultations were conducted online and digitally recorded.

A draft survey for awardees was created by the researchers and circulated to staff in January 2022 along with a preliminary analysis of focus group and interview discussions. A follow-on meeting was held in February 2022, which provided a forum for feedback on both documents, as well as discussion of the proposed processes for sending out the survey and invitation to participate to awardees.



### 2. Phase Two – Survey to 1916 BF Awardees in the MEND Cluster - March – April 2022

To promote the survey and to invite awardees to participate, a flyer was designed by Maynooth Student's Union (MSU) communications officer and graphic designer, Tyran Lovett (Figure 3).

The flyer informed awardees that the survey should take less than ten minutes to complete and that completing the survey would mean being entered into a draw to win a €100 One4All voucher, one of which was available for each HEI. This flyer was emailed to all students currently studying at the four HEIs who had been awarded a 1916 Bursary and sent out by the relevant Access office staff, who informed students that the evaluation was being carried out by an independent research consultant and would not affect their 1916 award or their relationship with their college. This email also informed students that following the analysis of the survey responses, online focus groups would be taking place with a limited number of awardees from each HEI. The email explained that these focus group discussions would provide a confidential space facilitated by the independent external researcher to discuss their experience of the fund and its impact, if any, for them should they wish to take part.

**ARE YOU/WERE YOU A 1916 BURSARY FUND AWARDEE**  
Who attends MU,DCU,DKIT OR TUS (AIT) ?

**HELP US IMPROVE THE FUND AND HELP US REACH THOSE WHO NEED US BY TAKING OUR SURVEY!**

Let us know your experience of the bursary fund by clicking on this survey to be entered into a draw for a **€100 ONE FOR ALL VOUCHER**

Supported by College Connect

<https://maynoothuniversity.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/1916-bursary-fund-awardees-survey-march-2022>

**College Connect**  
Education is for everyone.  
#ITCANBEYOU

DCU DUNBALK HEA HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY Maynooth University TUS

Figure 3 - The flyer to promote the survey for 1916 BF awardees in the MEND HEIs

The survey used the Online Surveys UK platform and was launched on 15 March 2022 and distributed to all awardees across the four participating HEIs. Awardees were given over two weeks to complete the survey and it was closed on 2 April 2022 with **111 respondents**. A respondent from each HEI was randomly selected, who received a €100 one-for-all voucher to thank them for their time. The survey is included in this report as Appendix A, and included questions about:

- Awardees' demographic profile and year of studies
- The impact (if any) for them of the fund under a number of different areas
- How awardees found out about the 1916 BF
- Awardees' experience of the application process for the 1916 BF

- Awardees experiences of HEI support in connection with the 1916 BF
- Awardees' suggestions for changes or improvements to 1916 BF

### 3. Phase Three – Focus Groups with 1916 BF Awardees in the MEND Cluster - May 2022

Survey respondents were asked if they would be interested in participating in follow-up focus groups, and 62 of the 111 respondents, or 56.9%, said that they would like to participate. Twenty-eight participants were selected and invited, and this number increased incrementally as awardees were communicated with and either confirmed or declined to participate. While initially it had been intended to have three participants from each college (12 in total), as selected awardees did not respond or cancelled, more were invited.

Three online focus groups with awardees were held in May 2022, with **eleven participants** in total, **6 women and 5 men**. There was representation across the four MEND colleges, many participants were lone parents and there was diversity in relation to nationality and ethnic background. There was also diversity in terms of the mix in the focus groups of people who had received the full fund, and those who had received a smaller funds or one-off funds in line with additional tiers added to the bursary.

It is important to note that consultations with awardees took place in May 2022, which is a challenging time for students, potentially including placements, undertaking exams and submitting assignments. Several awardees did not respond, cancelled, or did not attend focus groups. Most of those who cancelled were women, and the reasons were usually caring responsibilities such as hospital appointments for children, parents, or siblings. All efforts were made to accommodate cancellations and to offer opportunities for rescheduling, including the arrangement of an additional third focus group.

Following our participatory approach, interviews were carried out in an unstructured way so as to allow the participants direct how they shared their experience of the 1916 BF. The PI, Sarah Murphy, used the questions below as a guide for herself, but allowed participants to lead in discussing their insights and perspectives on the impact of the fund. Focus groups were therefore closer to 'research conversations' or 'discussions', and focused on the following five key areas:

- Participant's experience of the 1916 Bursary Fund
- How participants heard about the fund
- Participant's reasons for applying to 1916 BF and their experience of the application process



- The impact, if any, of the 1916 BF
- Participant suggestions/recommendations for future developments of the 1916 BF.

## 2.5 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS (AWARDEES)

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There were 111 responses to the survey in total. (Some questions are answered by less than 111 respondents but not less than 107.) Survey data indicates that most of the survey participants (85.5%) self-identified as female, as depicted in Figure 4.

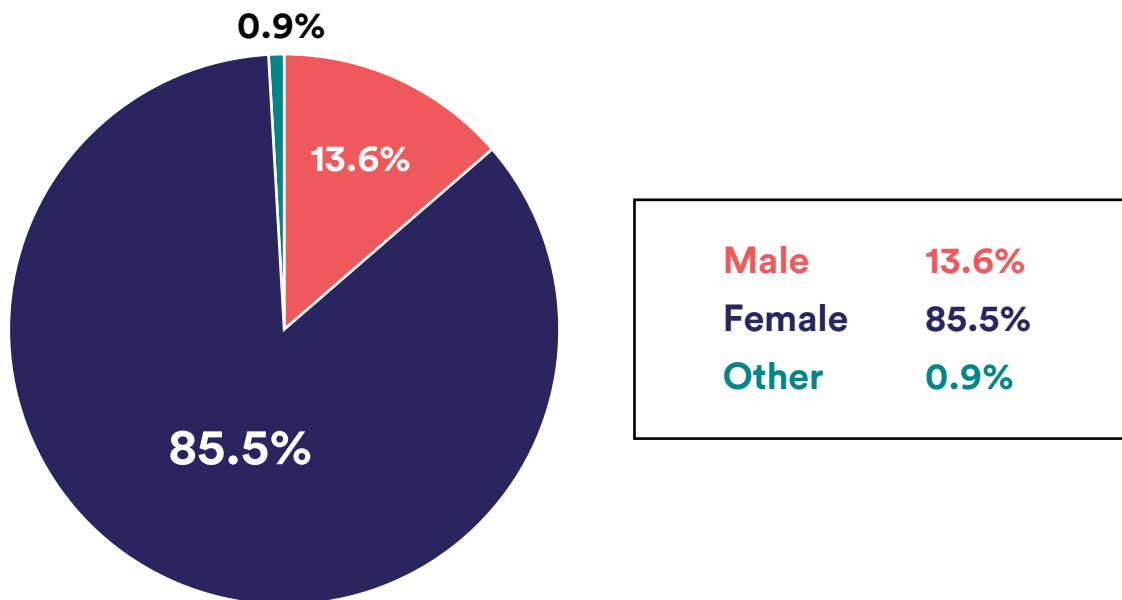


Figure 4 - Percentage of survey participants by gender

As Figure 5 shows, survey participation differed across each of the four MEND HEIs, ranging from 45 participants from Maynooth University to 11 participants from Technological University of the Shannon, Midlands.

### Institutions Attended by Participants

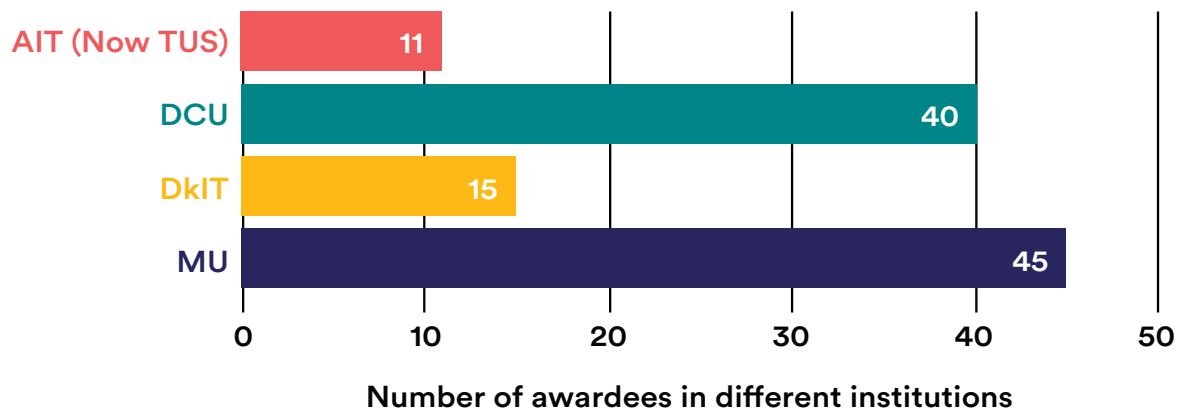


Figure 5 - The distribution of the participants by the MEND HEIs

As shown in Figure 6, the majority of the survey participants (62 participants out of 111) received the award in the 2021-2022 academic year.

### Year of the awards received by the awardees

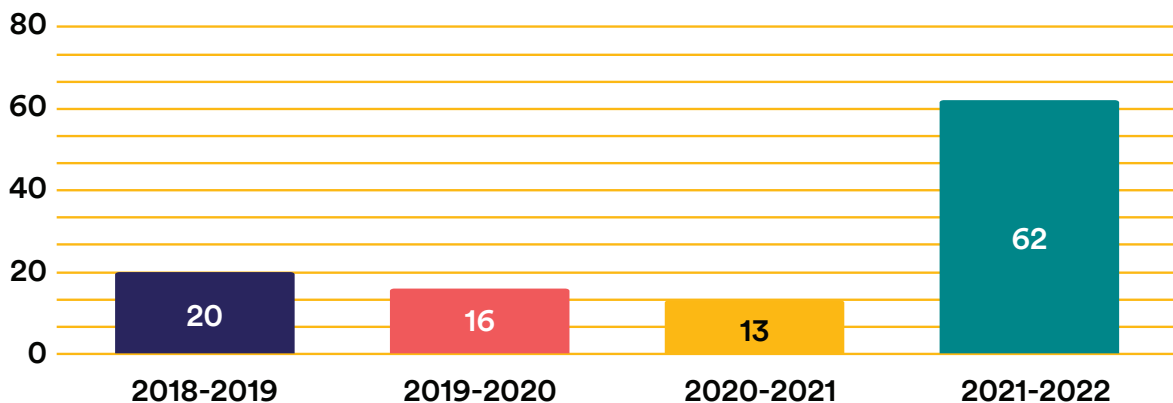
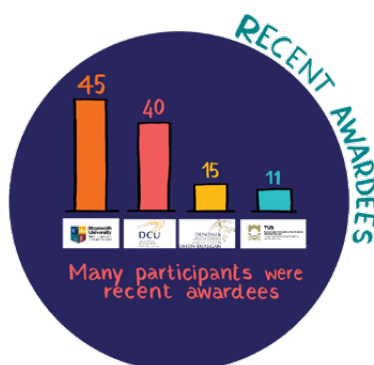


Figure 6 - The number of participants by the year of the awards



As Figure 7 indicates below, most of the participants (65 out of 111) had just started their higher education journey as first year students receiving the award. This ranges down to seven survey participants who are postgraduate students, who are a demographic also represented in focus groups. Participants who selected 'Other', explained that they had just graduated or had just started their Master's degree, so were therefore in-between stages.

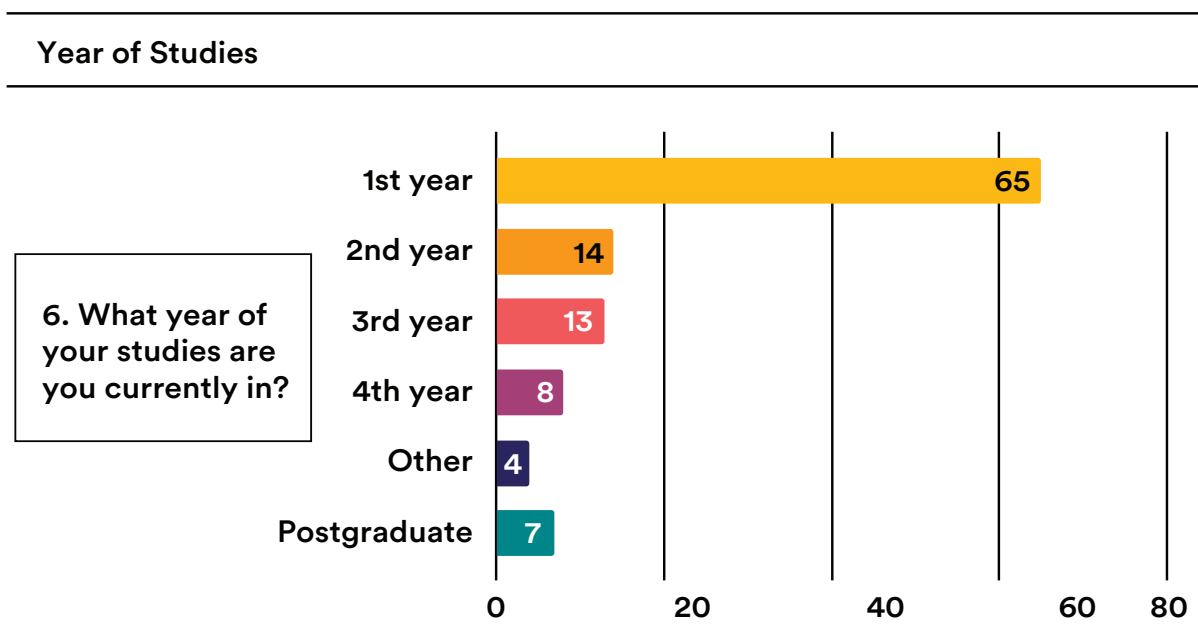


Figure 7 - The distribution of the participants by their year of study

## 2.6 ARTS-BASED REPRESENTATION



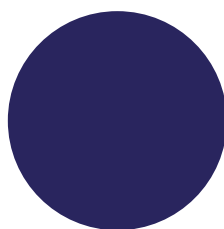
We believe that the representation of the results of research concerned with social justice, should not be limited to text, and agree with arts-based research proponents that other forms are required in order to render the findings understandable to affected persons, to reach a wide audience, and to provide a basis for further discussion.<sup>49</sup> For this evaluation we engaged with experienced graphic recorder and illustrator Esther Blodau, whose beautiful illustration is peppered throughout this report. Graphic recording is the skill of listening, synthesising, and translating the spoken word into a

drawing created in real-time. Most of the time, graphics are drawn on a large sheet of paper or artist board, however, with the shifting digital landscape, drawings are also commonly created on a tablet and projected on screens throughout the room.<sup>50</sup>

49. Bergold. & Thomas. (2012).

50. Ink Factory Official Website. 'What is Graphic Recording?'

We employed a version of graphic recording by audio-recording our synopsis of the report chapters, which were in turn illustrated by Esther, bringing in another lens to interpret the research evaluation. Although not necessarily new knowledge, incorporating illustration is in fact providing a new perspective by the very fact that the research is seen and experienced through a different lens.<sup>51</sup> A simple shift of perspective for example, can change the reflective surface of a pond mirroring its surroundings, to a translucent window onto the world below, and as new perspectives are encountered, so too the conditions are created for transformation.<sup>52</sup>



## 2.7 CONCLUSION



The positive response rate to the survey (111 participants, which makes up of 29% of MEND awardees across the four years of the 1916 BF from 2017-2021) and the rich data collected from the qualitative interviews, ensures that this research makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund. Limitations to the evaluation include an over-representation of females in the survey data (85.5% females in survey data), and an overrepresentation of first-year students (58.5%). As with the evaluation of the 1916

BF undertaken by the SOAR Cluster,<sup>53</sup> there may also be a bias in the data relating to experiences of completing the application form, given that the participants' success in being awarded the bursary may colour their perceptions of the ease or otherwise of the application process.

The following chapter, presents the findings of the research and examines the impact of the fund on awardees' higher education experiences as well as feedback on the practical processes of the fund from application to reception of the fund.

51. Meaney Sartori. (2020).

52. *Ibid*, 280.

53. SOAR Report. (May 2021), 18.



# FINDINGS



“

The bursary has been a domino effect across my whole family as it has supported me to be able to support my children in many ways, schooling, travelling, purchasing books for my studies. The fund has taken a lot of pressure off me financially which has helped with my own health and self-care, something I could not have lived without.”

– Survey participant

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

---

This chapter presents the findings of the research and examines the impact of the fund on awardees, the impact on their experience of higher education as a result of receiving the award, and also documents participant feedback on the practical processes of the fund from application to receipt. Consultations with awardees of the 1916 BF were conducted both through online focus groups and an online survey. As described in the Methods section, the research also includes online interviews and focus groups with 13 staff members who supported both awardees and unsuccessful applicants with their 1916 BF applications. In this chapter, we will draw on survey and focus group responses of the awardees as well as interview data from staff members, to put forward the findings from this evaluation. These various data sources enable us to hear the awardees' voice in a clearer and more critical way and to provide us with a greater holistic understanding of the impact of the fund at large.

### 3.2 THE PERCEIVED IMPACT OF THE 1916 BURSARY FUND

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Survey respondents were asked how much impact the Fund has had on various aspects of their lives using a 5-point Likert scale with options from 'extremely big' to 'no impact,' as indicated in Figure 8. When we dove more deeply into the additional responses of 'extremely big' and 'big' impact, the vast majority of respondents identified the impact of the Fund on various aspects of their lives as follows:

- **Almost 99% of the respondents believe that being able to afford things that supported them to focus more on their studies, including childcare, Internet, travel, food, accommodation' as the most impactful element of the fund;**

- Over 96% believe that they have less financial stress thanks to the fund;
- Over 96% believe that are able to attend and remain in college due to the fund;
- Over 93% believe that having the fund helps to focus more on their study;
- Over 69% believe that the fund helps participants to socialise more thus cultivating an increased sense of belonging (Figure 8).

These numbers indicate the overall positive impact of the fund and its ‘domino effect’ on the participants’ lives from economic, social and psychological perspectives. The fund is most impactful in alleviating some of the financial challenges the participants deal with, in their daily lives and with the associated costs of their education.

### The Impact of 1916 Bursary on the Awardees

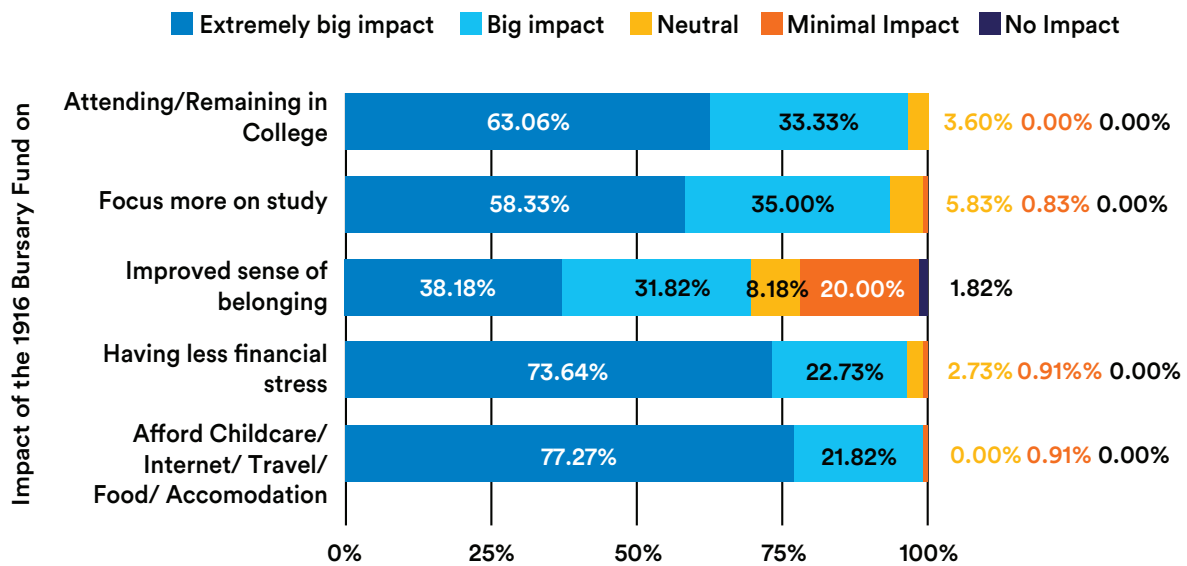


Figure 8- The Impact Scale of the Fund on Various Aspects of HE

### 3.2.1 ALLEVIATION OF FINANCIAL STRESS

When asked what participants believe would have happened to their college journey if they hadn’t received the fund, most of the respondents emphasised that they had been **thinking of dropping out** and not continue their higher education or how it would have resulted in having **extreme amounts of financial stress trying to juggle work, study and care responsibilities**:

“I do feel I would not have been able to continue my studies due to the cost of childcare.”

– Survey participant

“I think I would have dropped out before the end of the first semester.”

– Survey participant

“It would have severely impacted my studies as the stress of trying to support myself without burdening my low-income family was huge and I worried about how I would get to college sometimes.”

– Survey participant

The majority of focus group participants emphasised that they could **afford accommodation, transportation, food, internet, childcare, etc. because of the fund** and this is a ‘game changer’ for them. Many focus group and survey participants were **hit by the accommodation crisis**<sup>54</sup> and flagged this as a huge barrier to continuing their HE journey:

“I was homeless with no accommodation and working two jobs. I couldn’t afford the DCU accommodation without the help. I would have dropped out of college without this financial help.”

– Survey participant



54. Reynolds. (2020).



“...(receiving the award) was a big weight off my shoulders, even leading up to January, I didn’t know if I would be able to stay in college because of the finance and stuff. Because that was my first year and I was online. So I just stayed at home...but leading into the next year, and then the accommodation crisis and everything like that. I was getting a bit worried because I couldn’t get any financial help from my parents or anything. So it was just myself...I wouldn’t be able to afford all the accommodation and stuff.”

– Focus group participant

Some staff members also mentioned the **uniqueness of the bursary in terms of the difference it can make to students’ lives, especially by providing a better accommodation**. Staff also referred to the difference the BF could make in respect to **facilitating accommodation closer to the HEI** and in some instances being able to grant **critical independence from difficult, chaotic and sometimes abusive home circumstances**.

“Like the difference we’ve seen, (the difference) it’s made to students lives. I mean, nothing else would even come close...It’s always exciting to see the new first years...and they’re so happy and so thankful and it really gives them a boost, you know.”

– Staff focus group participant

“We’ve had experience with lone parents, where it means that they can pay childcare, so maybe, you know, that worry is removed...having funds to purchase childcare. And we’ve had people who’ve been able to maybe secure accommodation or better accommodation. So, in that sense, yeah, there is a correlation to doing better on their studies. Because if...you’ve a nice, comfortable place to go home to. That’s different thing than going home to completely unsuitable accommodation.”

– Staff focus group participant

Another big expense for students is **transportation costs** and the BF allowed students, not only to continue their studies, but also to remain in their chosen university as without the BF these costs would have been unaffordable.

“I felt like it made me be able to go to college further away from home, which gave me more opportunities because....Maynooth was the only college at the time doing this course, and I knew that was what I wanted to do so it’s where I have to go. I was worried about transportation and accommodation and having the bursary just took that fear and worry away from me.”-

– Focus group participant

**Food poverty and food insecurity** is a significant problem in Ireland, as well as in the UK, EU and the US, and is having a negative impact on the health and well-being of disadvantaged communities.<sup>55</sup> According to a recent study, food insecurity took the largest toll in the UK and in Ireland in the 2008 economic crisis within Europe.<sup>56</sup> University students, especially those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, were hit hardest with food insecurity as an effect of the financial crisis and reacted with walkouts and protests in Ireland.<sup>57</sup> Research participants in this evaluation highlighted how the 1916 BF fund partially helped **alleviate food insecurity** as well as other costs of living expenses:

“Had I not been awarded the 1916 Bursary, I could not afford a sandwich at university for lunch to stay healthy, to buy a laptop for college, to pay heating and electricity bills, accommodation rent, travel costs, books and class materials and extra medical expenses. It would have been impossible for me to manage at college as my single mother receives disability. The help of the SUSI grant would not have been enough financial help in getting my higher education degree.”

– Survey participant

As seen from the testimonies of the awardees, alleviating financial challenges for students takes away a lot of financial stress and worries caused by socio-economic disadvantage. Thanks to the 1916 BF, some participants were also alleviated from **needing to choose between work and study**.

55. Vasquez Menodza & McDonagh. (2022).

56. Davis & Geiger. (2017), 343-360.

57. Costa. (Oct 2022). *Corkbeo*.

(having the bursary) meant that I didn't have to work because I could not travel up and down, or else I could find a job here but I got a job here last year, a terrible experience. But anyway, it just meant I didn't have to travel for work and stuff like that. Just made me a lot calmer and happier.”

– Focus group participant

Some students have special needs and consequently additional problems. For example, a few students could not work due to their medical conditions and the bursary **helped alleviate stress associated with their healthcare**.

Last May, I was diagnosed with (medical condition)...That was obviously a huge thing. And so I stopped working and...it's taken a lot of pressure off that as well, sort of almost giving me the option to do that...it has definitely given me that sort of breathing space.”

– Focus group participant

According to our research findings, care responsibilities disproportionately impacted on the ability to focus on their studies among the awardees. The majority of participants in focus groups have children and reported **being able to afford childcare** as well as other costs for their children as a result of the fund, including **activities with their children** at weekends and **medical costs** where children were receiving medical treatment for serious health issues. This has an immense value in terms of mental health as reported.

“Mentally-wise it's just so much better for you...it gives you the freedom, especially if you have kids to be able to do a few things with them like fun things you know. Where you're not having to worry about...I can't do it this week, because I don't have the money”

– Focus group participant

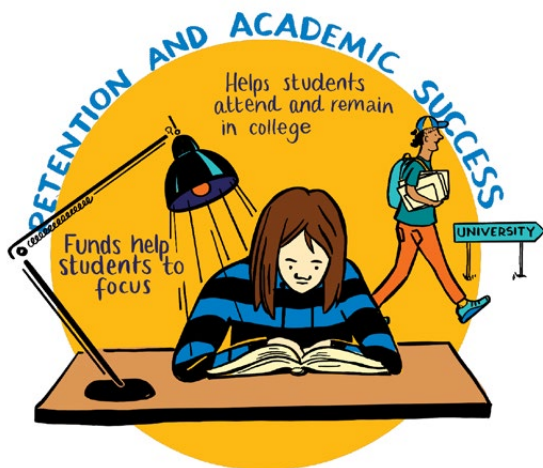
In addition to parental roles, many participants were also performing caring roles for family members. An interesting finding was that, while some were living with parents, and consequently classed by SUSI as a 'dependent' and therefore receiving €135 per month, they were actually living at home but supporting parents in caring roles that involved paying the bills for their parents, healthcare costs, taking care of siblings or other family members.

“I have one kid and he’s 12. But I’m the eldest of five and my dad passed away... years ago...So I’m quite involved in the upbringing of the other two, basically the two youngest...So I was gonna say one but I have three of them really...I constantly have to step up and take on the responsibilities”.

– Focus group participant

“I’ve a four-year-old (child) and then I look after my 12-year-old brother. Both his parents work shift work”.

– Focus group participant



### 3.2.2 STUDENT RETENTION AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Overcoming some of the financial challenges and having more economic and social resources thanks to the fund, students expressed feeling **less stressed, experiencing more relief and comfort that enabled them to focus on their studies** and consequently **academic success** as a result. They also mention explicitly, **improved mental health and well-being:**

“...last year, I moved back home, and I was back at work and stuff like that during college, I worked through my exams. And this is the first time now that I don’t have to work through exams. And I think knowing I have the bursary to be able to not have to work for my exams has taken a lot of stress which means I have more time to focus and study.”

– Focus group participant

“...(the bursary) helped a lot. I’ve averaged 70 every semester...At one point (before the fund), I was working full time and at college full time. I would have done whatever it takes to continue that. But obviously, the stress is extremely high to achieve it...maintain it”

– Focus group participant

“It enabled my son and I to secure accommodation outside of the antisocial environment we were in. My mental health was at an all-time low (before the fund). I am a different person thanks to this assistance.”

– Survey participant

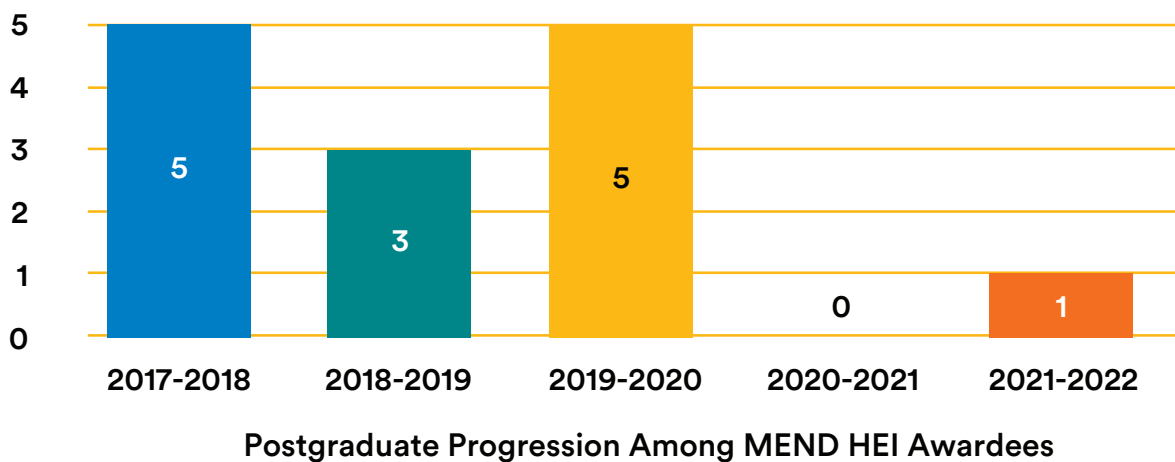
Some students were not only able to continue their studies, but enabled to **progress onto postgraduate programmes**, thanks to being able to focus on their studies, and their academic success after receiving the award:

...I’d definitely say it did add to my college experience and it definitely did help with grades and stuff like that...because I’d done so well in the BA, I kind of went on and then was able to apply for the masters and get the masters...So it definitely impacted that.”

– Focus group participant

Here are the numbers from the general 1916 BF recipients’ data available<sup>58</sup>; from 2017/18 award recipients of 1916 BF in the MEND region, five students progressed to postgraduate degrees. From 2018/19 awardees, three students progressed to postgraduate degrees. From 2019/20 awardees, five students progressed to postgraduate degrees (Figure 9).

**Postgraduate Progression Among MEND HEI Awardees**



**Figure 9 - Postgraduate Progression Among MEND HEI awardees (Total data)**

58. This general 1916 bursary fund data on all the recipients of the award in the MEND HEIs are provided to us and this is not our own data set.

However, some awardees could not succeed at their chosen HEI despite having been awarded the 1916 BF, the reasons behind which were provided to HEI staff and included; transportation costs; being a young lone parent; or simply through choosing the ‘wrong’ course. In our general 1916 BF recipients’ data of MEND HEIs, withdrawals range from seven withdrawals in 2017/18 to 16 withdrawals in 2021/22. It is important to highlight that 2021/22 withdrawals were across the three tiers of the award, where more awards, albeit for lesser amounts, were awarded (Figure 10).

### Withdrawals Among 1916 BF Awardees in the MEND HEIs

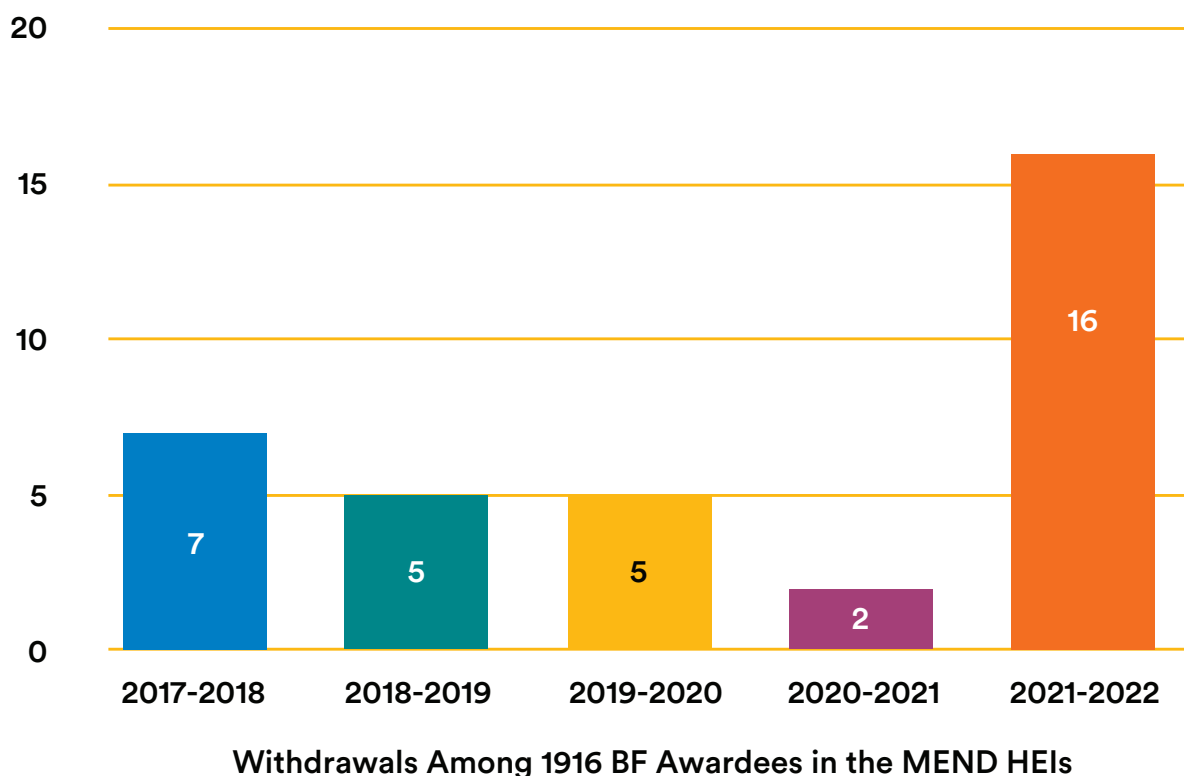


Figure 10 - Withdrawals Among 1916 BF Awardees in the MEND HEIs

These numbers paint a slightly darker picture and indicate that while the bursary has a positive impact on students’ lives, it is not sufficient when it comes to addressing the complex needs of socioeconomically disadvantaged, underrepresented groups to progress in HE. It should, however, be noted that there is a general increase in withdrawals from college among students in Ireland.<sup>59</sup>

59. Cox. (Oct 2022). *Breaking News*.

### 3.2.3 SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE FUND

As demonstrated above, financial challenges affect all aspects of students' lives, including their social and psychological aspects. The social impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund is complex and multi-layered and manifests in the daily lives of the participants. Many working-class students in Ireland worry about how and if they 'fit in' to their college; whether they are going to experience isolation, and whether they will have the capacity to make friends.<sup>60</sup> Being able to afford to **dress nicely**, having **access to healthy food** or a **MacBook** for college work, boosts **self-confidence** as well as the **social networking capacity** of awardees.

Dressing nicely to attend college is not merely a matter of social status among one's peer-group, it also influences **self-confidence** and **self-perception**.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, respondents report a 'next-level' increase in the quality of their lives as a result of receiving the 1916 BF due to **fitting better into college** and having the ability to **socialise in a more confident manner**.

"Having the bursary has allowed me to maintain friendships and connections made in college because I could socialise and I could buy new clothes which made me feel much more confident. I was literally below the poverty line and it has certainly improved my life overall. Physically and mentally."

– Survey participant

The bursary enabled me to purchase clothing to attend college. This might not seem a big thing but it made me feel great to have new clothing. Also it allowed me to eat well rather than rubbish processed foods, in turn allowing me to be healthier, which aids all aspects of my life."

– Survey participant

Staff also confirmed that the fund increases awardees' levels of confidence and self-belief, as well as enhancing their sense of belonging at their HEI and comes with related social benefits. The fund facilitates students being able to buy a coffee or a lunch, for example, and to stay on and socialise at college, which assists them in forming relationships and feeling part of the HEI. This increased capacity to socialise in college and the associated **increased sense of belonging**, is described as a '**huge boost**' for awardees, giving them a **sense of pride** in themselves.

60. Scanlon et. al. (2020), 753-765.

61. McDermott & Pettijohn. (2011).

“A sense of belongingness is quite, quite big...And it has been said about the financial and just that, you know, having maybe a little bit of disposable income where you can have your lunch in college or have a coffee. Yeah, they can socialise. Yeah, so that’s the belonging and that...is huge...because they can have a coffee rather than having to, you know, just...say oh, no, I don’t want any. They can join in in a coffee, or just know that the electricity won’t go off when they have an online lecture or something. You know, it’s those kinds of things that, yes, all of that it’s a build-up of all of those little erosions of the self that dissipate away”.

– Staff focus group participant

While some participants feel more self-confidence and a greater sense of belonging, others addressed the issues of discomfort or the associated shame that came with receiving the 1916 BF. This discomfort seems to stem from the perception of not fitting into higher education settings due to coming from a socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

“I find people often think it looks suspicious that I come from an under privileged area, so it’s obvious I don’t come from money but I would buy items (technology, software etc to help with college) I often find friends, peers ask “where do I get ‘all my money’ from” which makes me uncomfortable as I bought a MacBook with the money. (This laptop suits my course and software the best). It just makes me feel a little uncomfortable around the more privileged people in my class because they see me as weird.”

– Survey participant



Some reported **feeling guilty for receiving the fund** when they had friends, fellow students, with similar situations who had not been successful in being awarded the fund. For some focus group participants, they felt as though they were **leaving their friends behind** and experienced a **sense of guilt** in this. This touches on the issue of the competitive nature of bursary funds, the theory being that it also increases competition among HE providers to establish a more diverse, efficient HE sector,<sup>62</sup> however, the impact of this is experienced by applicants with respect to the needs assessment.

62. Callender, & Wilkinson. (2013), 281-308.



“The criteria is quite strict...it is very, down to the bone...a friend of mine applied for it as well. And the only thing different between me and her was I was a single mother...and the fact that I think one of her parents is semi-retired, so he still works...but other than that, that was the only difference. And then it made me feel kind of guilty. It did. Like, even now, when people are like, oh, you got that bursary? And I’m like, Yeah, I did yeah, I get really awkward about it”.

– Focus group participant

“Like only two or three of my friends, like the close ones that I would talk to quite a lot, know. But other than that, I wouldn’t say it to no one because I know there’s other people kind of just as much in a similar situation. Maybe not with children but, in a similar financial situation that’s struggling”.

– Focus group participant



### 3.2.4 IMPACT OF THE FUND ON THE INSTITUTION

Awardees of the 1916 BF do not only socialise more with other students in university, they also **use the Access office more often** and meet staff members and student advisors more regularly because of the fund. 1916 Bursary Fund recipients are expected to meet with a Student Advisor in their institution at least twice per year.<sup>63</sup>

We asked participants to rate the staff support they received as a 1916 BF awardee. Over half, 52.3% of the survey respondents, identified staff support as ‘excellent,’ 24.3 % referred to staff support as ‘very good’, and 15% of survey respondents described the level of support received as ‘good’ (Figure 11).

63. 1916 Bursary Fund. FAQs.

## Staff Support During 1916 Bursary Fund

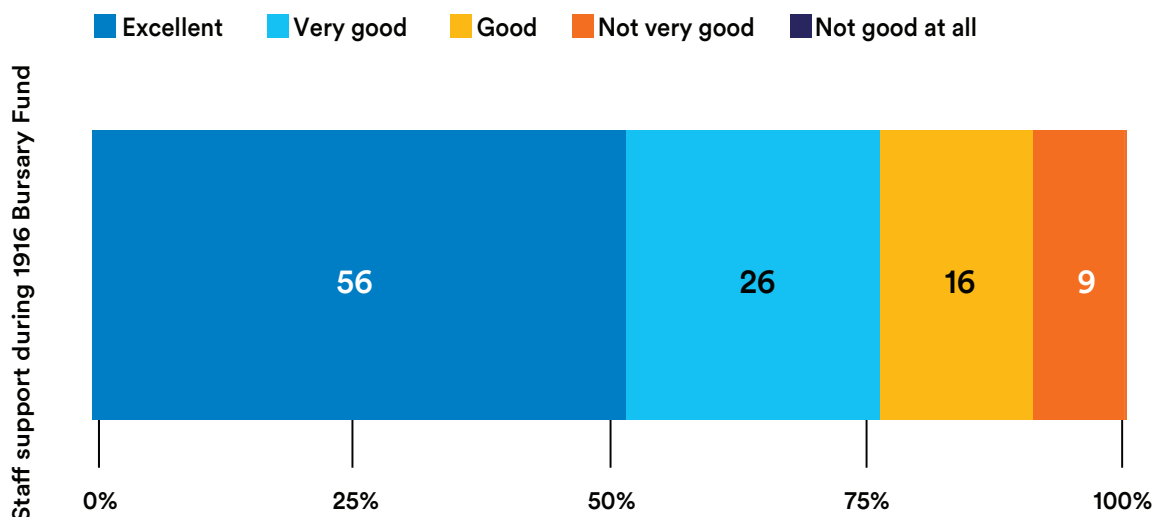


Figure 11 - Staff support during the 1916 BF

Overall, both survey and focus group respondents highlighted the significance of the Access office and the staff there during the years they were awarded the 1916 BF. This regular support from staff and student advisors results in a more robust institutional support, which in turn enables awardees to have more access to other financial, psychological, social and academic resources at various times over the course of their studies. While one focus group participant was connected with academic tutors through the Access office, another two were referred to the disability services by the Access officers, and yet another learnt about the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) as an additional financial resource solely because of the regular meetings with Access officers as a result of being a 1916 BF awardee. Building stronger relationships with the Access officer also motivates awardees as they are *aware that there's someone there to support* and to assist with the necessary institutional referrals to support awardees:

“...the (Access) officer in college, she’s really, really helpful. I had a meeting with her and just, she motivated me a little bit more even just speaking with her, and...you can tell that she really cares about the people that she works with, you know, so it definitely gave me a bit more motivation to keep it up.”

– Focus group participant

“...having the Access officer sort of helped, like I probably wouldn’t have been to the Access office otherwise. I built up a good relationship with her and, obviously, then, because I had been diagnosed with diabetes last year, and she had helped me to get in touch with the disability service in the college and things like that. You know, so it did help in terms of even just sort of being aware that there’s someone there to do that kind of thing.”

– Focus group participant

Similarly, some staff members described the value of the fund for them in supporting their roles within the university as it provided a means of **identifying students’ complex needs that they would not already have been aware of**, particularly with regard to students who may not have disclosed these or may not have come in through traditional channels:

“The financial incentive is fantastic. But there’s other supports that can be just as helpful for students to retain them. And I think identifying those needs as well through the 1916 was really positive”.

– Staff focus group participant

“The 1916 bursary has been a nice link into students...as well...there has been benefits of the administrative benefit of it, because I think colleges have now been able to tap into a cohort of students that previously maybe they weren’t tapping into, (or) have like the opportunity to tap into but...they’re identifying themselves through other means”.

– Staff focus group participant

### 3.2.5 PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE FUND

This evaluation shows evidence that the intertwined effects of the fund together with the continuous support throughout participants’ years in both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, give a **psychological boost** or ‘**an extra push**’ to ‘**keep going**’ in their studies, and has a ‘**game changing**’ effect on awardees’ lives:

“..since that time (I received the fund), the support from that stage, it was like an extra push to keep going...to do my studies.”

– Focus group participant

“I was finding balancing everything difficult and started to question if I was able to do this. Family demands, my health, and other. But the award redirected me and the feeling of somebody’s support was a game changer.”

– Survey participant

Staff focus groups also supported the positive impact of the fund reported by awardees, describing it as ‘**transformative**’, and affirming that it assisted students by alleviating financial pressures, enabling them to give up/reduce working hours and thus improving their capacity to focus on their education.

“There’s so many examples...where students have said that, you know, they were working 35 hours a week. And now they have 1916 bursary, and they’ve been able to...cut that right down, and...focus on full time study, or...they were having to commute two and a half hours each way to college. And now they’ve been able to...afford closer campus accommodation and what that means for their ability to fully participate.”

– Staff focus group participant

“Students who have gone on Erasmus programmes... studied abroad, who wouldn’t have without the 1916 bursary. So that amount of 5000 euros each year is transformative. Like, it does mean that your experience of higher education will be different...because you won’t have those same financial barriers as you might have had without it.”

– Staff focus group participant

So, in terms of overall satisfaction with the 1916 BF, as seen in Figure 12, most survey respondents (over 78%) are **‘very satisfied’** with the fund. If we add up the ‘somewhat satisfied’ category with ‘very satisfied’ category, over **94% of the respondents are satisfied** with the bursary fund overall. In terms of dissatisfaction with the BF, the two respondents who rated their satisfaction levels as ‘somewhat dissatisfied’, also rated staff support as ‘OK’ and the application process as ‘difficult’. It is possible that their satisfaction levels might be negatively influenced by their experiences with application processes for the fund or their expectations regarding staff support. In the next section, we explore the application process experience in more detail.

### Satisfaction levels of the awardees with 1916 Bursary Fund

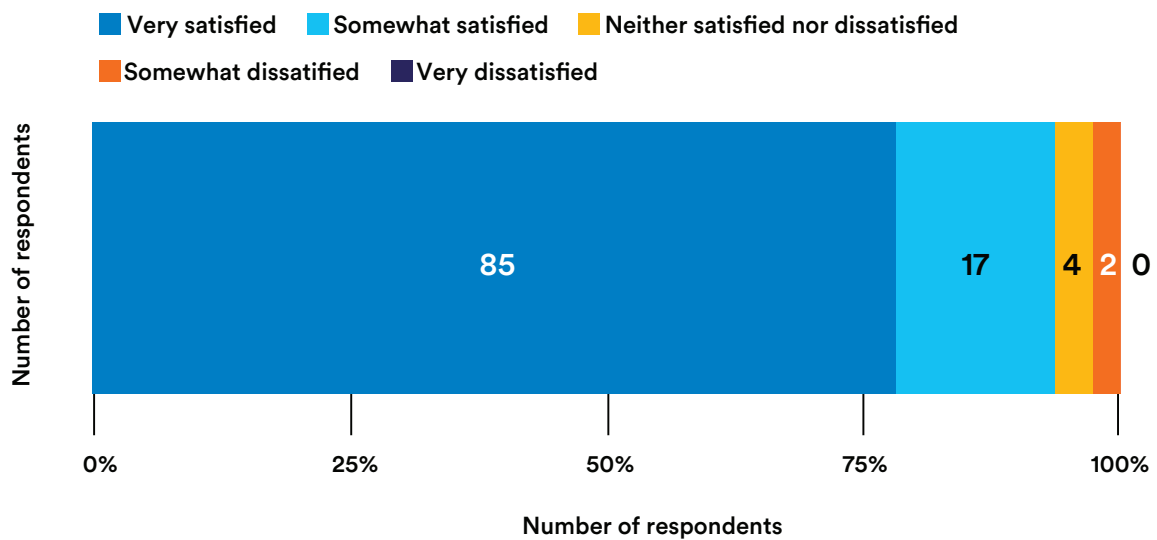


Figure 12 - Satisfaction levels of the awardees with the Fund

## 3.3 APPLICATION PROCESS TO THE 1916 BF

The process for application to the 1916 BF starts with finding out about the fund. As the 1916 BF is relatively new, starting in the academic year 2018/19, it is now becoming more widely known by students and recommended more by the Access officers, mostly for socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Figure 13).<sup>64</sup>

64. Check the 1916 Bursary Fund website to see all the eligible groups for the fund. 1916 Bursary Fund. Who is it for?

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## Who is the 1916 Bursary for?

The 1916 Bursary is for first time entrants to Higher Education who are from one or more of the following groups:

- » Socio-economically disadvantaged communities
  - » Lone and/or teen parents in receipt of a long-term means-tested social welfare payment
  - » Socio-economic groups that have low participation rates in higher education
  - » Members of the Irish Traveller Community
  - » Students with a disability
  - » Members of the Roma Community
  - » Students who are carers
  - » First time, mature student entrants and 2nd chance mature students
  - » Students entering on the basis of a QQI Further Education award
  - » Persons from ethnic minorities who are lawfully present in the State
- 

**Figure 13 - Eligibility criteria for the 1916 Bursary Fund**

As seen in Figure 14, people mostly found out about this fund through online means. Forty-six (31.5%) of the 111 respondents found out about the bursary through their college website or college social media; Forty (27.4%) from an email or a flyer from their college; and 22 (15.1%) from a support worker at their college. Fourteen (9.6%) found out through their school or FET and 14 (9.6%) through word of mouth. Three people (2.1%) found out through community organisations. Of the seven people (4.8%) who selected 'other', respondents mentioned finding out online with some mentioning that they found it randomly or had to search extensively before finding it.

## How participants found out about the fund

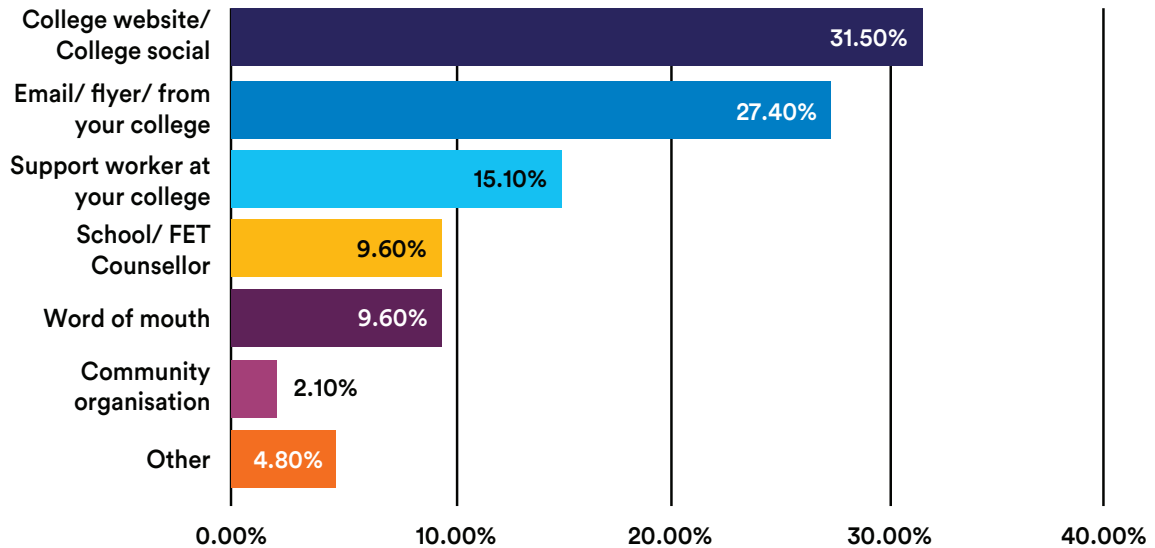


Figure 14 - How participants found out about the fund

A few focus group and survey participants referred to a lack of information about the fund, especially before they applied for college. Some of these respondents are early awardees since 2018:

“I found out about it randomly on Google when looking up courses.”

– Survey participant

“I researched grants for many hours before finding a website that had this listed.”

– Survey participant

Staff members also reported significant **challenges experienced by students in terms of accessing information about the fund:**

“We (HEIs) do so much work promoting it, and, you know, talking to our community partners, and talking to schools and talking to, you know, and sending the information as wide and as far as possible, but you’re still really relying on the student to get connected to the exact right place to make an application”.

– Staff focus group participant

However, currently, the fund is becoming more widely known by students and the Access officers are more experienced in supporting students to apply for and proceed with the fund. Furthermore, information about the fund is also shared through PATH 3. The College Connect project for example between 2018 and 2021 developed and delivered workshops, information sessions and outreach events directly to 1008 priority group individuals that included highlighting important dates and deadlines such as CAO, HEAR, DARE and SUSI applications as well as 1916 Bursary information. Moreover, eligibility checks and application processes have improved and become simpler and there is now a **unified application system** that can be accessed through the website<sup>65</sup> and via Access offices in the universities. This research includes some of the lived experiences of the awardees prior to this unified application system, which seems to address many of the issues raised by our research participants. The unified and simplified application system for the fund, together with the development of the 1916 Bursary Fund website, was in response to the issues raised and it clarifies the eligibility criteria as well as making the application process more accessible and easier in general.

### Application Process for the Awardees

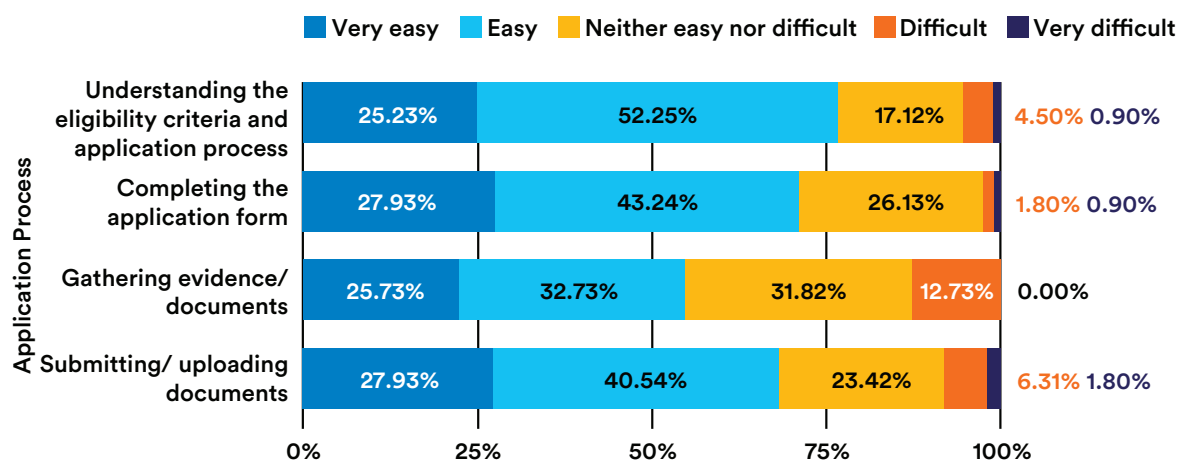


Figure 15 - Difficulty Levels of Various Tasks during the Application Process

65. See 1916 Bursary Fund official website for details.



Even before these changes, most survey respondents (over 70%) reported finding **completing the application form 'very easy' or 'easy'**, as seen in the Figure 15 above, but those who found it difficult found it very difficult.

While understanding the eligibility criteria and application process were found to be 'very easy' (25.2%) or 'easy' (52.2%) by the respondents, the most challenging part of the application process reported was down to the process of gathering the required documentation, and the amount of time and energy that this required. Over 31% of the respondents found this process 'neither easy nor difficult', over 12% found it 'difficult' compared to the rest of the application process. In the focus groups, respondents cited the **emotional weight of having to go back and revisit their past via documentation**. For example, one person who had been in care over two decades ago had to go back to their care facility for documentation, which they found traumatic:

"I was asked for supporting evidence in relation to being in care which I did not have as it was over 28 years ago. I found writing my own experiences emotional and it brought back a lot of painful memories but I felt extremely overwhelmed when I got the call that I had been granted the fund. I felt vulnerable when I put my words onto paper and sharing them not knowing exactly who was reading my life story."

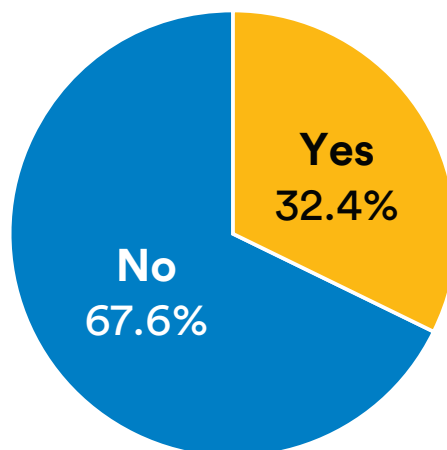
– Survey participant

Focus group participants described not knowing **what wording to ask for in supporting documentation**, including letters, while others said that they received guidance on the required wording from their Access office which had been helpful. Some people highlighted finding it difficult and **traumatising doing the personal statement**; that it made them feel 'bad about themselves' and feel like they were 'being judged' by their personal circumstances. **Personal statements are no longer needed in the application process in 2022 so this issue has already been resolved.**

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### Did you need help with the application process?

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Figure 16 - Help Needed During the Application

Over 32% of respondents **needed help with the application process** (Figure 16). Some participants suggested that it would be helpful to assign applicants a support worker who they could contact if struggling with the application process. Some also needed more clarity around **receipt of the fund, i.e. dates of payments**. Others mentioned finding the **character reference difficult**, as they like to keep the application **private due to shame** and wanting to **keep their financial difficulties private**.

“When I did mine, there’s a section where you had to get somebody else to write I think it was a letter about you, and...sometimes you don’t really want people to know about this. You want to kind of have it personal so it may be hard to find someone to do that for you? I’m not sure if that’s still part of it. But yeah, I know for myself, I kind of wanted to keep it to myself...maybe some others might not want anybody knowing”.

– Focus group participant

## 3.4 CONCLUSION

While the findings from this evaluation indicate the various aspects of economic precarity for participants, they also highlight the key role which the 1916 Bursary Fund plays in supporting participants' educational journeys in various ways. These range from allowing participants to **better focus on their studies** while **juggling financial challenges** and **care responsibilities**. The findings also highlight that awardees' needs are complex and multi-faceted and have to be met through financial, institutional and psychosocial resources available in and outside of higher education institutions in both the pre- and post-entry processes.

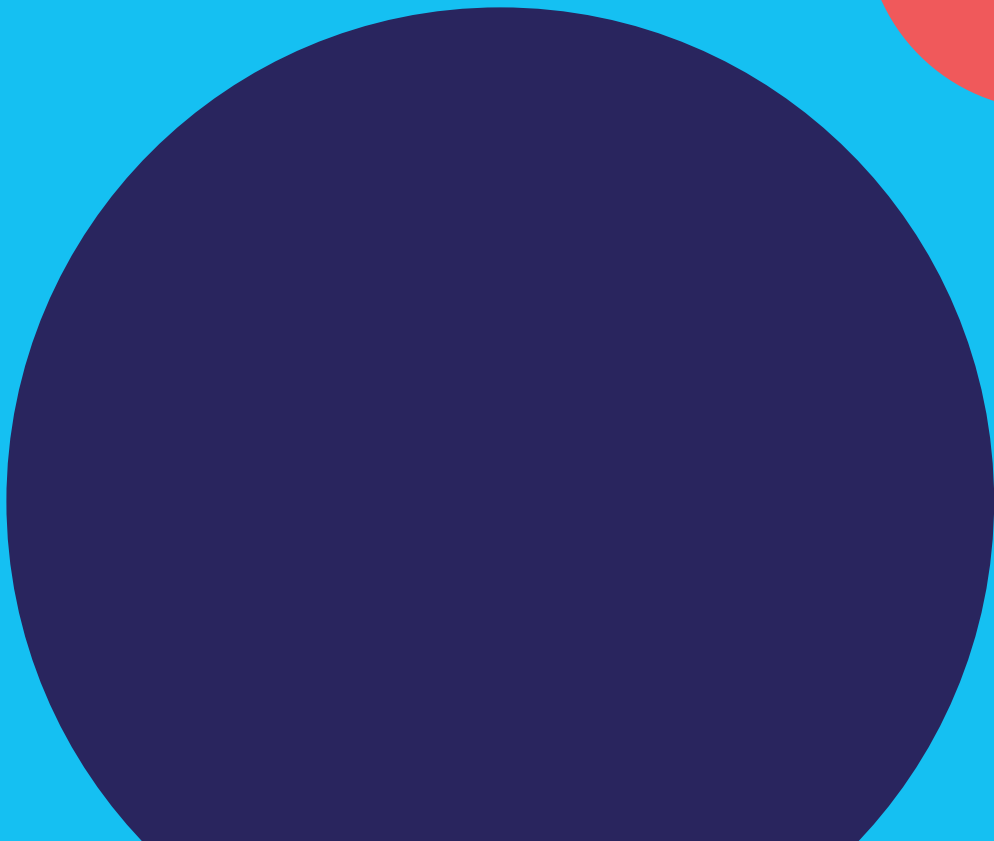


Participants documented their financial reasons for applying for the 1916 BF, reasons such as **accommodation, transportation, food insecurity, Internet**, and additional associated costs of education such as **printing, books, childcare support** as well as financing other **care responsibilities**. Financial challenges create a huge stress for awardees, who need relief from the intense stress of juggling work, study and family throughout their education process. The terms used by participants to describe this relief; 'a **domino effect**', '**safety pillow**', 'breathing space' give a sense of the visceral impact that the 1916 Bursary Fund has on people's well-being, mental health, and ability to stay afloat financially while attending higher education.

The following chapter puts forward seven recommendations in relation to the 1916 Bursary Fund. These recommendations are drawn from our analysis of participants' survey responses and participant input in focus groups, where participants were asked directly how the fund could be improved. The recommendations are also substantiated with insights from staff and our understanding of the changes that are already underway in relation to the application process.



# RECOMMENDATIONS



“

Maybe increase funds. I was awarded one of the lower tiers and yes it was helpful but months later I still find myself struggling . Money runs out really quick when you're using public transport to get to college , money for food, money for extra college material , and money to just do normal things really.”

– Survey participant

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we draw on participant input to put forward a series of recommendations, that are identified through participants' accounts, staff input, and through literature and policy analysis. In total, we set out seven recommendations that take into account participant and staff experience and views, while also setting these in the current context, where we see a review of the application process to the fund.

### 4.1.1 INCREASE THE NUMBER AND VALUE OF 1916 BURSARIES -

“I would like to see more candidates awarded the higher tiers.”

– Survey participant



Recommendations from survey respondents and focus group participants focused mostly on having ‘more awards’. By recommending ‘more awards,’ students not only mean an **increase in the number of the awards**, but also an **increase in the number of higher tiers**. Some participants also recommend **having more opportunities for postgraduate applicants**:

“I wish it’s provided to more people that are struggling financially while attending college...It’s not easy.”

– Survey participant

Participants also explained that their financial difficulties were increasing due to inflation and the cost-of-living crisis and asked that the **fund be increased in line with inflation and larger amounts be given to more people in need**. In 2023, Tier 3 of the fund increased to €2,000 per annum from €1,500 to respond to the cost-of-living crisis as announced in January 2023.<sup>66</sup> However, Tier 3 is a one-off payment and students emphasised the need for continuous and consistent payments of the fund and, as highlighted by the quote at the beginning of this chapter and below, the amount is simply not sufficient.

“The bursary is probably worth significantly less today than it was four years (ago)...I am in a position now where...I have to be more economically mindful; I suppose, you could put it. So yeah, finance at the moment, everything has gone up, prices of fuel...I have to try and fix my car like, prices of parts...so yeah, money seems to be flying out a lot more quickly now than it was a year ago”.

– Focus group participant

“I think it would actually help...like things are increasing, but like, the amount they pay is not, it’s not increasing.”

– Focus group participant

In terms of equity with regard to the distribution of the funds, participating staff members also observed that **the number of bursaries allocated to HEIs does not reflect the particular HEI student populations**:

“HEIs each get ten bursaries regardless of vast differences in size of student populations”.

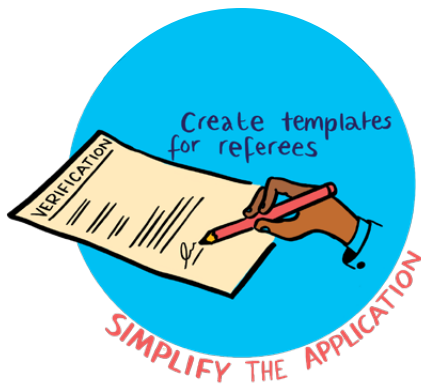
– Staff focus group participant

66. Kent. (Jan 2023). *Irish Examiner*.

### 4.1.2 SIMPLIFY THE APPLICATION PROCESS-

“Perhaps it would have been better if there were exact forms. You could just take and ask to be filled out...Because like, when I got my GP to write a letter, and obviously, they had to ask me, What do I want in this letter? Like I wasn’t 100% sure what they wanted...I think it would be more simple to people if, you know, you had a form like that said, you know, had the criteria on it...rather than having to have individual letters”.

– Focus group participant



Awardees asked for a simplified application process and made suggestions for built-in templates for referees providing verification for applicants, as highlighted in the quote above. This would mean that there would be simple forms requiring sign-off from state agencies like Tusla or for GPs to confirm disability status or medical conditions etc. rather than having to request that separate documents and letters be produced, and the resulting delay that this ensues.

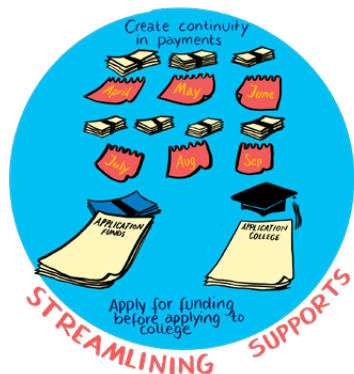
Some awardees, as mentioned in the Findings section, also highlighted the need for **a simplified, unified application process and for the fund to be more widely known and accessible**. These recommendations have already been actioned as per the Irish University Association (IUA) remit over the 3-year period (2021/22 to 2024/25), which is to coordinate the 1916 Bursary Fund into a **Centralised Application & Assessment Facility**. As well as agreeing to a common application process and a single timeline, one of the main objectives was to create a single identity for the 1916 BF and to develop a set of promotional and communication materials. The current 1916 BF logo, website and testimonials all stem from this, and recent awardees report that the website and unified process is changing their experience in a positive way and making the bursary more accessible to all through online and access platforms. Moreover, there is no personal statement documentation necessary for the applicants.

Another student who is a migrant, also complained about **the extra documents requested because of their visa status**. Moreover, **uploading these documents necessitates a level of IT skills and access to equipment and Internet**, which is also discussed as a barrier in the focus groups.

### 4.1.3 STREAMLINE THE SUPPORT SYSTEM, BOTH DURING THE APPLICATION PROCESS AND UPON RECEIPT OF THE FUND-

“If I had one issue ...the payments were very inconsistent in terms of the timing of them. I never knew when I was going to get the payments...from one year to the next...if you ask there was no clear answer to that. Even if...it was going to be the first of December and the first of May... as long as you knew...You’re applying for this and then waiting for it because of your financial situation... so it can be difficult to plan things in terms of buying things for college and whatever, when you’re really very unsure when it will come through.”

– Focus group participant



Participants highlighted a lack of consistency across the four HEIs, and across the different years that they were in receipt of the fund with regard to the payment dates and administration of the fund, as well as with information and extra supports such as vouchers etc. In particular it is recommended that payments be streamlined so that payment dates are consistent and awardees can budget accordingly.

Participants in all three focus groups called for **more consistency and information about payments**. Most awardees are highly dependent on the fund to sustain their daily activities from paying bills to provision of childcare; they reported **experiencing stress and negative consequences due to the inconsistency in when payments were paid to them**. Consistency in relation to payments was flagged as a significant concern by several participants who asked for dates of payments to be given to students in advance so they could plan their spending. One participant received their second payment in February the first year, but not until March in the second year. Participants highlighted the negative impact of this when they are ‘**down to the wire financially**’ and completely dependent on the fund due to their financial situation.

One participant had their children’s day-care ceased while they were **unable to pay due to a payment being received later than the previous year and they had to miss a month of college as a result**. This created **huge stress** on the awardee. Once the fund was paid, they managed to reorganise crèche places for their children as otherwise this participant would have had to drop out of their course.



“And then I had to leave college...because I had no one else to do that (childcare). So it was just yeah a big mess. Really. I’ve never felt so overwhelmed...I thought I was going crazy. It was really, really stressful...So I’m hoping it doesn’t have to happen again, because I’m heading into year four now. So I wouldn’t want to go through that again”

– Focus group participant

Some participants pointed out that the application of the fund should be **before they apply for college** so they can be relieved about their finances before they start the college. Focus group participants also suggested that it would be useful to **receive the first payment earlier** so that they could buy supplies for college. They understood that before October is not possible, but October or November would be more useful than Christmas week, as by then they typically owe money to a lot of people. They emphasised that **receiving the award, sometimes as late as January, creates considerable worry about their finances**. Post-graduate students flagged lack of **payments over summer** months as difficult in terms of sustaining themselves.

“I got into college in August, and then I didn’t hear about it until January.”

– Focus group participant

Staff members also flagged that the **timing of the application process and submission was extremely challenging for students simultaneously acclimatising to third level**, struggling to get to grips with their coursework and readings lists and that it is often difficult for students to engage when they are sent promotional information about the Fund in September or October as they are getting so many other emails from their HEI:

“The students that the 1916 bursary is targeted (at)...are the students who are stepping into the world of college and higher education is a completely new, daunting, treacherous, first couple of months. And it doesn’t take much for them to, you know, get that sense of ‘I don’t belong here. This is too much of a struggle for me’. And the added pressure that, you know, there is even another load of work to do to get the documents for the 1916 bursary”.

– Staff focus group participant

Lastly, while some participants have access to the student advisors or Access officers to help them out with the application process, others called for a **support worker to assist students with applying for the fund**:

“The fact that I struggled maybe if there was someone there on hand to maybe support someone who may be struggling with it, even like, you know, sometimes the way things are worded might not like people might feel overwhelmed with the words and go, what does that even mean? How, like, how do I even approach this? So yeah, maybe just someone to support them through the process of it.”

– Focus group participant

#### 4.1.4 OFFER A CLEAR AND PROACTIVE APPEALS PROCESS-

“I had already got an award from SUSI. So, most of the documents, they generated them from SUSI...but...because I wasn't born in Ireland...they need a lot of documentation. It took quite a long time and also after I finished the application, I got rejected... So, I asked again if maybe they could recheck... My sister also applied for another college...and she got the award...I think we have like, the same details and everything. So how come I don't get it? And my sister got it? So that's when I applied, you know, to make sure whether they... checked everything properly.”

– Focus group participant



Our research evaluation highlights some inconsistencies with the assessment process. We therefore recommend that the appeals process be clarified and promoted proactively by Access offices. The applicant above reported being first rejected from the fund and then getting the award after calling for their application to be rechecked. This appeal highlights the importance of a **clear appeals process and proactive institutional promotion of it**. While this instance is likely to be an individual case of human error, it is worth pointing out that this student had the courage to call the HEI and to ask for a re-check and

was in the position of having a yardstick by which to measure their rejection, due to their sibling being successful with the same circumstances. We also note the lack of 'successful appeals' from MEND data available to us and the decrease in appeals from year to year; 0 out of 35 in 2018/19; 0 out of 23 in 2019/20; 0 out of 17 in 2020/21.

Making appeal processes accountable is significant for any organisation and there is a tendency to not speak up in institutional settings among people from disadvantaged backgrounds, even to correct a simple mistake spotted in an application process.<sup>67</sup> Currently, **there is a clearer and more proactive appeal process** explained on the 1916 BF website as the following:

*“An appeal can be made by unsuccessful applicants via the online appeals form only. The link to the online appeal form will be communicated to all unsuccessful applicants in the application outcome email.”<sup>68</sup>*

This **appeals process** starts with an email sent to all unsuccessful candidates with the necessary information and a link to the online appeals form. Applicants are advised that the only ground for an appeal is if there has been an administrative error in the assessment process. No new documentation is allowed. This process is mostly a recheck of the application to ensure it was carried out correctly. The staff who originally assessed the applicant does not do the recheck and there is an independent appeals group set up in each cluster to process appeals. All these changes allow the students to appeal if they see any mistake. This process should be clarified and **promoted proactively by the Access offices and the fund itself for the students to feel more comfortable during and after the application process.**

#### 4.1.5 WORK TO DESTIGMATISE THE 1916 BF-

“I kind of wanted to keep it to myself...maybe some others might not want anybody knowing”.

– Focus group participant



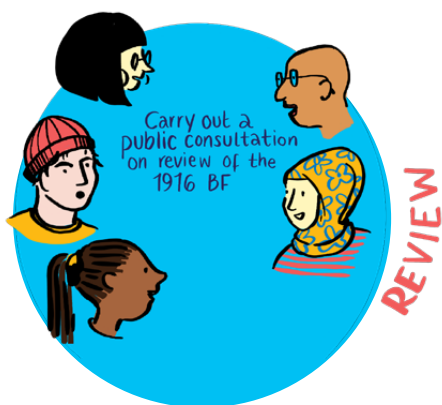
Participants expressed shame around accepting the 1916 BF and worried about ‘taking from others who might need it more’. We recommend that supports for priority group students be promoted and celebrated within the framework of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and sectoral commitment to the realisation of academic, personal and professional ambition.

67. Martin. , & Harrison. (2022), 813-841.

68. See the 1916 Bursary Fund official website, Frequently Asked Questions section for more information.

There is a **lot of shame** expressed by participants around accepting supports and this fund in particular. Many participants felt **too ashamed to ask for additional support** outside of the 1916 BF, and/or described a **sense of ‘taking from others who might need it more’**. To our minds, this suggests a need for a targeting of 1916 BF awardees for additional supports across HEIs in a manner that promotes and celebrates these supports within the EDI framework. Adopting a more **celebratory approach** to supports like the 1916 BF places more of a focus on diversity in terms of equality and emphasises the resourcefulness and strengths of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, rather than a deficit or ‘charity-model’ approach.<sup>69</sup>

#### 4.1.6 CARRY OUT A REVIEW OF THE 1916 BF TO INCLUDE PUBLIC CONSULTATION-



This evaluation and its limitations point to the value of a full and national review of the 1916 BF. A proper review of the 1916 BF, similar to the review carried out of SUSI,<sup>70</sup> we believe is necessary and would support embedding the 1916 BF as a permanent fixture of widening participation policy. This review would include conducting research on the current eligibility criteria and the potential impact to equity of access to HE of increasing bursary values and/or increasing the number of available bursaries.

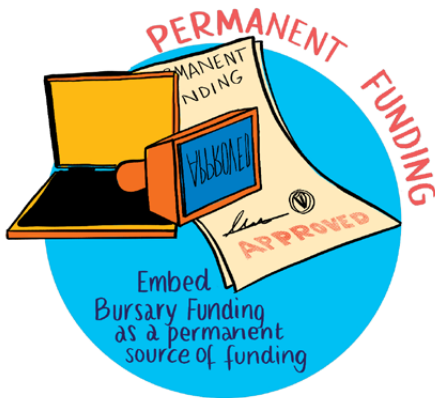
#### 4.1.7 EMBED THE 1916 BF AS A PERMANENT SOURCE OF FUNDING SUPPORT FOR LOW-INCOME PRIORITY GROUPS-

We (HEIs) do so much work promoting it, and, you know, talking to our community partners, and talking to schools and talking to, you know, and sending the information as wide and as far as possible, but you’re still really relying on the student to get connected to the exact right place to make an application”.

– Staff focus group participant

69. Smit, R. (2012), 369-380.

70. DFHERIS. (March 2021). Public Consultation on Review of SUSI.



The 1916 BF has been funded since 2018/19. As a targeted initiative aimed improving representation at HE level for groups experiencing multiple disadvantages, we recommend that the 1916 BF be embedded as a permanent fixture of access to higher education. Awareness of the fund is increasing, and our evaluation indicates that the 1916 BF is a key player in the retention of students from underrepresented communities at third-level and should be a permanent fixture of widening participation policy and be attributed ring-fenced funding.

## 4.2 CONCLUSION

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The recommendations put forward here, we believe have the potential, if actioned, to support a more robust Bursary Fund, that is a key player in supporting the access and retention of underrepresented priority groups at HE level in Ireland. While the request for an increase in the number of bursaries and the amount apportioned to each tier, indicates a need for increased financial support for diverse student populations, we believe that full and thorough evaluation and review of PATH programmes, may reveal opportunities, such as reportioning of budgets.

The following chapter is the final and concluding chapter of this evaluation that reflects on the evaluation findings along with researcher observations.



# **‘MIND THE GAP’ - DISCUSSION**



“

It (not having the BF) would have severely impacted my studies as the stress of trying to support myself without burdening my low-income family was huge and I worried about how I would get to college sometimes.”

– Survey respondent

## 5.1 INTRODUCTION



Economic hardship remains the most significant barrier in terms of access to higher education for students who experience both socioeconomic and other multiple challenges.<sup>71</sup> This evaluation indicates that even post-entry, financial challenges continue to manifest in every area of life for these students, ranging from accommodation to healthcare, and from food insecurity, to inability to access childcare, not to mention the hidden costs of education such as loss of earnings. While HE is ‘a site of struggle’ for students from diverse backgrounds for various reasons,<sup>72</sup> grants and bursaries such as the 1916 BF are a temporary but significant financial support to starting, continuing and completing their higher education journey. Financial supports such as, SUSI, SAF and the 1916 Bursary Fund, that specifically target groups underrepresented

in higher education who experience socioeconomic disadvantage, have a positive academic, psychological and social impact on the daily lives of students, as well as helping to meet the collective public mission of universities in terms of student diversity.<sup>73</sup> However, currently, these supports are not coming close to meeting the need when considered in relation to the real and hidden costs of higher education in Ireland.

71. SOAR Report. (May 2021).

72. Powell et al. (2020).

73. RIA. (2021), Equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

## 5.2 MIND THE GAP



The direct and hidden costs of higher education are felt far more acutely by college students or aspiring college students than ever before. This is particularly true for students, such as those targeted by the 1916 Bursary Fund, who are navigating multiple disadvantages, while depending on a precarious mesh of supports. In September 2023, SUSI thresholds will be increased, and the Student Contribution is being incrementally reduced, as the government scrambles to address the rising cost of living and rising cost of attending university.<sup>74</sup>

Renaming ‘university fees’ as ‘Student Contributions’ has not changed the actual monetary cost of higher education for many students, a point that has been raised by the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) through the ‘cost of college campaign.’<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the concept that one needs to ‘contribute’ to attend higher education is another facet of the neoliberal turn in higher education whereby a consumerist-student commodity is created that as with any commodity, requires ‘contribution’ to its cost.<sup>76</sup> This, the former president of USI, John Logue, argues, has resulted in “...a two-tiered education system, through the increase of fees and slashing of the grant, that has resulted in students from lower socio-economic class being pushed out of our third-level institutions.”<sup>77</sup>

The debates surrounding the downward trend with SUSI and the cost of the ‘Student Contribution’ do not happen in a vacuum.. A recent survey carried out by ‘discount’ supermarket chain Aldi, reported that 77 % of the Irish population is worried about the cost of living and half of the population has reduced their purchase of fruits and vegetables due to increases in prices.<sup>78</sup> Another survey by Behaviour & Attitudes published in September 2022 found that ‘four in five people say they have less money in their pockets compared to this time a year ago’.<sup>79</sup> Meanwhile, people are struggling to understand how their electricity bills have doubled, tripled or quadrupled due to the war in Ukraine and a world energy crisis.<sup>80</sup>



74. Noonan. (Sep 2022). *University Times*.

75. USI. Cost of College Campaign Website.

76. Breathnach. (2014), 1-18.

77. Donnelly. (Mar 2013), *Irish Independent*.

78. Kent. (Jan 2023). *Irish Examiner*.

79. Hutton. (Sep 2022). *The Irish Times*.

80. Hutton. (Sep 2022). *The Irish Times*.



The most impacted age group affected by these crises and who declare that they cannot make ends meet are between 25 and 49,<sup>81</sup> with parents and guardians struggling the most.<sup>82</sup> While the issues highlighted here affect the purchasing power and quality of life for everyone in society, they especially impact groups already experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and discrimination.<sup>83</sup>

The ongoing accommodation crisis in Ireland, that student union representatives have described as an ‘emergency,’ rendering some students on the verge of being homeless and others facing seven-hour daily commutes,<sup>84</sup> is impacting the cost of higher education at an unprecedented level.<sup>85</sup> According to the Zurich Insurance Cost of Education Survey 2022, the estimated annual cost of education for a college student in student accommodation or in rented accommodation is over 15,000 euros, with this decreasing to an estimated 7,600 euros for those who live with parents and are without rent payments.<sup>86</sup> The financialisation of student accommodation in universities has had direct and negative impact on students’ accommodation costs,<sup>87</sup> with a developer-led model to student accommodation that has been in operation solely to increase profits.<sup>88</sup> The situation is such that again, the government has been forced to step in with approval now secured to invest taxpayer money into student accommodation,<sup>89</sup> and at the time of writing this report, DCU has secured an investment of €40 million to support the delivery of 405 student beds for its students.<sup>90</sup>

The higher costs of a university tuition relative to family income and student debt, coupled with a generation facing the prospect of a lower standard of living than its parents, means that the value of a grant or bursary to meet the cost of university decreases accordingly.

## 5.3 FINAL REFLECTIONS

The 1916 Bursary Fund, first announced by the Minister for Education and Skills in December 2017,<sup>91</sup> has almost finished its fifth year of applications in 21 different colleges across the country.<sup>92</sup> This report presents a snapshot of the lived experiences of the 1916 Bursary Fund awardees from MEND HEIs across a four-year period.

81. *Ibid.*

82. *Ibid.*

83. Power et al. (2013).

84. White et. al. (Sep 2022). *Irish Examiner*.

85. Donnelly. (Aug 2021). *Irish Independent*.

86. Zurich Insurance plc, Ireland. (2022).

87. Reynolds. (2021), 1-21.

88. White et. al. (Sep 2022). *Irish Examiner*.

89. O’Brien. (Mar 2023). *The Irish Times*.

90. DFHERIS. (Mar 2023). Press Release.

91. HEA. 1916 Bursary Fund.

92. 1916 Bursary Fund. Participating colleges.

Their experience confirms what we have known for decades in terms of economic disadvantage being the most significant barrier facing diverse student populations in terms of access and retention in HE,<sup>93</sup> which became even more significant in the wake of the ‘Great Recession’.<sup>94</sup> The impact of the current rising costs crisis in the wake of Covid-19 and the Ukraine war, has yet to be seen. The findings of our research also indicate, however, that the 1916 Bursary Fund has thus far assisted in overcoming some of these financial challenges, while also motivating students to continue their education, to succeed academically, to fit into the HE setting, simultaneously reducing stress and anxiety levels thereby increasing mental health capacity.



Students from priority groups thus far underrepresented in higher education, bring with them a unique approach that forces us to examine our systems and structures more closely. Their presence not only makes the higher education scene more representative of our population, but also serves to enrich the higher education experience for all.<sup>95</sup> Priority group students make visible the systemic failures in access to higher education in a manner, that serves to develop a more critical consciousness of the HE setting,<sup>96</sup> thereby having the potential to improve the HE

experience for everyone through diversifying resources. This positive strengths-based approach<sup>97</sup> to widening participation and awareness of the resourcefulness of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, is only possible when HEIs and all stakeholders move beyond viewing diversity as a matter of representation in the HE setting, and instead consider equality alongside diversity and listen carefully to the voices and experience of students from diverse backgrounds.



93. For further information, See McCoy, & Byrne. (2011),141-157; O’Connell et al. (2006), 312-332.

94. Powell et al. (2020)

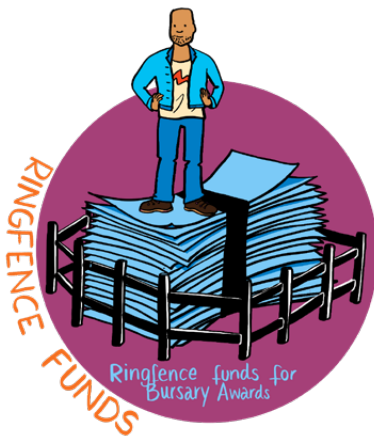
95. Yosso (2005), 69-91.

96. Cadenas. (2017).

97. Krutkowski. (2017), 227-241.



The 1916 Bursary Fund is not a ‘fix-all’ when it comes to access to higher education for priority group students, just as there is no consensus that higher education access on its own leads to social mobility for excluded social groups.<sup>98</sup> However, this evaluation supports the notion that bursary schemes are a significant resource to overcoming barriers in relation to access to HE for diverse populations, especially for low-income students.<sup>99</sup>



The first recommendation in this study advocates for an increase in both the number and the value of 1916 Bursaries, and the final recommends embedding 1916 BF as a permanent source of funding support. The number of applications to the scheme in the MEND Cluster emphasise the demand, while the issues discussed in this chapter and throughout the report, highlight the likelihood that this demand is only going to increase. As we reflect on some of the ‘real and hidden costs’ of higher education in the current economic climate, and the value of the 1916 BF, we believe we make a case for both ring-fencing and increasing the Fund, to ensure that we continue to ‘mind the gap’ between those who get to go to college versus those who don’t.

98. Averill. (2021)

99. Hatt et al. (2005), 373-388.

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## APPENDICES - PARTICIPANT SURVEY

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### 1. Consent

Please tick the box below to give consent to participate in the survey. Please note that you can only proceed with the survey if you give your consent. This research is being carried out by an independent consultant. All information you provide is anonymous, will be treated confidentially, and will not affect your 1916 award or relationship with your college.

By consenting to voluntarily participate in this survey I understand that all my answers will be recorded anonymously and will not affect my 1916 Bursary award or my relationship with the college I attend:

Yes

### 2. Please tick the appropriate box

Please tick the box below to give consent to participate in the survey. Please note that you can only proceed with the survey if you give your consent. This research is being carried out by an independent consultant. All information you provide is anonymous, will be treated confidentially, and will not affect your 1916 award or relationship with your college.

By consenting to voluntarily participate in this survey I understand that all my answers will be recorded anonymously and will not affect my 1916 Bursary award or my relationship with the college I attend:

Female

Male

Other

**3. Can you confirm that the 1916 Bursary fund was available for you to attend one of the following colleges? Please note that this information will not be used to identify you.**

AIT (Now TUS)

DCU

DkIT

MU

**4. Please can you let us know the year you were initially awarded the 1916 Bursary fund?**

2018-2019

2019-2020

2020-2021

2021-2022

**5. Was the 1916 Bursary Fund given to you to continue your studies as a masters/postgraduate student?**

No

Yes

**6. Can you tell us what positive impact (if any) the 1916 Bursary Fund has had for you in the following areas?**

- Being able to attend/remain in college.
- Being able to focus more on study.
- Being able to socialise more/ participate more in college life/ improved sense of belonging.
- Less financial stress.
- Being able to afford things that supported you to focus more on your studies, e.g. Childcare/Internet/Travel/Food/Accommodation etc.
- Other (please specify).

**7. Can you provide further detail on the positive or negative impact (if any) of the 1916 Bursary Fund?**

**8. If you had not been awarded the 1916 Bursary Fund, how do you think this would have impacted your college journey?**

## 9. How did you find out about the 1916 Bursary Fund?

- School/ FET Counsellor
- Community organisation
- College website/ college social media
- Support worker in your college
- Email/ flyer from your college
- Word of mouth
- Other (Please specify)

We would like to find out how you experienced the application process for the 1916 Bursary Fund. We have broken this down into four stages which include: 1) Understanding the eligibility criteria and application process for the fund; 2) Completing the application form; 3) Gathering the relevant evidence and documents; 4) Submitting and uploading the relevant documents.

## 10. Did you find understanding the eligibility criteria and application process for the 1916 Bursary Fund:

- Very easy
- Easy
- Neither easy or difficult
- Difficult
- Very difficult



**11. Did you find completing the application form for the 1916 Bursary Fund:**

- Very easy
- Easy
- Neither easy or difficult
- Difficult
- Very difficult

**12. Did you find gathering the relevant evidence and documents for the 1916 Bursary Fund application:**

- Very easy
- Easy
- Neither easy or difficult
- Difficult
- Very difficult

**13. Did you find submitting and uploading the relevant documents for the 1916 Bursary Fund application:**

- Very easy
- Easy
- Neither easy or difficult
- Difficult
- Very difficult

**14. Please tell us more about your application process experience.**

**15. Did you need help with the application process?**

Yes

No

Other (please specify)

**16. If you answered yes above, did you get this help? And from whom?**

**17. Could you tell us how you experienced the support you have received (if any) from staff in your university in connection with the 1916 Bursary Fund?**

- Excellent
- Very Good
- Good
- OK
- Not very good
- Not good at all

**18. Do you have anything you would like to add regarding support from university staff in connection with the 1916 Bursary Fund?**

**18. Do you have anything you would like to add regarding support from university staff in connection with the 1916 Bursary Fund?**

**19. Were you connected in with other supports in the university as a result of being awarded the 1916 Bursary Fund? If yes, please provide details in the box below.**

**20. Is there anything you would you like to see change about the 1916 Bursary Fund, including the application process, that you think would improve it?**

**21. Is there anything else you would like to add that we have not asked?**

**22. Thank you so much for participating in this survey which will help us to carry out this evaluation and to assess the impact of the 1916 Bursary Fund.**

**Please provide your email address if you would like to be entered into the draw for a €100 one-for-all voucher.**

**23. Would you be interested in taking part in a focus-group with other 1916 Bursary Fund awardees to further discuss your experience of the 1916 Bursary Fund? This would be a confidential space facilitated by an external researcher. You will receive a €50 gift voucher to thank you for your time and participation in the focus group.**

Yes, I would be interested

No thank you, I would not be interested

**24. If yes, please make provide your email address. Unfortunately, we can only facilitate 3 participants from each college, but we will send you an email to let you know if we can invite you to take part.**

**We really appreciate your taking the time to participate.**

















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