



Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Roundtable Discussion on the Future Funding of Higher Education

Chairperson and members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI), I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee in respect of discussion on the future funding of higher education.

For many years there has been a growing imperative to expand our psychological workforce and this imperative has escalated because of the psychological impact that COVID-19 has had, especially on our young people. We know that as a direct result of the pandemic demand for mental health support has significantly increased and is likely to continue to.

Successive Health Service Executive (HSE) and Government reports have identified that there is a significant shortfall in the number of psychologists being trained in third level to meet demand. A 2021 HSE report estimated an additional 321 psychologists were required in mental health services alone to meet demand. This does not take into account demand in other areas such as education and higher education.

What we have failed to address thus far, despite repeated direct advocacy to Government, is how we plan for increasing the number of training places and associated funding to the three professional training programmes to meet current and future demands.

If significant funding was to be allocated in Budget 2022 for further higher education training places, then at best an increased cohort of trainees could begin in September 2023 and that cohort would qualify in late 2026. Each year of delay to additional funding being allocated to third level psychology training programmes will add another three years to when they will qualify and enter the workforce.

In 2021, there were 66 funded HSE clinical psychology training places in universities, and in addition, the counselling psychology training programme has an intake of approximately 14, with approximately 20-22 on the educational psychology programmes. This is not enough to meet current or future demand.

A petition of over 2,400 signatories joined the PSI's continued calls for the disparity in funding for psychology trainees to be addressed by Government. Currently, trainee clinical psychologists have 60% of their fees paid and receive a student salary, while counselling and educational trainee psychologists pay fees of approximately €14,000 per year and complete three years of unpaid work throughout the duration of their studies and training in university.

The PSI has highlighted to Government for the past three years, in pre-budget submissions and direct correspondence to Government ministers and the Taoiseach, that one of the greatest barriers to getting qualified psychologists into the workforce is the inequity of counselling and educational trainees having to self-fund for the full period of their doctoral training as well as pay €14,000 per year in university fees. This results in many not being able to afford to enter the profession, or only a select few who can afford to self-fund, which risks the psychological workforce not being representative of the full socio-economic spectrum of the community they represent and support. We have advocated with Minister Simon Harris to work with the PSI to find ways to alleviate the burden of fees on trainee psychologists.

Thus far the PSI has been met with deafening silence from Government in relation to additional funding. I would ask the Committee how the PSI should understand that, on one hand, we hear regular statements in the media and from the Dáil about the need to support the mental health needs of our population; however, on the other hand, how the PSI has had no engagement whatsoever from Government about increasing the numbers of professionally trained psychology places in third level?

The PSI wishes to highlight the unjustified inequity of the current operationalisation of the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme which is a third level alternative admissions process for whom the aim is to reduce barriers to accessing education, but in the area of mental health, in fact does the opposite.

The DARE scheme is administered by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) for school leavers whose mental health difficulties have had a negative impact on their second level education and it

offers reduced points for applying to third-level education. The current DARE criteria for entry via the mental health condition route specifies that the only professional eligible to verify a mental health difficulty is a consultant psychiatrist. The PSI is of the view that this is an unnecessarily restrictive practice and that there is a need for a change in this specification. The PSI would argue that there is no justification for the exclusion of highly qualified chartered psychologists from verifying the impact of mental health on young people's education. Extensive training in the assessment and treatment of mental health conditions forms a core part of professional training programmes in psychology and, therefore, is a skillset and competency which is common to both psychology and psychiatry. A young person may have attended an appropriately qualified psychologist for assessment and/or support for their mental health condition. With the current process, the young person will be forced to also attend with a psychiatrist that they are unfamiliar with and incur additional costs to the family. This creates a situation of inequity of access for the young person/family. The position of the IUA, in the view of the PSI, represents an excessively narrow and medicalised view of mental health.

The above position is not consistent with the core value of equity in the government's Sharing the Vision policy, which outlines that equity is 'Access to services characterised by inclusiveness, fairness and non-discrimination'.

The PSI is calling on the Oireachtas for support in petitioning the Irish Universities Association and Government to urgently commit to a review and to reform the restrictive practices currently in operation regarding the validation of the impact of mental health conditions on young people and to remove this unnecessary barrier to accessing third level.

Thank you.

Representing the Psychological Society of Ireland at the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science meeting for a Roundtable Discussion on the Future Funding of Higher Education is **Mr Mark Smyth, PSI Past President (2020)**

Meeting details: Tuesday 05 April 2022 at 11.00 am, in Committee Room 2, LH2000, Leinster House