

# The 1916 Bursary: A Fund for Students Underrepresented in Higher Education

## Introduction

The 1916 Bursary is a financial award that aims to encourage the participation and success of students from sections of society that are significantly underrepresented in higher education, including the most socio-economically disadvantaged. It is part of the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) in the fourth National Access Plan (HEA, 2022). The bursary was launched in 2017 to commemorate the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising. It is co-funded by the Irish government and the EU through the Department of Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS).

From 2017 to 2023, the 1916 Bursary was operated by six regional clusters of higher education institutions (HEIs), where applications were assessed in six separately run schemes. In 2023, the City of Dublin Education and Training Board (ETB), having been asked by all the participating HEIs, agreed to provide administrative support so that the bursary could be run centrally in a single application and assessment facility.

## Bursary tiers

In 2023, DFHERIS secured additional funding from the European Social Fund so that the number of tier 1 bursaries could be increased from 250 to 400. The tiers are currently as follows. Tier 1: €5,000 a year, awarded to 400 new entrants in 2023/24. Tier 2: €2,000 a year, awarded to 200 new entrants in 2023/24. Tier 3: a once-off bursary of €1,500, awarded to over 800 students for 2023/24 only.

Tier 1 and 2 bursaries are also paid to students progressing into postgraduate study. This means that students already receiving a 1916 Bursary and who are



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**The 1916 Bursary is a financial award to encourage the participation and success of students from sections of society that are underrepresented in higher education, including the most socio-economically disadvantaged. It gives up to 400 students annually a €5,000 award for each year of their course. This article describes the bursary's structure and scope.**

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completing their undergraduate studies can continue to receive it for postgraduate study.

## Eligibility

To be eligible for a 1916 Bursary, applicants must meet financial, priority-group, and college entry eligibility criteria. Each participating college has a limited number of bursaries, which are awarded to the eligible applicants that present the greatest need.

The 1916 Bursary is open to students entering year 1 of an undergraduate programme, full-time or part-time, with a household reckonable income equivalent to the Student Grant Scheme (SUSI) special rate of grant for the year before their course begins. For 2024/25, the applicable financial year is 2023, and the SUSI special rate had three thresholds based on how many dependent children are in the household: fewer than 4: €26,200; 4–7: €28,715; 8 or more: €31,128. The income threshold increased by €4,950 per additional person in college.

Students who are directly entering year 2 of a programme can also apply, as can part-time students, second-chance mature students, and students on tertiary education programmes co-designed and delivered by an ETB and a HEI.

Eligible 1916 Bursary applicants must be from one or more of the following priority groups:

- » Students from communities, groups, or areas that are socio-economically disadvantaged or have low levels of participation in higher education, including those who have experienced homelessness, the care system, or the criminal justice system, or who are survivors of domestic violence.
- » Students who qualify for the special rate of maintenance grant under SUSI or are receiving a Department of Social Protection (DSP) payment.
- » Socio-economically disadvantaged mature students who were 23 years or older on 1 January of their year of entry to higher education, and never previously accessed higher education.
- » Second-chance socio-economically disadvantaged mature students. Such students may be considered for a bursary where they have previously attended but not completed a course, had a three-year break in studies since leaving the course, and are returning to attend an approved course.
- » Students with a disability.
- » Members of the Irish Traveller community.
- » Members of the Roma community.

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- » Further education and training award holders progressing to higher education.
- » Students who are carers, confirmed by the DSP as holding a long-term means-tested carer's allowance.
- » Lone parents or teen parents, confirmed by the DSP as holding a long-term means-tested social welfare payment. At least 20% of tier 1 bursaries will be targeted at lone parents.
- » Students who are migrants or refugees or from ethnic minorities who are lawfully present in the State.

To be eligible for a 1916 Bursary, applicants must be a new entrant pursuing an undergraduate course and progressing to higher education for the first time or by advanced entry to year 2; they must have been a resident in the Irish State for three of the past five years; and they must be studying an approved full-time or part-time undergraduate course.

Applicants for a 1916 Bursary must apply online and are advised to read the guidelines first. An application, once started, can be reopened anytime and edited up until submission or the closing date. Only one completed and submitted application per applicant will be assessed for a 1916 Bursary. For more information, visit: <https://1916bursary.ie/>.

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# New Initiatives in Third-Level Student Retention

## The Social Science Retention Project at Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest

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A new initiative is under way at Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest to reduce student attrition rates, which are recognised as a problem both in Ireland and internationally. This article describes the Second Shot project, shows the data behind its early positive impact, and outlines the next steps.

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### Context

Student attrition in higher education institutions has been recognised as a problem both in Ireland (HEA, 2018) and globally (OECD, 2019). High dropout rates are detrimental for economies, societies, and the institutions (Tinto, 1993). For the student dropping out, it is at best a missed opportunity (Johnson, 2012). Retention rates differ substantially in different regions, although direct international comparisons are complicated by methodological approaches.

In October 2021, Athlone and Limerick Institutes of Technology merged into the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS): Midlands Midwest. The university has approximately 14,000 students across seven campuses: three in Limerick City, one each in Athlone, Clonmel, Ennis, and Thurles. The Athlone campus is known as TUS Midlands. Seeking to improve student retention, TUS approved a new *Transitions and Student Success Strategy* in 2023.

### TUS Second Shot

The strategy identified a requirement for TUS to focus on improving student performance in the autumn repeat examinations. A new multi-annual project, TUS Second

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Shot, was launched in April 2023 aimed at reducing attrition rates by improving participation and success levels in these exams.

The project adopts 'dual-level engagement'. The entire student body is offered support from university central functions, such as a series of motivational text messages transmitted during the summer to all students who failed exams. Localised targeted interventions are offered to students in the relevant faculty or department, such as specific tutorials and advisories on approaching repeat assignments. An evidence-based approach was adopted to offer help to students as problems arose. The Second Shot project is supported by a specially designed computer program offering swift access to information on student exam marks.

It is hoped the project will achieve significant results over time. Results in 2023 were encouraging: TUS registered a 2.5% increase in student participation in autumn exams and a 0.7% increase in pass rates. Crucially, TUS has gone from having 14.8% of registered students (excluding trade apprentices) without full credits after the autumn exams in 2022 to 14% in 2023. The gain of 124 students was primarily driven by improved performance in both summer and autumn exams.

### Student Retention Project

The Department of Social Sciences resides in the larger Faculty of Science and Health in TUS Midlands and currently has 540 students enrolled, including 135 first-years. Many factors influenced a 5% increase in its attrition rate in 2021. The introduction of failed elements as part of the new CORU regulations in 2022 made it more challenging for students to pass.

External factors also affected performance. The accommodation crisis has increased the cost of rooms in Athlone and greatly reduced their availability. Many students must now commute long distances to lectures, which affects their assessment and exam results. Recent inflationary trends and the cost-of-living crisis have forced many to take up part-time or full-time employment, which can decrease their attendance and available study time.

Programme staff report numerous first-year students who are finding the transition to third-level education challenging, as they enter with low self-esteem (Mendes et al., 2021). Experience shows that intervention early in the academic year substantially increases the likelihood of students successfully completing the year (Ross, 2023).

Departmental results from the first iteration of TUS Second Shot were very encouraging, with repeating students' success rates improving by 11.2%. The department convened retention workshops in October 2023 to build on this,

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and initiated a Social Science Retention Project in February 2024 seeking to improve student experience and reduce attrition.

## Strategy

Because timely intervention by academic staff really matters to students (Meehan & Howells, 2018), the project appointed six student retention lecturers. Their responsibilities include communicating regularly with students, identifying appropriate supports, providing targeted tutorials, and proactively organising retention events to increase students' level of belonging and wellbeing.

This project is supported by two communities of purpose. The student retention lecturers meet regularly to discuss possible courses of action and measures they consider effective. A wider departmental retention group, comprising these lecturers, the programme coordinators, and the faculty administrator, also meets to determine the targeted measures to be prioritised.

Early stages of the project prioritised offering support to students in the context of TUS Second Shot. Student retention lecturers met students and encouraged them to engage with the numerous supports that TUS offers.

## Conclusion

Measuring progress was considered important from the outset of the Social Science Retention Project. Its efficacy is measured using the non-progression rate, autumn repeat exam participation rate, and autumn repeat exam success rate. Impact from the early stages has been positive, especially for autumn repeats. Student performance improved by a further 1.5% in 2024 – a 12.7% improvement in two years.

The retention project is in its infancy. Each year offers a new opportunity to improve it and potentially benefit more students. It may take time to improve processes and procedures to the optimal benefit of students. The 2024/25 iteration aims to see staff adopt positive measures to increase students' sense of belonging.

To disseminate the project actions, a series of reports and papers will be issued to examine the role that lecturers and administrators can play in supporting retention initiatives. This will inform the wider institutional retention efforts before the next iteration of the *TUS Transitions and Student Success Strategy*.

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