

Third National Access Plan Forum Report

14th March 2019 – Clock Tower, Marlborough Street

1. Context for National Forum

The third *National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015 – 2019)* was launched in December 2015. The vision of the National Access Plan is to ensure that the student body entering into, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population.

The Plan identifies the target groups that are currently being under-represented in Higher Education, which includes entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education, Irish Travellers, Students with disabilities, First time, mature student entrants, Part-time/flexible learners and further education award holders.

One of the commitment of the National Access Plan (NAP) is to hold annual forums to report progress to stakeholders on progress made under NAP and to inform future prioritisation of actions for the next phase of implementation. This is the third NAP forum.

2. Representation at the Forum

The previous two forums in 2017 and 2018 were held in the month of January. The forum for 2019 was moved to March as it was felt it was too soon after the first PATH seminar which was just held the previous November, the delay would give more time to consider the agenda and plan for a productive day. Consideration was also given to those who attended the PATH seminar as they would be on the invite list for the annual forum.

The attendance numbers were well in excess of 100 which far exceed the attendance numbers at the previous forum held in January 2018.

The Forum audience included a range of HEI officials, civil and public servants from relevant Departments and agencies, Stakeholders representative groups, school principals and students in higher education.

3. Format of the Forum

The third annual forum was built around two moderated sessions where the audience heard from, and posed questions to, a range of speakers and panelists representing different perspectives on access to higher education.

Session one focused on building partnerships and breaking down barriers. It was built around a keynote address and an open session involving a panel of experts' representative of

- Students who are recipients of bursaries
- Former Principal of a DEIS Post Primary School
- A business and employer representative
- A representative from one of the stakeholder representative organisation

The keynote speaker was Dr Rachel Carr OBE, Chief Executive and Co-Founder of IntoUniversity, was the Keynote speaker and the panel contributors were

Professor Eithne Guilfoyle was moderator for the discussion in this session. Professor Guilfoyle is Registrar and the Vice-President of Academic Affairs at DCU.

Session two reflected on progress and challenges during 2018 and looked to priorities for 2019. Dalton Tattan was moderator for the discussion in this session.

There were presentations from the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Education and Skills and the panel contributors from relevant units with the Department and its agencies.

4. Welcoming address

The forum was opened by Dalton Tatton, Assistant Secretary of the Department of Education and Skills. Dalton thanked everyone for coming and said that the Department and the HEA were overwhelmed by the response of stakeholders to participate in the forum as it far exceeded expectations in planning for the event.

Dalton passed on the apologies of Minister Mary Mitchell O'Connor who could not make the event due to other work commitments. Minister Mitchell O'Connor asked that he convey her sincere thanks and congratulations to all for their endeavours and to wish all continued success in progressing the path towards greater equity and inclusion.

He went on to speak about the value and objective of the Forum being to help plan for future interventions across not just the higher education system but right across the wider education community and indeed right across Government so that equity of access will not just be a long-term aim, but an expectation.

The Forum provides a valuable opportunity to meet each other and deepen the understanding of different perspectives of the opportunities and barriers that exist in the equity of access to higher education space.

5. Session 1 – Building partnership and breaking down barriers

Professor Eithne Guilfoyle Registrar and the Vice-President of Academic Affairs at DCU Was the moderator for this session. The keynote speaker for this session was introduced by Professor Guilfoyle.

Dr Rachel Carr OBE is the Chief Executive and co-founder of IntoUniversity. She has 20 years' experience working directly with children and young people. Her idea for the IntoUniversity programme was backed by the Sutton Trust in 2002 and she spent four years on the ground creating and delivering the programme to children and young people in North Kensington. In 2007 she became the CEO of the newly formed charity which was set up to scale the North Kensington project nationally. Since then Rachel has led on the expansion of the charity from one IntoUniversity centre serving 850 students a year to its current 30 centres and extension projects supporting over 30,000 students each year to reach their potential.

Professor Guilfoyle introduced each of the panel contributors by giving a brief biographical introduction on each.

The Panel Contributors were:

- **Derek Byrnes**, a 1st Year Student on the BA Honours in Social Care Work at Limerick Institute of Technology. Derek is a 1916 Bursary Recipient (2017-2018)
- **Anne Marie Quilligan**, a 3rd year student in Limerick Institute of Technology studying for a BA Honours in Social Care Work. Anne Marie is a Leaders @ LIT Scholarship Recipient.
- **Mary Daly**, a former Principal in a DEIS school in Dublin
- **Tony Donohoe**, Head of Education and Social Policy, Ibec
- **Anastasia Crickley**, Chairperson of Pavee Point and Vice President International Association for Community Development

Professor Guilfoyle then introduced Dr Rachel Carr to give her presentation on the IntoUniversity Access Model.

Dr Carr's presentation focused on what the IntoUniversity's programme does and covered items such as what their mission is, the number of students provided for and the age range, progress of the students and how the programme can increase young people's chances of attending university and tackling key issues such as attainment, decision making, perceptions of risk and family and peer networks. The programme works closely with schools, universities and businesses and hopes to expand to other countries in the coming year.

Professor Guilfoyle thanked Dr Carr for her presentation and proceeded to put questions to the panel contributors.

Derek Byrnes and Anne Marie Quilligan were asked what their overall experience of higher education is.

Their responses were very positive, both outlining how much help, support and encouragement they receive from their college and how only for the bursary they would not have been in a position to go to higher education. Receiving the bursary takes monumental pressure off them.

Mary Daly's opinion was sought on what should be done in terms of supports for students in DEIS schools. She responded by saying there is a need for pre-schools / primary schools and post primary schools to be working together. Extra support is needed for earlier intervention. It is also important to change the mind-set of the students. Raising awareness and expectations and having proper teacher training for DEIS schools is essential.

The question put to **Tony Donohoe**, Ibec - What is the role of businesses in helping students to obtain a career after higher education?

He responded that social fabric is how businesses work. Diversity is good for business brings different talents and influences as a group. He spoke of encouraging integration and career services 500+ businesses in Ireland that employ more than 250 staff.

Anastasia Crickley, Pavee Point, gave her views on why the system has found it difficult to impact on Travellers. Her response was mainly on the issues of targeted resources, engagement with Travellers, acknowledging what has gone wrong and the need to have ambitious targets for PATH which are agreed with Traveller representatives.

After the Panel discussions Professor Guilfoyle took comments from the floor. She thanked the speakers and panel contributors for their participation and closed the first session.

6. Session 2 – Progress to date and challenges for 2019

Dalton Tattan was moderator for the discussion in this session and he introduced the presenters and panel contributors.

Caitríona Ryan, Head of Access Policy in the HEA, presented on the review of progress to date on the National Access Plan, how we are doing on achieving the targets set in the National Access Plan and where the gaps remain. She also gave an overview on the following key deliverables, PATH – Strands 1, 2 and 3, Access Data Plan, Fund for Students with Disabilities, Student Success.

Richard Dolan, Head of Higher Education Equity of Access Unit in the Department of Education and Skills presented on what the key priorities are for 2019, those being mainly PATH Strands 1, 2 and 3, Travellers, Lone Parents, SAF / FSD, Mature Students, Data Plan.

Dalton introduced the panel contributors and asked for their observations.

Dr Mary Cregg is Principal Officer of the Social Inclusion Unit in the Department of Education and Skills. The Social Inclusion Unit is responsible for developing and promoting a co-ordinated Departmental response to tackling educational disadvantage from pre-school through to second-level education (3 to 18 years).

Mary spoke about the DEIS plan for primary and post primary level. There is a lot of work to do – if the students do not come through the primary and post-primary system they are then coming into the system as a mature student. Evidence shows even though there is improvement in DEIS schools, however gaps still remain. The role of the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) coordinator in the school is important. She mentioned the School Excellence fund and the opportunities for schools to avail of funding.

Phil O’Flaherty is the Head of the Further Education and Training Section in the Department of Education and Skills. This business unit is responsible for setting the policy and funding framework for the further education and training sector and works in close co-operation with SOLAS and the 16 Education and Training Boards.

Phil spoke on why it is important that people come through FE and how it works. The FET work with community partners and how that reach is there. It is mainly the over 25s who engage in FE programmes. Few people who are in college are in employment – SOLAS have a programme that is funded from the National Training Fund. Outside of this there is a whole range of activities going on which creates real opportunity for people with success stories.

Andrew Brownlee is Executive Director for Strategy and Knowledge with SOLAS and is responsible for setting strategy, allocating funding, monitoring performance and promoting active inclusion across the further education and training system.

Andrew spoke about the FE – HE transitions sub-group, the different levels of progression through the ETB and HEIs and how FET prepares students well. There is a need for SOLAS / HEA / DES to look at performance and the strategic performance in place for ETBs. Trainee or apprenticeship options should be open to students who are not ready to progress to higher education immediately.

Dr Mary Nugent is a Regional Director with the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). She has a particular interest in raising reading standards and has completed research and published a number of studies about effective interventions for struggling readers, including a paper on supporting Traveller children to develop literacy skills. Mary is the chair of the NEPS Literacy and Numeracy Working Group.

Mary spoke about how inspired she was by our guest speakers. She mentioned how there is a Literacy programme specifically for Travellers to help them read and write. She was delighted to see so many Traveller students in attendance. The struggles with mental health is a huge concern for NEPS and they see a lot of anxiety issues among Leaving Certificate

students. Mary hopes to see more of our new Irish people with us when the Forum meets again next year e.g. more refugees, etc.

Dalton thanked the presenters and panel contributors for their participation.

7. Group discussion

The forum was then broken up into groups who were asked to discuss and give opinions on three questions on the theme of the forum.

“Building partnerships and breaking down barriers and Review of 2018 and Priorities for 2019”

What is working?

What is not working?

What are we not doing that we should be doing?

The answers are summarised in Appendix 1 below.

8. Feedback forms

All attendees were asked to complete a feedback form by answering three questions. A total of 10 Feedback forms were returned.

APPENDIX 1 - Questions for Group Discussion

Q1 – What is working?

- More conversations across sectors
- More diverse voices are being heard generating expectations
- DEIS and alternative pathways to HE
 - Access programmes where access officers link up with schools
 - Access offices linking with the Community
 - Range of opportunities in Special Education
 - More Further Education opportunities through SOLAS
 - Development and modelling of Partnerships with Business in School
- Enhanced inclusion of students with Special Education Needs – changing expectations for all groups.
- Schools are more welcoming and this is a positive impact in terms of diversity
- Development of wellbeing policies – help with the understanding of different diversities
- Having dedicated access professional staff;
- Increased awareness and partnership;
- The passionate staff who believe in the future of all people;
- Peer mentoring;
- Access leaders;
- The funding and supports that are available to the target groups
- Change in approach – supporting community engagement
- New focus on community engagement at national level.
- Targets set for the duration of the NAP.
- Access courses

Q2 – What isn't working?

- Un-equal distribution of power – reasonable funding for supporting under-represented students in HE particularly for mature students.
- PATH is a relatively small fund with a significant administrative burden on over worked Access Units.
- Engagement and retention of adult learners due to issues; lack of access, cost, lack of agile and flexible delivery, i.e. recognition of the complexity of adult lives. The greater the socio-economic difficulties, the greater these factors impact, e.g. lone parents.
- Educational disadvantage is intergenerational, therefore an integrated systemic community-based emphasis is necessary.
- Post-primary schools completion for vulnerable and marginal groups.
- Curriculum in schools needs to include Traveller culture and other groups

- Clearer information on pathways between FET & HE - links with primary schools – early intervention – targeted approach
- Mental health, autism, deaf student drop-out rates - need for better data and better supports
- Stage agencies not linked up – Department of Social Protection gives different message to access offices.
- Infrastructure in HEIs - needs to be more student centred – more engaged - not enough emphasis on mainstreaming - More reward / value for Access staff - Lack of progress in implementation of inclusive teaching and learning - Diversity across institutional leadership
- Lack of engagement with the community - Businesses not being mandated to invest meaningfully in communities
- Lack of childcare facilities - Adequate supports for students with caring responsibilities
- Precarious nature of funding for long term large scale change
- Fragmentation and duplication of initiatives and work
- Student financing - Lack of flexibility in provision of funding for part time flexible pathways - SUSI student grant not adequately covering the cost of HE – limited in the scope to assess someone as independent - Funding levels and models – cost of living is rising - Lack of funding for non EU and those who fall just below the funding threshold.
- Numerical targets used to determine effectiveness & impact of social - too number based – student success doesn't always mean retention
- No qualitative data taken
- Students that don't have a successful bursary fund application were not on the panel
- Doesn't show quality of the service
- No universal process / standard procedures – only HEI represented was LIT

Q3 – What are we not doing that we should be doing?

- HEAR route / DARE route
Those students who could qualify for both routes are forgotten about. Need to get into the primary and secondary schools to work with students, parents and teachers to raise their expectations.
- Speaking a technical bureaucratic language that shapes policy rather than an accessible language that reflects the reality of the student in their place, community. More engagement with local groups (Travellers) is needed, e.g. 1 in 3 homeless children in Dublin are Travellers.
- Use of identifiers to allow linking of data
- Further engaging with targeted communities to change attitude to education
- Physical accessibility as a baseline. All HEA institutions should be 100% accessible for those with mobility problems.
- Language – Asylum seekers / refugees / other marginalised individuals fall through cracks of existing services. Language and literacy support would be beneficial

- SUSI eligibility – is there anything we can do to support those in the international protection system financially as they are not eligible for SUSI for 3 years.
- Mental health supports
- Diversity of those working in education in Ireland
- Linking with P&T Groups, Pre-schools, Primary and Secondary Schools
- Building relationships to share information about access courses and existing supports, sharing experiences – what works and what is not working. Building trust
- Get role models involved
- Cultural awareness training for teachers and staff
- Make people aware of their rights - Better access to information for students about support services
- Get more third level education into local communities – community intervention
- Involve parents and siblings in discussions on third level education
- Mapping progress when people get to university. Drop-out rates; job success
- Remove structural barriers to access – Lone Parents; Young parents; age barriers under 23; rent supplement; BTEA
- Very few part-time courses available at 3rd level (e.g. Trinity no courses)
- Young white Irish male disadvantaged
- Early intervention – outreach staff.
- One web-based portal with clear and comprehensive educational information.
- Reinstating Visiting Teacher Service or equivalent
- Putting Traveller culture into curriculum
- Mainstreaming the value of diversity
- Reasonable incentivisation to businesses for hiring diverse staff
- Retention programs for mature students rolled out nationally
- Increased support services across the board
- Publicly funded education – free access to all