Mature Student Participation in Higher Education

Terms of Reference of the Research Study

The requirement of this study is to conduct a comprehensive research study that identifies the issues and challenges associated with first-time mature student participation in higher education and to make recommendations that will support increased participation from this group. For the purposes of this study, first-time mature students will include mature students looking to pursue a major award at Level 6, 7 or 8 on the NFQ for the first time (i.e. it includes mature students who may have previously obtained a Level 6 qualification and would like to return to higher education to pursue Level 7 or 8; it also includes mature students who may have previously commenced a higher education programme but did not complete it). Specifically, the research study will be required to address the following ten terms of reference:

1. To carry out an analysis of the trends in mature student participation in higher education (full-time and part-time) in Ireland.

2. To consider the educational attainment levels of the Irish population and to set out the opportunities for increased mature student participation.

3. To investigate the issues, barriers and challenges associated with participation in higher education by current and potential first-time mature students (i.e. the NAP target group). This analysis must include analysis of the specific issues experienced by all mature students as well as from mature students from each of the NAP target groups, e.g. Travellers, students with a disability, lone parents, students with a socio-economic disadvantage.

4. To identify and reflect on the supporting structures, guidance systems and community structures that are associated with increased mature student participation (using relevant international benchmarks where appropriate) and to reflect on the structures most appropriate to mature students including mature students from each of the NAP target groups, e.g. Travellers, students with a disability, lone parents, students with a socio-economic disadvantage.

5. To identify the models of education delivery, teaching and learning approaches and peer support models that support increased mature student participation and student success (using relevant international benchmarks where appropriate) and to assess which models best support mature students including mature students from each of the NAP target groups, e.g. Travellers, students with a disability, lone parents, students with a socio-economic disadvantage.

6. To explore the impact and likely longer-term impact of policy interventions and adjustments to target increased mature student participation.

7. To examine the role of other education providers in delivering the NAP mature student targets, including the creation of pathways to higher education for mature students, e.g. the role of further education providers, the role of community education providers.

8. To assess the full range of funding supports available to mature students in higher education (e.g. education supports, DEASP supports, etc.), to understand what supports are working well and what might be regarded as deficits and to consider the alignment of policies in the areas of education, skills, employment and social protection.
9. To analyse the definitions of mature students currently used in the NAP.

10. To translate the research findings from the above terms of reference into meaningful recommendations on future policy initiatives to support mature student participation. Recommendations will need to be detailed, well developed, targeted and with any associated resource implications highlighted. Recommendations should consider the interventions and support that would meet the needs of mature students including mature students from each of the NAP target groups, i.e.:

   a. Recommendations specific to participation by members of the Irish Traveller community who are mature adults.

   b. Recommendations specific to participation by students with disabilities who are mature adults.

   c. Recommendations specific to participation by persons from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (including former children in care, ethnic minorities) who are now mature adults.

   d. Recommendations specific to participation by mature adult lone parents.

It is recognised that there will be commonalities among some of the recommendations across target groups, however, it is essential that the study considers the needs of all NAP target groups in its analysis and recommendations.

Recommendations should also consider appropriate definitions and data collection for future national access plans.