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Cork Access Network Submission on National Access Plan 2022-2026

1.1 Cork Access Network consultation on the National Access Plan 2022-2026

A Consultation process was undertaken by Cork Access Network¹ (CAN) to prepare for a submission on the National Access Plan that would reflect the views of a wide range of committed stakeholders in the Cork area.

This process included:

1. A consultation among members of the Cork Access Network Steering Group. See Appendix 1;
2. A cross-sectoral inter-agency Focus Group, held on 4th June attended by 32 invited organisational representatives. See Appendix 2;
3. An online questionnaire sent to Focus Group attendees in advance.

For the purpose of engagement with all stakeholders the nine areas suggested in the National Access Plan 2022-2026 Consultation Paper were reduced in both the Focus Group design and in the online questionnaire to five specific questions as follows:

Question 1:	What should our overall vision for equity of access to Higher Education in Ireland be for 2022-2026?
Question 2:	Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan? How do we ensure that vulnerable members of our society are included (e.g., learners currently in care or who have experienced being in care)?
Question 3:	How can pathways between Further Education and Training and Higher Education be better developed?
Question 4:	How can other social inclusion initiatives outside of the Higher Education sector be harnessed to support equity of access objectives?
Question 5:	Is there anything further you would like to share?

¹ Cork Access Network was established in 2021 by Cork ETB, Munster Technological University (MTU), University College Cork (UCC) and Cork City Council, as Cork Learning City lead partners, to work collaboratively with a wide range of partners to Mitigate Against Educational Disadvantage in Cork City and region.

1.2 Cork Access Network submission will reflect these five questions as follows:

Q1: What should our overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022-2026?

The Cork Access Network submission can be summarised under five key principles:

1. A learner centred approach
2. A strengths based approach
3. A whole of education approach
4. A whole of life approach
5. A whole of society approach

1. A learner centred approach

An ongoing commitment to **a learner centred approach rather than a system centred approach** was identified in the consultation as being key to widening participation and to achieving targets for 2022-2026.

A continued **focus on the under-represented learner, involving engagement, consultation and the co-design of specific measures** to address under-representation was called for in contributions from a wide range of stakeholders.

There is an important **role for community organisations who engage with target groups of learners** including Travellers, Roma, Migrants, etc., as equal partners, to work beside educational bodies to facilitate this process.

The **role of the Traveller Visibility Group in the Cork City Inter Agency Traveller Education Group** and in the implementation of a Traveller Women Leadership course in UCC was identified as a model of Good Practice in learner centred approaches in the Cork region.

2. A strengths based approach

A commitment to **a strengths based approach rather than the deficit model** was identified by CAN partners as a vital starting point for all measures tackling educational disadvantage and under-representation in Higher Education.

CAN's mission has been informed in part by the work of Cormac Russell, of Nurture Development, who hosted an online application of the **Asset Based Community Development - ABCD** model. The *ABCD Master Class* received very positive feedback from among the over 100 partners represented. The approach we are implementing among the Cork Access Network partners is to engage, consult, and involve learners, and representatives of target communities, in decision making and in the co-design of responses.

A **model of good practice** identified by CAN stakeholders in the consultation process is:

Mentoring and Role Modelling - A Graduate Traveller Network has been recently established by the Traveller Education Coordinator at MTU Cork Campus. This PATH funded post has enabled support to be provided to Traveller graduates to develop in their careers and to increase the visibility of positive Traveller educational and career outcomes. **This post and the initiatives it supports need to be mainstreamed.**

3. A whole of education approach

The following contributions emerged from the consultation that are relevant to the question posed by the *National Access Plan 2022-2026* Consultation Paper 4.3:

Q. How can a whole of education approach to widening participation in Higher Education be achieved?

A whole of education approach requires **local networks of key educational stakeholders engaging as equal partners to be brought together regularly.** **Cork Access Network offers a model for establishing such partnerships.** These partnerships should take as a starting point that Access to Higher Education begins in Early Years Education and successful progression to Higher Education requires successful engagement at Primary, Post Primary and at Further Education levels. These networks should engage with partners from community and enterprise/industry in addition to the educational representatives.

Access Teams within HEI's need to be resourced to enable extensive engagement with partners outside the HE setting, in other educational sectors, in community and in the workplace.

A whole of education approach should include the provision of **wrap around and connected education services and supports that follow a learner from Early Years through to Higher Education.** Support for parents must be seen as key to this process.

The supports needed for progression by students from under-represented sectors of society require a **whole of education support system approach.** **Barriers between services and supports at different levels need to be identified and removed** as students continue to struggle to access financial supports, for example, as they progress between levels, and schemes such as SUSI and others often require renewed applications with different criteria to qualify for each scheme.

Literacy & numeracy: As a result of gaps / failings in the Primary and Secondary education system, **some target groups including Traveller children often have low levels of numeracy and literacy.** Significant changes in the education system and supports for the students are required from Early Years to Secondary level to improve Traveller numeracy and literacy skills. This is a precursor to supporting Traveller access to Further and Higher Education.

The Access Plan Implementation strategy needs to be connected with supports for **retention and progression at Secondary level,** in particular, as crucial elements in supporting progression to Third level. The evaluation of initiatives such as the School Completion

Programmes, and the National Traveller and Roma Integration Strategy funded STAR projects will assist in this.

A **model of good practice** highlighted by CAN stakeholders during consultation is **The CETB Youthreach FE Course Shadowing week** initiative.

Central to a whole of education approach is the need for **joined up thinking and collaborative working across government departments and agencies** including the Department of Education and Skills, The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youths, TUSLA, community advocacy organisations and others.

Flexible Models for HE delivery for targeted Mature Students: Options for increased flexibility by HEI's in designing bespoke programmes to enable targeted Mature Students to access HE should be introduced. When programmes are responsively organised and delivered as a partnership between educational institutions and community development organisations the engagement, retention and outcomes are generally very positive.

4. A whole of life approach

A vision for an Access Plan should be underpinned by a commitment to **Lifelong Learning, where access to Higher Education throughout the adult life-cycle needs to be available** and supported for under-represented groups and individuals. Educational progression is not linear, particularly when there are socio-economic and cultural barriers that need to be overcome.

Access by under-represented groups to Higher Education as Mature Students has been identified as a key focus for the new Plan. Mature Student entry to HE needs to include part-time options that are attainable, and that include supports.

The Plan needs to take account of the **culture of under-represented groups**. Traveller culture, for example, means that there are competing demands to form a family at school leaving age so a focus on entry for Travellers to HE as Mature Students is needed to allow for this and to create viable alternatives. Community advocacy groups that engage with target groups are vital partners in this.

5. A whole of society approach

CAN agrees that the vision for equity of access to Further and Higher Education in Ireland be 2022-2026, should **reflect the diversity of Irish society**.

Access to Higher Education should be regarded as deriving from access to Education in the broadest sense, and a commitment to lifelong education as a basic human right. This commitment is underpinned by the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, *Quality Education and Lifelong learning for all*, the UNCRC etc., where the right to fulfil one's educational potential in Higher Education should be considered a basic right.

The mission of the partners of the new Access Plan should be to **generate sustainable and inclusive pathways to Higher Education** that nourish and cherish the diversity of talents, knowledge and skills of all the people of Ireland.

The **workplace is an important Access route to Higher Education for under-represented groups** that needs to be identified in the new Access Plan. The Plan should include a commitment to engage with business and enterprise as critical to its future success. The National Training Fund is a potential funding source for such activity.

Engagement in **Community Education, as a flexible, part-time and locally based Access route to Higher Education for under-represented groups** needs to be highlighted in the Plan.

A model of good practice identified by CAN stakeholders in the consultation process is:

Cork Life Centre, a voluntary organisation offering an alternative learning environment to young people who find themselves outside the mainstream education system. The demand for places in this centre is greater than the available places and thus each year students are being turned away. The Cork Life Centre values the individual and meets young people where they are at, delivering a range of one to one and small group supports for young people who are currently unable to engage in mainstream Second Level education.

Q2: Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan? How do we ensure that vulnerable members of our society are included (e.g., learners currently in care or who have experience of being in care)?

In addition to the target groups identified in the previous Access Plan 2015-2019, and the Progress Review to 2021, the following groups were identified in CAN consultation with stakeholders as needing particular attention:

- learners currently in care or who have experience of being in care;
- young people and adults with experience of the criminal justice system;
- young people who are experiencing homelessness or are in emergency accommodation;
- mature students from the Traveller and Roma communities;
- mature student who are Immigrants, and parents of migrant children in the schooling system;
- people with cognitive and intellectual disabilities.

Q3: How can pathways between Further Education and Training and Higher Education be better developed?

Some specific submissions during the CAN consultation include:

A Further Education Access Service resourced and established using a similar approach to the HE Access Service is needed. The FE Access Service should have similar focusses and targets as the HE Access Service with dedicated supports for supporting targeted students with socio-economic needs, people with disabilities, Travellers, etc. These linked services in the two settings should be tasked with creating and sustaining a seamless support service as individual learners progress from FE to HE.

Pathways between Further Education and Training and Higher Education depend on **strong sustained relationships and regular communications between key decision makers and people in key roles that support Access and Progression in both FE and HE. A local network of key educational stakeholders engaging as equal partners** can play a key role in formalising these peer-to-peer relationships and sustaining them over years, as personnel change. Cork Access Network is an example of such an initiative.

Better **employer/industry engagement to support work placement modules for targeted students** while in FE are needed as many lack the social/ life experiences to enable the sourcing of appropriate work experience, and this is an increasingly significant component of courses in both FE and HE.

Increased credit bearing recognition of prior learning in the workplace, including the use of micro-credentials, will enable progression for people who have FE qualifications, and who have gained skills and competencies to identify appropriate pathways to HE.

Accessible documentation and inclusive language in FE and HE course information materials are needed, rather than 'glossy brochures'. Instead of information sources that market a programme strongly for the purpose of student recruitment, employers have highlighted the need for new versions that name the relevant careers and career paths associated with both the FE courses and the HE progression routes.

Two models of good practice identified by CAN stakeholders in the consultation process are:

The MTU Cork Colleges Progression Scheme, where the HEI reserves a number of places on specific degree programmes as identified in partnership with FE Colleges, for applicants receiving specified levels and other requirements in their awards.

The Access UCC established FE to HE Progression Role, working in partnership with CETB, and liaising closely with MTU Access, works with students from city DEIS schools while in FE to support progression onto HE or alternative pathways. This initiative also works with those from Traveller community, learners from Youthreach and Cork Life Centre.

Q4: How can other Social Inclusion initiatives outside of the Higher Education sector be harnessed to support equity of access objectives?

Some specific submissions during the CAN consultation include:

The role of social inclusion initiatives and community education organisations needs to be acknowledged, resourced and engaged as partners in delivering on Access Plan objectives nationally and locally. Community development organisations are crucial support partners in engaging target community members in education programmes and in supporting them to remain engaged throughout course delivery. An Access partners network such as CAN provides a mechanism for including and engagement between social inclusion partners with HE, FE and other education and access partners. Engagement with CSR (Community Social Responsibility) policies and actions with individual businesses and business/enterprise networks is a strong additional dimension to this.

Mentoring and Role Modelling. There is a need for a Mentoring programme for targeted learners who have expressed interest in accessing HE or who are in the early stages of their course, by other members of their community or other targeted learners who have succeeded in HE. Such Role Models should be supported and resourced appropriately as key sources of advice and inspiration.

Two models of good practice identified by CAN stakeholders in the consultation process are:

A Level 7 Leadership Training programme delivered to 19 Traveller women where the Traveller Visibility Group (TVG), the Southern Traveller Health Unit (STHU), the UCC Adult and Continuing Education Department and Access UCC worked together to support and deliver a bespoke supported programme that 19 Traveller women have successfully progressed to from Level 6 to Level 7. This was a PATH funded initiative. The supportive role of the TVG was integral to the success of the programme.

The **STAR project, (Supporting Travellers And Roma) funded as a NTRIS pilot project is a good example of TUSLA lead inter-departmental work related to Traveller and Roma communities participation and progression in education.** Working in conjunction with all relevant partners and has a strong social inclusion focus.

Appendix 1

CORK ACCESS NETWORK

has been established by Cork Learning City partners – Cork ETB, Munster Technological University (MTU), University College Cork (UCC) and Cork City Council, to provide an outcomes focused approach which will lead and inform a 2021-2024 Action Plan for Increasing Education Opportunity and Access in the Cork Region.

Cork Access Network (CAN) works collaboratively to Mitigate Against Educational Disadvantage in Cork City and region through:

1. Creating an Open Forum of Equal partners that will meet 4 times yearly;
2. Creating a platform where initiatives tackling educational disadvantage across the life cycle can be shared;
3. Identifying issues that perpetuate barriers to Access and Progression that can be tackled by partners working together;
4. Establishing cross sectoral sub-groups that can progress responses to identified issues;
5. Mapping the range of partners and providing accessible information on each partner's services;
6. Creating solidarity between partners in all settings;
7. Allowing links to emerge between disparate partners who are committed to tackling Educational Disadvantage.

STEERING GROUP

Chaired by Dr. Barry O'Connor (former President CIT), the current Steering Group members are:

- Denis Leamy, CE, CETB
- Deirdre Creedon, Access Service, MTU Cork Campus
- Olive Byrne, Access UCC
- Ciarán Lynch & Ruth Griffin, Adult Education Officers, CETB
- Denis Barrett, Cork Learning City Co-ordinator, Cork City Council
- Siubhan McCarthy, Cork Lifelong Learning Festival Co-ordinator
- William McAuliffe, Cork Learning City Co-Chair, National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals

BACKGROUND

The **Cork Access Network** - CAN, builds on the ***Leave No One Behind Mitigating against Educational Disadvantage Webinar***, funded by the DF&HE and hosted by Cork ETB and Learning City partners - Cork City Council, MTU, and UCC in Dec. 2020.

Lead partners on the Webinar formed a Steering Group to establish CAN as an Access Partners Forum in January 2021, to enable partners to pledge sustainable and consistent levels of support for all learners; embedding and further building upon existing good practice in tackling educational disadvantage.

PROGRESS TO DATE

Webinar *Leave No One Behind* - Mitigating against Educational Disadvantage Dec 2020 (Att. 241)

The Webinar, co-chaired by Denis Leamy CETB CE, and Dr Barry O'Connor, explored responses to educational disadvantage from city-wide, national, and international perspectives, and was informed by the experiences of individual learners who had faced and overcome barriers in their educational progression.

Guest speakers included: Andrew Brownlee – CEO, SOLAS, Jonathan Barr - OECD, Raúl Valdes Cotera - UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, Niamh O'Reilly - AONTAS, Paula Cogan – President, Cork Chamber, Prof. John O'Halloran - Interim President UCC, Adrienne Rodgers - Cork City Council, and a range of individuals who shared personal stories of educational progression and overcoming barriers.

Focus Group on Access - April 2021 (Att. 42)

A Meeting of key partners to extend the conversation and build a Network of Access partners organically. The Focus Group gathered a range of views from Access partners across:

- Schools and Formal Education;
- Further and Higher Education;
- Community and Basic Education; and
- Business and industry perspectives.

This, the first consultative session, was designed to inform the design of subsequent Network sessions and actions.

Responding to Educational Disadvantage– a Strengths Based Approach, Webinar and Meeting May 5, 2021 (Att. 124)

Responding to Educational Disadvantage through the lens of ABCD – a strengths based approach, with Cormac Russell - Webinar and Master Class, with 'soapbox' inputs from 4 different local Access initiatives.

Focus Group 2 - June 4th 2021 – National Access Plan consultation workshop (Att. 34)

This Focus Group and Workshop was designed as a consultation session to gather inputs for the CAN submission to the NAP, and as an awareness raising and information sharing exercise, to generate other submissions from organisations in the Cork region.

Focus Group 3 - June 24th 2021 - Access through the Workplace

Will gather inputs and create conversations between key partners across Education, Training, Business and Industry who are involved in Educational Access initiatives connected with workplaces.

Future Forum Sessions – in planning, for Oct 8th, Dec 3rd, Feb 4th

Initial Outcomes of CAN Programme 2021:

- A partnership approach to Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage in Cork that can form the basis of large scale, multi-agency, cross sectoral proposals.
- A Forum that can address the Cork City Profile 2018 Education and Learning Recommendations on Educational Disadvantage

The Cork City Profile 2018² Chapter 3 - Education and Learning outlined the situation in Cork City based on the CSO statistics from 2016, and a range of actions was identified to improve the profile for the future regarding Educational Disadvantage.

CAN, as a network of equal partners committed to Access, is now in a position to take and support initiatives that tackle Educational Disadvantage and the effects of Early School Leaving, highlighted in the City Profile, through an Area-Based, thematic and multi-agency approach, that brings together multiple stakeholders.

² <https://www.corkhealthycities.ie/corkcityprofile2018>

Appendix 2

**CORK ACCESS NETWORK FOCUS GROUP/ CONSULTATION ON THE NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN 2022-2026,
4th June 2021**

In Attendance:



