

xNational access plan Higher Education consultation paper

From the Education Unit, Cork Prison and the Dillon's Cross Project (a community outreach project offering support and education to females with a relative in prison or who have been in prison themselves) under the remit of Cork ETB.

Previous generations in Ireland, people with the least education and from the most disadvantaged backgrounds were locked away in institutions. Much work has been done to change this, however, much work remains to ensure that we don't further disadvantage this group.

1. What should our overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022 to 2026?

All Irish citizens should have equal access to all levels of education, from preschool to further and higher education. Targeted interventions should be in place from an early age to ensure that students from disadvantaged backgrounds acquire the basic reading, writing and social foundation skills, which are essential to progress to further, and higher education.

'Innovative and radical' approaches should be used to access these most difficult to reach communities such as prisoners, ex-prisoners, lone parent families, persons with addictions, homeless and others who don't have the economic and social support that many in mainstream have.

Sufficient supports need to be in place through all early childhood years, to ensure that students have the foundations on which to build to allow them accessing Higher Education. A strategy which truly offers equal access to all, must include these communities. In the context of prison populations interventions and supports should be in place from preschool for children of those in prison and lifelong learning should be the model.

2. Who are the target groups that should be specified in the 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)

The target groups that should be specified:

- Prisoners, Ex-prisoners, prisoner families and communities affected by imprisonment.
- People in addiction
- Homeless centres
- Marginalised groups e.g Traveller/ ethnic minority community
- Lone parent families
- Early school Leavers and those at risk of early school leaving/expulsion.
- Students who have learning disabilities e.g. dyspraxia, ADHD, Autism etc.
- Addicts or recovering addicts.
- Community Groups

How do we ensure that vulnerable members of our society are included?

- Voices and feedback from agencies working with referenced groups are listened to.
- Specific personnel with responsibility for inclusion of these groups are employed in relevant ETB's
- Reports such as that completed by INdecon need to be authored on a regular basis.
- Pathways for these members need to be clearly mapped and signposted and necessary supports must be in place.

3. How can create pre and post-entry activities be developed?

Many students in prison come from disadvantaged backgrounds, going back many generations. Many of these students lack self-belief and the confidence that they can compete academically or in the work force. In addition, having a criminal conviction is a serious obstacle.

Pre-entry activity development:

- Reservation/ringfencing of places on apprenticeship courses and in colleges would be a positive first step.
- Could Solas compile a database of prospective employers from each county who would consider giving an ex-offender a placement/work experience/employment?
- Could tax incentives be introduced to make this a more attractive prospect for prospective employers? Could state/public bodies be 'encouraged' to offer placements? Real offers of employment need to follow completion of courses and/degrees. **Having a criminal conviction is a serious obstacle.**
- Pathways need to be clearly mapped and signposted and links need to be in place. Students need to be familiar with the National Framework of Qualifications, i.e the QQI ladder and the stepping stone approach it offers.
- Progression courses and support services must be available
- Community education projects such as the Dillon's Cross Project or teachers in the Education Units to work with students to ensure they are well prepared.
- Accommodation and accommodation supports must be in place.
- Students should have 'firm' foundations in place ie if progressing to a QQI level 5 then minimum of an overall award at QQI level 3 or modules at level 4.
- Work experience and availability of mentors - Support overcoming obstacles
- Base centre for delivery of support classes etc.
- Supply taster courses and job market Work Experience
- Linking with Training centres/MTU to facilitate delivery of academic component of apprenticeships while in prison.
- Delivery of short 'barrista training' type courses within the prison/community organisations.
- Organising transport/buses for groups of participants from community projects to access courses in training centre.
- FE centres/colleges etc. to offer information sessions on their courses in prisons community education projects.
- Inviting employers into prisons at open/career days
- Arranging visits for community groups including children to visit Universities.

Post-entry activities

- Garda vetting/ conviction need to be addressed. Spent convictions....
- Added support/mentoring to cope with unfamiliar territory/mentoring
- Link in with local business communities
- A common centre/building/link in Centre where students can access support to complete and submit assignments.

4. How can current funding programs be better utilised to further the objectives of the National Access Plan?

- Monies allocated to existing projects proven to work.
- Education bases in the community to be used as a support link Centre.
- Support staff to be recruited for ex-prisoners.
- More access to grants/ monies for students to help them with their educational life e.g., travel pass, Help with childcare.
- ETBs to have discretion to support new initiatives supported projects tackling social disadvantage.
- SUSI grants available for completion of courses on a part time basis eg for Moms with part time jobs, striving to access higher education.
- Delivery of training centre courses/modules in prison
- Facilitating completion of some of the theory part of apprenticeship while in prison – and exploration of whether the placement piece could be completed with Irish Prison service.
- Adapting delivery of third level courses to online/blended learning thereby reducing transport issues.
- Online availability of courses such as nightschool.ie and access to online courses part time, evening and at weekends.
- Leapcard
- Tax incentives be introduced to make employing/give students with convictions work/work experience a more attractive prospect for prospective employers
- Local subsidized childcare for parents. Offering subsidized accommodation for those who have gone back to Education.
- Specific allocation of hours for access officers with prison focus
- Administration staff, resource staff in centres supporting prisoner/prisoner families.
- More consultation with user groups on issues such as childcare, costs, learning difficulties- support.

5. How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded within HEI's?

- Specific allocation of hours for access officers with a prison support function.
- Identifying lecturers who would be interested in interested with persons in prison.
- Diversifying lessons and methodologies to suit and include all types/ learners in every class.
- Mainstreaming of community projects - Having their own allocation of teachers and admin hours and admin staff
- Encourage self agency over learning
- Peer learning/supports

6. How can a whole of education approach to widening participation in higher education be achieved?

“Prisoners’ children are a highly vulnerable group with multiple risk factors for adverse outcomes” (Murray and Farrington, 2005:1269).

Murray and Farrington (2008 in Martyn, 2012:10) found that “65% of boys who had a father with a criminal conviction ended up offending”. An American study (Johnston, 1995 in Loucks, 2004:6) indicated that children of incarcerated parents are “five to six times more likely” to go to prison than their friends.

Prison specific

- Working with children of the prison population from birth, providing supports with education, counselling, etc
- Specifically for the prison population – home school prison liaison officers, support teams associated with prisons who are tasked with supporting families.
- Local school involvement in prison related projects
- Creating strong links between prison education providers and other further and higher education providers. Remove the obstacles that the prison system currently had especially around IT. Create pathways for these learners.
- Option of completing an alternative to Leaving Cert eg QQI modules, for students struggling with mainstream Leaving Cert.
- Highlighting examples of successes
- Incorporate soft skills.
- Provide necessary supports e.g counselling, IT support, writing documents/essays etc
- Promotion of agency over own learning
- Peer learning

7. How can pathways between further education and training and higher education be better developed?

Developing pathways –

- Recognition of prior working experience/RPL
- I.D a clear pathway – mapping and signposting.
- Life long learning
- Study skills classes – referencing/writing essays.
- Create stronger links within disadvantaged sections of population.
- Remove the obstacles that the prison system currently has.
- Places reserved on courses and allocated after an interview process for disadvantaged people.
- Personal support/counselling provision
- Availability of online courses, part time, evening and at weekend.
- Easier access with support and scaffolding in place.

8. How can other social inclusion initiatives outside of the higher education sector be harnessed to support equity of access objectives?

- Mainstreaming of these initiatives with proper resourcing in terms of funding for buildings and staffing to include teaching/tutors and administration.
- Recognition of prior working experience/RPL
- I.D a clear pathway – mapping and signposting. Advertisements/ Booklets
- Availability of career guidance personnel.
- Promotion of Life long learning
- Provision of study skills classes – referencing/writing essays when students from these programmes do progress to higher education.
- Create stronger links within disadvantaged sections of population.
- College mini /taster course to be given so they can get a feel for it and what is involved
- Counselling services and addiction
- Consultation with all initiatives and groups -in Cork, Cork Alliance, Churchfield trust, Dillon's Cross project.
- Collaboration and consultation- leading to a pooling of resources. Prison focused strategies for pre and post release with specific education reference.
- Intergenerational education-based projects – Dillon's Cross project
- Promotion of apprenticeships as a real option, with work placements organised locally and theory components offered locally or preferably blended learning. This would facilitate students completing theory in their local education hub/project as necessary.
- Offering TAX incentives to employers to employ an ex-prisoner.

9. What challenges has covid 19 presented in relation to an inclusive higher education system and how can they be addressed?

- Lack of personal contact and interaction with their peers. Feelings of isolation.
- Lack of access to computers/laptops/ internet.
- Inequality of access to learning
- Lack of space e.g. library, computer room.
- Gap in learning, Students had to abandon projects and this caused the student to lose momentum. It can be difficult for the student to regain that ground.

10. What aspects of equity of access to higher education currently work or do not work from a student perspective.

Working:

- Prisoners have access to QQI, OU, State exams
- Career day and career prep
- Sports coaching programme which is delivered in Cork offers an overall award at level 3, with optional follow on modules at level 4. This prepares students for direct access to level 5 modules in the community.
- Visiting lecturers from colleges
- Pathways exist for prison students to progress to further education colleges in Cork as well as MTU/UCC
- MTU/ training centres modules delivered in the prison.
- Employability placement in hotels

Not working:

On release from prison or difficulties encountered by family members of prison who aspire to Higher Ed:

- Garda vetting.
- Lack of familiarity with FE and Higher Education providers
- Lack of assistance and advice
- Financial obstacles
- Unstable living arrangements.
- Inadequate childcare facilities or these are too far away
- Travel/ transport- lack of there of
- Addiction counselling not in place
- Unstable home life/ homeless
- Adverse cultural issues
- Low confidence/ Self esteem
- Lack of wrap around supports eg addiction and counselling when prisoners leave prison.

Q11. Biggest challenge for students for accessing higher education.

- Unfamiliar territory, navigating the system.
- Lack of support
- Financial costs
- Access – lack of transport
- Childcare requirements
- Lack of peer group
- Colleges seen as unattainable.

- Getting time off to access education if in part time employment.
- Educational support- literacy issues
- Unstable accommodation
- The feeling that Further Education/ College is an unrealistic achievable goal for them

Q12. What can make a difference for students accessing and completing higher education?

- Mentoring and guidance both within the third level institute and from the referring organisation.
- Education hub in the local area, where this support, mentoring and guidance is available. This centre could also allow access to online classes while reducing transport barriers.
- Transport
- Familiarizing students with FE and College.
- For students contemplating an apprenticeship, placement location can be the deciding factor. Therefore, in the case of a student from a seriously disadvantaged background, consideration should be given to completing as much as possible of that apprenticeship in their own locality. This negates the need for transport and reduces or eliminates the cost of rental accommodation.
- In the case of young mothers who would like to continue the education pathway, delivery of courses/degrees online, part time, evening and at weekend. Access to recorded lectures also makes studying easier.
- Alternative and innovative local childcare solutions. Using a childcare centre at a school or college works for students who have their own transport but not so well for a Mom using public transport during the Winter months.
- Having placements in place for apprenticeships. Offering tax incentives to employers to make it a more attractive prospect to employ an ex prisoner or a person from a disadvantaged background.

Q13. How has Covid 19 impacted on students.

- Increased mental health concerns.
- Introverted
- Isolated
- Social anxiety
- Lack of physical Contact
- Limited access to education/ resources and no access to online learning
- Elevated levels of stress
- Decrease in confidence and reduction in motivation