

## **THEA Submission to the Consultation Process on the Next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2022-2026)**

Over the past five decades, as our sector evolved from Regional Technical Colleges towards Technological Universities, our institutions have developed and retained a strong and successful ethos of inclusiveness as a central part of our mission, while also raising aspirations and facilitating students to realise their potential across multiple levels of the National Framework of Qualifications. As a result, national access target groups are, and continue to be, well represented in the student body within the context of our social inclusion approach.

Due to our diverse student profile, our institutions have always developed and maintained very effective teaching practices and strong student/staff relationships, as evidenced by research such as Studentsurvey.ie<sup>1</sup>. Our sector spearheaded the development of teaching and learning centres, inclusive practice and pedagogy and a range of additional supports.

We will soon enter our third academic year impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our teaching and learning centres and access and disability services have been key to ensuring that our sector demonstrated an agile and focused responsiveness during this challenging period. Given our student profile, our students have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Existing inequalities in terms of housing, income, and cultural capital have been amplified by the new ways of working and living. The ethos of staff engagement with students on an individual level has been a key factor in keeping vulnerable students engaged in their studies.

One of the key strengths of our sector is its willingness to explore and adopt non-standard entry routes into higher education. In any given academic year, up to half of all first year entrants have gained a place on a basis other than Leaving Certificate points in that year. Additionally, our advanced entry agreements with the FET sector maximise the potential of the FET entry route for potential students. Nationally, there is much learning to be had from an evaluation of how the sector has worked closely with the FET sector, in particular. We commit to maintaining and further developing this relationship into the future.

Great stories of individual success have emanated from the sector over this time with many students being the first in their families to access higher education, often through the variety of non-traditional pathways used by our institutions, and to progress successfully to employment and / or postgraduate study. Many of our graduates remain within our region upon completion, thus contributing to the local and regional economy, and acting as role models to their families and communities.

We have supported, and we continue to support, the regional economy as a key driver for regional growth and development. We have established strong links with industry and community stakeholders. We respond rapidly and strategically to the needs of the regional workforce – in terms of upskilling and in response to the challenges of the changing economic cycles. For many of these workers, this chance to upskill while in employment or due to recent unemployment is best offered by our sector.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, higher indicator scores for Effective Teaching Practices, Student-Faculty interactions <https://studentsurvey.ie/reports/studentsurveyie-national-report-2020>

Over the next decade, it is our firm intention that we will continue to play a major role in inclusive education provision and regional development, as our institutions continue to evolve.

During the period of implementation of the next access plan, institutes of technology and emerging technological universities collectively commit to:

- Actively sharing and dissemination of good practice
- Working collaboratively in order to develop a more consistent approach to data collection in order to enable tracking of individual student success, as students progress within and between our institutions
- Adopting and promoting a whole-of-institution approach to mainstreaming access objectives and initiatives to further student success
- Further developing and enhancing our relationships with the primary and post primary sectors
- Maintaining and enhancing, where identified, ongoing support for students throughout their studies to maximise the whole student experience of higher education
- Conducting a post-COVID sectoral review of our responsiveness and evaluating our preparedness for a similarly disruptive event in the future. This review would include an examination of the positive outcomes that developed from the changed landscape, in terms of flexible delivery options for target groups (mature learners and lone parents with caring commitments, students with disabilities, etc.)
- Working closely with the HEA to refine and develop enhanced identification and targeting of underrepresented groups

In order to enable these clear aims and aspirations, we wish to emphasise the need for national policies and infrastructure to more systematically support whole of institution / whole of higher education / whole of education approaches.

- Genuinely whole of institution approaches can only be achieved when sufficient and sustainable Access resourcing is built into funding models in order to redress historic anomalies. For example, the ratio of non-academic staff to academic staff is lower in our institutions than in other HEA institutions<sup>2</sup>
- The evolution from RTCs to TUs should include the evolution of access from one small but key part of inclusive institutions towards a mainstream strategic priority in order to better reflect the inclusive reality of our institutions
- The trajectory of recent improvements in data collection nationally should be prioritised to support tracking of individual students, particularly those who may transfer between programmes or institutions or who take “time out”, on their journeys towards individual success

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<sup>2</sup> 0.7 in IoTs, 0.9 in traditional universities, 1.4 in colleges from [Institutional-Profiles-2017-18-Jan-2021.pdf \(hea.ie\)](#)

## **Dundalk Institute of Technology Submission to the Consultation Process on the Next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2022-2026)**

From its inception, DkIT has been an institution that is responsiveness to the needs of its region and one that has a student body that reflects the wider demographics of its region. We are living through a time of rapid societal change. These changes relate both to the new and emerging target groups but also to the possibilities opened up by pedagogic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is imperative that the Irish education system rises to this challenge. Education has the potential to be a key driver of social inclusiveness.

The new National Access Plan should commit to developing a strategic ‘access flow’ between primary and second level education and third level education. Concentrating access resources at third level is playing ‘catch-up’ and has little to no impact on the structural difficulties from pre-school through to senior cycle in second level. Only by an agreed strategy and agreed actions on a national level with all education partners will further progress be made.

Rather than projects contingent on short-term funding from the third level sector that delivers discrete pre-entry and post-entry ‘activities’, there is a need to develop a national strategy to embed access in pre-entry, primary and second level sectors of the education system. The current system is reliant on proximity to a third level institution with the requisite staffing and resources but even then, the approach is not strategic, is piecemeal and contingent on short-term sources of funding.

There is also a need for more “joined-up” communication at national level among Government departments and more targeted provision of information. Quite a number of students have been in receipt of PUP during 2020 – it is debatable to what extent students are aware that PUP is to be counted as reckonable income for 2020 by SUSI and as such, their entitlement to SUSI or their level of maintenance grant may be adversely affected.

### **The “Pillars” Approach and the Use of Deprivation Index Scores**

DkIT supports the idea of a “Pillars” Approach and the potential it represents for a National Access Plan (NAP) that is reflective of the changes taking place in Irish society. The “Pillars” Approach, rather than expanding the number of target groups, will function as a better way of responding to the needs of under-represented groups in a society where the most disadvantaged belong to a number of target groups. This acknowledgement of the intersectionality of disadvantage and the understanding of how this impacts on the effectiveness of practice is key.

The use of Deprivation Index Scores (DIS) is a very welcome development in the monitoring of progress towards a higher education sector that reflects the wider society. DIS has the potential to illustrate the intersectionality of disadvantage and to illuminate nuances in regional demographics.

### **Existing Target Groups**

Notwithstanding this, there is still a role for the tracking of access and participation of previously identified target groups to ensure that progress is being made. There are clear differences between

how the targets are being met at sectoral level. It is proposed that the HEA consider setting different targets for each sector as this will allow for better tracking of progress.

### FET Students

The Consultation paper does not refer to FET students as a target group or otherwise. DkIT has consistently exceeded the targets for FET entrants and a more focused national strategy in terms of this progression route would be the best way to increase these numbers at national level. The vast majority of our mature entrants hold an FET qualification prior to accessing third level. Similarly, students from the other target groups are well-represented at FET – improving FET award-holders access to HE will increase access rates from the target groups. FET is a very useful ‘bridging’ route for ethnic minorities who have not completed second level education in this State. Advanced entry routes from FET would also benefit from a national and strategic approach. (In the current academic year, DkIT admitted 62 FET students directly into second year of a programme of study). FET entrants should remain a priority group in any new National Access Plan.

### Traveller Students

It is proposed that a more detailed evaluation of Traveller access rates would help to identify where the barriers exist. Travellers as a target group should be further divided along gender and age/entry route lines. It is our experience that Travellers accessing third level tend to be female and have entered via the mature entry route or the FET entry route. In the past, we have tried to develop specific Traveller access routes in conjunction with second level schools in our region. Unless and until Traveller students are supported to complete senior cycle at second level (including taking sufficient Leaving Certificate subjects at ordinary level, at least), Traveller access rates into third level from this age cohort will continue to be disappointing.

DkIT is using Dormant Accounts Travellers in Higher Education and COVID-19 Once-off COVID Contingency Fund for Access Services to fund a Traveller Education Coordinator post for the academic year 2021/22. This person’s duties will include, inter alia, building relationships with education providers and Travellers in the region to promote access to third level. By the end of the next academic year, it is our hope that as an institution we will have a better understanding of how to address the challenges of Traveller access to third level. It is our view, however, that at national level, sufficient support needs to be put in place at second level and primary level.

### Mature Students / Part-time learners/ Hybrid and flexible models of delivery

The rate of mature entrants to third level closely tracks the unemployment rate. Without supports such as the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) it is not possible for disadvantaged persons to avail of third level study as mature students. FET courses lead to employment as well as functioning as an entry route to third level, particularly for mature learners. Mature entry to third level is a national policy objective – it is important that FET students are encouraged to consider third level (and FET courses best leading to third level study) as well as having the option of taking up paid employment after completing their FET course. The “Coherence” pillar (i.e. co-ordination across the government departments) is key here. If BTEA is not forthcoming for progression to third level study, it stands to reason that mature student numbers at third level are negatively impacted.

The online and in some cases, asynchronous delivery of lectures during the pandemic has been of benefit to those mature students who have caring responsibilities and/or who have a long commute to campus. These students expressed a wish to see blended delivery of course content. (Note: this view was not confined to mature students. See below comments from non-mature students).

Those in low-paid and/or insecure employment are unable to fund third level study as part-time students. The pandemic has shown that it is possible to deliver online content and outside of 'normal' lecturing hours. The learning of the past fifteen months should be evaluated at national level to explore ways to support part-time learners. This would benefit mature and non-mature students. Parity of funding for part-time students is key.

### Students with Disabilities

The creation of a Framework for the implementation of UDL across the sector would benefit all students not just those with a disability or from one or more of the other target groups. This would likely have the added benefit of reducing costs for the sector in the longer term as well as increasing the access, participation and graduation rates of students.

Consideration should be given to the development, at national level, to a bridging programme for certain categories of students (including students with disabilities) that would function to develop pre-entry skills in the area of assistive technology, academic writing, study skills, time management, etc. Many students progressing directly from second level struggle with these concepts and the academic language specific to third level. This is a particular challenge for mature learners or those who have been out of the formal education sector for some time. A short module may be created and included by HEIs in a similar way to that of the Consent training and encouraged to be undertaken either before or soon after starting, it could be online and available continuously.

Consideration should also be given, at national level, to the issue of mature learners who start third level without a formal diagnosis of a specific learning disability (SLD) where the student or her/his advisors believe an SLD may exist. Such students cannot access funding on a pre-entry basis and so are playing 'catch-up' when trying to arrange such a diagnosis once they have begun third level study.

There would be a benefit in the development of a national policy and awareness campaign around disclosure to the HEI by students from under-represented groups, especially students with disabilities. Disclosure needs to be promoted in a positive manner, highlighting the benefits and encouraging disclosure so that supports can be offered.

### **Emerging Target Groups**

A number of emerging target groups that have entered the access discussion however, there is no agreed definition of these emerging target groups nor is there an agreed method of data collection / tracking of entrants from these groups.

### Lone Parents

Lone parents are a priority group for the PATH 2 1916 Bursary programme and so, presumably, for access to third level. This element of a student's status is not collected as part of any standard data collection at national or institutional level. To collect such data from our student body without a clear reason for doing so or a clearly identifiable benefit to the student, is a breach of GDPR. We have no way of knowing if more or less lone parents are accessing third level from one year to the next. This issue is one that needs to be addressed at national level.

### Ethnic Minority

Similarly, there is a lack of clarity regarding the use of the term – ethnic minority. The current definition obtained from the HEA is 'anyone born outside the island of Ireland' however many such students do not identify as being part of an 'ethnic minority' and many born on this island, identify as belonging to an ethnic minority. The HEI (when scoring for PATH 2 Bursaries or other supports) is left with the dilemma as to whether the HEI has the right to assign this status to the student (when the student record shows the student was born outside the island of Ireland) or whether it is appropriate for the HEI to do so when the student has chosen (for whatever reason) not to so identify. A more coherent national definition would help create more clarity and consistency here.

### Homeless Students

Homelessness is an emerging category (1916 bursaries, etc.) and again, a national definition and approach to identification, tracking and reporting of this target group is required if progress is to be made.

### Students previously and currently in the Care System

There is a need for clarity and consistency in this area at national level. Time spent in care can differ widely and the impact on the individual as a result differs quite widely. Consideration should be given to the length of time in the care system, how recently the learner has been taken into the care system and also how appropriate it is to take this factor into consideration in cases where the learner has been out of the care system for a very long time (decades in the case of some mature learners). It should also be possible to distinguish between those whose experience of the care system has been very disruptive (or recent) and those who have lived with a foster family for most of his/her life. These differences become particularly important when this factor is used in scoring mechanisms for various forms of assistance / support (and where being or having been in the care system tends to carry a high score).

### Protection Applicants and Refugees

There is a range of Sanctuary Scholarships and related schemes across the third level sector. This is a confusing landscape for protection applicants and other related categories of potential students. Rather than a piecemeal and ad-hoc approach, a clear national statement of policy and funding would support equity of access objectives in relation to these learners. By way of example, those with Refugee status who do not meet the residency requirement (three years) do not qualify for 'free fees' and support from SUSI – this despite the fact that refugees, by definition, have been unable to plan and make free choices about their future. A simple change at national policy level would eliminate what seems to be an anomaly in the system but one which sees refugees without the required length of residency delaying entry to third level.

### Former Prisoners

The inclusion of former prisoners as a target group is welcomed. In the past, DkIT has worked on projects targeting this group of potential learners. This group face particular challenges re-entering the workforce and education is a useful bridge in this respect. DkIT is partnering with other HEIs in the MEND cluster on a pilot scholarship scheme for former prisoners (funding from the Irish Probation Service) – the learnings from this scheme may prove useful at national level.

### Gender and Disadvantage

Gender has been referred to above, in terms of access by Travellers. However, the Deprivation Score Index (DIS) statistics appear to indicate that, from disadvantaged areas, males have a lower access rate than females. National initiatives and funding should be gender-proofed to ensure that young, working-class males are not further left behind.

DkIT has a strong track-record in the area of apprenticeships and we are eager to be part of any initiatives that introduce a less “traditional” cohort onto these courses e.g. women, members of ethnic minorities, persons with a disability, mature learners.

In light of the issues highlighted above, the robustness and transparency of the DIS system makes it the best way forward for planning and monitoring of progress.

### **Current funding programmes**

In order to encourage third-level access from under-represented groups, funding needs to move to a coherent and sustainable footing. Prospective students from low-income backgrounds cannot commit to third level study on the basis that funding may or may not be available.

The Student Assistance Fund, 1916 Bursary programme and other scholarships are competitive and an individual student has no guarantee of support. Other supports are ad-hoc from one year to the next and a response to a certain set of circumstances (e.g. ICT support during COVID, Dormant Account Funds – Travellers in Education). While all funding is welcome, and is used by the individual HEI to best promote access and participation, this does not provide a secure basis on which to plan if the individual comes from a low-income family. Students from under-represented groups are, to a very large degree, students from a low-income background. To this end, the review of SUSI is welcomed. Funding to which a student has an entitlement has the potential to be far more effective in increasing access and aiding planning for low-income students and their families.

Recent funding initiatives e.g. the ICT Loan Scheme have a reduced impact when announced after the academic year has begun. Most students have already purchased their own equipment in preparation for third level. Additionally, the most disadvantaged students were wary of taking a laptop on loan as they did not want the responsibility if anything happened to the laptop during the loan period. These are students living in cramped accommodation, often sharing a bedroom with a

sibling(s). There would have been a greater take-up of the laptops among the most disadvantaged students had the laptops need been provided on a loan basis.

The Dormant Accounts – Travellers in Education funding and the COVID-19 COVID-19 Once-off COVID Contingency Fund for Access Services is most welcome and as it has been disbursed on an individual HEI level, allows DkIT to tailor its use to our individual access profile. If either funding stream is to be continued, early confirmation of this would of course make for better planning at institutional level.

### **COVID-19: Challenges and Learning**

DkIT conducted a student feedback survey for an almost two-week period at the end of October / beginning of November in academic year 2020/21. This survey focused on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic on the students' ability to engage with their studies and more generally, on their sense of well-being during these unprecedented circumstances. This feedback survey replaced the programme-level survey normally distributed once a semester in the academic year. Feedback was circulated to each School (Head of School and Head(s) of Department) in November 2020 and the student feedback was used to inform academic planning for semester two of that same academic year.

As will be clear from the DkIT DIS score, and as is the case of many other HEIs in the sector, COVID-19 had a disproportionate impact on students from a background of disadvantage. It is not uncommon for our students to live in cramped, overcrowded accommodation (e.g. to share a bedroom with one or more siblings) and to be reluctant to take equipment on loan for which they are responsible (see above re. the ICT Grant Scheme).

*"We do not have access to quiet places such as the library and many of us have busy homes, perhaps longer deadlines on CA's as it is tough trying to concentrate at home 24/7."* (DkIT Student)

*"I believe the workload is much more difficult while engaging in remote learning. The same volume of information and learning cannot be effectively communicated via remote learning."* (DkIT student)

*"...some students don't have easy access to laptops/computers etc. and it can make learning online quite stressful, especially when asked to do projects that require a computer/specific software."* (DkIT student).

Notwithstanding the difficulties experienced, some students reported some positives to the changed learning environment and this puts the spotlight on those aspects of the 'normal' way of doing things that is often problematic for students, especially students from the target groups.

*"What doesn't work is long travel being a stressor, I would argue that college life was made dramatically easier for those who used to have long commutes pre COVID-19, I was lucky to only have a short commute but even I felt the benefits of not commuting. (Of course not everyone may feel the same way)."* (DkIT student)

*"More blended learning, I don't have children but personally found it much easier to work, attend lectures and keep up with laundry/shopping/etc. with the extra time due to turning on the laptop and not having to commute personally. I imagine parents felt relieved to have less to do and pay for."*

*Personally, I rarely had to fill the car which was a nice bonus. Face to face practical things can never be replaced but all of the theory, which you have to go and study yourself anyway, could be left online in my opinion. I think in 2021 it's environmentally unfriendly, time consuming and plain unnecessary to show up for face to face theory lectures 5 days a week, or give a choice to participants who learn better in person.” (DkIT student)*

Many students requested that lectures be recorded and available online at a time that would fit around that student’s other commitments.

*“Record the lectures and send to students to watch again” / “More pre-recorded classes.” / “Ask the lecturers to pre-record lectures and upload them so if we can’t make it they are there to watch...” / “I truly believe pre-recorded lectures are more effective than joining live classes. Some areas do not have a stable internet connection.” (DkIT students).*

THEA has committed to conducting a post-COVID sectoral review of our sector’s responsiveness and evaluating our preparedness for a similarly disruptive event in the future and DkIT will be an active partner in this process. However, there is a strong role for the HEA in conducting a similar review with particular emphasis on how existing inequalities have been reinforced or mitigated.

### **Inclusivity and Student Success**

The concept of Student Success provides a useful framework for understanding and enhancing experiences and outcomes for all students. The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning’s has developed a National Understanding of Student Success [National Understanding of Student Success - National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education](#) that identifies key enablers: engagement and student partnership; assessment and feedback; professional development and the centrality of teachers; transitions and cultivating belonging; evidence-based decision making; enabling policies and practices. Each of these provides a useful focus for enhancement activity that will benefit all learners.

Developing a sense of belonging is recognized internationally as a key element of successful transition within higher education. Within the Technological Higher Education Institutes (THEIs), the relatively small class sizes allow high levels of contact between students and academic staff. This may encourage positive relationships<sup>3</sup> and is likely to support transition. While whole institution approaches are needed to foster belonging, academic activities at the programme level seem to be particularly effective.

Higher education requires students to engage in literacy practices that may be unfamiliar to them, and evidence shows that this is a challenging aspect of transition for many. Academic reading and writing are often viewed solely as skills, rather than disciplinary discourse practices that play a key role in disciplinary socialisation. Further, the expectations are often tacit and thus challenging for many students. This aspect of disciplinary socialization may be particularly challenging for students who are ‘first in family’ in third level education and/or from a family background that is not drawn from the professions. Cultural capital that facilitates this socialisation differs across socio-economic groups. Making space for academic literacy within the curriculum would help to make these

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<sup>3</sup> For example, evidence from StudentSurvey.ie indicates that THEIs score relatively well on *Student-Faculty Interaction* and *Quality of Interaction*, see [StudentSurvey.ie National Report 2020 | Student Survey](#)

expectations explicit and provide additional support and guidance within the context of the discipline, benefiting all students. Libraries and learning development/writing centres have an important contribution to make in terms of both supporting academic teams and individual students.

A UDL approach offers significant benefits for all students and has an important role to play in any whole institution approach to access and student success. Nationally, the UDL digital badge developed by AHEAD and the National Forum has had a very high level of engagement and done much to raise awareness of UDL. Ongoing professional development and training opportunities in UDL will be important in terms of mainstreaming UDL, as will support and resourcing for implementation at level of each institution. At a national level, this requires a recognition of the fact that the ratio of non-academic staff to academic staff is lower within THEIs than in the 'traditional' universities, as well as a commitment and sufficient funding to redress this historical imbalance.

Assessment plays a significant role in shaping the student experience and as such is an important focus consideration in terms of access. The contemporary focus on assessment *for/as/of* learning explicitly recognizes that assessment can serve several functions. Assessment *for* learning emphasizes the formative potential of assessment and particularly the powerful impact of good feedback. An inclusive approach to assessment design, including offering appropriate choice, is important in a meeting the needs of a diverse student body. Programme-focused approaches help to ensure that a range of types of assessment are used across a programme and that students have opportunities to discuss and use feedback.

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning has carried out a significant of work around assessment in the past year and this represents a valuable resource for institutions and practitioners seeking to enhance their assessment practices. Professional development and training play a crucial role in sustaining high impact learning and teaching practices, supported by enabling policies at both national and local level. This also requires resourcing to be considered and prioritized, particularly considering, the very heavy teaching loads within the THEIs. Finally, better data is needed to be able to evaluate the impact on target groups. This is the time for a national strategy to track individual student success within and across institutions, with a particular emphasis on tracking the extent to which membership of one or more of the target groups interplays with student success.