

The Institute of Technology Sligo welcome the opportunity to contribute to the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education. As part of THEA, staff from our Access office contributed to the collective statement below which encapsulated the Institutes of Technologies agility in meeting the needs of a broad spectrum of students and their commitment to continue to do so.

THEA STATEMENT ON THE VISION FOR EQUITY OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND FOR THE PERIOD 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](https://studentsurvey.ie)¹. 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.

¹ 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 institutions²
- 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

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

WHAT SHOULD OUR OVERALL VISION FOR EQUITY OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND BE FOR 2022-2026?

The vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022-2026 should be one that is inclusive of all learners and have clear indicators of how this vision of inclusion will be achieved. Our systems and processes should exclude no potential person from engaging in education. Our economy requires a supply of innovative and critical thinking graduates who bring diverse ideas to their places of work. Similarly, our wider social and cultural development as a nation also requires learners who are creative, socially engaged and equipped to challenge traditional ways of thinking. We should be aiming to mainstream inclusion. This will require both providers of educators, funders, and policy makers to be agile and visionary in their thinking and practice. The pandemic has shown that we have the capacity to work together for the common good and this harnessing of working towards the common good needs to be built upon.

In practical terms this will mean hyper flex models of delivery, widening the choice of delivery modes, access to SUSI/ funding for learners regardless of mode of delivery, equipment grants, rural broadband, Post primary, HE and FE s working together more to make potential pathways easier to understand, access and navigate by potential learners etc.

INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT ACCESS: DEPLOYMENT OF BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGY

Creating a national blockchain system for education would enable the central storage of student learning records; this can improve access to learning records across colleges, making the registration processes more efficient. It could also help students see what careers available and what courses are they need to take, assisting the personalisation of the student learning journey. Furthermore, if HEI's identify obstacles of minimum entry by subject, a national body could create and host the courses. These courses would follow a MOOC model; they would be free and always open, with the possibility of tutor support as required. At the moment, some HEI's or programmes create access courses; however, by creating and financing a national MOOC platform, you are removing the need for each HEI to develop a version of that course. Additionally, these courses could assist with the RPL of students with industry experience.

INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT ACCESS: UNIVERSAL ADOPTION OF THE PRINCIPLES OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING SUPPORTED THROUGH THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

The development of a Centre of Excellence in Inclusive Practice which should be a centralized unit of dedicated people with a mission to streamline access to scarce, high-demand capabilities for rapid execution of Universal Design for Learning implementation across the higher education sector in Ireland. This group would hone

expertise in specific subject areas, standardizes best practices for wide-scale adoption, and provides thought leadership & direction in this area of expertise. While UCD, UCC and Ahead have contributed significantly to this area of education within HE, the HE sector in Ireland has not sought to bridge the gap with transitions from one sector to the other in relation to best inclusive practice which impacts both admission and retention of college students. Additionally, these HEIs work independently within their own silos and there is not a centralized unit in relation to inclusive practice within Ireland. Since its inception of the UDL Working Group (est. Dec 2019) IT Sligo has made significant strides in implementing and sharing best inclusive practice through several key developments within a UDL initiative that has produced wide academic staff participation. The North/ Northwest of Ireland is home to several HEI's that work independently on UDL progression. These developments are fairly new and are gaining slow traction. (LYIT, GMIT, AIT, St. Angela's) However, centralising these efforts and working collaboratively will scale these operations. Our proposed Centre of Excellence which was part IT Sligo HEA Compact submission, will scale within the organization and replicate its activities across varied HEIs.

INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT ACCESS: ACCESS TO FUNDING SUPPORTS FOR FULL TIME STUDENTS REGARDLESS OF MODE OF DELIVERY

Full time online programmes are more attractive and amenable for many learners but recipients of these programmes have not the same access/eligibility to current financial supports via SUSI by virtue of mode of delivery.

WHO ARE THE TARGET GROUPS THAT SHOULD BE SPECIFIED IN THE NEXT NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN?

The core 4 pillar target groups (people with disabilities, socio-economically disadvantaged, mature students and members of the travelling community) as well as those marginalised with less obvious needs of educational inclusion, those with less educational capital – as in the learners of the iNote* and **Higher Ed 4All programmes. These learners are the carers, stay at home mothers, people with significant social, physical or mental issues and persons with Intellectual disabilities.

** The iNote project (HEA Innovation in Teaching & Learning award) provides opportunities to transform the higher education experience through the building of digital capacity which will transform the teaching, learning, delivery and student support experience.*

***Higher Ed4All : The aim of this HEA project is to provide flexible, fulltime, online/blended programmes, listed via the CAO, for students who would find it too challenging to participate successfully in an on-campus course – for a range of reasons such as: caring/family business responsibilities; disability; social communication barrier; cost; or geographical isolation. Currently there are two such programmes on offer at IT Sligo. The following bodies are co collaborators with IT SLIGO-Family Carers Ireland, Disability Federation Ireland, Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim ETB.*

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)?

Connecting programmes such as the current programme development Social Health and Community engagement (SHACE), Higher Ed 4all or similar models to Access programmes nationally or through a Centre of Excellence in Inclusive Practice as proposed above. A collaboration between third level programmes designed to support the vulnerable members of society and Access programmes will unite a measurable and supportive

third level pathway. The educational sector needed to be engaging with this cohort in a meaningful way to gain an appreciation of their future desires and gain an understanding of the perceived and potential barriers to them in the educational sector.

HOW CAN PRE-ENTRY AND POST-ENTRY ACTIVITIES BE DEVELOPED?

Pre-entry

1. 3rd level Educational Mentors situated in disadvantaged areas (within community development groups) to bridge support of access.
2. (Disabled/ neurodivergent) bridge support programmes for second to third level. There is a large number of attrition rates among disabled third level students and connection to third level within the senior cycle is imperative to their overall development and transition.
3. (Mature & Mental Health) SHACE programme collaboration, which also works with employment post entry.
4. Online short courses on a HEI MOOC platform that all HEIs can use to create common course to basic entry supports. e.g Maths
5. School outreach programmes should be mainstreamed and funded.
6. Access to funded pre leaving cert tutorials
7. Expand opportunities for non-traditional learners to participate in taster modules which require no commitment to register.

Post Entry

1. Support programme with targeted measurement for each pillar group and agencies that will work collaboratively on this transition. A place at the Access table for Careers Offices to collaborate on these transitions prior to exit.

INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT DIFFERENT STUDENT COHORTS

Socio-economically disadvantaged students

Consideration should be given to building bridging courses in the FT sector or MOOCs into HEI. Target particular courses in which students have a real opportunity to find work locally. These may be courses that provide bridging into what HEIs offer via Springboard.

Students with disabilities

Full-time online education can assist students in entering the system through the CAO; some of these students may have practical barriers to accessing higher education such as transport, carers etc. A HighFlex model of teaching enables students to choose the mode of education that best suits their need, opening their choice to how they can access HE.

Students who are members of the Irish Traveller community

The expansion of scholarships can demonstrate the government and HEI's seriousness about addressing minority access issues. HEI's can bridge the gap by consciously including travellers and other ethnic or gender minorities into HE Projects. They can also open up their physical "spaces" or resources for local groups to bring members physically into the local HEI's. This introduces the possibility of higher education with its members; it makes it a less daunting prospect. The promotion of HE as an option to minorities by their peers makes the idea of access to HE real, a leading by example philosophy.

First-time mature students

HEI's need to identify and advertise pathways of entry from the FE to HE sectors; furthermore, these courses need to be mapped to careers. Students need a clearer picture of what course they can take and where the emerging employment sectors are. This section of the population will require upskilling or will change their career, and these pathways are not always apparent to them. The FE and HEI sectors are good at mapping within their industry but not cross-sector.

[HOW CAN CURRENT FUNDING PROGRAMMES BE BETTER UTILISED TO FURTHER THE OBJECTIVES OF THE NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN?](#)

There should be free, central common access programmes.

Non-traditional modes of delivery which address geographical and mobility inequities should be supported.

Build in accountability into the funding streams. HEIs should be accountable (via FSD for example) for embedding UDL into programmes and for providing comprehensive plans with measurable goals and targets.

New support roles such as Neuro-Diverse Support roles should be considered.

[HOW CAN A WHOLE-OF EDUCATION APPROACH TO WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION BE ACHIEVED?](#)

Initiatives to support widening access should commence in primary schools. A concept similar to the Mental Health Initiative Big Brother: Big sister should be considered between DEIS schools' pupils and the staff of local HEIs.

Ensure the campus is perceived as a community resource for all sectors of society. The resources- physical and intellectual should be available to local communities to support projects, local cultural/ social initiatives etc.

[How can pathways between further education and training and higher education be better developed?](#)

Both the FET and HE sector need to provide opportunities for their students to take common modules. These modules could be credit or non-credit bearing. If credit bearing, there may be an opportunity for exemptions to be given through the RPL system of the HE at a later stage.

The FE and HE sector need to present the potential learner with a clear pathway that details how they can progress through the FE sector and onto the HE sector. Gaps in provision should be responded to collectively.

HOW CAN THE GOAL OF MAINSTREAMING BE FURTHER EMBEDDED IN HEIS?

The concept of mainstreaming should be replaced with the concept of inclusivity. Widening participation and creating the structures/ environment for inclusion should be seen as everyone's business in Education and not seen as the remit of Access officers etc. Access officers should be facilitated through the necessary supportive resources to be educators and leaders in good practice not the primary "doer". Staff at Faculty/ Department should be provided with the resources to initiate and embed inclusive practices and process through the employment of specialists roles centrally such as instructional designers, inclusive support workers etc.

The educational needs of non traditional students beyond the 4 core pillar target groups should be considered and responded to- for example persons with intellectual disability, chronic mental health and the aged.

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

The most obvious challenge was flipping the classroom and providing alternative assessments in what has been mostly a traditional learning setting. Again, a solution is a centralised unit working exclusively with all HEIs to progress and upskill colleagues on inclusively designing curriculum.

The on-campus environment facilitates the development of trusting relationships between academic staff and students. This is much harder to replicate in an on-line setting. Each student should be allocated a mentor for the duration of their studies in the Institute. A particular emphasis should be placed on year 1 students as the transition into third level can be very challenging. This should be resourced and not left in a voluntary capacity.

Assumption that all third level students are technologically competent. HEIs should have a means of assessing technological competence on admission and provide training/ support at the level required.

The inaccessibility of some processes/documents. A solution is the adoption of accessibility tools such as Blackboard Ally, an accessibility tool, into Moodle and the provision of training to staff/students.

Students were disadvantaged through non modifiable factors such as poor broadband in rural areas.

PRESIDENT OF STUDENT UNION FEEDBACK

What is the biggest challenge for students in accessing higher education?

There are many barriers to higher education for students in Ireland, none greater than the cost associated with attending higher education. At €3000 students in Ireland pay the highest fee's in the EU and that is before we begin to talk about the substantially greater fees paid by international students. Postgraduate students and international students are being used to plug a gap in government funding and are essentially being used as cash cows.

Another barrier to higher education is the over-reliance on the private student accommodation market that has left a disastrous track record for students, society, and the government's own response to the housing crisis. The standards of student accommodation has drastically fallen but prices have risen over the past number of years.

The largest barrier facing students in Ireland is finance. We need a publicly funded higher education system which means that the government is investing in our young people. For every €1 invested in Higher Education, a further €4 is circulated in the economy. Investment in Higher Education can act as a powerful stimulus to re-ignite our economy, and transform our society with higher levels of education, employment, and life satisfaction.

[How has Covid-19 impacted on students e.g., academic, financial, health, college experience and how can we address these impacts?](#)

The Covid-19 pandemic has been one of the most difficult times for students in this country. The Students' Union welcomed the increase in funding for student supports. The increase to mental health supports has been hugely welcomed, with hope that these supports can be extended long into the future. Bridging the digital divide for students in supplying a laptop lending scheme for the shift to remote learning.

Students have been stuck in their bedrooms for the past 15 months trying to learn remotely which we feel has had a negative impact on their learning. Studying online does not easily facilitate group work or networking. Students have been a credit to themselves with their efforts and commitment to their courses. With the need to have students back on campus as soon as possible to enhance the aspect of teaching and learning.

The college experience this year has taken a massive hit with the main forms of student engagement, clubs & societies, reduced to virtual meet ups. Students have been massively exhausted by the number of virtual classes, meet ups and events throughout the year with many not engaging due to this burn out. First year students have been the worst affected by the pandemic with some of which never meeting their colleagues.

Fundamental to the return to campus is engaging this cohort with the new cohort of students to ensure that they have the sense of belonging to the IT Sligo Community.

[What can make a difference for students accessing and completing higher education?](#)

By breaking down the barriers to higher education and giving students the emotional and academic supports to fulfil their potential will make a huge difference to accessing education.

Students value success in many ways and by continuously supporting those students through their time in college will lead to higher completion rate. By providing students with the ingredients to succeed through better resources like the enhancing study spaces, it will lead to a higher level of students completing their courses. By continuously helping students navigate their career paths and enticing them to put their best foot forward.

Students must also want to take this opportunity and avail of these resources, by signposting them to these supports will give the student a better return on investment.

