



Mary Immaculate College

Response document

**Submission to Public Consultation Process for the next
National Access Plan 2022-2026**

June 2021

INTRODUCTION

Mary Immaculate College (MIC) is an autonomous, university-level, Catholic College of Education and the Liberal Arts. Founded in 1898, and linked academically with the University of Limerick, MIC is the oldest higher education institution (HEI) in Limerick. Significant expansion in recent decades has seen the College's offerings proliferate across two impressive campuses, one based in the heart of Limerick City, and one in Thurles, Co. Tipperary. The diverse student community comprises of more than 5,000 learners, participating in 12 undergraduate degree programmes and a multiplicity of postgraduate opportunities extending to doctoral level. Academic staff are engaged in a wide range of research interests, which underpins all teaching and learning at the College. MIC seeks to prepare its students for professional excellence and to nurture their capacity to lead flourishing lives.

MIC welcomes the opportunity to respond to Public Consultation Process for the next National Access Plan 2022-2026. The College strongly supports this consultation process, which seeks to identify the challenges and strengths associated with higher education (HE) participation by students traditionally underrepresented in HE and offers a number of options for future development in this sphere. The consultation document was circulated to several interested parties among MIC staff and faculty and this response collates the feedback received as a result of this process.

RESPONSE TO THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION PUBLIC CONSULTATION PROCESS FOR THE NEXT NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN 2022-2026

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

While we agree with a strategic approach to the review of existing policies and structures, As an institution, MIC wishes to make a contribution to the ideals of lifelong learning and mature student participation, which includes developing and enhancing skills, continuing professional development and importantly, learning for the sake of learning. We would stress the need to look beyond the solely utilitarian model. As stated in the previous MIC Strategic Plan (2012-2016):

[Higher] educational participation must offer the skills necessary for labour market but must also extend equity of opportunity to people at all stages within the lifecycle, with a range of motivations for learning, including for its own sake...ensures that ...[graduates] are not simply geared for participation in the Smart Economy, but for the creation of a Just Economy (MIC Strategic Plan, 2012: 7).

The College is supported of the move towards the development of a thematic approach in the new Access Plan. MIC acknowledges that while target-setting is a useful instrument of policy, as we move towards the third national access plan, it is timely that a more nuanced understanding of widening and broadening of participation in higher education develops.

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 experience of being in care)?

MIC supports the continued inclusion and targeted support of mature students in the next National Access Plan. The issues, barriers and challenges associated with

participation in higher education by current and potential first-time mature students are well addressed in the body of literature on adult learning. Finance (both student and institutional) plays a key role in participation of mature students (for example, Cross, 1981; Ozga & Sukhnanan, 1997 and 1998; Woodley *et al.*, 1987; Thomas, 2001; Reay, 2002; EC, 2010) and certainly in an Irish context, research concurs that finance constitutes a substantial obstacle to pursuing third-level studies for many adult learners (Fleming and Murphy, 1997; Lynch, 1997; Inglis and Murphy, 1999). Our experience at MIC supports this.

Working with and supporting students over an extended period foregrounds the need for access to emergency funding for mature students when their financial circumstances deteriorate suddenly. Stresses faced by families financially if a partner becomes unemployed or if the household struggles with the challenges of family illness, or the death of a supportive parent are often overwhelming. Any sudden deterioration in their often-precarious financial situation has negative impacts on the mental health of mature students and on their ability to reach their potential on their programme. MIC encourages students to apply for the Student Assistance Fund and uses philanthropic funding, when possible, to support students in need but there are insufficient financial resources to meet individual student demand. We have a duty of care to all students and especially mature students who have worked towards entering HE for some time. State measures such as the 1916 bursary fund awarded by the Programme for Access to Third Level Education (PATH) Strand two and philanthropic approaches such as Uiversity are positive developments although the numbers that can benefit remain small.

Many mature students have lived financially independent lives for several years and have no financial support available from their families. They engage in significant levels of part-time work, often to the detriment of their studies. Mature students have described how they work in bars and nightclubs until the early hours of the morning and still attend all lectures. Due to significant part-time work commitments students

are often chronically sleep deprived and this negatively impacts on their ability to achieve academically. Opportunities to successfully participate on full-time programmes of study are only real opportunities if they are matched with adequate funding levels which allow students to focus on their programme of study and to flourish in HE.

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

Key learning from the pre-entry and post-entry work completed by MIC highlight the longitudinal nature of access work, particularly with those coming from more marginalised backgrounds. Our work shows the need for additional individualised supports for both prospective students and students in HE programmes. The range of supports often include but are not limited to, system navigation signposting, financial support, academic support and cultural 'dislocation' and navigation, therefore continued and further resourcing will support the development of pre-entry and post-entry activities.

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

Building relationships with faculty and professional services staff is particularly important for students throughout their ongoing transition into HE. This transitional period tends to be quite extended for mature first-time entrants, especially those from non-traditional HE backgrounds (Tett *et al.*, 2012). Extensive experience of working with access students indicates the necessity of having flexible supports in place and adopting an open-door policy. This proactive approach, and ongoing relationship building, ensures that small worries and concerns can be dealt with in a supportive and timely manner before they become more serious issues.

Current funding periods (e.g. three years for PATH programmes) can create challenges for longer term more strategic planning. Many third level undergraduate programmes are four years in duration therefore a three-year period of funding does not currently allow for planning to support incoming students through their HE programme in full. This limitation poses an operational risk of comprising student success. Longer term funding (e.g. 6 years +) would enable programmes to be better utilised to further the objectives of the National Access Plan, embedding programmes and supporting sustainability in the long-term.

5.How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded within HEIs?

Higher education institutional culture influences how adult access is constructed endogenously. At the level of the individual HEI, there is a need for more and ongoing dialogue as well as an articulation of how and why access is important at the level of each institution among all categories of staff. Institution-wide dialogue would facilitate a greater awareness of access activities and contribute to the mainstreaming of access which, as the evidence shows, is work in progress. Therefore, it is recommended that greater investment is needed in the area of staff development and training through Access sections, Centres for Teaching and Learning and Human Resource offices. Such initiatives have potential to feed into revisions and development of institutional mission statements and strategic planning activities. Further, it is recommended that the governance of access at institutional level is revisited. In many HEIs, the governance of access is administratively dominated. In terms of improving the status of access work and ensuring that mainstreaming is taking place, it is important that access is seen as core work and therefore, it is recommended that there is cross-institutional democratic representation on the various access committees and that such committees are chaired by a senior academic who is obligated to report into various governance committees. Membership of access

committees should include representation of the student body as well as from senior administration and academic management.

Work practices are changing among higher education professionals. Emerging themes in the discourse among access personnel include the casualisation of labour, job security, lack of access to promotional opportunities, opportunities to access research funding and participation in international or supra-national networks. It is recommended, therefore, that the work of access staff should be valued, appreciated and encouraged by institutions. MIC advocates for a need to support access staff development and the establishment of mechanisms to encourage interested access personnel to up-skill and become research active and disseminate their findings via local, national or international fora. Such investments will not only facilitate retention of staff but contribute towards the mainstreaming of institutional access endeavours

6. How can a whole-of-education approach to widening participation in higher education be achieved? 8. How can other social inclusion initiatives outside of the higher education sector be harnessed to support equity of access objectives?

It is important that higher education institutions are involved locally and working partnership is a useful approach to fostering relationships and bringing the institution out into the community, thereby reducing perceptions of elitism. Working in partnership acknowledges that access work is more than just about attracting greater numbers of access students. This aspect of work recognises that educational disadvantage is multi-faceted and complex and some of the work undertaken by access staff, particularly in local communities, functions more in a longitudinal inter-generational way, rather than yield immediate dividends. It is recommended that working in partnership continues to be valued as a mechanism to support access and that further research is needed in this area. In addition, it is timely to move access from the realm of project-based work and mainstream by committing additional resources

to the area. Experiences and successes over the past few years with the PATH programme, in particular, highlight the role that 'champions' or access advocates can make on the ground. Working across the different aspects of the education system is complex and at times, messy and 'champions' are key agents in navigating these structures.

Gorard *et al.* (2006) consider that partnership works more effectively at a strategic, rather than an operational, level and is not without challenge. MIC argues that partnership is a way of bringing more cohesion to the broad area of access for all concerned and is also necessary in the context of dwindling support from exchequer funds and the need to be more cost-effective. In addition, some literature shows that partnerships present new ways of working and therefore pose a number of challenges. Gorard *et al.* (2006: 93) identify these as 'practical, organisational and cultural...market pressure and funding methodologies create further tensions'.

Nonetheless, there are risks for HEIs in working in partnerships to promote access. Some of these interesting issues included programme duplication, definition of boundaries between the sectors, as well as concerns around the lack of return in terms of student numbers versus the degree of financial and personnel investment. MIC is committed to the principle of partnership and our/its access staff and academic staff are deeply involved intra-institutionally, local, regionally and nationally. There were also growing instances of international collaboration and of students being involved in a partnership model of working.

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

McGrogan (1995) discusses how the impact of collaborative working arrangements depends on the different partnership structures. For example, if some collaborations

form on a voluntary basis, this may influence levels of involvement and commitment to collaboration and trust. Further, if the structure of the collaboration is a horizontal one, where all higher education institutions are equal, this probably results in reducing competitiveness between institutions for funding and other resources. Although many of the endogenous higher education institutional access-related partnerships emerged in response to exogenous competitive funding schemes, such as Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF), and the Programme for Access to Third level (PATH), essentially the structure of the partnership was vertical with one institution assuming a lead role. Clearly individual agents were committed, as many of the consortia or alliances have continued in between funding periods, but they may also be seen as part of the wider clustering which is ongoing in the HE landscape at present. The emergence of these consortia and alliances illustrate the ability of individual and collective agents to adapt and self-organise in response to a constantly changing exogenous policy environment.

MIC has established a series of appropriate entry and exit points for inclusive life-long learning. In line with the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, in terms of provision, the College has developed a suite of access courses as follows: Pre-University Programmes (PUPs) (community based outreach taster accredited programmes), a Foundation Certificate for Mature Students (Level 6 Special Purpose Award, BA entry), a B.Ed. (Primary) Adult Access Course (developed and delivered in partnership with the Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board) and a Programme in Contemporary Living for people with intellectual disabilities (developed in partnership with the National Institute for Intellectual Disability at Trinity College Dublin). Over the years, this suite of programmes has greatly augmented the numbers of mature students enrolling in MIC. Further, participation in these preparatory years ensure that mature students are well prepared. Despite the challenges, across organisations and among our partners, it is clear that management,

staff and students greatly value the programmes. We believe these are examples of good practice across the sectors.

It is imperative that further research on the impact of access courses delivered in partnership, or delivered externally by the further education sector, is undertaken. Findings reveal that progression rates to undergraduate courses vary and more research is needed to explore this further. In particular, there is a need to gather cross-sectoral data in both the further and higher education sectors, with reference to access including entry route, subsequent academic performance and post-graduation destinations. We are confident that the findings would reflect positively on both sectors. However, it is noteworthy that individual agents within each organisation play a significant role in providing access to higher education and results point to the existence of a complex web of social relationships across agents (Mason, 2008). MIC further suggests that interaction across a wide range of collaborative partnerships is pivotal to providing access to higher education. Institutional research reflects that partnership is a relatively new way of working for the sector and both structure and agency within the FE and HE sectors need to combine to provide for greater access.

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

The emergence of COVID-19 has presented both opportunity and threat to an inclusive Irish higher education system. The sudden and rapid pivot to online learning brought some challenges to everyone in the sector. However, working online ultimately provided a greater efficiency in work practices, particularly in terms of outreach work. Some participants noted a greater engagement with online information sessions, open days and evenings. The move online ensured that more materials, resources and information were included on HEI websites. Geographical challenges were also negated. This is very important learning from an access

perspective. Further, in terms of gender/equality, female students and those with caring responsibilities or mental health issues have benefited from the flexibility offered by the online learning environment. In addition, the hybrid model has facilitated a rapid transition to UDL, a move very much welcomed by students with disabilities. Finally, the continuous assessment model has afforded opportunity for a deeper engagement with the teaching and learning environment and has reduced many of the stressors students in access categories frequently express and is reflected in the lower retention rates and higher academic attainment level. The reduction in physical space required in HEIs and the associated decline in travel to/from work and college have obvious benefits to further the national goals in the area of climate change and sustainability.

Challenges include the institution-wide recognition that the relational/normative aspects and social aspect of higher education matter a lot and how can this be fostered in a hybrid model. This has implications for the planning involved in the start of the next academic year.

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