



**Maynooth
University**
National University
of Ireland Maynooth

Submission by Maynooth University

NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN

2022 – 2026

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1. Widening Participation, Access, Diversity, and Inclusion at Maynooth University

The [Maynooth University Institutional Review Report](#) (2019) named Maynooth University (MU) as a ‘national leader on all dimensions of widening participation at undergraduate level in university education’. MU is proud to have one of the highest percentage of students from disadvantaged/ underrepresented populations of any University in Ireland where 49% of the student body are SUSI recipients¹; 28% of new enrolments from under-represented socio-economic groups²; 15% of new enrolments have a disability³; and 10% of the student body are from the most disadvantaged areas (Deprivation Index)⁴. MU has an outstanding record of partnership with the most marginalised communities. The MU tradition of engaging with prisoners and former prisoners and of supporting penal reform contributed to the University’s decision to identify ‘prisoners and former prisoners’ as an under-represented group in our student population in the [Maynooth University Strategic Plan 2018-2022](#) (Maynooth University, 2018). MU has also led ground-breaking work over the last two decades in relation to Traveller access to HE, with 29 Travellers currently studying at MU.

MU has recognised widening participation, diversity and inclusion as central to University strategy and pivotal to student success with Goal 6 of the [Maynooth University Strategic Plan 2018-2022](#) (2018) calling on the campus community to ‘*build on our achievements to date and become a model university for equality, diversity, inclusion and interculturalism*’ by intensifying our efforts for the groups that we currently serve and to extend our work to meet the needs of other marginalised groups.

The vision, goals and targets contained in the MU Strategic Plan 2018-2022 are reflected in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011), which provides a roadmap for reform of higher education. It identifies that the capacity of higher education in Ireland will have to double again over the next twenty years and highlights that those

¹ SUSI - Student Grants Recipients Review, HEA (2015). This is the latest data available as SUSI and HEA currently looking at GDPR issues before release of further data

² New enrolments from under-represented socioeconomic groups (HEA 2019) - Higher Education System Performance, Institutional & Sectoral Profiles 2016-17 (HEA, 2019)

³ New enrolments with disabilities (HEA 2019) - Higher Education System Performance, Institutional & Sectoral Profiles 2016-17 (HEA, 2019)

⁴ Student Body from Areas of Disadvantage - Spatial and Socio-Economic Profile of the Higher Education Population 2018/2019, (HEA 2020)

entering the system now and, in the future, will have very diverse learning needs. It calls on higher education to innovate and develop to provide flexible opportunities for larger and more diverse student cohorts.

‘Equity of Access and Student Pathways’ is the second of seven priority objectives of the Higher Education System Performance Framework and forms a key component in the MU’s annual Performance Compact Agreement with the HEA. The [Maynooth University Mission Based Performance Compact 2018-2021](#) (HEA, 2014) reflects the goals, objectives and targets of the [National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019](#) (HEA, 2015) and the [Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021](#) (HEA, 2018a) and MU’s own widening participation strategy.

MU is committed to embedding a whole-of-university approach to access and student success and to sustaining our excellent completion rates for students from disadvantaged cohorts. The System Performance Framework requires HEI’s to have a Student Success Strategy by 2020 which will ‘embed whole of HEI approaches to institutional access strategies’ (HEA, 2018b: 12) and MU is progressing this key objective through participation as a pilot HEI in the National Forum Student Success project.

Two reviews to support national access strategy have been initiated in the last eighteen months. MU made a submission to the *HEA Research on Mature Student Participation in Higher Education* in June 2020 and the *Review of Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI)* in April 2021. We look forward to seeing how the learning and recommendations from both studies can be reflected in the National Access Plan (NAP) 2022-2026.

2. National Access Plan 2022-2026 – Maynooth University Consultation

Maynooth University (MU) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the [Public Consultation Process for the next National Access Plan 2022-2026](#) (HEA, 2021) which was announced on 16 April 2021 with the closing date for receipt of submissions set as Friday 18 June 2021.

The [National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019](#) (HEA, 2015) was the third national access plan which had a vision of ensuring that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education (HE) at all levels reflected the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. The plan set out five goals and more than thirty actions with the aim of supporting increased access and participation in higher education by six main target groups (i) entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education; (ii) first-time mature students; (iii) students with disabilities; (iv) part-time/flexible learners; (v) further education and training award holders; and (vi) Irish Travellers.

As part of the consultation process, MU considered the [Progress Review of the National Access Plan](#) that reported on achievements and challenges during the lifetime of the current plan (HEA, 2018a). The review acknowledged the increases in participation rates across several target groups, significant additional investment in new access initiatives with the Programme for Access to Higher Education Fund (PATH⁵) and the development of the Access Data Plan⁶ which was highlighted as a landmark achievement to enable a new framework for evidence-based policy making to inform the direction of future access policies and the setting of targets in respect of equity of access. The review also highlighted some of the challenges including the failure to reach targets in respect of certain target groups particularly mature students and Travellers, limited progress achieved in respect of pathways from further education and training to higher education and challenges in ensuring that access infrastructures in HEI's are connected and integrated and reflect mainstreaming objectives.

From a policy perspective, MU was also cognisant of the new emphasis nationally and institutionally on student success for the target groups in HE with the central requirement of the new System Performance Framework 2018-2020 (HEA, 2018b) requiring all HEI's to have a Student

⁵ The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) has been progressed by the HEA and Department of Education and Skills (DES). PATH is a dedicated fund of with three separate strands to support HEI's to implement the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019.

⁶ Haase, Trutz and Pratschke (2018), A Data Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education

Success Strategy in place by 2020 to embed whole-of-HEI approaches to institutional access strategies. This is a key policy priority.

As part of this submission, MU conducted a campus wide consultation process. This process sought input from staff, students and community stakeholders and partners at consultation sessions held in May and June 2021. This submission has been prepared based on the learning from our achievements and experiences working with students and community stakeholders to date and our learning from this consultation process.

This submission to the National Access Plan (NAP) 2022-2026 is based on the key questions asked in the [NAP 2022-2026 Consultation Paper](#) (HEA and DFHERIS, 2021) outlined below:

- What should our overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022-2026?
- 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)?
- How can pre-entry and post-entry activities be developed?
- How can current funding programmes be better utilised to further the objectives of the National Access Plan?
- How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded within HEI's?
- How can a whole-of education approach to widening participation in higher education be achieved?
- How can pathways between further education and training and higher education be better developed?
- How can other social inclusion initiatives outside of the higher education sector be harnessed to support equity of access objectives?
- What challenges has COVID-19 presented in relation to an inclusive higher education system and how can they be addressed?

MU considered one further question which had not been flagged but that is a priority from a MU perspective as follows:

- How can data and evidence support NAP practice and policy?

MU considered each of the above questions and has outlined a response together with recommendations under each of these headings. The recommendations are also summarised in Section 12.

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

A new vision for higher education as a model sector for equality, diversity, inclusion

The [National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019](#) (HEA, 2015) articulated a vision of ensuring that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education (HE) at all levels reflected the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population.

This is a strong vision but should be reframed. The evidence is that the cycle of educational disadvantage commences at birth and that the roots of inequality can be found in "...the social and economic disadvantage of communities and families (e.g., poverty and the factors related to it, such as unemployment, parental education, and occupational attainment" (Kellaghan et al. 1995: 23). The vision for the next national access plan should include more actions related to joining up policy and practice across all education sectors to support equality of opportunity at all points in a student's life journey.

A new vision might be to build on our achievements to date to become a model sector for equality, diversity and inclusion focussing on HEI's as models of inclusion meeting the needs of a diverse student and staff body. In this vision, diversity is expected and celebrated, and student success is about recognising the complexity of all our lived experiences and having targeted approaches for working with students who present with additional needs. In this vision, we can incorporate all the elements of equality, diversity, and inclusion into an inclusive institutional framework.

1. **Recommendation:** Articulate a new vision for the NAP seeking to build on our achievements to date to become a model sector for equality, diversity and inclusion focussing on HEI's as models of inclusion meeting the needs of a diverse student and staff body.

4. Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan?

How do we ensure vulnerable members of our society are included (e.g., learners currently in care or who have experience of being in care)?

Having a target group/s named in the Plan has provided an important strategic impetus for institutional and sectoral initiatives and focus. MU is recommending that clarity be provided in relation to the definitions of all NAP target groups, that additional target groups be named in the new plan, that the intersectional nature of disadvantage be explicitly considered and addressed, that the student voice directs and informs actions and that target groups and that access to STEM be explicitly prioritised in the new Plan.

4.1 Definitions

There continues to be uncertainty across the sector about the definitions of each of the named target groups in the NAP which contributes to issues in relation to a lack of clarity and cohesion on targeting, data collection and reporting.

- 2. Recommendation:** Initiate a consultation process to review and clearly define each target group in the NAP so that all HEI's are working to the same definitions.
- 3. Recommendation:** Articulate the rationale for the inclusion of a target group based on research, evidence and data and update/refine as necessary over the lifetime of the Plan.
- 4. Recommendation:** Use language in relation to target groups that is positive and empowering to ensure that targeting is not conflated with labelling and stigma.

4.2 Target Groups

There have been significant developments in data and evidence since the launch of the current plan in December 2014. This improved evidence base including [Higher-Education-Spatial-Socio-Economic-Profile-Oct-2019 Academic Year 2017-2018.pdf](#) which provided a spatial and socio-economic profile of Higher Education Institutions in Ireland using census small area deprivation index scores (HEA, 2019) and recent research including the national review of the Higher Education Access Route scheme (2021, forthcoming), provide new data to inform the identification of NAP target groups.

5. Recommendation: Name the following target groups in the new NAP (a detailed rationale for the inclusion of these groups is included in Appendix A).

- Travellers and Roma
- Refugees and protection applicants
- Care experienced
- Lone parents and teen parents
- People with prison experience
- Students attending DEIS schools
- Students living in areas identified as disadvantaged (deprivation index)
- Working class girls/STEM

4.3 Intersectionality and Multiple Identities

Successive national access plans have aimed to broaden access to HE primarily by setting quantitative targets to increase participation in HE by specific groups that continue to be under-represented. The access plans to date have not address the intersectionality of disadvantage and the quantitative targets are unconnected, so that for example there is a target for mature students (as a cohort) and students with disabilities (as a cohort) but no target for mature students with a disability. There is a national target for students with a disability but no target for working-class students with a disability. There is within these quantitative targets an assumption that a single characteristic, disability, social class, age etc., defines the individuals within that cohort. There is also an assumption of homogeneity, of identical experiences, barriers, and outcomes.

There is compelling evidence in an Irish context that national target groups are not homogenous. Watson and Nolan (2011) identified that educational disadvantage, poverty, and disability are interconnected and mutually constitutive (2011: xii). The intersection of disability and social class in education can be seen where children with special educational needs (SEN) are more likely to cluster in disadvantaged schools, live in one-parent families (many of these comparatively socio-economically disadvantaged) than children without special educational needs, and are more likely to be in families dependent on social welfare (Cosgrove et al. 2014). The same intersection of disability and social class can be seen in relation to educational outcomes where children with each type of disability, and without a disability, attending DEIS⁷ schools at second level are more likely to perform at a lower level than their counterparts in non-DEIS schools and the gap is

⁷ One of the largest national initiatives developed to address educational inequality is the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) School Support Programme, a national initiative of the DES, introduced in 2005, aimed at lessening educational disadvantage and bringing about social inclusion in primary and second level education.

particularly large for young people with specific learning, emotional/behavioural and physical/visual/speech disabilities (Banks et al. 2016). In relation to higher education, working-class students with disabilities experience education differently and have profoundly inequitable outcomes in the context of progression to HE, retention within HE, and the student experience of education (Ryan, 2019).

In MU, students from the target groups experience multiple identities simultaneously with different aspects of that identity foregrounded in different contexts. Thus, a mature student is also for example a mature woman with caring responsibilities, a Traveller, and is also a person with a disability. These students are experiencing complex intersectional disadvantage, which is not simply additive, current policy and supports do not take this into account and subsequently the needs of these students are at risk of not being adequately addressed.

- 6. Recommendation:** Ensure that the intersectionality of disadvantage is captured and addressed in national access policy, targets, and practice.

4.4 Student Voice and Community Stakeholders

MU puts learners and communities at the core of our work which has greatly enhanced our approach to widening participation, with all parts of the University and external stakeholders working together to maximise resources and impact. Having learners and communities as key drivers of the Access programme is empowering for them, ensures our work is informed by their lived experience, and has a profound impact on their attitude to HE. Partnership with regional stakeholder organisations is a powerful vehicle with which to connect with people from target communities and support a transformative passage into college. The collaborations between MU and our community stakeholders have been greatly enhanced by the PATH 3 funded College Connect⁸ programme.

Students who have been through the system are the greatest asset that the NAP and individual HEI's have to inform policy and practice. Their lived experience can guide and inform policy as they know what will impact and improve opportunities for other students and communities ensuring

⁸ College Connect is a HEA Programme for Access to Higher Education 3 (PATH)-funded project which aims to support implementation of the National Action Plan by evolving and deepening widening participation activity in the Midlands, East, North Dublin (MEND) region. Our MEND partners include Dublin City University (DCU), Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) and Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT).

our policy and practice is evidence based. Direct quotes from students who participated in the MU consultation process are included in Appendix B⁹ and Appendix C¹⁰. Several quotes are included below:

“Lecturers and staff would be trained on inclusive language and awareness of the challenges that their students face such as the many forms that disabilities may take and other disadvantages students may have. Departments and lecturers should meet with access students to build positive relations to make it easier to make contact during times of crisis and share a greater understanding of their needs”.

“It would just be like beneficial just all universities, just talk to their students. It's just having an open dialogue, starting the conversation, see what's missing, and to move forward from there. See how they could improve. Instead of just guessing. And instead of saying, this is probably what they want. Ask them, you know”.

“We need more spaces of collaborative learning from students to lecturers and departments, but also, you know, open dialogue spaces like ‘hey we are trying to improve inclusion, what do we do?’

- 7. Recommendation:** Prioritise the role of students and communities in key decision-making bodies/groups related to access and widening participation policy and practice.

4.5 NAP Target Groups and STEM

It is well understood that 21st century skills are key to societal growth and economic prosperity. Students coming from under-represented groups are significantly less likely to develop these skills in school and participate in STEM courses in school, they are also less likely to continue these into 3rd level education. In Ireland we see students from DEIS schools are particularly under-represented in STEM and are even less likely to pursue STEM courses at third level than any other group. These discrepancies in STEM education are evident in childhood and increase with progression into higher education. Less than one third of engineering and one fifth of computer science undergraduates are from diverse backgrounds, and at age fifteen, only 4.7% of students from lower socio-economic group females compared to 18% of males showed interest in STEM, even amongst the highest-grade pupils (OECD 2014). This potential skills gap has major future implications as it not only adversely impacts the economy, but it also threatens to widen the opportunity gap between those people who are affluent in society, and those who are not. This

⁹ Appendix B – consultation with current access students attending Maynooth University

¹⁰ Appendix C - consultation with students /former students of Maynooth University with prison experience

discrepancy is linked to cultural stereotypes, a lack of academic opportunity, socioeconomic factors, and lack of representation for minority groups in STEM professions and courses.

The new Plan should develop a strategy to specifically address the issue of access to STEM courses and skills for target groups. Such a strategy would recognise the value that 21st century skills bring to the education and employment opportunities of groups that are named in the National Access Plan and offer these groups the ability to develop the core skills.

8. **Recommendation:** Set specific targets for access to STEM courses for NAP target groups.
9. **Recommendation:** Prioritise and resource targeted initiatives to support access to STEM courses for NAP target groups.

4.6 NAP Target Groups and Access to the Professions

There is a particular issue in relation to equality of access for target groups to all courses and especially the professions. Historically, access groups have tended to predominantly progress to arts and humanities courses and have been less likely to access high demand elite programmes. PATH 1 explicitly recognised this in relation to access to initial teacher education. Ensuring equality of access needs to ensure that targets are not just about access to HE, but more specifically about access to all courses, particularly the high demand courses and the professions.

10. **Recommendation:** Set specific targets for access to high demand courses and the professions for NAP target groups.
11. **Recommendation:** Prioritise and resource targeted initiatives to support access to the professions for NAP target groups.

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

5.1 Regional approaches to outreach

Historically, the landscape of Irish HE outreach into disadvantaged communities has been fragmented, often institutionally focused, and complex to navigate for learners. A lack of nuanced data on participation meant there has been a poor evidence base for targeted action. Widening participation policy tends to be top-down, rather than informed and driven by communities/stakeholders. While some groups were supported to access educational opportunities, the most marginalised groups and communities across the region were often left behind. Goal 5 of the National Access Plan recognised this and asked HEI's to work collaboratively to develop regional and community partnership strategies (HEA, 2015). Research argued there is a need for shared visions and approaches to widening participation (Fleming, Loxley, Finnegan, & Kearns, 2017).

MU is widely recognised for the exemplary and progressive work it does as a national leader in widening participation and has extended this out regionally through the HEA Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) funded project College Connect, which aims to support implementation of the NAP by evolving and deepening widening participation activity in the Midlands, East, North Dublin (MEND) region. Our MEND partners include Dublin City University (DCU), Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) and Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT). Launched in November 2019, College Connect's innovative collaborative MEND approach decreases fragmentation and is advancing our understanding of how to address barriers to participation. Adopting a regional approach, bringing together HEI's that previously would have largely worked in isolation, to develop shared models and resources supports maximum evidence-based engagement and has the greatest impact in terms of enhancing educational aspirations and illuminating pathways for the most under-represented in HE.

This regional approach has prioritised improved tracking of participation and community outreach engagement across the region. Through partnership with AIRO¹¹ (the All-Ireland Research Observatory), College Connect has visually mapped the MEND region's participation rates in education and the project's community engagement footprint across 400 community

¹¹ All-Ireland Research Observatory (AIRO) is a research unit based Maynooth University specialising in socio-demographic analysis, spatial analysis (GIS), spatial planning and data analytics.

organisations, identifying ‘coldspots’ to focus attention and resources. A public version of the map will be available on the College Connect website in 2021. This tracking and mapping model could be replicated nationally to inform outreach activities and connect community partners and HEI’s.

- 12. Recommendation:** Develop and share the College Connect regional model of outreach that is underpinned by the systematic tracking and mapping of participation rates and community outreach engagement.

5.2 Student Experience

The current NAP has a strong focus on access to HE and on the student experience. There are several issues here that bear greater focus in the new NAP.

Currently, access cohorts are less likely to avail of placement and internship opportunities and are not taking up international mobility opportunities when compared to the mainstream cohort. Evidence presented through the 2017 EMASI¹² and the recent EPFIME¹³ reports that students who participate in mobility projects experience greater success in HE. The new Plan should set specific targets related to the student experience including access to mentoring, placement, Erasmus, and internship opportunities.

Access Offices also have responsibility for supporting more and more student cohorts. In 1998, the Maynooth University Access Programme (MAP) initially had responsibility for supporting students who accessed MU from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. MAP responsibility was later extended to include students who accessed MU through the HEAR and DARE routes, students with disabilities and students that were mature (2008). From 2015, the cohorts supported were further expanded to include Traveller/Roma, postgraduates and part time students with disabilities and students who enter MU through the QQI route. From 2020, there has been a rapid increase in the cohorts of students supported by MAP to include students on foundation programmes, students in receipt of a variety of targeted scholarships and bursaries, university of sanctuary scholarships, students who are homeless, carers, students who are/were in care, prisoners/ ex-offenders, refugees etc.

¹² mobilitytoolkit.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/EMASI-Report-Print-Web-Final.pdf

¹³ epfime.inclusivemobility.eu/#research-report

There has also been a sharp increase in the number of students with complex intersectional needs requiring support and in a 2020 analysis of approximately 600 MAP students, 143 were identified as experiencing multiple layers of disadvantage. This has significantly increased demand for MAP student advisory support, which is individualised advisory support for access students recognising that these students often present with significant additional support needs. This advisory support role is fundamentally different to other student/ advisory supports across the university. MAP advisory support continues throughout a student's period of study, is particularly important at crisis points and has a direct impact on engagement and retention for students underrepresented in higher education¹⁴ The single dedicated advisory point of contact for all access students to proactively address barriers and challenges experienced by individual students has been invaluable during COVID-19 and was successful in keeping students in their studies at a time when their lived experience might otherwise have made it too hard to navigate on their own. COVID-19 has disproportionately affected the identified target groups, compounding existing inequalities. This has created further demand for student advisory, financial and other MAP supports.

- 13. Recommendation:** Set specific targets for access to mentoring, placement, Erasmus, and internship opportunities.
- 14. Recommendation:** Prioritise and appropriately resource advisory support for target groups to support the student experience and student success.

5.3 Student Guidance

Access to guidance continues to be an issue for target groups. From a social class perspective, many students may make the wrong course choice because they do not have the social connections to have 'insider knowledge' of courses or institutions, may not have siblings who attended HE or may not have had access to the course guidance available to those with more financial resources (Thomas and Quinn, 2006, Thomas, 2002, Thomas, 2011). The adequacy of pre-entry information, advice and guidance, particularly for students who do not have cultural or economic capital, and access to appropriate guidance is an issue that particularly affects equity groups (Bowes et al. 2013, Liston et al. 2016, National Forum 2015).

¹⁴ [Academic advising and first-generation college students: A quantitative study on student retention. NACADA Journal, 33\(1\), 46-53](#); [The Advising Task Force Final Report University of Missouri-Kansas City \(2012, p73\)](#); ["Improving Academic Advising Using Quality Function Deployment: A Case Study." College Student Journal 50 \(2016\): 253-267, Swecker, H. K., Fifolt, M., & Searby, L. \(2013\).](#)

While the importance of guidance in terms of building aspirations and encouraging higher education take up is discussed in the existing NAP, a strong evidence base is emerging from the work of PATH 1¹⁵ at MU which highlights the persistent challenges that remain for students from underrepresented groups in terms of accessing good school career guidance. Echoing findings from earlier research into the experiences of Irish student teachers from lower socio-economic groups (Keane, Heinz, and Lynch, 2018), Burns, Colum and O'Neill (forthcoming) found that there was a propensity for career guidance at school level to coach many Traveller students from underrepresented groups out of teaching and towards more 'realistic' options. Such experiences are particularly problematic given the reliance of students from underrepresented groups on school-based guidance given that their families and wider social networks had little or no experience or knowledge of HE (Finnegan et al., 2019).

There is also space within the next iteration of the NAP to articulate a stronger vision for the role of adult guidance. Drawing on the experience and analysis of interviewing over 500 applicants to MU's Think about Teaching Foundation Certificate over the past four years and recent research (Finnegan et al., 2019), there is an emerging awareness of the importance of targeted guidance for students which crosses institutional spaces and, at best, follows the student. The FET strategy (SOLAS, 2020) also recognises the importance of coherent and longitudinal adult education guidance.

- 15. Recommendation:** Develop a national strategy to meet the guidance needs of all target groups to support access and progression to HE.

¹⁵ PATH 1 in MU funded the Turn to Teaching Programme, the largest national initiative to diversify access to initial teacher education.

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

Student funding mechanisms and national funding initiatives have been powerful levers to progress the objectives of successive national access plans.

6.1 Student Funding

Finance continues to be one of the main barriers for many of the target groups in relation to accessing and succeeding in HE.

MU welcomed the national review of the SUSI scheme and made a detailed submission to the review in 2021 with five main recommendations:

- All courses should be included under the Student Grant Scheme, from foundation courses, undergraduate, part-time, and post-graduate programmes.
- The Income Thresholds should be widened to facilitate a broader range of lower income families that acknowledges, and supports, working-poor households and a wider diversity of low-income financially insecure households.
- The Student Grant Scheme should provide supports that are linked to the real cost of living and support the diversity of student experiences so that those most in need receive the financial support they require.
- Student funding sources should be consolidated and simplified so that the students who need funding can apply for and access appropriate levels of student funding to support equitable access, participation, and progression in further and higher education.
- Disaggregated data should be published annually on a national basis outlining the impact of SUSI on admissions, participation, and progression in higher education to support the system to reflect on and respond to outcomes and gaps and inform national policy and practice.

The issues of the adequacy of student funding have been exacerbated by COVID-19. The ESRI reported that among 20-year-olds in the Growing up in Ireland study, most students drew on multiple forms of funding for their studies/training (Mangan-Ryan et al., 2020). Almost two-thirds (64%) received money from their family while 20 per cent reported indirect family support (in the form of food or accommodation). Just over four in ten (44%) were using earnings from their own part-time employment. Loss of employment among their parents, coupled with probable restricted opportunities for part-time work and ineligibility for emergency income supports (PUP

and TWSS) for seasonal workers, are likely to affect young people's ability to fund their education in the period to come. The report confirmed that while no research has been conducted to date in Ireland on the potential impact of this issue, a study in the UK (Montacute and Holt-White, 2020) indicates that around a fifth of higher education applicants are now unsure about their choice of course or decision to go to college. In Ireland, a third of existing students reported that they had lost their job or had reduced hours while over a fifth reported difficulties in their parents supporting them financially. (Darmody et al., 2020: 62). Reduced access to part-time or summertime work and uncertainty about accommodation when much learning is online are likely to increase the financial pressures for students (Darmody et al., 2020: 74). Additional support will be needed address COVID-19 impact in the meantime potentially through significantly enhanced allocations to the Student Assistance Fund.

16. Recommendation: Implement SUSI review recommendations to join-up initiatives for student access into third level institutions such as the SUSI grant and the universities of sanctuaries scheme in addition to other bursaries and scholarships, to make the grant application process more accessible to students.

17. Recommendation: Provide additional administrative supports to Access Offices who are currently managing the administration of multiple student financial supports from a complex array of funding streams all with associated regulatory and compliance reporting requirements.

18. Recommendation: Allocate enhanced allocations to HEI's to support student financial hardship in the coming years pending more fundamental changes in the SUSI scheme.

6.2 Strategic Initiative Funding for HEI's

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) which is a dedicated fund, broken into three strands, committed to increasing participation by under-represented groups in higher education. The fund, initially valued at €16.5 million, was established by the Department of Education and Skills in 2017. These funds have proved to be powerful levers for progressing national strategic policy objectives within HEI's and across clusters.

These funds are very welcome and important to the university as important levers for the development of strategic initiatives and have provided crucial supports for students. However, the management of these multiple sources of narrowly targeted funds together with the approach of

allocating funding on a competitive basis to HEI's for targeted access initiatives, means that Access Office resources are often tied up in building consortium applications for funding, securing the funding and then managing the resulting large-scale projects which are both institutionally and nationally important. There is also a significant financial accounting, reporting and compliance requirement associated with the management of these funds. While additional funding has been critical, the administration responsibilities has placed enormous pressure on access infrastructures which were originally set up to serve the student body rather than to procure funding.

Similar issues have arisen in relation to the management of funding streams available to Access Offices include the Student Assistance Fund, the Fund for Students with Disabilities, the FSD Inclusion funds, COVID 19 ICT grant, and the COVID Stimulus Surplus Package.

Additional resources (potentially ringfencing a percentage of funding awarded to each HEI) to support the oversight, management and administration of these projects/funding streams would support the achievement of strategic objectives in a more effective manner.

- 19. Recommendation:** Provide additional resources (potentially ringfencing a percentage of funding awarded to each HEI) to support the oversight, management, and administration of PATH/ funded access initiatives.

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

7.1 Mainstreaming versus Inclusion

The NAP calls on HEI's to 'mainstream the delivery of equity of access in HEI's and to move widening participation out of traditional locations into university structures and to embed whole-of-HEI approaches to institutional access strategies so that access for under-represented groups is prioritised across all faculties and functions. The Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021 concludes however that "it is reasonable to state that the mainstreaming of supports is not a priority that is evident at the highest levels of planning in HEI's" (HEA, 2018a).

In responding to increasing student diversity, higher education institutions have in the past tended to rely on specialist staff, as well as the commitment of particular academic faculty, who often assume the role of 'access champion'. This often leads to access, participation, and success being 'owned' by the few, rather than the many. In line with this vision, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) recommends that "the next step is to integrate the principle of equity of access more fully into the everyday life of the HEI's so that it permeates all faculties and departments and is not marginalised as the responsibility of the designated access office" (HEA, 2015, p. 25). The benefits of this more integrated approach can be seen in MU where the holistic supports provided by MAP have been supported by the MU curriculum and the intellectual, cultural, and social environment offered at MU that provides all our students with opportunities to reach their full potential.

The review of the NAP provides an important and timely opportunity for the sector to critically appraise how the needs of all students can be met in a more effective, sustainable, and impactful way through inclusive mainstream and targeted services and supports and to take action to address identified gaps which have been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Building on mainstreaming, the new NAP should focus on supporting HEI's to become more inclusive, ensuring that the design of every aspect, including teaching and learning, student supports, and the built and IT environment is suitable to meet the needs of a diverse student and staff body. We recognise that inclusive higher education is not a 'one size fits all' approach and that there will always be a need for targeted solutions to meet the requirements of some students. However, we must as a sector move to an approach where our diverse student body is celebrated, and student success is about recognising the complexity of all our lived experiences leading to

mainstream approaches (including Universal Design for Learning) integrated with targeted approaches for working with students who present as particularly in need. Such an approach would mainstream supports (contributing to the success of all students) while still offering pathways, supports, and guidance to address particular challenges, e.g., caring, mental health, disability, cultural/social capital gaps, financial hardship, gender identity/race & ethnicity challenges etc. This way we can incorporate all the elements of equality, diversity, and inclusion into student success structures.

There is a key issue in relation to access to HE related to how we measure success and progress. The successive nature of national access plans to date has primarily focused on measuring access by reference to quantitative participation rates in HE (at the point of access to HE) of specific target groups. The new NAP should support a move away from a focus on quantitative targets as the primary indicator of access to the development of a national framework for inclusion in HE to support HEI's to respond to the need for a whole-institution response to access, participation, and success of under-represented students in HE. Such a framework would measure progress by reference to the inclusive nature of the culture in HEIs, structures, the diversity of the student body (access, retention, and progression to employment), the diversity of the staff body, inclusive policies in relation to admissions, programme design, curriculum, assessment, student supports, the accessibility of the built environment, and the flexibility of modes of learning and assessment (Kelly and Padden, 2018). These frameworks would be underpinned by specific targets, disaggregated data collection, and appropriate institutional access structures and resources. This approach could build on existing good practice in this area and the NAP could then measure, monitor, report and support sectoral progress in this area.

20. Recommendation: Prioritise a move away from a focus on quantitative targets as the primary indicator of access to the development of a national framework for inclusion in HE to support HEI's to respond to the need for a whole-institution response to access, participation, and success of under-represented students in HE.

21. Recommendation: Provide specific resources to support the development of inclusive approaches and the sharing of good practice in collaboration with relevant stakeholders.

7.2 Access Infrastructures to Support Student Need and Embed Inclusion

The role of Access Offices has dramatically changed since the publication of the last NAP in 2014. The three main roles traditionally associated with Access Office included recruitment and outreach, supporting students to transition successfully to higher education and coordinating the provision of a wide range of advice, technology, and academic supports to promote retention and progression. Access Offices however have taken on a range of additional strategic responsibilities in recent years including compliance from the perspective of equality legislation, providing additional finance to students experiencing financial hardship, innovating solutions to critical issues for example, in relation to student mental health, and supporting staff to embed inclusion and to develop inclusive practices to meet the needs of all students is a MU strategic priority.

The current NAP calls on HEI's to 'mainstream the delivery of equity of access in HEI's' and to move widening participation out of traditional locations into university structures and to embed whole-of-HEI approaches to institutional access strategies so that access for under-represented groups is prioritised across all faculties and functions. Mainstreaming and enabling student success is a key strategic priority nationally, championed by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. MAP is increasingly responsible for embedding a whole-of-HEI approaches to access, liaising in collaborative partnerships with all administrative and academic departments.

As outlined earlier in this submission, while the responsibilities of Access Offices have increased and student numbers and demands for support have increased exponentially, the core grant funding to Access Offices has remained static. This is negatively impacting the capacity of HEI's to effectively address student support and inclusion.

- 22. Recommendation:** Recognise the expanded cohorts and additional associated responsibilities of Access Offices.
- 23. Recommendation:** Review and increase the core grant funding to Access Offices to enable them to meet the increased student demand.
- 24. Recommendation:** Consolidate Access funding for the future into a ring-fenced core grant for access rather than multiple sources of competitive narrow targeted funding streams.

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

8.1 NAP target groups

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact across all Irish society. Internationally, however there is agreement that the impact has been felt most keenly by the most marginalised in society where “Students from privileged backgrounds, supported by their parents and eager and able to learn, could find their way past closed school doors to alternative learning opportunities. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds often remained shut out when their schools shut down” (OECD 2020¹⁶, page 4).

In Ireland, an ESRI report published in partnership with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs draws on existing and emerging Irish and international research on the effects of the pandemic restrictions on children and young people, to provide insights into the potential consequences of the current crisis from infancy to early adulthood, highlighting that while the pandemic impacts on the outcomes of all children, the gap between the advantaged and less advantaged is likely to widen as it will be harder for the more vulnerable groups to ‘catch up’ (Darmody et al., 2020). While COVID-19 will likely have long-term consequences for all learners and their families, it will have a particularly detrimental impact on disadvantaged children (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020), children in alternative care arrangements, care-leavers, children considered at risk due to their family situation, children experiencing poverty, children with disabilities, and migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee children (Larkins et al., 2020), who may find the alternative arrangements put in place by schools more challenging due to limited resources and lack of support. The study also reported that principals and teachers in DEIS schools report much lower levels of student engagement in remote learning than in non-DEIS schools during the period of school closure (Mohan et al., 2020; Bray et al., 2020). The current unprecedented situation is likely to exacerbate existing educational inequalities in society.

The current risks are significant with the report highlighting that school closures have resulted in marked inequalities, as children and young people vary in their access to books and digital resources and parents themselves have differential educational, cultural, and time resources to

¹⁶ THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EDUCATION INSIGHTS FROM EDUCATION AT A GLANCE 2020

support their children's learning. Evidence points to a digital divide between schools, with some schools making a smoother transition to distance education where they had the infrastructure in place and/or greater prior experience of digital teaching and learning. Children and young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds will return to school having suffered greater levels of 'learning loss' on average. Indeed, there is a risk that some of those who were not highly engaged in school before the closure may not re-engage in full-time education. Children with special educational needs will likely face challenges in readjusting to the routine of school and in making up learning loss. (Darmody et al., 2020, 8).

The report authors identified that "The disruption of learning is likely to have long-term consequences for many, especially for more disadvantaged children and young people. While short-term measures are important to address the immediate needs of children and young people, the actions taken need to be underpinned by policies addressing larger structural inequalities" (Darmody et al., 2020).

The report highlights that schools and HEI's need to put measures in place to counter the negative impact for learners, families, and teachers, especially for those in the most marginalised groups (those most disadvantaged in terms of social class, families with children with special educational needs, migrants, refugees, and others) who lack the resources or skills to engage with home schooling.

8.2 Digital Divide/Digital Poverty

COVID-19 has forced a pivotal shift into the digital world; students, teachers, families, employers have been forced into the digital work, learning and communication environments. In Ireland we were unprepared. Many schools and colleges have moved towards online education without the necessary skills to fully harness the benefits of this mode of learning. COVID-19 has revealed the true scale of the digital crisis facing modern society; many are "digitally excluded" through either a lack of digital access, a lack of digital skills or a lack of integrated policies which ensure that there is equality in access to digital living.

Having access to the digital world has been recognised as being a crucial mediator and moderator of achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (Reddick et al., 2020). In the context of education, we can see that digital poverty is driven by a number of factors which include:

- **Digital skills** - these are the key skills needed to engage in education, to deliver education effectively and to ensure that students are suitably skilled to engaged in the modern workforce
- **Technology/hardware** - this refers to schools, educators and students having access to the hardware needed to stay digitally connected, to teach and learn effectively, this also refers to the technology to code and to develop technology solutions
- **Digital infrastructure** - this refers to having access to the digital network through broadband/Wi-Fi which allows people to work 'online' and stay connected. This refers also to having a working digital network within the school system
- **Supports and Policies** - this refers to knowledge and awareness of the policies in place to support digital wealth, wellbeing, and inclusion. Knowledge of industry supports within the system also forms part of this driver.

COVID-19 has pushed Ireland to reconsider its digital strategy in relation to education. The new NAP should prioritise the development of a digital strategy where the focus is on developing students' digital skills and ensuring that students, through university supports, have digital access through technology and connectivity.

25. Recommendation: Develop and resource new and additional strategies to address and monitor COVID-19 impact on target groups.

26. Recommendation: Develop a national strategy to address the digital divide/digital poverty.

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

Foundation Certificate Programmes

The current NAP acknowledged that there had been limited progress in respect of the development of coherent pathways from further education and training to higher education. This is significant given the important role that further education and training plays in enhancing the educational outcomes of students. Data collated as part of the NAP Progress Review indicates that the rate of increase in the number of students entering higher education based on a QQI-FET award is slow. While links between PLC's and HEI's are well established with more than 1,200 linkages and with significant number of students in higher education holding a QQI-FET award, challenges remain in establishing transparent supporting structures for building coherent pathways from FET to HE.

More substantive collaboration and partnership is required between further education and training and higher education institutions. Further education and training play a critical role in preparing students for HE and ensuring student success and better educational and labour market outcomes. This action surrounding pathways requires more sustained engagement between QQI, FET, and HEI's (HEA 2018a, p. 14).

Goal 4 of the current NAP speaks directly to the development of access and foundation courses that would be delivered through further education (GOAL 4, objective 5). Rather than seeing these processes as separate and distinct (i.e., FE courses leading to access to degree courses in HEI's), there is a need to develop pathways to degree courses (particularly courses that lead to professional qualifications that have traditionally been hard to reach for underrepresented groups) through cross-institutional FE-HE curricular collaborations. Such an approach is also congruent with some of the aspirations of the most recent FET strategy which identifies pathways into and from HE as a key strategic target (SOLAS, 2020).

A recent evaluation of the Science Foundation Certificate at MU recommended creating longer pathways into science programmes through the development of linked Level 5, FE-based programmes (Fitzsimons & O'Neill, 2015). Such an approach holds huge potential in supporting access to the professions such as teaching and medicine, which has been tightly guarded around the Leaving Certificate points system and rigidly held academic entry requirements. Such a shift

would also help to diversify access routes from FE to HE, which have almost exclusively resided in the domain of access to the social sciences. Any pathways developed between FE and HE should also lead to meaningful and supported pathways to, through and beyond HE.

Foundation programmes at MU have also been very effective at targeting the most marginalised and providing bridges to HE and employment. For example in 2019, the MU Department of Applied Social Studies partnered with the Eastern Region Traveller Health Unit and Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, and with the support of the Department of Adult and Community Education, delivered a foundation programme for Traveller Community Health Workers with progression pathways to the part-time Level 8 (Hons) Bachelor of Social Science in Community and Youth Work, a professionally endorsed programme in both Community Work (AIEB) and Youth Work (NSETS). Of the eleven students who commenced the programme, nine of the eleven participants have progressed to the degree programme. The graduates are guaranteed employment with the HSE on completion of his programme.

There is a growing evidence base to suggest that foundation certificates situated on university campuses are a very effective and necessary pathway for students from underrepresented groups into HE (Murphy, 2009). For example, research by O’Sullivan, Bird, Robson and Winters (2019) found that Foundation Certificate students’ sense of belonging and confidence, both academically and socially, significantly increased relative to the experiences of students who had accessed college through contextualised admissions such as HEAR and DARE. Foundation programmes are a vital bridge for many students underrepresented in HE who experience fragmented experiences of education and differential access to the social and cultural capital that can support student success. These programmes also offer the opportunity to contribute significantly to NAP objectives, including supporting diversity to the professions. The largest national initiative to diversify access to initial teacher education *Turn to Teaching*, a PATH 1 funded MU programme has engaged hundreds of participants. Of these, at least 28 are now registered on *Initial Teacher Education* (ITE) programmes. The deep and profound impact on participants’ lives, sense of identity and development of confidence to pursue a professional pathway were clearly articulated in the qualitative evaluation of this programme:

“After completing the TTT course I feel like I will be just as good as anyone else on the [ITE] course and feel confident that I will make a good teacher.”

(Turn to Teaching Foundation Course Student)

There are several barriers to students accessing Foundation Certificate programmes that could be addressed by a national strategy. These include the fact that SUSI funding is not available to students, an issue highlighted by students on the Think About Teaching Foundation Certificate (Maynooth University, 2020).

27. Recommendation: Prioritise a national strategy to support the development and resourcing of foundation courses to support progression into HE.

28. Recommendation: Ensure that students studying on foundation courses, part time or full time, are eligible for SUSI/funding support.

10. How can other social inclusion initiatives outside of the HE sector be harnessed to support equity of access objectives?

Mapping and developing partnerships with regional stakeholder organisations/ initiatives

To significantly improve equality of opportunity and recruit a student body that reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population (HEA Strategic Priority 4), HEI's must connect and partner with learners and communities as key drivers of access initiatives. This approach is empowering for our partners, ensures our work is informed by their lived experience, and has a profound impact on their attitudes to HE. Partnership with regional stakeholder organisations is a powerful vehicle with which to connect with people from target communities and support a transformative passage into college.

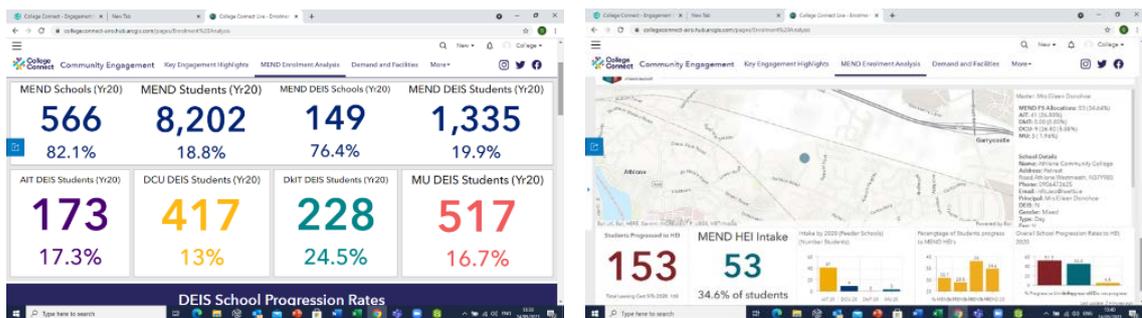
The HEA-funded PATH 3 programme *College Connect*¹⁷ which MU leads, complements and augments the work of MAP and the mainstreamed teaching and learning supports across the University to ensure student success more broadly in the region. College Connect has developed a powerful model to link and partner with other social inclusion initiatives, harnessing our expertise and resources to support broader. equity of access objectives. This model could be replicated nationally. There are three key stages in this model:

¹⁷ *College Connect is a HEA PATH 3 funded action-research project by Maynooth University, Dublin City University, Athlone Institute of Technology and Dundalk Institute of Technology which aims to support access to higher education for marginalised groups (including Travellers, people with disabilities, people in the asylum system, refugees, people with criminal convictions) in the Midlands, East, North Dublin (MEND) region. The project is supported by a Regional Steering Group which sponsors the work representing the National Travellers Women's Forum, the Pathways Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners, One Parent, dis ABILITY Louth and the Irish Refugee Council, along with the HEI partner representatives.*

1. Map and track community engagement and outreach

Through partnership with AIRO¹⁸ (the All-Ireland Research Observatory), College Connect has visually mapped the region's participation rates in education (through the College Connect HUB) and the project's community engagement footprint (through the College Connect MAP) across 400 community organisations, identifying 'coldspots' to focus attention and resources.

The College Connect HUB provides a unique visual interface documenting school enrolments to the 4 MEND HEIs providing mapping tools and interactive dashboards to analyse progression to MEND HEIs from both DEIS and Non-DEIS schools from 2017 to 2020. Individual progression profiles are also available for all schools across the country through an easy-to-use interface. Drawing on existing feeder-school data sets, the HUB is able to present this data in a unique interface and also layered over other pre-existing data such as the Pobal Deprivation Index.



The College Connect MAP identifies the MEND HEIs engagements across more than 400 community organisations, identifying 'coldspots' to focus attention and resources.

“Many of these organisations would not have been linked to HEI’s prior to this work. Deep and transformative partnerships and activity are now being developed through this mapping and engagement process.”

(Ayoma Bowe, College Connect)

¹⁸ All-Ireland Research Observatory (AIRO) is a research unit based Maynooth University specialising in socio-demographic analysis, spatial analysis (GIS), spatial planning and data analytics.

2. Build a unique evidence base through Community Needs Analysis model

The College Connect programme has developed a unique Community Needs Analysis (CNA) model which involves working with a network of community-based organisations to achieve maximum impact. The CNAs deploy participative research methodology and approaches to building engagement with communities and understanding their experiences and needs in respect of higher education access and success. The objective of the research is to identify and respond to community needs and to support engagement by the project and HEI's in the community space. The research is a partnership with the communities who co-lead all stages and co-author outputs and reports.

A pilot CNA¹⁹ has been published with people with prison experience. The research was led by Dr Sarah Meaney, in collaboration with the Pathways Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners, based in Dublin city. The [Community Needs Analysis for Prisoners and Former Prisoners](#) was innovative in its design - driven by peer researchers who engaged with prisoners/ former prisoners, supported by focus group interviews with Mountjoy Prison Progression Unit and conversations with staff of Shelton Abbey Prison's Education Unit.

Using the same model, College Connect in 2021 partnered with the Irish Refugee Council to carry out a CNA with Refugees and people in the protection process²⁰. The broad aim of the CNA was to explore both the barriers and the supports that exist within HEI's for Refugees and People in the Protection Process, and to see what could be put in place to better support this cohort to progress to and through College and University. The research which was led by peer researchers identified the intersectional and multiple nature of barriers faced by non-traditional students in education including childcare and financial constraints, and the lack of clear information.

College Connect is currently working on a CNA with the National Travellers Women's Forum (NTWF) & Pavee Point which involves supporting 21 Travellers to become peer researchers incorporating creative methodologies like Photovoice to foreground the participative voice. This is building on the ground-breaking work that MU has already completed over the last two decades in relation to Traveller access to HE.

¹⁹[maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Community%20Needs%20Analysis%20for%20Prisoners%20and%20Former%20Prisoners%20Report.pdf](https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Community%20Needs%20Analysis%20for%20Prisoners%20and%20Former%20Prisoners%20Report.pdf)

²⁰ Meaney, S and Nwanze, L (forthcoming). Community Needs Analysis with the Irish Refugee Council – A study as part of College Connect. Maynooth University: Ireland

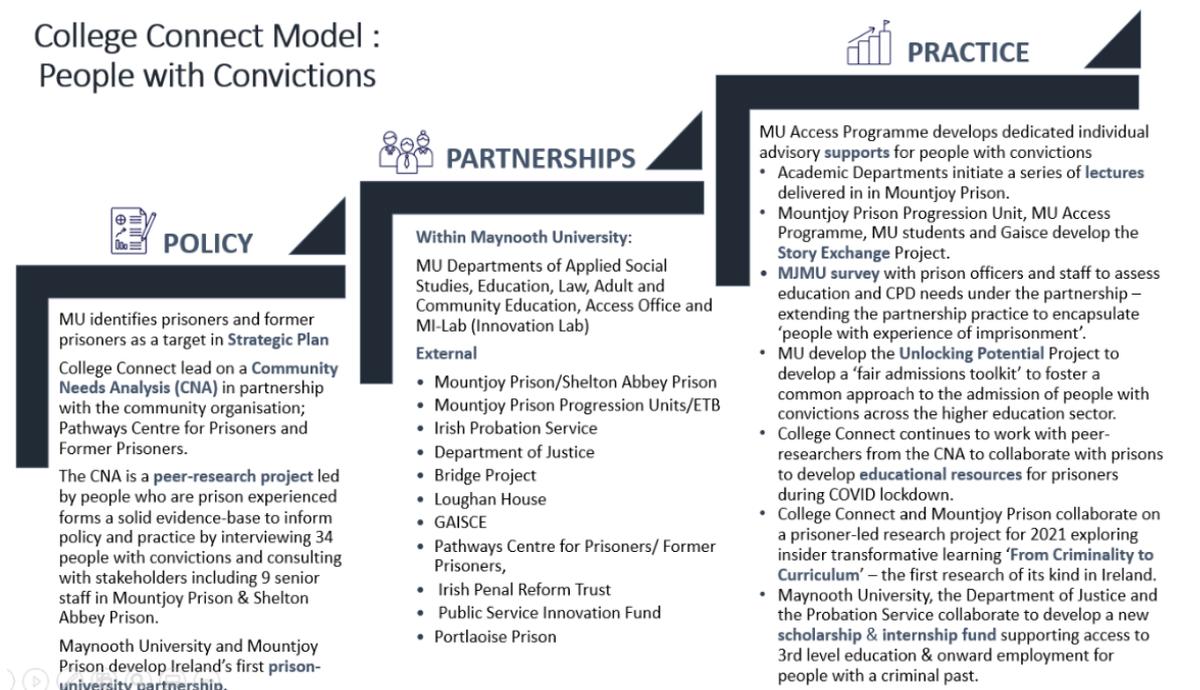
3. Leverage the College Connect evidence and relationships to inform and stimulate change within HEIs

MU's Strategic Plan identified 'prisoners and former prisoners' as an under-represented group in our student population and MU built on the CNA to achieve the following outcomes/impact:

- In 2019, MU and Mountjoy Prison came together with support from the Public Service Innovation Fund 2019 to establish a prison-university partnership.
- In 2019, MU developed the Story Exchange Project, a collaborative initiative between Mountjoy Prison Progression Unit, MAP and Gaisce – The President's Award. Facilitators remarked on the increased confidence they witnessed in prison participants and a change of attitudes towards college and educational progression.
- In 2019/20, MU developed a series of lectures in Mountjoy prison to open a broader range of academic experiences to inmates and developed the Unlocking Potential Project led by the MU Department of Law with Mi: Lab – the Maynooth University Innovation Lab, the Irish Prison Service, the Irish Probation Service, the Pathways Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners, and the Irish Penal Reform Trust. Supported by the Public Service Innovation Fund 2020 the project is developing a 'fair admissions toolkit'.
- MU's work in this area has leveraged further opportunities with the Department of Justice and the Probation Service asking to partner with MU in 2021 to develop a new scholarship & internship fund supporting access to 3rd level education & onward employment for people with a criminal past.

This College Connect community outreach and engagement model as it has been applied in MU can be visualised as follows:

College Connect Model : People with Convictions



This model could be shared and replicated across the sector to build an evidence base and harness community relationships and social inclusion initiatives to work in partnership to achieve access objectives.

29. Recommendation: Share the Collect Connect model of community outreach and engagement and seek to replicate this model nationally.

30. Recommendation: Develop the AIRO (the All-Ireland Research Observatory) tool to map and track participation rates in education and community engagement footprints across community organisations, identifying ‘coldspots’ to inform and focus attention and resources.

11. How can data and evidence support NAP practice and policy?

Whole of Sector Approach to Gathering, Analysing and Reporting on Data

Goal 3 of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 aimed to “gather accurate data and evidence on access and participation and to base policy on what that data tells us”. Specifically, the National Access Plan identified the need to develop an overall data strategy for equity of access; to review current and new data to see how this may be developed to identify geographic areas with high levels of disadvantage and to analyse rates of participation in higher education from those areas. The [HEA - Data Plan Report 2017](#) set out a plan to progress this objective and the [Higher-Education-Spatial-Socio-Economic-Profile-Oct-2019 Academic Year 2017-2018](#) provided a spatial and socio-economic profile of Higher Education Institutions in Ireland using census small area deprivation index scores (HEA, 2019). These are significant achievements in providing an evidence base to inform policy and practice.

There continue to be serious issues with the availability and consistency of data at a national and institutional level that hinders the capacity of the education sector to respond to access issues.

- Reports/data on participation of access cohorts in primary and post-primary schools to inform pre-entry strategies and approaches continues to be unavailable which has an impact on the setting of national targets. The forthcoming HEAR review for example identified that projected numbers of students by access cohort within the post-primary system was not available. Such information would have given a clear indication of the numbers expected to enter HE and helped to inform how we identify them and target them for pre-entry activities (HEAR review, forthcoming: 7). The review group recommended that HEI’s engage with DFHERIS/HEA representatives to outline how the inaccessibility of relevant data is counterproductive to national objectives to target those who are under-represented in HE.
- There is a failure to collect some critical access data on participation. A review to Identify the barriers for lone parents²¹ in accessing HE for example identified that the HEA does not require that HEI’s collect information on the family circumstances of their student population, either in terms of marital status or parenthood status. Similarly, data on care-experienced young

²¹ Byrne, Delma and Murray, Cliona (2017) *An Independent Review to Identify the Supports and Barriers for Lone Parents in Accessing Higher Education and to Examine Measures to Increase Participation* Technical Report. Department of Education and Skills, Dublin.

people's entry to higher education is limited to the data published via HEAR reporting²² (HEA, 2019). The result is that for many target groups, HEI/national data is not available to document their access to HE.

- There is a failure to collect data on participation, retention, and progress through and beyond HE. Therefore, providing a statistical portrait of current HE enrolment, field of study, type of HEI, progression, completion rates and post HE outcomes of some target groups particularly in the context of employment is not possible. This is relevant because there is evidence of poorer outcomes for NAP target groups in the context of retention and progression to employment.
 - A recent study by the Irish Higher Education Authority (2018)²³ found that students from disadvantaged schools for example were twice as likely *not* to progress from first year to second year in college as compared to their peers from non-disadvantaged schools. In Ireland, a national commitment to better data on retention is substantially weakened by a failure to collect data on the retention in HE of students with disabilities. There is a need to collect disaggregated data on the retention of all access target groups.
 - A report by the HEA, [HEA Graduate Outcomes Survey: Class of 2018 report](#) also identified that socioeconomic background has an impact not just on access to HE, but also on post-graduation outcomes, with those from affluent areas earning the most nine months after graduation and those from disadvantaged areas earning the least. The barriers faced by unemployed graduates included a 'perceived lack of experience', 'family reasons' (including childcare) and health/ disability related reasons. Approximately 10% of graduates involved in 'other' activities indicated 'financial' barriers to partaking in work or further study. The MU consultation identified issues with work placement and internship opportunities, lack of mentors and role models and differential cultural/ economic capital.
- The data collected on access represents one identity, mature students, or students with a disability for example. There is no collection or reporting of participation at the intersection of identities, lone parents/migrants, lone parents/care experience, mature students/ Travellers etc. It is difficult therefore to identify nuanced experiences and outcomes of intersectional disadvantage.

²² Brady, Eavan; Gilligan, Robbie; and Nic Fhlannchadha, Siobhan (2019) "Care-experienced Young People Accessing Higher Education in Ireland," Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies: Vol. 19: Iss. 1, Article 5. Available at: arrow.tudublin.ie/ijass/vol19/iss1/5

²³ A study of progression in Irish Higher Education 2014/15 to 2015/16. Available from: hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/05/HEA-Progression-Report-2018-FINAL.pdf

- The analysis and reporting on different elements of the national access strategy is fragmented and uncoordinated so it is challenging to see the national picture. For example, the IUA developed strong reporting on HEAR and DARE outcomes, although the reporting has ceased in recent years (Nic Fhlannchadha 2017). The review of the HEAR scheme recommends that IUA should invest in a data infrastructure to allow it to monitor the progress of the HEAR and DARE scheme, deciding what data was necessary, building a database and analysing and reporting on that data. (HEAR Review, forthcoming: 11). From a national perspective it would be more impactful if the new NAP could support reporting on all access measures and strategies nationally so that there is a cohesive integrated reporting of all access targets, outcomes, and impacts. This tracking and monitoring are critical to evaluating what access is contributing to in terms of student success and national policy.
- Finally, the focus of access policy and measurement has primarily been access at the point of entry to HE which is reflected in the NAP as targets for entry to HE for various named groups. There are however no targets set for retention, progression, graduation outcomes, and/or employment rates of the target groups. This must be addressed to measure equality of access and the contribution of access policies to student success.

The new NAP must ensure that quantitative targets are set for the access, retention, progression, graduation outcomes, and/or employment rates of target groups and that access data is collected, analysed, and reported on across the entire education system. Gathering this data, analysing, and reporting annually on that data, would inform policy and practice. It would also allow HEI's to respond to emerging issues within the lifetime of an access plan and to be responsive to emerging contexts.

- 31. Recommendation:** Prioritise the collection and analysis of disaggregated access data on all target groups' participation in primary, secondary, and further education to inform the setting of national targets and the tracking and monitoring of outcomes in HE.
- 32. Recommendation:** Set targets for the access, retention, progression, graduation outcomes, and/or employment rates of all NAP target groups.
- 33. Recommendation:** Prioritise the collection of disaggregated data on all target groups participation in HE, by field of study, type of HEI, with progression, completion rates and post HE outcomes to inform policy and practice.
- 34. Recommendation:** Report nationally and sectorally on the retention, progression, graduation outcomes and employment rates of all target groups to support the identification of key trends, informed decision making and proactive responses to emerging issues.

12. Summary of Maynooth University Recommendations

1. Articulate a new vision for the NAP seeking to build on our achievements to date to become a model sector for equality, diversity and inclusion focussing on HEI's as models of inclusion meeting the needs of a diverse student and staff body.
2. Initiate a consultation process to review and clearly define each target group in the NAP so that all HEI's are working to the same definitions.
3. Articulate the rationale for the inclusion of a target group based on research, evidence and data and update/refine as necessary over the lifetime of the Plan.
4. Use language in relation to target groups that is positive and empowering to ensure that targeting is not conflated with labelling and stigma.
5. In the new NAP, name the target groups included in Appendix A.
6. Ensure that the intersectionality of disadvantage is captured and addressed in national access policy, targets, and practice.
7. Prioritise the role of students and communities in key decision-making bodies/groups related to access and widening participation policy and practice.
8. Set specific targets for access to STEM courses for NAP target groups.
9. Prioritise and resource targeted initiatives to support access to STEM courses for NAP target groups
10. Set specific targets for access to high demand courses and the professions.
11. Prioritise and resource targeted initiatives to support access to the professions.
12. Develop and share the College Connect model for outreach that is underpinned by the systematic tracking and mapping of participation rates and community outreach engagement.
13. Set specific targets for access to mentoring, placement, Erasmus, and internship opportunities.
14. Prioritise and appropriately resource advisory support for target groups to support the student experience and student success.
15. Develop a national strategy to meet the guidance needs of all target groups to support greater access and progression to HE.
16. Implement SUSI review recommendations to join-up initiatives for student access into third level institutions such as the SUSI grant and the universities of sanctuaries scheme in addition to other bursaries and scholarships, to make the grant application process more accessible to students.
17. Provide additional administrative supports to Access Offices who are currently managing the administration of multiple student financial supports from a complex array of funding streams all with associated regulatory and compliance reporting requirements.
18. Allocate enhanced allocations to HEI's to support student financial hardship in the coming years pending more fundamental changes in the SUSI scheme.

19. Provide additional resources (potentially ringfencing a percentage of funding awarded to each HEI) to support the oversight, management, and administration of PATH/ funded access initiatives.
20. Prioritise a move away from a focus on quantitative targets as the primary indicator of access to the development of a national framework for inclusion in HE to support HEI's to respond to the need for a whole-institution response to access, participation, and success of under-represented students in HE.
21. Provide specific resources to support the development of inclusive approaches and the sharing of good practice in collaboration with relevant stakeholders.
22. Recognise the expanded cohorts and additional associated responsibilities of Access Offices.
23. Review the core grant funding to Access Offices to enable them to meet the increased student demand.
24. Consolidate Access funding for the future into a ring-fenced core grant for access rather than multiple sources of competitive narrow targeted funding streams.
25. Develop and resource new and additional strategies to address and monitor COVID-19 impact on target groups.
26. Develop a national strategy to address the digital divide/digital poverty.
27. Prioritise a national strategy to support the development and resourcing of foundation courses to support progression into HE.
28. Ensure that students studying on foundation courses, part time or full time, are eligible for SUSI/funding support.
29. Share the Collect Connect model of community outreach and engagement and seek to replicate this model nationally.
30. Develop the AIRO (the All-Ireland Research Observatory) tool to map and track participation rates in education and community engagement footprints across community organisations, identifying 'coldspots' to inform and focus attention and resources.
31. Prioritise the collection and analysis of disaggregated access data on all target groups participation in primary, secondary, and further education to inform the setting of national targets and the tracking and monitoring of outcomes in HE.
32. Set targets for the access, retention, progression, graduation outcomes, and/or employment rates of all NAP target groups to inform the monitoring of outcomes in HE.
33. Prioritise the collection of disaggregated data on all target groups participation in HE, by field of study, type of HEI, with progression, completion rates and post HE outcomes to inform policy and practice.
34. Report nationally and sectorally on the retention, progression, graduation outcomes, and employment rates of all target groups to support the identification of key trends, informed decision making and proactive responses to emerging issues.

Appendix A – Rationale for the Inclusion of New Target Groups

1. Refugees and protection applicants

It is increasingly recognised that individuals with experience of forced migration are significantly under-represented in higher education. In Ireland, this category would include those:

- applying for international protection ('asylum seekers');
- with refugee status ('refugees');
- who are victims of human trafficking;
- with subsidiary protection; and
- with leave to remain.

This under-representation has been addressed at the institutional level by the emergence in 2016 of the [“Universities of Sanctuary Ireland”](#) (UoSI) initiative, through which higher education institutions aim to (i) create a culture of welcome and inclusion and (ii) provide scholarships to students who have experienced displacement. All Irish universities now have “University of Sanctuary” status. At a national policy level, the challenges faced by this group have been recognised in the expansion of the ‘Student Support Scheme’ for protection applicants. As Minister Harris [stated](#) when announcing the relaxation of the scheme’s criteria, this “will hopefully result in more people accessing third level education”. The forthcoming review of the HEAR scheme has also identified that young people living in Direct Provision should be acknowledged among Ireland’s most disadvantaged youth cohorts (HEAR Review (forthcoming), p 22 and p23).

At a local level in MU, students and community representatives have spoken of a range of serious challenges faced by those living in direct provision, relating to trauma and mental health, access to information about the Irish education system and applying to university, and access to basic materials such as textbooks, among other issues. It is also important to note that emerging research shows that this group may experience wider socio-economic disadvantage and intersecting vulnerabilities (Cronin et al, 2020).

College Connect²⁴ committed to carrying out a series of Community Needs Analyses (CNA²⁵) to support target groups underrepresented in HE, to explore and address the barriers to access. In early 2020, College Connect partnered with the Irish Refugee Council to carry out a second CNA with Refugees and people in the protection process. The broad aim of the CNA was to explore both the barriers and the supports that exist within HEI's for Refugees and People in the Protection Process, and to see what could be put in place to better support this cohort to progress to and through college and university. The research which was led by peer researchers identified the intersectional and multiple nature of the barriers faced by non-traditional students in education including childcare and financial constraints, and the lack of clear information. Themes which are more particular to the experiences of this cohort include poverty and starvation, non-recognition of prior learning, ineligible immigration stamps, stigmatisation and racism, location and transport between direct provision centres and colleges, and complex bureaucratic systems (Meaney 2021²⁶, forthcoming).

The recognition of those with experience of forced migration as a target group in the new National Action Plan would recognise the entrenched educational disadvantage of this group and consolidate and build on these existing inclusion initiatives. Furthermore, collaboration with Universities of Sanctuary Ireland (UoSI) and the Irish Refugee Council on these issues would provide an excellent example of "harnessing other social inclusion initiatives outside of the higher education sector to support equity of access objectives", as mentioned in the consultation paper."

Students coming within the specific sub-group above (refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable immigrant groups) also fall within broader groups whose needs could/should be considered in the revised NAP. Ensuring equity of access for migrants and children of migrants, and for those from ethnic or religious minorities, should be a guiding principle for the development of the NAP, in line with the national [Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2021](#) and the [public sector human rights and equality duty](#). This point is directly related to the consultation question on the "overall vision for equity of access to higher education". Linked to the point above, anti-racism is a cross-cutting

²⁴ College Connect is a HEA PATH 3 funded action-research project by Maynooth University, Dublin City University, Athlone Institute of Technology and Dundalk Institute of Technology which aims to support access to higher education for marginalised groups (including Travellers, people with disabilities, people in the asylum system, refugees, people with criminal convictions) in the MEND region.

²⁵ The CNAs deploy participative research methodology and approaches to building engagement with communities and understanding their experiences and needs in respect of higher education access and success. The objective of the research is to identify and respond to community needs and to support engagement by the project and HEI's in the community space. The research is a partnership with the communities who co-lead all stages and co-author outputs and reports.

²⁶ Meaney, S and Nwanze, L (forthcoming). Community Needs Analysis with the Irish Refugee Council – A study as part of College Connect. Maynooth University: Ireland

theme which would require institutions to address structural and other barriers to equity of access, and progression to employment for these cohorts.

2. People with Prison Experience

Maynooth University has a strong track record of engaging with prisoners and former prisoners and of supporting penal reform. Several departments in MU, including Applied Social Studies, Education, Law and Adult and Community Education, have a wealth of experience working with and within the criminal justice system. This tradition contributed to the University's decision to identify 'prisoners and former prisoners' as an under-represented group in our student population in the [Maynooth University Strategic Plan 2018-2022](#) (2018).

This strategic commitment was supported by College Connect who completed a Community Needs Analysis led by Dr Sarah Meaney, in collaboration with the Pathways Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners, based in Dublin city. The [Community Needs Analysis for Prisoners and Former Prisoners](#) was innovative in its design - driven by peer researchers who engaged with prisoners/former prisoners, supported by focus group interviews with Mountjoy Prison Progression Unit and conversations with staff of Shelton Abbey Prison's Education Unit. The study identified that there are 4,015 people in prison custody in Ireland (01 July 2019), the majority of whom have never sat a state exam, with over half having left school before the age of 15 (IPRT, 2019). The return to education, which often begins inside the prison, has been identified as a key factor in enabling prisoners to reconceptualise their place in society. Prisoners and former prisoners have been identified as being underrepresented in higher education in Ireland, although official data on this in an Irish context is unavailable.

People with prison experience often represent the most marginalised and include those who experience multiple intersectional barriers to accessing higher education. As with the recommendation with regard to refugees and protection applicants, naming this group in the new NAP would support the linking of existing good practice and initiatives including the [Mountjoy Prison Maynooth University Partnership](#) and the Unlocking Potential project at MU which aims to develop a 'fair admissions toolkit' to guide the redevelopment of university convictions policies and foster a common approach to the admission of people with convictions across the higher education sector.

3. Lone Parents and Teen Parents

A report commissioned by the HEA [An Independent Review to Identify the Supports and Barriers for Lone Parents in Accessing Higher Education and to Examine Measures to Increase Participation](#) (Byrne and Murphy (2017) considered the barriers for Lone Parents in accessing HE identifying that lone parent families and children living in lone-parent families continue to experience the highest risks of poverty and deprivation nationally (Byrne and Murphy, 2017 p107). The study noted that while lone parents were first given emphasis in the 2008 National Access Plan that there is: (i) limited visibility of lone parents in a range of policies and practices of HEI's; (ii) very limited data collection around lone parent participation and outcomes, (iii) limited targeting of lone parents for entry; (iv) limited policy development regarding the needs of lone parents once they transition into HE; and (v) an underdeveloped childcare infrastructure for lone parents attending HE. The study identified that supports needed included (i) financial supports (ii) enhanced student supports (academic, assessment of need, policies relating to lone parenthood or motherhood, budgeting services); and (iii) enhanced information supports pre- and post-entry and that targeted scholarships and enhanced student supports (academic guidance and counselling) were central to enhancing lone-parent retention at HE.

The study identified a framework to increase the participation and retention of lone parents in HE including identifying the needs of lone parents as part of the implementation of institutional equity of access strategies, including lone parents and other target groups who are studying part-time within the remit of access strategies and students services, ensuring that communications and prospectuses reflect a more diverse student body, including lone parents, providing clear information on what routes of entry, supports and services are available for lone parents, targeting local communities with high concentrations of lone-parent families and low levels of participation in HE, establishing scholarships and financial aid packages to incentivise and support participation by lone parents on full- or part-time programmes, including lone-parent students as role models in mentoring programmes for students in second-level and FE, providing affordable, on-campus crèche and childcare facilities, supporting internships, placements, more flexible modes of study, targeted career guidance and other services to address the specific needs of lone parent students, including those studying part-time, and enhanced reporting including data analytics on the access, participation and experience of lone-parent students (Byrne and Murphy, (2017: 112, 113). Naming lone parents in the new NAP would allow for this framework to be further developed.

A further nuance to this targeting is suggested by the forthcoming HEAR review who suggest that teen parents should also be explicitly targeted and supported due to the entrenched disadvantage and poorer academic outcomes.

4. Travellers and Roma

One of the existing target groups that experience issues of educational disadvantage within an intersectional framework are Irish Travellers. Watson et al. (2017) found that just 1 per cent of Travellers had a degree, and only 8 per cent of working-age Travellers had stayed at school up to Leaving Certificate level compared with almost three-quarters of the rest of the population. The CSO identified that 13.3 per cent of Traveller females were educated to upper secondary or above compared with 69.1 per cent of the general population. Nearly 6 in 10 Traveller men (57.2%) were educated to at most Primary level, in sharp contrast to the general population (13.6%) while just 167 Irish Travellers held a third level qualification in 2016, albeit up from 89 in 2011 (CSO²⁷, 2016).

The HEAR Review (2021, forthcoming) highlighted that Irish Travellers and Roma emerged during the Review as key target groups for HEAR due to this group facing multiple barriers of extreme socio-economic disadvantage, generally resulting in low levels of educational attainment. Lack of recognition of Traveller culture in education curricula; lack of understanding of Travellers lives and experiences within the school environment, and experiences of discrimination and isolation of Traveller children in schools, are cited by Traveller organisations as some of the key barriers to the advancement of Travellers in the education system, and a core reason for the low participation rates of Travellers in Higher Education²⁸. Considerable progress is needed at every level if Travellers are to realise full rights to a university education²⁹.

MU welcomes the [Action Plan to Promote Traveller Participation in Higher Education](#) (Government of Ireland, 2019) a much-needed framework to increase Traveller participation and success. We also welcome the ring-fenced funding of €300,000 for targeted supports to address the implications of COVID-19 on Traveller access to, and participation in, higher education. The funding, which was secured through the Dormant Accounts Fund, aims to support increases in Traveller participation in higher education and help to address the challenges for Travellers arising from COVID-19.

MU recommends that the target group be expanded to include Traveller and Roma and that additional and dedicated resources are allocated to ensure the full scope of the Action Plan be achieved.

²⁷ Central Statistics Office (2016). [15 April 2020]: cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8itseah/

²⁸ Doyle, R. (2017). Travellers in Prison Initiative 'Hearing their Voices' Traveller Women in Prison. HSE. [15 April 2020]: ssgt.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Hearing-their-Voices-Traveller-Women-in-Prison.pdf

²⁹ Travellers in HE Seminar Report. (2016). Maynooth University. [11 April 2020]: maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Travellers%20In%20Higher%20Education_Seminar%20Report_0.pdf

5. Care Experienced

Research internationally consistently shows that children leaving the care of the State tend to have lower levels of educational attainment and higher rates of unemployment and social disadvantage than other young people³⁰. A study on care experienced young people accessing HE in Ireland³¹ identified that young people with care experience generally have poorer educational outcomes than their peers and are less likely to pursue further or higher education. A range of factors have been identified as impacting on educational attainment among children in care including placement instability and school mobility, higher rates of special educational needs, increased rates of exclusions and absenteeism, low expectations of their ability. Disrupted schooling leading to young people not being fully prepared for further and higher education, a lack of institutional tailored support from higher education institutions, and pressure to opt for short-cycle occupational training were identified as some of the barriers faced by young people with care experience in relation to pursuing further and higher education.

The recent review of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education recommended that children in care should be recognised as a target sub-group within this policy as children in care have particular needs and challenges in accessing higher education (HEA, 2018a). The HEAR scheme uses an intersectional multi-indicator approach to identify socio-economic disadvantage using a range of financial, social, and cultural indicators or criteria. Young people in the care of the Health Service Executive / TUSLA, is one of the eligibility indicators.

6. DEIS School attendance

One of the largest national initiatives developed to address educational inequality is the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) School Support Programme, a national initiative of the DES, introduced in 2005, aimed at lessening educational disadvantage and bringing about social inclusion in primary and second level education. The rationale for DEIS is that disadvantage associated with poverty is exacerbated when large proportions of pupils in a school are from deprived backgrounds known as the 'social context effect' (Sofroniou et al. 2004). Schools were/are selected for participation in the scheme based on family and pupil characteristics

³⁰ Darmody, M., McMahon, L., & Banks, J. (2013). Education of children in care in Ireland: an exploratory study.

³¹ Brady, Eavan; Gilligan, Robbie; and Nic Fhlannchadha, Siobhan (2019) "Care-experienced Young People Accessing Higher Education in Ireland," *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1, Article 5.

including levels of unemployment, local authority housing, lone parents, Travellers, Junior and Leaving Certificate retention rates and examination results (Smyth et al. 2015). DEIS schools have a higher proportion of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, students with disabilities, and Irish Travellers, have a higher incidence of literacy and numeracy issues, behavioural issues, absenteeism, lower student motivation and less parental involvement than non-DEIS schools (Smyth and McCoy 2009). DEIS schools have an overrepresentation of students with lower income levels, maternal education, and few educational resources in the home (McCoy et al. 2014b).

The concentration of disadvantage in a school has an additional impact on young people's outcomes (Smyth et al., 2015); even controlling for individual background, those in schools serving predominantly disadvantaged populations achieve lower test scores and lower exam grades and are less likely to go on to higher education (McCoy et al., 2014; McNamara et al., forthcoming) reported in Darmody et al., 2020: 26). Students with special educational needs (SEN) are more concentrated in DEIS schools (Banks et al., 2015). The ESRI suggests that DEIS schools and existing inequalities in education are likely to be exacerbated by school closures, the curtailment of support services and restrictions put in place (Darmody et al., 2020).

There are persistent differences in academic achievement and outcomes between students attending DEIS and non-DEIS schools (McCoy et al. 2012, Banks and McCoy 2011, Smyth and McCoy 2009). The differences between achievement and outcomes in DEIS and non-DEIS schools can be wide and suggest an increasing ghettoisation of schools identified as disadvantaged (McCoy et al. 2012, Smyth and McCoy 2009). The numbers of students progressing from DEIS schools to HE in Ireland has been estimated by the HEA to be 12 per cent of the total number of new entrants to HE, a rate that has improved only marginally since the commencement of the current national access plan (HEA 2018c, 19). The ESRI suggests that DEIS schools and existing inequalities in education are likely to be exacerbated by COVID-19 related school closures, the curtailment of support services and restrictions put in place (Darmody et al., 2020).

The HEAR scheme uses an intersectional multi-indicator approach to identify socio-economic disadvantage using a range of financial, social, and cultural indicators or criteria. Attendance at a DEIS school is one of the indicators.

7. Living in Areas identified as Disadvantaged.

The HP Deprivation Index is widely used in Ireland as a method of measuring the relative affluence or disadvantage of a particular geographical area. The Deprivation Index scores are a composite index of ten census measures including age dependency rate, population change, primary education, third level education, persons per room, professional classes, semi and unskilled classes, lone parents, and male and female unemployment rates (Haase and Pratschke 2012: 2). These measures cover the demographic profile, social class composition, and labour market situation of each 'small area' as defined by the Central Statistics Office. Each small area is assigned a relative index score categorising each area into one of eight categories as extremely affluent, very affluent, affluent, marginally above average, marginally below average, disadvantaged, very disadvantaged and extremely disadvantaged. Deprivation index scores range from over 30 (extremely affluent) to below 30 (extremely disadvantaged) (Haase and Pratschke 2012: 4).

The HEA now has an excellent infrastructure developed to capture data on area and has already provided a spatial and socio-economic profile of Higher Education Institutions in Ireland using census small area deprivation index scores (HEA, 2019). These are significant achievements in providing an evidence base to inform policy and practice. The HEAR scheme also uses area as an eligibility indicator. To meet the area profile indicator for HEAR, the applicant's address must be identified as Disadvantaged, Very Disadvantaged, or Extremely Disadvantaged.

8. Working class girls/STEM

The STEM gender gap is well documented: STEM courses and careers are male dominated with engineering and computer science courses having the lowest percentage of female applicants year on year. When we consider income and class, the STEM gender divide widens. With working class females significantly less likely to participate in higher level STEM courses in school, and less likely to apply to STEM degree course, they are rarely seen in STEM professions later in life. We are faced with a situation where females are less likely to access STEM careers and the young women who do succeed in STEM are more likely to come from families or communities with the social and cultural capital to support their STEM aspirations. This is a worldwide phenomenon; in Ireland we see that girls in DEIS schools are particularly under-represented in STEM and are even less likely to pursue STEM courses at third level than any other group.

Despite being in the midst of a technological revolution- STEM education is facing its greatest challenge. The number of young people pursuing STEM careers is steadily decreasing and only half of all students who do choose STEM courses end up in STEM careers. We are also in the midst of skills gap; by 2022 it is estimated that there will be 6.2 million new STEM jobs unfilled and only 2%

of candidates are expected to have the right qualifications to fill these roles. Any further drop-off in interest in STEM subjects will result in a serious human capital shortage, increasing the risk of economic crisis for countries overly dependent on STEM trades.

This potential crisis will not only adversely impact the economy, but it also threatens to widen the opportunity gap between those people who are affluent in society, and those who are not. With working class women being least likely to enter STEM fields there is a real risk that they will be left out of the 21st-century job market if these trends are not reversed. Women from working class communities will be more likely to end up in low paid, low potential jobs, remaining entrenched in poverty through a lack of STEM opportunities. Besides addressing the skills shortage and providing a means for women to become socially mobile, a diverse STEM workforce benefits everyone. By including female voices from all backgrounds we increase the diversity of opinions, ideas, and points of view in STEM. This can only help to boost creativity and innovation. Finally, including working class females in the STEM workforce means adding vibrancy, resilience and expanding the talent pool from which employers can recruit.

The 2019 'Understanding Gender Differences in STEM' study revealed that the subjects female students choose for the Leaving Certificate cycle strongly influence whether they will go on to study STEM at third level. By age 15 students have made subject decisions that will determine their future STEM options. Boys are three times more likely to study physics and applied math, while girls are more likely to study chemistry and biology. Less than 5 per cent of girls study engineering, building construction, design graphics and technology. A study conducted by NGO Teen-Turn revealed complex reasons for girls' lack of engagement with STEM. Of the 400+ Irish girls who participated in their programme (the majority coming from working class or minority communities), biology is the most offered STEM subject in girls' schools- which does not always lend itself to all STEM degree courses. Of those girls who were interested in STEM courses or careers, they were held back by university matriculation requirements due to a plethora of reasons; working class families can lack knowledge of college entry requirements affecting Junior Cert subject choices and levels. Challenges also present in relation to schools' capacity to provide a full range of STEM subject offerings; we know that boys are more likely than working class girls to attend schools which offer a full complement of STEM subjects.

To meaningfully support working class women to progress into STEM courses and careers there needs to be targeted activities to meaningfully support females to progress to and through specific courses. Naming this group would focus attention and would include the development of activities to support their STEM participation, linking with primary and secondary education to provide clear pathways for these young women into STEM courses and careers.

Appendix B – Voices of Maynooth Students

Question 1: If you could describe the perfect HEI from an access perspective, what would it look like?

- Students recommended that lecturers and staff would be trained on inclusive policy, language, and awareness of the challenges that their students face such as the many forms that disabilities may take, and other disadvantages students may have.
- Students recommended that Departments and lecturers should meet with access students to build positive relations to make it easier to make contact during times of crisis and share a greater understanding of their needs.
- Students recommended that all students and staff would be made aware of the supports available and that strategic plans be made for the timing of communications about supports to students as they can get lost in the volume of emails from Universities. The application processes would be streamlined and simplified for financial and other supports and scholarships and grants would be accessible for all levels of education from undergraduate to PhD levels.
- HEI's would be inclusive of students from all backgrounds, levels of ability and cultures with representation of this inclusivity being mirrored in the staff.
- Online resources should be checked by every department to ensure they are accessible.
- Trying to clamp down on students that are not participating by taking down slides decreases access for students with disabilities.

"If this is the person that is supposed to be the go-to, and (he/she) doesn't really know how to deal with a student, how are the other people to know, and not just general disabilities but culturally sensitive too".

"If a student is a Traveller or prison experienced the lecturers and departments need to know how to offer a solution that's applicable to that person, instead of using like a broader one that applies to the entire student body".

"If the actual role is to teach so that should be like a crucial part of their teaching. To be aware of everyone there by trying to pass on knowledge and know if they need to get it from different sources or like the message needs to be given to them and conveyed in a certain way".

"There needs to be a standard for these online materials, as for many students it can be very inaccessible. For example, students with dyslexia being unable to read lecture slides due to the lectures not having knowledge of dyslexic friendly fonts".

"The application (process) is just so inaccessible for certain students. I could be wrong, but it feels tailored towards specific situations and people and if you don't fit into that box, you're completely left outside. I had to work seven jobs just try and put myself through college and just because we couldn't fit into a box with the application but because of the way the gross or the net [income is taken into account] because of a certain question, which is really, really difficult because trying to get through your degree while also trying to financially, stabilise yourself, it impacts your mental health and your college work".

"If you want to get more people a better representation in higher education, they need to see themselves, like if you're going out the door afterwards to get the proper jobs other than sticking around in academia, you're not going to get that, 'Oh look, I can do that' unless you see it. A lot more needs to be done to get them into that next step to post grad or PhD level".

"I was trying to encourage people to get involved, before COVID, to kind of move stuff online because it's more accessible. I would encourage that as part of the national access plan, that they urge departments to put stuff online, in addition to in person things".

"Lecturers are looking at 'How can we make sure students are engaged?' in the wrong way. If a student is lazy and doesn't want to do this, how can we punish them for not engaging by taking down the online material. And as a result, this is just hurting students with disadvantages, particularly students with disabilities because if they only have lecture material available in a lecture and are not physically able to make it to the lecture, they've just punished me for having a disability".

Use the "learning we got from the virus, there is a chance this could all kick off again if we could end up back there. Hopefully, we won't but the chance is there. Departments should check what they do provide, that its inclusive of visually impaired, dyslexics, can everything be accessed with a screen reader easily? as you just highlight the text and have it read to them, check that they can get through it, especially the more dense book and stuff. For whatever subject resources lecturers are putting up should be accessible for all. Like we're not just talking about disability students but actually it should be accessible in general for all students it should be easily accessible".

Question 2: How has COVID-19 impacted on students at MU e.g., academically, financial, health, college experience and how can the new plan address these impacts?

- Students identified that there are pros and cons to the switch to working online but a lot of students felt the isolation and that their mental health suffered.
- A positive has been that being able to access lectures and materials online has been beneficial for some students, especially those with physical disabilities that had trouble getting to lectures.
- COVID-19 highlighted the lack of digital literacy of some students and the need for training as well as highlighting problems with accessing the internet.
- Working online made it harder for some students with disabilities to access group work. Students with disabilities could benefit from lab partners to share workloads.
- On the return to college, some students may need help with anxiety about getting back on campus including second year students that may need an orientation as if they are starting college.
- Mental health has been a significant issue for many students.

"Mental health has definitely been a major issue that's going to be affecting students in the future. I think it's been highlighted by COVID. I think definitely the national access plan needs to focus on the students whose education has been disrupted by COVID who need help kind of getting back into the swing of things. To see that they're being encouraged back into education".

"Students are feeling so low. They really feel like they're not getting the college experience. They feel like they're behind the screen, they're doing work but they're not actually getting that fulfilment or enjoyment they would have wanted".

[There will be] "people who will be dealing with like anxiety and stuff of being in big groups after COVID, things that like that that wouldn't have usually been an issue can now really be an issue. It can be like the smallest thing, like being scared to go into a lecture hall, like these things need to be taken into consideration".

“Some people learn from like speaking rather than listening, and I feel online methods are very passive. You can either take them in and benefit, or they can go right over your head like this. This year I feel like my intake of information has been minimal compared to other years, whereas other people [like] the new online environment so it's kind of just making sure people from both sides of spectrum needs are met”.

“I think one of the main things has been that it's really accessible for some people. It's so much easier to study, so much easier to revise. You have all of this material at your disposal. And it's really better for students who can't be there physically or for whatever reason can't deal with it at the moment”.

“I know some mature students and even some first years because I was working on campus at the time that were asking me “What's Moodle? How do I get onto my email? What's this, how do I do that?” They didn't know how to utilise online resources which would be a huge barrier”.

“Internet issues is a huge thing that I had to deal with because I had to move home because I couldn't use the internet here”.

[In a group work situation] “I tried my best, but I just wasn't at the same academic level, they tried to like remove me from the group because when you don't meet people in person, you lose that personalisation, the human element of it and you often forget when you're so kind of focused on the grades”.

Question 3: From a Maynooth University perspective, what should be the prioritised in the new National Access Plan?

- Students agreed that MU is a leader in innovations in access for students and that we should share best practice and initiatives as part of the National Access Plan with other colleges and HEI's.
- Students would like to be consulted more on issues that affect them.

“It would just be like beneficial just all universities, just talk to their students. It's just having an open dialogue, starting the conversation, see what's missing, and to move forward from there. See how they could improve. Instead of just guessing. And instead of saying, this is probably what they want. Ask them, you know”.

“We need more spaces of collaborative learning from students to lecturers and departments, but also, you know, open dialogue spaces like ‘hey we are trying to improve inclusion, what do we do?’ We need more of these open dialogue spaces”.

“We're doing all of these initiatives, but how do we make that a standardised practice throughout? One idea is to deploy the actual ambassadors we have, especially local universities by Trinity DCU and more so UCD, and show them that this is who we are, this is what we do and engage with students on the ground”.

Appendix C – Consultation with students /former students with prison experience led by Dr Seamus Taylor, Head of Department Applied Social Studies, and Professor Aislinn O’Donnell, Head of Education, Maynooth University

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the National Equity & Access Plan. We confine these comments to the issue of enhancing equity and access for potential students and students with experience of prison.

- We would start by strongly urging that the new National Equity and Access Plan make the enhancement of equity and access for students with experience of prison a national high- level priority in its next Plan.
- We would recommend that this priority be taken forward by resourcing initiatives between prisons, probation, ETBs, Universities, other state services and relevant NGOs to provide education pathways supported by wrap around services (housing, income support, counselling et al) to advance education for students with experience of prison. These could be Multi Agency Partnerships for which universities, Prisons and Probation hold the ring in each region.
- We make the recommendation above in recognition of the reality that prison can be a very challenging experience for prisoners and that the experience of prison can be traumatizing for prisoners.
- We recommend that pre- release prisoners interested in pursuing further and higher education should have the opportunity to participate in gradual structured temporary release where they can go accompanied by support staff to visit education facilities in the community including universities and further education colleges.
- If prisoners are leaving prison to attend university it is essential that the students housing situation is addressed first. There should be a settlement first policy. Stable accommodation / housing provides the cornerstone of stability from which prisoners attending further education and university can begin to build their lives. Without stable accommodation students cannot participate in university on a level playing field with other students. We recommend that an option to consider and pursue is one of targeted/ reserved places in student villages for accommodation for students who have come from living in institutional settings such as prison and or residential childcare. Such accommodation could provide a support bubble for students at this period of transition.
- There must be adequate income support for students with experience of prison to live on whilst undertaking their education whether that is in the form of SUSI grants or other forms of income support. The income support needs to be in place from the very outset of studies.
- There must be adequate support to meet transport costs to and from college where students do not live on campus.
- There must be access to counselling and support services which have understanding off and are sensitive to the prisoner and post prison experience. Access to counselling and support should be regular if needed and available over the course of studies if needed. There should also be easy access to specialist support services such as addiction counselling if needed.

- Prior to entering further and higher education students with experience of prison should be provided with IT and digital skills to a minimum of ECDL standard. They should have as they leave prison access to a personal and education laptop and an email address. These are basics from which to pursue a successful education journey.
- There should be wherever possible a continuity in support services for students with experience of prison between support staff in prison and support staff in aftercare services. Services such as those provided by NGOs like IASIO should have a seamless continuity to the post release period.
- The Probation Service support to students with experience of prison merits fundamental review. Probation Service is largely accessed through court orders issued for supervision. Probation is largely experienced as monitoring and supervision service. It is not experienced as a support service. This needs fundamental rethink.
- It is important not to overly compartmentalize and regard as separate worlds those of prison and university. should not be seen as sealed communities, one from the other. There are some prisoners with previous university education experience. There are prisoners pursuing advanced distance learning with a range of universities. They are an underrecognized source of peer support, advice and guidance to prisoners thinking of pursuing higher education. This support should be recognized and fostered.
- In general, there is a need to foster have more porous boundaries between support services in prison and those in the community.
- There is a fundamental and starting point need for all universities to review convictions policies and to in future have policies in place that enable students with prison experience to pursue education without undue barriers to their advancement based on previous experience of prison. There should only be such policies in place as are required to enable appropriate police vetting for courses requiring same and they should be applied in a non- discriminatory way.

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