

*Education has the power to transform lives, lift people out of poverty and break down cycles of disadvantage. The objective of achieving equity of access to higher education is rooted in principles of equality and social inclusion and has been a longstanding national policy priority in Ireland.*

If taken seriously, the national ambition articulated through the statement above, made in the opening paragraphs of the National Access Plan Consultation Paper, is of vital significance and truly challenging. There is ample evidence of the transformative potential of education at the level of the individual in Ireland and in countries across the world. There is also evidence that education has the power to transform societies. What is really difficult is providing for and delivering equal access to that transformative potential.

Principles of equality and social inclusion are more radical than they sound. This is evident in the deep challenges encountered thus far in implementing Ireland's longstanding national policy priority in respect of equal access to Higher Education. A shift in the culture of Higher Education Institutions is required to deliver against the principle of equality and social inclusion. A shift in culture that requires:

- the development of understanding (sensitivity to and respect for differences in experience and perspective)
- changes in practice toward the Universal Design of Learning, in respect of both methodology and curriculum
- becoming institutions that learn as well as teach, and are capable of sharing authority (open to critique and open to change).

The evidence presented as part of this consultation process suggests that all of this is easy to say and very hard to enact. A determination to sustain and renew our national commitment to this policy, as suggested by the consultation, is important. The drive toward a whole of education approach to widening participation and ensuring that equal access for all in respect of all aspects of learning (mainstreaming) are important and welcome. Ensuring strong provision of individual supports for those who need it (and will continue to need it) is vital.

Dr Siun Hanrahan  
Head of Academic Affairs  
*On behalf of the National College of Art & Design, Dublin.*

### How should our overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022-2026?

- Strong individual supports for those in need.
- Education of, and support for, staff in order to embed equity of access across HEIs.
- Universal Design of Learning (inclusive in respect of methodology and curriculum).
- Investment in inter-institutional collaboration to enhance pre-entry, post-entry and post-exit support.

### 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)?

- Challenges of marginalisation:

Identifying specific target groups is really important, enabling, as it does, accountability in respect of the success of access initiatives. However, It is worth giving consideration to how the intersection of various economic and social factors may create significant disadvantage and marginalisation, without easy categorisation:

*Is it possible to introduce an element of flexibility whereby if someone can evidence their status as marginalised they can access supports?*

*Additional Target Groups...*

- Prisoners, former prisoners, young offenders
- People in care

*Ensuring that vulnerable members of our society are included...*

- Encouraging and supporting long-term partnerships between Education providers and target communities and relevant organisations.
- Consideration of HEI governance structures at national level and how marginal perspectives are *effectively* included within and authorised in giving guidance to HEIs on becoming culturally inclusive organisations.
  - How might marginalised communities have a voice and role on governing authorities?
  - Capacity building in communities is important but so is capacity building in HEIs so that we become capable of recognising, understanding and changing the structures and assumptions that sustain the privileges of the status quo.

### How can pre-entry and post-entry activities be developed?

- Continued financial support for pre-entry out-reach initiatives.

- National guidance / Forums:
  - enabling links across 'whole' of education & related provision.
  - sharing of practice/innovations in respect of access and induction initiatives.
  - enabling sharing of practice and development of policy/initiatives to enhance supports in respect of mental health. (Is there more that can be done to enable access and successful engagement on the part of individuals for whom mental health is an issue *before* entering HE?)
- Investment in long-term partnerships with target communities and relevant organisations.
- Investment in Mentorship and 'modelling' structures:
  - pre-entry, post-entry and **post-exit** mentoring.
  - early / mid-career mentoring opportunities for former access students, perhaps as accredited CPD (under Human Capital Initiative structures).
  - Opportunities for mentoring inputs from late-career / pre-retirement professionals to offer advice support.

One of the opportunities that may not be readily available for access students is having a social network that enables professional support post-exit. Building post-exit mentoring opportunities could be of real value as part of what makes investing in higher education feasible for marginalised individuals/families.

- Continued investment in one-to-one learning supports.
- Student advice and support team for both pre-entry and post entry advice and guidance.
- Universal Design of Learning and Teaching:
  - national guidance on policies and practice
  - CPD - Teaching the Teacher is vital
- Investment in Post-Exit Mentoring:
  - As noted above, support in building professional network and practice upon completion of HE could greatly enhance meaningful 'access'.
  - The national Human Capital Initiative could provide a valuable platform and spur to creative thinking in support of the enhancement of post-exit access structures.

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

- Fund research into curricula and teaching and learning in higher education to ensure teaching methods and materials are inclusive and accessible to all.

- A less narrow focus in terms of target groups, perhaps better capturing ‘intersectionality’ and creating the possibility of giving support to anyone who can evidence their status as marginalised.
- PATH work in developing a diverse teacher cohort is vital - more diverse staff in teaching, and keeping diversity of staff on the national agenda for HEIs is also vital.
- The Fund for Students with Disabilities needs to take account of smaller colleges who may be disadvantaged by the new funding model. Core learning support and assistive technology support need to be available to each student in need, without disadvantaging students for attending a small/specialist College.

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

- Staff CPD, encompassing:
  - diversity training,
  - unconscious bias,
  - neurodivergence and meeting diverse educational needs
- Mentor training (staff/student academic mentoring)
- Support for programmes that explore and support student (and staff) understanding of diversity (along the lines of the active consent training/workshops being established across HEIs).
- Affordable Accommodation.
- Embedding Universal Design of Learning *and* continuing to ensure capacity to meet individual learning needs.
- ‘Whole of system’ investment – enabling engagement with representative organisations.
- National initiative to enable HE student access to software – Adobe Suite, for example.
- Extending Assistive Technology availability (where may be needed in the absence of a diagnosis).
- Continue SATL initiative – with clear signposts to encourage and enable initiatives that support ‘universal’ student success.
- Curricula – guidance and clear expectation that lecturers, module leaders and programme leaders review curricula to ensure inclusivity and resist cultural and ‘privilege’ biases. Curricula that encourage students to identify and challenge orthodoxies.

### How can a whole-of-education approach to widening participation in higher education be achieved?

- Consideration of HEI governance structures at national level and how marginal perspectives are *effectively* included within and authorised in giving guidance to HEIs on becoming culturally inclusive organisations.
- Investment in understanding and creating alternative pathways into HE for people who learn differently.
- Extend 'free fees' support to part-time programmes and students.
- National Disciplinary Forums to give thought to how a view-forward to career options and imaginable futures can be communicated to young people who might not otherwise see or understand the kinds of options that a given discipline entails.

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

- Encourage the development of pre-entry college courses jointly run and staffed by FET and HEI; PLCs designed to equip students with the skills to succeed in 3rd level.

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

- Supports to enable cross-sectoral collaboration so that the expertise of those working with marginalised groups can be shared with HEIs, and HEIs enabled to respond effectively; inter-agency collaboration fostered and supported.
- Support for working with young teachers as they take up roles in schools to support continued understanding, development and promotion of social inclusion and focus upon:
  - enabling students to see a route into HE, and
  - engaging with HEs to communicate the obstacles as perceived by young people.
- Tackle housing crisis in Dublin!
- Enhance 'transitional' supports for those who have been multiply-disadvantaged through learning challenges or social disadvantage (the care system).
- Greater investment in HSE and wider disability support - the cost and the *time* it takes to get diagnoses means that those without wealth to draw upon are marginalised.

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

- Digital Connectivity - the digital divide is significant and the funding for laptops made a really important contribution. *But CONNECTIVITY* is also key. With challenges ranging from available signal/broadband to affording the data required to engage with contemporary HE learning activities. Fund Connectivity!
- Space – this has been a real challenge for many marginalised groups. Meaningful access for marginalised groups requires:
  - Decent, affordable accommodation for students.
  - Decent and reasonable accommodation for families that is sufficient to enable quiet work within the home.
- Mental health challenges. *Belonging* problems increased across the whole of the student population. Enhanced mental health supports across the whole of Ireland’s education system will need to be in place for several years post-COVID, as the impact of the pandemic will take time to address.
- One notable challenge is that, due to Covid, there is a significant backlog of psychoeducational and mental health assessments at a national level. This means that some students starting their HE journey this September will not have received a needed diagnosis. Furthermore, the backlog may take years to work through so that additional provision in respect of enhanced availability of learning supports at HE will be needed for several years.
- Financial difficulties arising from Covid will affect significant numbers of people and provision needs to be made to mitigate this (again, this is likely to persist over a number of years).
- Students with ADHD in particular faced substantial difficulties this year. In addition to enabling the sharing of best practice in terms of supporting specific learning challenges, ensuring that Learning Support Services are funded across the transition into a post-Covid learning environment will be important.