



**National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE)**  
**Submission to the next National Access Plan for the period 2022 – 2026.**

NCGE is an agency of the Department of Education (DE) with responsibility to inform the policy of the DE and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science, (DFHERIS) on guidance in education and training sector and to support the development of quality guidance practice in post-primary and FET. NCGE represents the Department and Ireland at EU Commission level on the development of EU policy on lifelong guidance and was directly involved in the development of the guidelines and publications of the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN).

The NCGE Management of Guidance Committee is a sub-committee of the Board of Léargas with committee members nominated by the Minister, and appointed by Léargas, to include relevant stakeholders such as the Department, DSP, Léargas, HEA, SOLAS, ETBI, IGC, Adult Guidance Association, University Directors of Studies of Guidance Counselling, NAPD. Paul King (DCU) is the Ministers' nominated Chair.

The following submission provides a general response by NCGE to the questions posed by the partnership of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and DFHERIS in the development of the next National Access Plan for the period 2022 – 2026, and will attempt to address some of the questions posed in the National Access Plan 2022 – 2026 Consultation Paper.

NCGE welcomes that various national strategies are based on the current elements of the Programme for Government 2020, in areas such as Reskilling and Retraining: developing a culture of lifelong learning; developing a standardised system of accreditation of prior learning; support the recovery phase with the provision of new career paths for people with different interests and abilities; improving access to Higher Education for Traveller community; improving access to FET and HE generally; supporting pathways to professions for disadvantaged students; taking account of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals and focusing on social inclusion, anti-poverty and Community development.

NCGE welcomes the Programme for Government focus to examine the creation of a single-information portal for school-leavers for both Further Education and Higher Education programmes of study and to ensure that Ireland supports our citizens and general population to recognise our place as global citizens at the heart of Europe.

NCGE expects that it is incumbent on DFHERIS and HEA to report on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities following its ratification in Ireland 2018. People with Disabilities are included within the target groups of both the AEGS and the HEA National Access Plan (NAP). Provision of information and educational and career guidance to support access to both FET and HE opportunities should be included in such reports based on the Council of Europe Action Plan to promote the rights and full participation of people with disabilities in society, improving the quality of life of people with disabilities in Europe 2006-2015: which included reference to access to employment, vocational guidance and training. Provision of nationally available guidance services providing impartial

information and guidance to those adults with disabilities who wish to engage or re-engage with education will allow DE, DFHERIS, HEA and SOLAS account for this activity in such reports.

Higher Education in Ireland should be accessible to all who wish to enter into HE, whether directly from post primary school or as an adult ( i.e. all those over the age of 18 years) returning to education, as undergraduate or returning to HE to complete post-graduate level. Impartial accessible information and guidance should be available to all across the lifespan to support them to consider their options for attending HE.

NCGE proposes that the provision of quality impartial guidance with up-to-date information on all education and training options in FET and HE is vital to encourage and support access to Higher Education for all target groups.

Within this document, NCGE will refer to the term “Guidance” as the overarching concept for the provision of careers guidance, careers education/development and guidance counselling.

### **Guidance**

The EU Council Resolution, 2008, on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies states :

*“...the definition of Guidance as referring to a continuous process that enables citizens at any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which those capacities and competences are learned and/or used. Guidance covers a range of individual and collective activities relating to information-giving, counselling, competence assessment, support, and the teaching of decision-making and career management skills.”*

In 2007, the Irish National Guidance Forum, stakeholders from across education, training and the labour market agreed on a national definition “Guidance facilitates people throughout their lives to manage their own educational, training, occupational, personal, social, and life choices so that they reach their full potential and contribute to the development of a better society” .

Building on the vision set out in the previous HEA (2015, p.7) report “to ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population”, the NCGE identifies the means to address the shortcomings of the National Access Plan 2022 – 2026 Consultation Paper through the lens of **guidance in education across the lifespan**. The updated vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland for 2022-2026 should ensure that *all individuals* have access to an impartial, free, high-profile year-round public adult guidance service that is available both online and face-to-face, delivered by competent professionals at every transition point as they navigate their way through life. The NCGE believe that this service should be available to all individuals irrespective of their socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, disability or other circumstances.

Guidance services should be delivered by those with the requisite qualifications and skills to foster trust and confidence among the most vulnerable members of our community. In addition, there should be a



joined-up approach between the different services and agencies currently available to ensure seamless delivery, avoiding duplication contributing to a sustainable, transparent, accountable, and evidence-based service delivery model.

The current practice of funding for guidance services is based on the model of DE funding guidance in schools, SOLAS funding guidance in FET, with HEA funding access programmes and careers services through the student support programme. These guidance services do not formally connect, co-ordinate or make cross referrals. The development of the National Guidance Strategy would address the co-ordination and delivery of considered and cohesive guidance services to support access to FET and HE programmes, as often it is through progression from FET that learners will access HE.

The ETB Adult Education Guidance Services (AEGS) were originally established to support adults to return to basic education and FET programmes. NCGE Statistical Reports show that, over the course of 14 years, that 19.9% were referred to HE programmes.

It is the role of quality guidance services to provide impartial information and guidance to potential learners. Reports from the Adult Guidance Management System (AGMS) (i.e. the database of the AEGS) indicate that, from 2004-2018, with 643,225 individual beneficiaries accessing impartial information and guidance in the AEGS nationally, 19.9% of clients planned to or progressed into HE. AEGS work closely with the DSP in relation to client eligibility and financial supports available.

In recognition that “teachers have a critical role to play in raising academic aspirations” (HEA 2015, p.17), the NCGE echo a call by the OECD (Musset and Kureková Mýtina 2018) that career guidance should be included within Initial Teacher Education and ongoing Professional Development amongst school staff to embed careers education in the curriculum and nurture an awareness of post-secondary school pathways from an early age. These points were also emphasised in a recent webinar (OECD 2021) delivered by policy analysts of the OECD and are supported by evidence-based research (Covacevich *et al.* 2021). According to Covacevich *et al.* (2021, p. 59), “effective counsellors will encourage and enable students to engage in multiple and continuing discussions about their career interests and how they relate to their educational experiences”.

Irish studies have demonstrated the benefits of the vocational/career and personal/social dimensions of post-primary school guidance to support progression to third level education (McCoy *et al.* 2006; Smyth and Hannan 2007; Smyth and Banks 2012; McCoy *et al.* 2014; Indecon 2019). Clear benefits were evident among schools in receipt of an additional allocation of guidance counselling hours through the Guidance Enhancement Initiative, which reportedly had “more targeted and focused guidance interventions”, including more guidance for junior cycle students and personal support for students (DES 2006, p.135). A study that analysed applications and entry to higher education in Ireland reported higher rates of college application in those schools with a greater number of hours for career guidance when compared with other schools (Smyth and Hannan 2007). In another study, qualitative interviews of 27 young people (aged 21-23) highlighted the importance of guidance interventions in the decision-making process upon leaving second level education (McCoy *et al.* 2014). Furthermore, young people from working-class backgrounds were more dependent upon school-based guidance than their middle-class peers (McCoy *et al.* 2014). Similarly, guidance counsellors were found to be one of the most effective means of provision of career information in a recent report (Indecon 2019).



Currently the allocation of guidance hours in schools remains lower than the pre-2012 ex-quota guidance position based on student enrolment. A minimum ratio of 22 hours for guidance for 500 students should be considered as the autonomy afforded to management since 2012 has meant that when resources are tight, hours for guidance have been diverted to other school causes, giving rise to inequitable provision (McCoy *et al.* 2014; Smyth *et al.* 2015). Smyth *et al.* 2015, in reports published by the ESRI, have proposed that reinstating the ex-quota model of guidance will help address the inequitable provision of guidance nationally.

In addition, the NCGE welcomes support for initiatives such as the work of the Trinity Access Programme (College for Every Student <https://brilliantpathways.org/>) (or the Canadian Career Trek (2021) approach) as models of practice that could be rolled out nationally for all students who are underrepresented at third level.

The NCGE commends the progress made by the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) college and university admissions schemes for prospective students who are underrepresented at higher education due to their socio-economic background or whose disabilities have had a negative impact on their second level education (Access College 2021). This progress would not be possible, however, without the work of the school based guidance counsellor, and NCGE would welcome this recognition. These critical pre-entry schemes should be expanded to Further Education colleges as identified in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (HEA 2015). The Covid pandemic will have placed additional pressures on families, and a review of the income threshold to assess the eligibility of the HEAR scheme and SUSI grant is warranted on this basis. There should be a national database of supports available at third level so that students eligible for HEAR and DARE schemes can make informed decisions about what colleges are best equipped to support their post-entry needs.

### **Target Groups**

It is critical to recognise that pathways to HE will require lifelong learning approach where some individuals will benefit from a return to education through the FET sector first, prior to progression to HE. The list of designated “target groups” of the ETB Adult Education Guidance Services was outlined by the Department of Education and Skills in 2012 to ensure provision of impartial accessible guidance to the most vulnerable and marginalized groups, such as all Adults and young people aged over 16 years who left school with low or no formal qualifications or low literacy levels.

This list of “target groups” should be considered in addition to specific focus on students from disadvantaged backgrounds, those attending DEIS schools and ethnic minority groups, and in particular those for whom English is their second language. Clarification of “vulnerable” can prove difficult as there are disadvantaged children with disabilities attending non DEIS schools, and children from “educationally advantaged” backgrounds attending DEIS schools. It is crucial here to consider the circumstances of the individual and not the institution to which they are attached.

### **Pathways and Transitions**

Processes for application to HE need to be clear, unambiguous and transparent. Where there are clear procedures for applications directly from the school system, the development of pathways from FET to

HE should be nationally agreed systems, making use of QQI structures. Locally developed progression options between FET centres and HE institutions do not benefit all FET students nationally. HE should consider that applications from FET learners should include an increased quota of places to ensure progression opportunities, in particular for those “disadvantaged” adult learners who have returned to education through the FET system and are more prepared for progression options into HE programmes at NFQ Levels 7 and 8.

Access programmes / work shadowing opportunities to support young people and adults to experience HE learning, as part-time or fulltime or online students is necessary. Continued development of partnership with schools and FET sector at local and regional level is required to ensure cohesive and approach to supporting access to HE.

Financial supports available for younger student and adults and clarity of the costs of attending HE are required to support pre-entry decisions. Exploration with employers regionally on partnership approach to learning while working, outside of the apprenticeship model is crucial to support those who are required for personal reasons to continue to earn a salary and yet wish to complete Higher Education programmes not available through the Apprenticeship programmes.

Standardisation and clarifications of national Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes will support more appropriate pathway progressions for all concerned.

Clarification of Pre-entry is required. Pre-entry for a student completing the Leaving Cert in school is different to pre-entry for a young adult, aged 24 years, with refugee status, family financial difficulties and childcare issues. Post-entry requires onsite supports, financial and academic, mentorship programmes and ongoing guidance support to ensure development of career management / career development skills, to confirm life and / or education and career goals and outcomes.

### ***Funding and Social Protection***

Recognition of the role of the Dept of Social Protection is crucial for those who wish to access HE from less traditional or disadvantaged groups. Access to SUSI grant for unemployed individuals in conjunction with social protection issues such as housing supports, access to free or affordable childcare, medical card etc is vital to removing barriers to progression into and completion of HE. Funding mechanisms require a whole of government focus to support adults returning to education.

To minimize some of the physical and practical barriers to access, with financial constraints, consideration must be given to establishment of online provision and outreach campus developments across the geographically hard to reach areas.

### ***Implications from Covid pandemic***

Initial, anecdotal evidence to NCGE suggests that some students in HE responded more favorably to online learning than others. Those with mobility or health issues could participate in HE in more suitable ways than prior to the school / college closures due to the pandemic. However the reported access to (or lack of) broadband, a suitable place to study and/or research, and difficult family circumstances and housing accommodation have provided challenges.

It is important to consider that the provision of HE programmes online allowed students who were struggling financially or personally to “go to college” but not “leave home” which suggests opportunities for developing a blended learning approach to future teaching and learning approaches in HE.

Despite the move at national policy level to support more home / remote based working opportunities, the long term implications of education in such isolation may not be conducive to the development of relevant and necessary career related skills such as team work. These issues will need to be considered further in light of further national policies on remote working.

Where the target remains to reach more adult learners to encourage them to engage in HE programmes, the development and use of a blended approach with online teaching and learning and face to face delivery, as a result of the pandemic, cannot be underestimated.

### ***Social Inclusion***

HEA National Access Plan Interim report detailed requirement for social inclusion, and access to HE for disadvantaged groups. Key to this access is nationally accessible guidance services for ALL, delivered online and through walk – in service across ETBs and ensuring career development skills are integrated into schools’ curriculum and all relevant FET programmes. Furthermore, the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) developed by POBAL and Dept of Rural and Community Development, provides “supports for disadvantaged individuals to improve the quality of their lives through the provision of lifelong learning and labour market supports”. In the event that individuals “targeted “ by this SICAP programme are considered “ target groups” for the National Access Plan, it is crucial that such groups are provided with access to the professional guidance and information staff and programmes of the ETB AEGS.

### ***Education for Sustainable Development***

The National Access Plan will be required to take account of national policies for the implementation of the UN 17 Sustainable Development goals. In this context, NCGE has held 2 National Guidance Forum meetings focusing on the role of guidance in supporting the implementation of these SDGs. Further information is available from NCGE, but in summary Guidance has a role in supporting the implementation of Goals 4, 5 and 8.

Each of these has a direct implication for the HE National Access Plan :

GOAL 4: Insure inclusive & equitable quality education & promote lifelong learning opportunities for all  
Goal 4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship

Goal 4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations

Goal 5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere

Goal 5.5 Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life



Goal 8.3 Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation....

Goal 8.5 By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men

Goal 8.6 By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training

### ***Graphic Illustration***

The following provides a graphic illustration of how guidance provision to an individual is embedded in the context of that individual: - supporting the person to consider their own personal circumstance, their experiences, interests and aptitudes *and* to develop the skills of career development in career decision making , applications processes etc and to consider these plans in the context of the wider economic conditions and requirements of society.

### ***In summary***

DHERIS and HEA have a clear opportunity now , under the auspices of the new National Action Plan and the FET Strategy 2020-2024 , to reconsider , reconfigure and resource the role and remit of the ETB AEGS to ensure provision of impartial accessible information and guidance to ALL individuals within the necessary target groups for FET *and* HE. Based within the ETBs regionally, with a national requirement to connect with the Regional Skills agenda, the ETB AEGS services are perfectly placed to provide information and guidance, and to liaise directly with DSP on all adults who wish to consider their HE options, whether as progression from FET or access into HE directly.

The National Access Plan is directly reliant on the development of a DE / DFHERIS agreed National Guidance Strategy, which will provide an opportunity to develop the “integrated strategic approach to tertiary education” as per the previous DES Action Plans.

NCGEs welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the above points within a bilateral meeting and / or stakeholder consultation group with those responsible for this invaluable work.

On behalf of NCGE

*Jennifer McKenzie*

*Director, NCGE*

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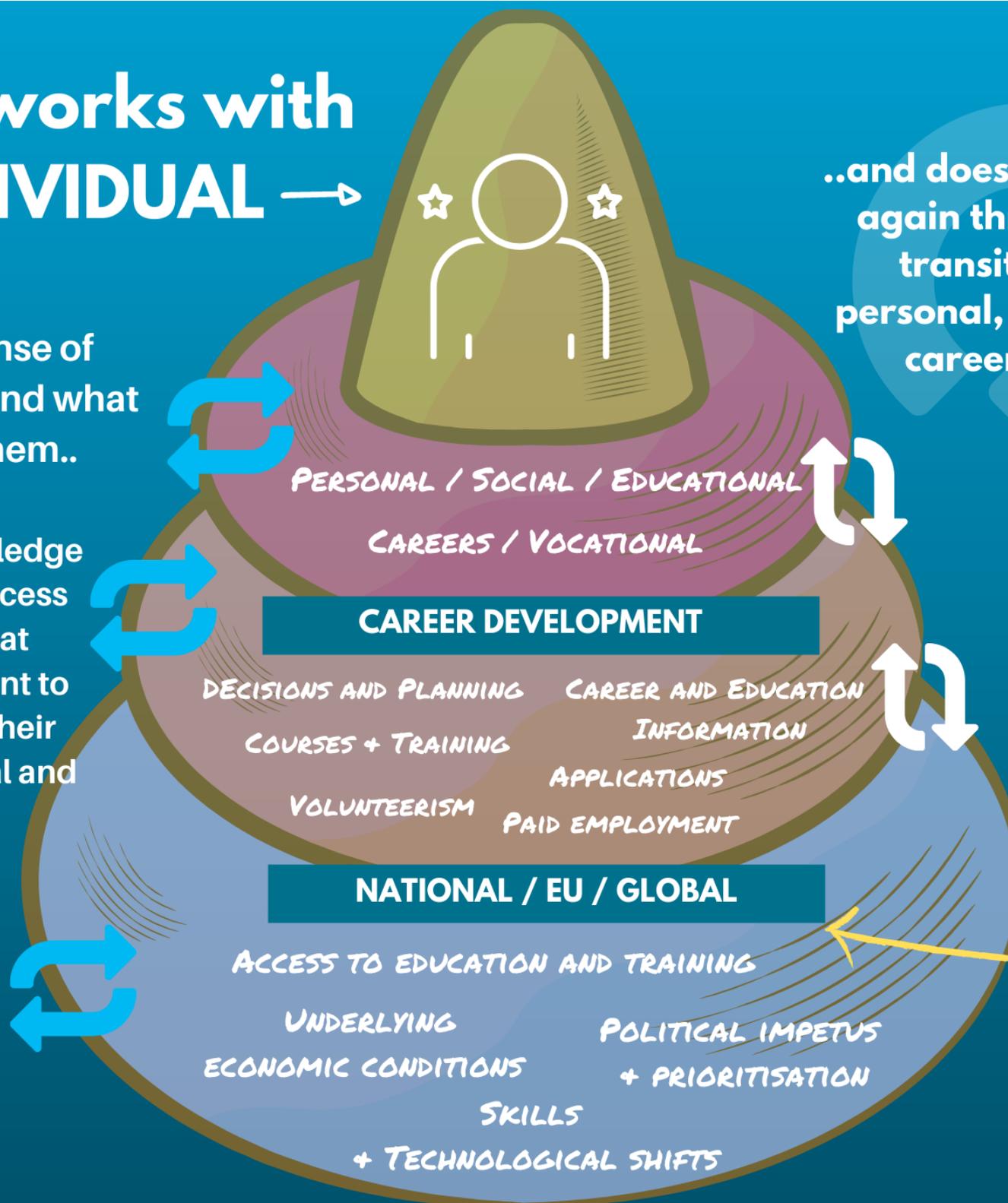
[director@ncge.ie](mailto:director@ncge.ie)

# Guidance works with the **INDIVIDUAL** →

→ ..to make sense of who they are and what interests them..

→ ..to develop the knowledge & skills needed to access and determine what information is relevant to plan for and attain their personal, educational and career goals..

→ ..within the context of society as a whole..



..and does this again and again throughout the transitions in the personal, educational & career life cycle.



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