



The Higher Education Authority

National Access Plan

A Response

June 18, 2021

Introduction

NCSE strongly welcomes the HEA's National Access Plan 2022-2026, particularly its vision for equity of access to higher education for all students with disabilities to adult educational settings. This vision enables the NCSE to continue in its goal to remove barriers, to widen participation, and to enhance the inclusive educational opportunities for all learners with disabilities to access further and higher education. The development of a continuum of further and higher education will support students to access a more integrated third level system facilitating a widening of options available to students with disabilities. Creating a robust transition support at post primary level will facilitate students' successful transition from post-primary school to adult education.

In supporting a widening of access, the National Access Plan will enable the participation of all students leaving school to access a system that is flexible and holistic with an emphasis on skills for life. This system reflects social, participatory and community engagement and successful academic outcomes for all students. This includes looking at options within further and higher education that support long term meaningful engagement and participation in adult life. Currently, there is significant variability in the options available to students upon leaving post primary and special school settings from both a geographic and accessibility viewpoints.

This paper highlights some considerations for the National Access Plan around definitions and categorisation, and planning for further and higher education of young people with disabilities emulating the social model of disability. It utilises a framework for inclusive further and higher education development and considers an implementation process that incorporates the voice of individuals with disability, the environment or educational institutions to support meaningful engagement, and participation for all to ensure for better outcomes.

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, while still not fully commenced, points to the need for significant early planning around school leaving to ensure that a child can continue their education or training on leaving school. Section 15, which is yet to be commenced, sets out the following:

Planning for future education needs.

15.—(1) In preparing or reviewing an education plan, the principal of the relevant school or relevant special educational needs organiser shall, from the child's attaining such age as the principal or organiser considers appropriate, have regard to the provision which will need to be made to assist the child to continue his or her education or training on becoming an adult.

(2) In performing the functions under subsection (1), the principal or the special educational needs organiser shall—

(a) ascertain the wishes of the child concerned and of his or her parents, and

(b) take such steps as are necessary as will enable the child to progress as a young adult to the level of education or training that meets his or her wishes or those of his or her parents and that are appropriate to his or her ability.

(3) In preparing or carrying out a review of an education plan in respect of the child who has special educational needs and who within the following 12 months will reach the age of 18 years, the Council shall cause an assessment to be made of—

(a) the extent, if any, to which goals set out in any previous such plan or the plan, as the case may be, successfully met the special educational needs of the child or student, and

(b) the reasons for any failure to meet those goals and the effect any such failure has had on the development of the child,

and the plan shall include measures to address any such effect.

Other sections of the Act set out some functions for the NCSE in relation further and higher education, rehabilitation and training. Section 7 (3) of the Disability Act 2005 provides additional functions and took effect for adults who turned 18 years of age in June 2020. NCSE considers that the Access Plan should be cognisant of the need to build in transitional planning at an early stage for students with disabilities.

In considering our functions, the NCSE commissioned two research papers, mapped post-school options for young adults (2014) and developed some information pamphlets (2018) which may inform and assist the development of the Access Plan as follows:

- NCSE Research Report 14 (2013): Moving to Further and Higher Education: An Exploration of the Experiences of Students with Special Educational Needs
Authors: Conor Mc Guckin, Michael Shevlin, Sheena Bell and Cristina Devecchi

- NCSE Research Report 15 (2013): What Works in the Provision of Higher, Further and Continuing Education, Training and Rehabilitation for Adults with Disabilities? A Review of the Literature
Authors: Carmel Duggan and Michael Byrne
- Information on Post-School Options for School Leavers and other Adults with Disabilities: Further Education and Training
- Information on Post-School Options for School Leavers and other Adults with Disabilities: Higher Education
- Information on Post-School Options for Rehabilitative Training and Adult Day Services
- Information on Options for Adults and School Leavers with Disabilities: Post-School Education and Training

All of the above may assist in this and other considerations and are available to download at www.ncse.ie. Hard copies of these documents are available on request.

Definitions and categorisation

The achievement and status of educational attainment can be life enhancing for individuals with disabilities and, for some, can ensure a positive vocational outcome allowing for greater independence and participation in society.

Clarity is required regarding the **definition of higher education** and the current distinction between higher and further education. In reading the documentation, it is unclear if all education and academic levels are of interest to the National Plan group.

Review of the alternative accreditation options would be helpful, especially in the context of recent university inclusion initiatives such as the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities. The academic demands of the traditional definition of higher education (Level 7 and Level 8) are not achievable for some people with disabilities. Many adults with disabilities can engage meaningfully with Level 4 and Level 5 certification and in adult education programmes. These give great satisfaction and personal achievement for students and, for some, provide a pathway to employment for students.

A further issue for clarification is the **categorisation of disability** limited to “physical mobility”, “deaf/hard of hearing”, and “blind/vision impairment”. Little information is given about the

participation of people in categories groupings such as those with intellectual disabilities, complex learning difficulties, complex medical conditions, or autistic individuals. Their number, as a proportion of the population, is far greater than the three categories of disabilities referenced above.

There is little reference given to people with enduring mental health conditions. Mental health challenges can, and do, manifest in late adolescence and into early adulthood. This particular cohort of young people have specific support needs while they manage intense disruptions in their lives. The impact of the Covid pandemic on young people requires consideration. It is widely acknowledged that mental health support is an under resourced area. Therefore, we believe it is important to include it within the categorisations to ensure access to appropriate supports for young people with co-occurring disability and mental health needs to enable them to engage in higher or further education. NCSE considers that the National Access Plan should refer to all people with disabilities and complex health needs.

Social Model of Disability Perspective

The social model of disability looks at environments and supports surrounding an individual, specifically how the environment can support individuals and promote their meaningful participation in society. With regard to the statement in the submission that “some prospective students simply do not see themselves as belonging to a university, institute of technology or college in the first place, we suggest that this needs to change” (p2). An alternative statement could state that educational institutions are not featured in the lives of some groups and communities due to current barriers that exist. The National Access Plan should outline the expectations on institutions to support and promote students with disabilities to meaningfully participate in what they offer in terms of their relevance, and their positive future outcomes in the lives and communities of focus. It also needs to consider the views of those who currently do not attend further and higher education and why this is the case.

Removal of barriers to access

The ‘mainstreaming’ approach to support systems is one practical way to remove the many barriers individuals with disabilities experience when attempting to access further and higher education. The issues below give some indicate this need for review.

- There is currently no funding available for supports such as access to transport or an educational care support worker (equivalent role to an Special Needs Assistant and primary and post primary level) to learners with disabilities who are registered on courses at QQI level 1-4. In addition, there is no funding available for learners who wish to study on a part-time basis.

- Funding under the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) requires that students are registered on full time courses which are accredited at QQI level 5/6. This excludes a large cohort of students with disabilities from accessing support.
- Solas manages the administration of this fund in conjunction with the Education & Training Boards. Solas took over this role for the further education sector from the Higher Education Authority in September 2020.
- Some learners receive funding to support their education from both the HSE and Solas via the FSD. Currently, the experiences of students indicate that the government departments do not communicate with each other, leading to a fragmented and ineffective service.
- Some colleges of Further Education offer Adult Leaving Certificate programmes. If a person with a disability wishes to enrol on any of these programme, and he/ she requires funding for supports such as an educational care support worker (equivalent to an SNA), he/ she cannot access funding as he/she is over 18 years. This is a current barrier in the system as this cohort of learners are not catered for. Funding cannot be accessed via the NCSE or Solas.

The National Access Plan should build on the considerable experience and capacity available to students with disabilities from their schools, disability groups, disability services, community voluntary groups, and the State agencies currently involved in supporting individuals and groups in education.

Measuring outcomes

We suggest a need to reflect more broadly on outcome measurements in the context of the social model of disability. Currently the plan details numbers of students entering and exiting the student body. A more holistic measure is required that provides information on not just academic outcomes but also life outcomes and captures those who may not complete further or higher education. The lived experience of students with disabilities, acknowledging their voice as central, is a very rich and informative mode of capturing the outcomes of this plan. Identifying the supports and barriers to engagement in further and higher education is also essential to inform policy moving forward.

The NCSE interprets educational outcomes to include academic achievement; attendance-related such as completing programmes; happiness-related outcomes such as confidence, wellbeing, positive relationships, attitude to learning, engagement in extra-curricular activities, and quality of life indicators; independence related outcomes, such as resilience, socialisation, mobility, use of assistive technology and life skills; and end of school outcomes (NCSE, 2014).

A collaborative partnership between stakeholders that include disability groups, community groups, educators from schools and further education, and managers from government departments would inform a broader focus for outcomes measurements.

Inclusive Further and Higher Education: A focus on the student and the educational institution

The National Access Plan states that its overall vision is 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.” There is also the requirement to consider how the education system needs to change to adapt to the needs, interests and goals of diverse groups.

Active participation is central to inclusion and is particularly important for the personal development for individuals in challenging circumstances. Inclusivity requires that all learning and all learners are valued and their achievements celebrated. Learning occurs in a planned, shared environment where goals are set collaboratively reflecting the individual’s capacity and interests to enhance their participation and quality of life. Education in inclusive settings enhances diversity in the school and community. It builds social capital.

Applying a framework to the Discussion

It may be useful to establish a framework within which access to higher and further education can be explored further. This framework would benefit from a focus on the following aspects:

- 1. Person-Centred- Student voice as central to decision making**
- 2. The Environment- Further and Higher Education**
- 3. The Experience- Meaningful engagement as ‘student’ and ‘learner’.**

This would allow for the exploration of key influencing factors such as identifying a need for further support; adjustment in personal skills; adaptation to the demands of the role and tasks of being a student; and the removal of barriers to participation. Each area is detailed below in relation to these considerations and key focus areas for the National Access Plan.

- 1. “Person-Centred”:** Key components to consider in relation to the ‘person’ include; student voice as central to decision making that identifies interests; values; self-view; standards and expectations; motivation; skills and strengths; history of success as a learner, and availability

and use of a network of supports. These would support the development of a **personal future plan**. Positive personal future planning should commence in middle childhood and early adolescence for all students and continue throughout students' third level experience.

Key focus areas for the National Access Plan around supporting this could include:

- Incorporating a focus on each student's personal development, decision making, goal setting, and active planning for his or her own activities in schools, after-school clubs, participation in day programmes, and summer camps
- Career exploration and guidance: The participation of all students in an active Transition Year programme, including a work placement experience that requires collaboration with other agencies and groups external to school settings. Resources to support students in underrepresented groups is lacking. Disability agencies and voluntary groups could make a contribution if facilitated and resourced to do so.
- Structured work experiences and summer placements for students from the targeted groups within further and higher education to widen their experiences and participation, further their personal development, and promote possibilities of a future involving better access to training, education and employment.
- Advocacy training (including self-advocacy) for students and those with a supportive role in a student's life (e.g. peers, parents, teachers, youth groups, sports clubs).

2. **"The Environment"-Further and higher education:** Key components to consider in relation to the 'further and higher education environment' include; physical settings; mission; social and cultural ethos; including how and, to whom, they market themselves; who they include and currently exclude in this space; procedural and administrative processes and regulations, and the outcome measurements they and their funders require. Examination of these components will identify the barriers and enable the creation of supports to enhance participation in an environment where individuals from underrepresented groups, who currently experience difficulties in accessing further and higher education, achieve greater equity of access.

Key focus areas for the National Access Plan around the further and higher education environment could include:

- the voice of students with disabilities who have experienced being part of the further and higher education environment
- Further and higher education institutions:

- Supporting disability groups, disability services, schools, educators and members of the underrepresented groups to build up a data base on the various educational settings with reference to their own information needs.
 - Having a physical presence in schools, communities with disabled individuals, and with employment placements to develop person-to-person engagement.
 - Including service learning, or Civic Engagement as part of their course requirements, as it is emancipatory and builds social capital. Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities are an example of an institution who are doing this.
 - Involving their students in activities that allow for opportunities for underrepresented groups and communities, especially in their schools, youth clubs, mental health support groups and disability groups to collaborate on activities with shared aims.
 - Developing a felt presence in the local environments of the communities and groups of focus. The knowledge within the communities and groups should be brought to the fore, their history illuminated and shared with the wider society.
3. **“The Experience”-Meaningful engagement in being a ‘student’ and ‘learner:** Key components to consider in relation to the Experience that captures **meaningful engagement in being a ‘student’ and ‘learner’** that includes: the self-management and organisational skill demands of being a student; the new social and physical environment; course expectations and workload (directed and self-directed) and the outcomes required.

Key focus areas for the National Access Plan around Experience-meaningful engagement in being a ‘student’ and ‘learner’ could include:

- Tailor admission requirements to outcomes required for the individual.
- Build social capital through engagement with local communities, employers, disability groups, schools, youth groups etc. to provide holistic and enriching learning experiences including supported work experience.
- Looking at meaningful life and educational outcomes for individuals (as discussed in paragraph above).
- Support and develop the work of student services in supporting those students who have succeeded in entering further and higher education as being particularly valuable for the transition in, through and post higher education.

Conclusion

Developing inclusive education is effortful, multidimensional, and challenging. Collaboration is essential. Schools, individuals, voluntary groups, further and higher education settings all have key roles in delivering on a vision of equity of access to further, higher education and all adult educational settings for all students with disabilities.

The Plan needs to focus on further and higher education options, and to develop more inclusive definitions of further and higher education, as well as re-assess categories of disability to encompass and represent the broad spectrum of disabilities in our community.

Interrogating the National Access Plan within the context of the the social model of disability perspective, and utilising a framework that focussed on the key tenets of 'student', 'the further and higher education environment', and 'meaningful engagement in being a 'student', will support the development of structures, policies, and supports to enable the inclusion of a diversity of learners.

Developing a positive personal future plan for active engagement in education and community settings should be a consistent requirement by all support agencies engaging and supporting individuals with disabilities. With a focus towards self-directed personal development goals, positive personal profiles and skills will be developed to support individuals to reach a greater level of independence and participation in society. Funding allocation for supports should prioritise this as a necessary requirement.

The National Access Plan needs would benefit from ongoing engagement with stakeholders (e.g. disability groups, policy, schools, parents, students, educational institutions etc.) at different time points (pre-transition; transitioning, while attending, transitioning from) to capture the longitudinal experiences of individuals as they progress. Furthermore, capturing the longer term outcomes to increase the participation of individuals is required. Outcomes should include measurement of the impacts of policy on the lived experiences of target individuals and groups.

This will support an informed vision for this plan that embodies an inclusive approach.

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