



Submission from the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

The Board of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, including representatives of the HEA/DFHERIS, QQI, USI, IUA, THEA and HECA, welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the next National Access Plan. As the national body responsible for leading and advising on the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education, we represent all those who teach, learn and shape related policy and practice across the sector.

The National Forum has always worked to support the success of all students in Irish higher education; student success is the central priority within our current strategy. In considering how to support the success of all students, we recognise that if, as the consultation document suggests, we are aiming for a society that embraces diversity and where higher education is accessible by all regardless of background, disability, ethnicity or financial means, then teaching and learning approaches must be inclusive, evidence-informed and particularly responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable in our higher education community.

We welcome the focus on inclusion in the recent Statement of the Strategy of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. As a body that has consistently emphasised the importance of being inclusive of all those who teach, all those who learn and all institution types, the National Forum stands ready to support the related ambitions of this Strategy.

We also welcome the wording in the recently published General Scheme of the Higher Education Authority Bill¹, which emphasises ‘equity of access and participation’ rather than simply ‘equity of access’. The National Forum has long held that students need to be supported to succeed throughout their educational journey, and indeed supported to engage in learning throughout their lives. This was echoed in the advice of John Gardner during the HEA/National Forum Student Success Think Tank in 2019: ‘Move beyond access to success. Access is necessary but insufficient.’

The HEA Access section and the National Forum have worked in close collaboration for many years, building evidence, promoting informed use of data for student success, developing a national understanding of student success and, more recently, working on the development and implementation of a guiding framework for student success. Together we have shifted understanding and focus from non-completion in higher education to a focus on what helps students to succeed in higher education, and we have informed related understandings and actions.

Through this submission, we will consider the coming years and how developments likely to arise during the lifetime of the next National Access Plan might allow for a continuation of the collaborative work that has allowed the National Forum and our colleagues in HEA Access to work in partnership toward shared goals in the past. We focus on four main areas: implementing a national student success framework, inclusive pedagogical approaches, equity of access and participation in a digital and open world, and strategic and policy alignment.

¹ See here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/70ed2-general-scheme-of-the-higher-education-authority-bill/>



Implementing a national student success framework

Building on evidence built through consultation and research in the preceding years, the National Forum developed a one-page guiding framework in 2021 to inform conversations, decisions and actions at institutional level around approaches to embedding student success. The Guiding Framework for Student Success² identifies three key pillars for student success: enabling institutional capabilities, enabling institutional culture, and enabling institutional practices.

Work commenced in 2021 on the development of a toolkit to accompany the Framework. This toolkit, which is being developed through sectoral consultation, will allow the enablers of student success to be interrogated by different units within an institution and also allow them to be viewed through the lens of various roles.

- We recommend that the new National Access Plan strongly endorse engagement with the Guiding Framework for Student Success and associated toolkit to ensure informed, whole-of-institution approaches to student success are advocated at the highest level.

Inclusive Pedagogical Approaches

When considering how to ensure teaching and learning attends to the needs of all students, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is increasingly accepted as an excellent approach. The National Forum and AHEAD, working in partnership, developed a professional development Open Course focused on UDL.³ In 2020, this course was expanded to staff across further and higher education, representing the largest national roll out of UDL professional development ever undertaken in Ireland. A second large-scale delivery of this Open Course is due to take place in late 2021 and the National Forum is committed to supporting the embedding of UDL principles at every opportunity.

The Open Course has been exceptionally popular due to its relevance for all those who teach in all contexts for all levels of education. A recent exploration of lessons learned through the shift to online/remote teaching and learning in spring 2020⁴ highlighted the benefits of programmes of study being underpinned by the inclusive principles of UDL in order to ensure greater equity of opportunity, participation and outcome for all students.

- We recommend that the new National Access Plan strongly endorse engagement with the principles of UDL to underpin inclusive and accessible pedagogical approaches within higher education.

Equity of access and participation in a digital and open world

The importance of the digital lives of learners has never been more in focus than it is at the current moment and, as the new National Access Plan looks beyond the pandemic context, related considerations around equity of access and participation must be attended to.

² See Guiding Framework here: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/guiding-framework-for-embedding-student-success/>

³ See here: <https://opencourses.ie/opencourse/universal-design-in-teaching-and-learning/>

⁴ See here: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/reflecting-and-learning-the-move-to-remote-online-teaching-and-learning-in-irish-higher-education/>



Through an exploration of experience and learnings of key stakeholders, conducted by the National Forum during the initial months of the pandemic, it was found that barriers to learning experienced by some students were further exacerbated by the move to online/remote teaching and learning, while some students found that barriers to learning were fewer. The ways in which online/remote learning can be leveraged to mitigate educational disadvantage and create opportunities for equitable access and participation for all students are now better understood by more people. Some students with disabilities found it easier to learn remotely. Similarly, many students found that the alternative assessment methods being provided during the time of campus closures suited their individual learning preferences. On the other hand, exclusively online/remote learning did introduce new challenges. As one respondent noted, students from areas of disadvantage, for example, rely almost exclusively on services that they can access on campus. These students are also the least powerful in insisting that their needs are met and are the most dependent on schools/college for their educational resources. Participants at the recent Annual Access Forum also discussed the importance of these issues in relation to the next National Access Plan.

Prior to the closure of higher education institutions in March 2020, close to 30,000 students and staff who teach responded to Ireland's National Digital Experience (INDEX) Survey, published in May 2020. The INDEX Survey provided baseline data for the digital experiences, engagement and expectations of the Irish higher education community pre-pandemic. During the lifetime of the next National Access Plan, a second iteration of the INDEX Survey is likely to be conducted and this will shed light on the impact the pandemic has had on the digital lives of those who teach and learn. Specific data from the INDEX Survey could have significant explanatory value during the implementation phase of the next National Access Plan. For example, the Survey design allows data to be gathered from specific demographics. The 2019 INDEX Survey dataset included data on the digital experiences, engagement and expectations of the 8,000 mature students, and close to 3,500 part-time students. Further, thanks to the inclusion of questions on use of assistive technology in teaching and learning, the INDEX Survey report contains a dedicated section on how students and staff engage with assistive technology.

- Insights such as those from the pre- and post-pandemic INDEX Surveys, and other evidence built by the National Forum and its partners, may be useful in designing learning, curricula and supports to work towards a quality educational experience for all students. It would be helpful if engagement with the INDEX Survey and its data, as well as other evidence to support enhanced teaching and learning, was encouraged through the next National Access Plan.

A promising trend related to digital is the move towards open education in Irish higher education. Open education refers to resources, tools and practices for teaching and learning that seek to 'open up' education by increasing access to higher education and enabling learners and teachers to work across boundaries of all kinds, e.g., classroom (physical or online), discipline, institution, sector, geography, and legal/copyright restrictions. The National Forum has always placed a strong emphasis on open education principles, practices and policies in Irish higher education, recognising that this requires support for individual open practice as well as a commitment to openness at programme, institutional and national levels.⁵ In light of the growing development of open

⁵ See here for an overview of National Forum work on open: www.teachingandlearning.ie/open



education across Europe and internationally, as well as the increasing urgency of supporting Irish higher education staff and students in an increasingly networked society, the need is clear.

- Open education supports inclusion, equity and enhanced pedagogy and we recommend that its importance, and related resources and supports developed by the National Forum, be emphasised within the next National Access Plan.

Strategic and policy alignment

Our experience has suggested that mainstreaming any ethos or approach across an institution or the wider sector requires a number of steps. These include building evidence, fostering understanding, building capacity across structures and processes and building capabilities amongst those who learn, teach and lead. Underpinning all of these aspects of mainstreaming, however, is the need for strategic alignment between key actors and related policies, decisions and actions.

2021 is the final year of the National Forum's current strategy and the new National Access Plan will be published before our new strategy is finalised. As such, bilateral consultation regarding alignment of the two strategies would be welcome to ensure achievable goals are set and potential synergies are leveraged. The next strategy of the National Forum, which is likely to serve as the national teaching and learning strategy for higher education, is set to be informed by a national partnership project recently announced by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, *Next Steps for Teaching and Learning: Moving Forward Together*⁶.

The Next Steps project is being co-ordinated by the National Forum in collaboration with partners including HECA, Ibec, ICOS, IUA, QQI, RCSI, THEA, TU Dublin, USI and specialist colleges. The project also includes collaboration with the HEA and DFHERIS, as well as AHEAD, NStEP, StudentSurvey.ie and Student Affairs Ireland. The project involves a collective consideration of what was known about enhanced teaching and learning across face-to-face, blended and online/remote contexts prior to the pandemic, as well as what we know so far about what has been learned from the experience of the shift to fully online/remote learning since 2020. Lessons from this project are likely to be instructive in helping to support the success of all students into the future. In addition to informing the next strategy of the National Forum, findings and recommendations from this unique partnership project may be of interest in the development and implementation of the next National Access Plan.

As we look to the future, towards more flexible, lifelong, non-traditional engagement with learning, we must ensure teaching and learning, and its underpinning structures, are prepared for new trends. If, for example, an increase in work-based learning and micro-credentials are to be accommodated this will have related impacts on institutional structures and processes and on the professional development needs of those who teach. While the National Access Plan has a justified focus on specific target groups, the upcoming teaching and learning strategy will have the success of all students in mind. As such, we would encourage meaningful dialogue on good practice and evidence for enhanced teaching and learning that may serve the ambitions of both documents.

⁶ See more here: <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/2021/05/11/minister-launches-national-teaching-and-learning-partnership-project/>



NATIONAL FORUM
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**Response to Consultation on
Next National Plan for Equity
of Access to Higher Education
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- The National Forum would welcome continued partnership with the HEA Access Section as the new National Access Plan and the new national teaching and learning strategy are developed during 2021, and as they are implemented in subsequent years.

We would be happy to engage further on any aspect of this submission. Further detail on the work of the National Forum can be accessed at www.teachingandlearning.ie.