

# TU Dublin Submission for Consultation for new National Action Plan 2022-2026

TU Dublin welcomes the opportunity to make a submission as part of the consultation process for the new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education. We are very pleased to see such a comprehensive consultation process for this critical issue for higher education and for society. The TU submission uses the Consultation Process Guiding Questions as a structure.

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

### 1.1 Recommendation: Create an inclusive higher education system in which all adults and young people feel they belong and which is learner-centred and responsive

The overall national access policy goal outlined in the last National Action Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education continues to be relevant 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’ (HEA, 2015: 6)

- **Belong**

To create an inclusive higher education system in Ireland from entry to graduation across all disciplines where all adults and young people [regardless of socio-economic status, age, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, disability, creed, family or marital status], feel that they fully belong in their university, course and campus. To develop a sense of belonging that is not just about ‘fitting in’. Creating a sense of belonging for all students includes developing their understanding of socio-historical bases of discrimination and exclusion valuing differences and building solidarities.

The vision should be that all are included, and all can and should come and that all can feel a sense of belonging and have the potential to succeed within the system.

- **Learner-centred and responsive**

The vision should include a commitment to being learner-centred and responsive to learner needs.

- **Lifelong learning and shared responsibility**

Equity of access to higher education should be an evolving and amenable framework that is the responsibility of all education and social welfare providers from cradle to the grave.

- **Explicit reference to economic exclusion in the vision**

Make explicit reference to ‘economic’ exclusion/marginalisation/discrimination, etc. rather than just referencing ‘diversity and social mix’ as per the vision of the previous NAP. Focus is currently on economic discrimination as a possible 10<sup>th</sup> ground in anti-discrimination legislation. Lack of money/resources is not the only barrier to access but it a shared one across many marginalised and underrepresented groups. Economic

status is a determinant of a wider social status but it would seem remiss to omit naming it as a barrier/challenge.

- **Beacon of equality, diversity, inclusion and representative of society in terms of both students and staff**

State that Higher Education can and should be a leading light of equality, diversity and inclusion in every sense and can play a leadership role in society in relation to the issue of access and equality. As part of Access, it is essential that steps are taken to ensure that the staff profile of each HEI is more representative of society. A higher education sector approach to this would be helpful.

- **Value of diversity for all and the benefits for society as HE is an equality, diversity and inclusion gateway**

Emphasise the value of diversity for all learners through the perspectives, experiences and knowledge they bring to education. Recognise that higher education is a gateway to many (but not all) positions of influence in society and if we want public services, industry etc to be representative of society, higher education also needs to be representative. Ensuring that positions at all levels of the public services are staffed by people representative of society is of benefit to everyone in society.

## **1.2 Recommendation: Identify and analyse the national strategic options available to achieve equity of access**

Progress has been made in many areas of NAP but as outlined in the Consultation Document there are recurring issues that are impacting on our ability to achieve equity of access. It is timely to consider if a fundamentally different approach is required in Ireland to achieve equity of access. It is important to identify the key strategic options, analyse the pros, cons, risks and benefits of each option and state clearly which options are and are not included and the rationale for these decisions. This type of review would also need to address key questions including the issue of the number of places in higher education.

Some possible strategic options for consideration include:

- **Strategic Option 1: Maintain and develop existing objectives with an ongoing focus on under representation**

Recognise that progress has occurred, continue to focus on under representation, further develop existing approaches and continue to achieve incremental progress.

This approach would take time and it may be difficult to achieve equity of access.

- **Strategic Option 2: Strong focus on increasing educational attainment of underrepresented groups**

Acknowledge that a key issue is the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on educational attainment, take a whole of education approach, focus intensively on additional subject and learning support for learners from early years through every stage of education, recognise the impact of widespread use of grinds on leaving cert attainment and points and introduce a high-quality national tutorial programme for underrepresented groups.

This approach does not address all aspects of under representation, risks a focus on individuals rather than system changes and it may not be possible to address the long-term impacts of structural inequalities.

- **Strategic Option 3: Use different entry mechanisms for groups who are underrepresented**

Recognise that structural inequalities impact on educational attainment and that using points reductions through national access entry routes may not sufficiently address the impact of structural inequalities on educational attainment. A broader range of entry processes to HE could be used, for example MEQs, rather than points; interviews etc.

This approach would take time and may not address the persistent patterns of under representation.

- **Strategic Option 4: Focus on over representation in HE also and the benefits of advantage**

Recognise the impact of the benefits of advantage and privilege over many years for some groups who are over represented in higher education and consider factoring these advantages into higher education selection processes or using a more neutral approach, for example, MEQs and random selection.

- **Strategic Option 5: Focus on achieving proportionate representation in all forms of further and higher education:**

Acknowledge the patterns of both over representation of some groups in HE and their under representation in other forms of education and training; the under representation of some groups in HE and over representation in other forms of education and training. Widen the range of education and training options for as many occupations as possible, set quotas for all forms of education and training that reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population, use a wide range of selection processes to fill places accordingly, put in place comprehensive supports in all forms of education and training.

- **Strategic Option 6: Whole of Society and Education Area-based Approach**

Identify the areas that experience especially high levels of under representation and implement cohesive whole of society and education area-based approaches with overarching education and community partnerships encompassing all education, community and statutory organisations through each stage of education from early years to adult education.

- **Strategic Option 7: Transformative systems approach to higher education and other forms of post-compulsory education and training**

Widen the qualification routes to as many occupations as possible; strengthen the links between different forms of education and training; deliver comprehensive part-time, hybrid, modular and micro credentialism approaches; increase the range and availability of foundation and bridging programmes and generic first year programmes in higher education; widen selection processes; increase inclusive education teaching and learning approaches; provide comprehensive learning and learner supports at all stages of education and develop a national all-age careers education and guidance service to support learners.

- **Strategic Option 8: Identify the best combination of the above and other options following analysis**

### **1.3 Recommendation: Consider developing a longer-term plan**

Progress has taken place but it will take a longer-term vision and time to address the key issues and may require significant change. Can progress really happen in four years? Is it time to develop a 10-year plan?

### **1.4 Recommendation: Consider the issues of language in the vision and plan**

Consider carefully the issue language and use language that emphasises equality, diversity and inclusion. Avoid language that can portray people or groups as ‘lacking’ in some quality.

Understanding both barriers and bridges to participation and success in higher education is necessary. Using positive language that does not mask key issues but also states a commitment to providing bridges and pathways to HE is important.

### **1.5 Recommendation: Representing the vision of access to all HEIs and profiling the lived experience of people from underrepresented groups**

The image of the vision should be addressed. Access to higher education should not be portrayed as entry to elite institutions. Rather, how higher education is presented in the media and across the system should reflect the diversity of institutes and opportunities to succeed and grow in all areas of that system. The notion of equivalence and achievement and opportunity should be underscored.

A high-profile campaign highlighting the experiences of well-known people from underrepresented groups who have accessed higher education would be helpful. Hearing the nuances of their stories and lived experience is important.

## **2. 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)?**

### **2.1 Recommendation: Continue to include existing NAP target groups**

- Entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education;
- First-time mature students;
- Students with disabilities;
- Part-time/flexible learners;
- Further education and training award holders; and
- Irish Travellers
- Lone parents
- Ethnic minorities (see below)

### **2.2 Recommendation: Recognise the relationship between the economy and mature students in education**

Build this relationship into the targets and use this as an opportunity to connect these developments with flexible and blended learning, including workplace learning.

### **2.3 Recommendation: Include additional target groups and a stronger focus on some sub-groups within target groups**

In addition to groups identified in earlier National Access Plans there are new specific cohorts in our community who are not getting to college and young people and adults from these communities need additional supports to access college. They include; young people and adults in the international protection system, low-paid workers, migrant workers and their families, disadvantaged young people (including young people in care and young people in the juvenile justice system), single parents. Reference to and awareness of annual Social Inclusion Reports (Dept. Social Protection) as well as attention to Traveller, Roma and other minority ethnic communities in Ireland.

- People with refugee status
- People in the process of seeking asylum and/or living in Direct Provision
- Migrant workers and their families
- Students of colour
- Members of the Roma ethnic minority as it is required by EU and the Roma and Traveller integration strategy but does not feature in the National Access plan summary
- People from other minority ethnic backgrounds
  
- People with intellectual disabilities  
Provision should be made for students with intellectual disability and mechanisms to include students with intellectual disabilities within programmes should be developed

to foster inclusion within higher education and build opportunities for greater social and economic inclusion post-graduation.

- Students with Hidden Disabilities
- People with Sensory Needs
  
- Students with extra caring responsibilities
  - Young Carers
  - Carers
  - Lone parents
  - Teen parents or new pregnancies within higher education
- Homeless Students who have experienced homelessness in last 5 years including those who are over 18 and fall outside family unit for emergency accommodation.
- Care of the State/TUSLA<sup>1</sup> or have previously been in care, Young care leavers
- Students who are over 18 and estranged<sup>2</sup> from family units.

Estranged students – no financial or emotional support from parents; can occur prior to, or during, their tenure in HE. Financial support systems currently aren't responsive enough or easily accessed. Often these students have to leave HE in order to access social welfare, as survival becomes their priority. Provision of accommodation, financial and emotional support, in a timely manner, could enable students to begin/continue with their studies. Collaboration between HEIs and government bodies should be encouraged, to ensure these students are adequately supported.

- People with criminal justice histories
- Aged Community and Seniors
- LGBTQ+
- Students attending Youthreach
- Young early school leavers, Youth Outreach Programmes
- People who are in minimum wage employment e.g. hospitality etc
- Stay at home (partners) - empty nesters
- People experiencing economic disadvantage
- First generation college student
- Social class and class fractions

There are very few references to social class in Access in Ireland, with a stronger focus historically on SEG or a focus on poverty and social exclusion/ inclusion. The focus on deprivation index and area disadvantage is a very positive step forward but including an understanding of class is also important. Understandings of class enable a focus on the issues of identity, class fractions, class as process, how social class can change. Attention to these issues enables a better understanding of the interactions of

---

<sup>1</sup> The review of the NAP recognition of the 'particular needs and challenges in accessing higher education' experienced by children in care and the recognition of their 'status as a sub-group within the overall target groups' (Higher Education Authority 2018, p. 28) is welcome. In addition, there is scope to build on existing links to provide access routes and specific supports for young people in care and in the aftercare sector to continue into and successfully navigate higher education.

<sup>2</sup> Estranged students can fall into a number of categories - young adults (18-22) who do not qualify as mature students and thus cannot be independently assessed by SUSI. Mature students who are estranged and cannot verify their independence (e.g. cannot provide documentary evidence that they are self-sufficient) are also treated as dependent by default by SUSI.

the different structures that lead to intersectional impact and a better understanding of the stories of people's lives and the types of changes that can occur to support equity of access.

### **2.3: Recommendations: Race Equity**

At present Travellers are the only ethnic minority currently recognised as a targeted group. This could be extended to all students from a Roma, Traveller, Black and Minority Ethnic background. Travellers are the sole ethnic minority currently recognised as a targeted group (HEA, 2015). While some 'subgroups' including 'some people from ethnic minorities' were acknowledged in the last plan (HEA, 2015: 15), these are not named, hence Black or other minority ethnic students are absent from targets or the monitoring of access, participation and outcomes. Although the HEA does examine the impact of nationality on student progression (e.g. Liston *et al.*, 2018), this does not capture migrants who become naturalised Irish citizens, nor the growing second generation (Fahey *et al.*, 2019) of Black and minority ethnic students who are entering higher education. Hence, there is lack of evidence base to analyse the 'equality of opportunity' these students experience. There is a need to focus not just on the endpoint, but also on the students' journey, in order to gain insights into the individual, structural and institutional barriers they face (RIA, 2020: 1). There is a need to hear students' experiences of belonging on campus given the link research has shown between academic success and belonging (Loke, 2018).

Adopt the recommendations in the [Statement by the National Athena SWAN Ireland Intersectionality Working Group on the Use of Ethnicity Categories in Irish Higher Education](#)

- The Irish higher education sector needs to create an evidence base regarding staff and student representation, access and outcome by ethnicity with the explicit purpose of recognising and tackling institutionalised racism and advancing equality in higher education;
- All information campaigns and reports should include guidance on the limitations, and ethical use of, ethnicity data;
- Individual institutions need to be required to monitor student demographics and outcomes by ethnicity, with the purpose of tackling institutionalised racism and advancing equality through targeted actions. Quantitative data needs to be combined with qualitative data to gain insights into students' lived experiences of higher education during the course of their studies.
- Individual institutions should be supported in advancing the recruitment, retention and progression of students from minority ethnic groups through dedicated actions, and equality action plans, as appropriate.
- The Irish higher education sector needs to further develop capacity to track student outcomes across a range of equality grounds and protected characteristics.

### **2.4: Recommendation: Foreground Intersectionality and Heterogeneity within Target Groups**

The NAP progress review appears to take a silo approach to the six priority groups identified in the NAP, treating them as discrete groups with no overlap. It doesn't appear to acknowledge to acknowledge the cross-cutting, intersectional nature of disadvantage and discrimination as it is lived and experienced by people in the target groups. Marginalised

individuals and groups often experienced multiple disadvantages and challenges, and a needs-based analysis focused on individual learners more likely to generate appropriate and targeted supports than trying to label and assign people to particular target groups. The progress review document does call for greater clarity around the target to increase participation by first-time mature students from the target groups and in doing so appears to acknowledge a certain interconnectedness between the ‘groups’ but does not apply the same logic to the other ‘categories’. Also, who decides who is in which category, particularly when it comes to people experiencing multiple disadvantages?

Intersectionality in terms of the current and proposed new target groups is key for the next plan and in terms of other issues, including gender.

Focus on sub-groups and heterogeneity within the current and proposed targets groups

### **2.5 Recommendation: Ensure national targets can be turned into effective targets for individual HEIs and that the required dataset is available**

Good progress has been made in relation to data and further data is required to capture these issues.

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

#### 3.1 Recommendation: Higher Education & Education-Community Partnerships

- **Education & Community Partnerships**

Build on Path 3 work, area-based and community-based models of Access support to establish Higher Education and Education-Community Partnerships based on deprivation index score data, identifying the areas most in need of such a partnership (Path 3 was established based on the clustering of HEIs, a new phase could be based on the areas in need of most support).

This approach would include early years, primary schools, second level schools, community sector organisations, FE, adult and community education, statutory services (e.g. Tusla, HSE), voluntary activities (e.g. local sports clubs, music activities) and HE. Each sector has considerable knowledge about its own work and students, however, from research it is clear that there can be a polarisation of knowledge within sectors and few fora to share critical knowledge between sectors. It is this sharing of knowledge and partnership working between all parts of the education and community sectors that is key to accurately identifying both the challenges and bridges to education that will enable recurring issues and patterns with regard to achieving equity of access to be addressed.

This approach would provide attention to the extended journey from birth, through early years, primary school, second level school higher education and how children's routes are mapped from the early stages of education with support through DEIS and similar initiatives. It would also enable a mapping of the journey for different under-represented groups and design specific interventions to complement general interventions for those groups.

It would also involve a comprehensive mapping in each area of all of the education offering, interventions and programmes available and conduct a gap analysis and alignment analysis. It would enable the design and delivery of a comprehensive programme of interlinked supports addressing all of the key barriers and bridges, delivered in a partnership approach. This would include structured engagement outreach programmes. It would also recognise the interlinking of issues of the structural issues class, race and gender in available options and decision-making (Reay *et al.*, 2005) and also enable the tailoring of programmes to meet the needs of specific groups.

Many of the recommendations made below can also be factored into these partnerships.

This approach will require dedicated staff based in the different sectors for the work of co-ordination, alignment and integration and development of existing initiatives and establishing partnership effective partnership structures. National support for this approach is a key requirement.

- **Community-based Access Officers**

Support HEIs to build on Path 3 work and undertake more outreach work to the particular under-represented groups to build on the already excellent open evenings, taster programmes etc. This is where there is value in having a community-based access officer (or shared between HEI and Community Groups e.g. a Local Community Development Programme (LCDP) assigned to each geographic community and community of interest which are currently identified as not accessing third level education.

Under the first National Access Plan 2005-2007 Action Plan on Equity of Access to Higher Education funding was earmarked for two pilot community-based access initiatives. Following an open call among local development partnerships, two projects were awarded funding, Offaly and Clondalkin. The projects demonstrated success in developing a community-based model of access which complemented institution-based access programmes and initiatives.

- **Learning Champions & Learn to Learn Programmes**

Recruit, train and deploy ‘learning champions’ within in target communities and groups to include members of those communities/groups who have successfully returned to learning and can act as signposters and role models. ‘Non-traditional’ learners i.e. people who have few or no qualifications and who lack confidence in their ability to learn’ are more likely to be influenced by people from similar backgrounds with a positive experiences and outcomes of learning.

Provide/make available/promote specific learning to learn programmes which include not only study skills, academic writing, time management etc. but also help learners to identify their own learning styles, to develop resilience and persistence in the learning journey, to take ownership of and responsibility for their own learning, to motivate and sustain self-direction.

Provide/make available/promote programmes to support the ongoing development of literacy, numeracy, digital and ESOL skills and competences.

- **Collaboration with specific community groups**

One way to develop pre-entry and post-entry activities is to do so through collaboration between the access offices of our third level institutions and community-based projects and organisations representing the interests of the particular under-represented groups (e.g. Disability Advocacy Groups, Centres for Independent Living, Traveller Projects, Roma groups).

HEIs to create links to community group settings to aid in the application stage to process for under-represented groups, for example, Traveller community groups in social care settings.

Work with community organisations/employers to provide step by step support to these groups to access university courses, and provide a university guidance counsellor for this cohort of student.

### **3.2 Recommendation: Work with Early Years**

Further develop and expand early years interventions. Work with Area Based Childhood Programmes and consortia.

### **3.3 Recommendation: Further develop work with Primary Schools**

- Review existing primary school initiatives, identify and share best practice
- Introduce the language of further and higher education at primary school
- Resource students who are digital disadvantaged
- Link activities with primary to HE curriculum

### **3.4 Recommendation: Further develop work with Second Level Schools**

- Develop short programmes on college, further education and training as part of Junior Cycle Prog
- Provide course as part of TY programme - college, higher and further education
- LCVP at senior level could be redesigned to include additional module and available to all senior students in 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> year.
- Mentoring support during LC years
- Further develop Open days and school visits and online resources highlighting the college activities, life and benefits of going to college
- Continue programme of Student Ambassadors from diverse backgrounds to go to Secondary Schools to speak about HE and supports available to students
- Introduction to HE language e.g. assessment, module, semester, learning outcomes, Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) etc
- Secondary School student support varies where they may not receive support in their School.
- Dyslexia Assessments: ensure Educational Psychologist services available to Secondary schools
- Promote Community Engaged Research and Learning (CERL) – opportunities for third level students to engage with schools as part of their programme modules
- It appears that some students are making the decision on the day of the exam to drop to lower levels of the exam due to avoiding risk and a fear of failing. How widespread is this? Do we have data? What actions could be taken to support students in this decision-making?
- More collaboration between HEIs and the professionals working on these activities, to share best practice and ensure all geographical areas and demographics are included in outreach activities
- Potential clustering of schools to align with a college/university. Some schools are linked to many universities and colleges, others are not.
- HEIs should have links with Career Guidance staff and Special Education Needs Co-ordinators in both mainstream and special educational schools to foster awareness of opportunities in Higher Education for students with intellectual disabilities.

### **3.5 Recommendation: Careers Education and Guidance**

- **Resourcing for Guidance Counselling**

Resource schools better to support students. Career Guidance counsellors are caught between delivery a career guidance service to students while also engaging in counselling. Continue to recognise and support Guidance Counsellors CPD – keep them updated on all opportunities available to students.

- **Careers education in Primary Schools**

“Career-related learning in primary schools is about helping children to understand who they could become and helping them to develop a healthy sense of self that will enable them to reach their full potential. Early interventions can bring a lasting impact on children’s development and perceptions of different occupations, and of the subjects enabling access to them. Starting career education early is important. As longitudinal studies have shown, holding biased assumptions and having narrow aspirations can influence the academic effort children exert in certain lessons, the subjects they choose to study, and the jobs they end up pursuing. Research has also shown that the jobs children aspire to may be ones that their parents do, or those of their parents' friends, or that they see on the TV and/or social media. Low expectations are often shaped by biases or commonly accepted stereotypes, such as ‘science isn’t for girls’ or ‘university isn’t for the working classes’. These societal expectations act to restrict children futures by limiting what they believe they can do” (Kashefpakdel *et al.*, 2018).

- **Radical Careers Education Programme starting at a very young age**

- Harness the knowledge the children, young people and adults in socio-economically disadvantaged areas have and place that knowledge within the contexts of sociology of education and politics with a focus on information about participation rates in education, explain these in structural terms and discuss these findings
- Ensure that such careers education programmes draw on both sociological understandings, community interaction theory (Law 2002), psychological understandings
- Recognise and draw on the role of networks and people who influence education and career decisions
- Provide clear information about the wages of different jobs in Ireland, based on hourly rates of pay, not annual salaries. Show the link between learning, qualifications and hourly rate of pay.
- Provide a clear programme outlining what is college + understanding of college programmes & jobs + academic support
- Provide a clear understanding of school subjects + higher education disciplines + jobs
- Explain how many jobs don’t require a specific degree and explain in clear terms why this is the case
- Provide a pro-active and deliberate expansion of understanding of graduate jobs through a well-researched careers education programme – use community-based research and learning approaches in this careers programme to enable children to actively engage in this learning.
- Provide a detailed understanding of the benefits of higher education from local role models and support key relationships of trust that young people have

- Adapt the programme to meet the needs of different age groups including adults considering returning to education

### 3.6 Recommendation: National Tutorial Programme

- State firmly the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and educational attainment
- Access to HE for many is based on Leaving Cert results and a very significant percentage of students attend private grinds which inflates the grades and points overall. One way of addressing this is to provide a high-quality national tutorial service for young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
- This tutorial service could also provide dedicated learning support for children with disabilities.

### 3.7 Recommendation: Dedicated Supports for students with disabilities in socio-economically disadvantaged areas

Specific focus is needed in relation to pupils with disabilities who are from an SED background as it is clear that they are particularly under represented in higher education.

Access work with schools based in children's hospitals would be valuable for children who spend considerable time in hospital. This could also enable work with siblings of children with disabilities/chronic illnesses. Research highlights the impact of this on siblings and hospitals have increasingly recognised the value of developing sibling programmes. HEIs could liaise in a more structured way with the schools in hospitals and the social workers to identify ways of recognising and supporting children and families.

### 3.8 Recommendation: Factor relationships, networks and social capital into pre-entry Access work

Education behaviours and decision-making is part of wider decision-making and relationships, networks and people of influence in a person's life are important. Access work needs to factor these networks and decision-making processes into its work. This could be done very well in education & community partnerships as per recommendation 3.1 above.

- **Work with Parents**  
Recognise and draw on approaches to parenting that acknowledge that societal structures can result in a diversity, not deficit, of parenting approaches. Recognise that education outcomes can vary greatly within families, particularly in SED areas. It may be difficult for a parent to persistently promote higher education in a family where older siblings have left school at fifteen. It is important that recommendations about work with parents factor in the diversity of circumstances.

Access/outreach activities working with schools to engage parents. Meet parents where they are at, providing training through school's settings, link in with HSCL, with area-based community and adult education

- **Siblings and extended family members**

Siblings and extended family members who have progressed to higher education often play a significant role in assisting younger siblings. How can Access work support these roles?

- **Role of the Peer Group**

Decisions-making can occur within peer groups (Brooks, 2005). How can access work draw on these processes and support peer groups?

- **Recognise the role of networks**

Recognise the role that networks play in supporting education and access to higher education. Engage with community-based organisations – the role of sport, youth clubs, the role of the Gaeltacht, part-time work, employers. Recognise that people have diverse networks and consider how to engage with influential people in a person's networks.

### **3.9 Recommendation: Research and understand diverse information needs**

There are differences in the information required and at what stages. More nuanced information is key. Who provides the information that is 'hot knowledge' is key (Hutchings, 2003) - trusted individuals in education and the community. It is also not simply a matter of providing information and guidance. Often information is provided but it does not resonate with people due to content, method or timing. Diverse strategies involving content, method and timing for different groups are required, depending on their orientation towards higher education.

### **3.10 Recommendation: Comprehensive review of pre-entry engagement and outreach programmes and activities**

Comprehensive national research is required to map existing activities, assess the effectiveness of activities and identify what is required – funding for more initiatives or funding to better align, co-ordinate and develop existing initiatives?

### **3.11 Recommendation: Encourage HEIs to maintain and develop a broad range of Access Entry Routes**

As opposed to the 'attainment gap' in the UK which places the deficit on the student, the term 'awarding gap' is now being proposed which transfers responsibility for closing the gap in student outcomes onto the institution. Such an approach should also be employed in the Irish context.

- **Access and Foundation Courses**

Access and Foundation Courses should continue in all forms and cater for diverse learners

- Full-time in HEIs
- Full-time in FE
- Based jointly on-campus and in community-based colleges of further education. (This was included as a proposal in a previous Action Plan whereby ETBs would have a role in access/foundation courses).

- Part-time foundation programmes
  - Bridging programmes, for example provision of Summer preparatory courses in such topics as Academic Writing, Accessing the Library, Research skills, and note taking skills for learners returning to education after a long break e.g., mature students with limited previous education or those who have suffered educational disadvantage.
  - Access to Apprenticeship Programmes
- **Higher Education Links Scheme**  
Develop the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELs) to a greater extent to develop more specific links between particular QQI courses in workplace, industry, community-based projects and colleges of further education with specific degree programmes offered in higher education institutions.
  - **Dedicated Access Entry Routes from FE**  
The QQI Access TU Dublin entry route is aimed at students, from a socio economically disadvantaged background, who have completed a QQI Level 5 and 6 course and are applying for entry onto year one of a TU Dublin course through the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELs).
  - **HEI-Specific Access Entry Routes**  
In addition to being a member of the national HEAR & DARE schemes, TU Dublin operates its own access route. The TU Dublin Access Route is aimed at school leavers from socio economically disadvantaged backgrounds who would like to study a full-time undergraduate course in TU Dublin. Operating our own scheme gives TU Dublin the autonomy and flexibility to improve the programme to reflect the demographics and needs of the applicants. Maintaining our own access route is supported by guidance counsellors in our link schools.
  - **Collaborative Programme**  
The Learning Together programme is a collaboration between TU Dublin and the Daughters of Charity Disability Support Services. It accommodates 6 students with intellectual disabilities on a 2-year programme leading to a QQI Level 3 award. They take a variety of practical modules which are running as part of our Level 7 / 8 programmes and are fully included in mainstream tutorial and lecture classes with support as needed.
  - National Access Entry Routes
  - Recognition of prior learning (work experience): maintain and develop
  - Promotion of Level 6 and Level 7 programmes and ladder approach
  - College Maths entry exam offered to students who do not meet maths requirements and do not have significant maths element to programme
  - A range of routes that both enable people to access higher preference programmes and access higher education

### 3.12 Recommendations: HEAR & DARE

- Very positive to see the HEAR Review
- HEAR/DARE application process can be difficult, particularly for students who are first applicants to higher education in a family and need help to gather financial and

medical documentation. Where students are estranged from family, these documents may not be made available to them. There needs to be some recognition that the case for urgency in addressing the lower participation of under-represented communities requires that restrictive deadlines and criteria be more flexible for these cohorts including direct entry routes, should CAO deadlines have passed.

- There could be a specialist post in all schools or shared by schools to encourage participation for students traditionally under-represented in higher education. Such posts could support the application process, particularly the information required in the Educational Impact Statement. Smaller schools do not have this supportive role and applicants to HEAR and DARE can find it difficult to connect, particularly if they have left the school setting.
- Review of aged reports required for DARE eligibility

### **3.13 Recommendation: Conduct research on different entry approaches and selection mechanisms**

Many of the above entry routes, particularly the large-scale routes still use the Leaving Cert and CAO points as the main selection mechanism. Would it be better to use MEQs and random selection as the basis for access entry routes? Or as the basis for most higher education entry? Or a process that does not use the Leaving Cert at all? Research identifying the options, pros, cons, risks and benefits is required.

### **3.14 Recommendation: Allocate resources to extend availability of Post entry supports for NAP target groups**

- Progression rates show success of dedicated support programmes for underrepresented groups and there is a need to resource the expansion of such programmes to wider groups of students from SED backgrounds who may not have come through access entry routes.
- Access services to be available to any student with access ‘related’ issues. Student’s family may reach the income threshold but there may still be obstacles to same student attaining their qualification i.e. Being a young carer, Needing or forced to be independent of families emotional and financial support.
- It is important to continue to resource access services in institutions to accommodate flexible learners
- Students who started college or sat their Leaving Cert during the Pandemic should have access to any supports including SUSI extended beyond 23 years in order to reflect delays in achieving qualification.

### **3.15 Recommendations: Support student transitions and success in higher education**

- Current 2<sup>nd</sup> and third year students ‘adopt’ a new entrant for the month of September
- Introduction to HE language e.g. assessment, module, semester, learning outcomes, Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) etc
- Basic IT skills for learning
- Each student be assigned a support person/mentor outside of their school who checks in with the student once a month
- Clarity on expected outcomes for assignments, examples and step by step guidance for first two assignments

- Recognition of supports in relation to practical, financial, academic, social and identity transitions. What are these identity transitions? How do we best support students with such identity transitions? Do students experience the ‘hidden injuries of class’ (Sennet and Cobb, 1977)? How does this interlink with issues of gender and race? How do we support students and educate all students and staff?
- Provide on-site childcare facilities

### **3.16 Recommendations: Assessments for Students with Disabilities**

- Dyslexia Assessments – Educational Psychologists services available to HEIs e.g. mature students, apprentices who are returning to HE
- Ensure resourcing for Assistive Technology needs assessment

### **3.17 Recommendations: Models of Delivery**

- Hybrid delivery or more flexible delivery of modules/programmes for students with additional caring commitments (childcare/elderly parents), or debilitating illnesses which prevent attendance on campus (e.g., e-learning)
- Tailoring of programmes and content for non-traditional students (same learning outcomes)
- Part-time education available online and offline – not accessible when offered only in evenings. Part – time education should be offered during the normal working day also as some people only work in the evenings.
- Retired University staff are a valuable resource and an overlooked resource.
- In terms of the challenges in recruiting mature students, the NAP progress review referenced changes in the labour market and the extent of the economic recovery. However there seems to be a missed opportunity in connecting these developments with the provision of flexible and blended learning opportunities, although necessary developments in this as a result of Covid-19 may have brought this into sharper focus. Many mature students will choose to work and study at the same time if they can find flexible, accessible and affordable study/learning options. Older students are likely to have existing and sometimes extensive financial commitments which mean they are not in a position to forego their incomes and need to continue to earn while they learn.
- The ‘gold standard’ should not be full-time, continuous learning because that is an unattainable goal for many members of unrepresented groups, and can also have the effect of ‘second-rating’ other modes of engagement.

### **3.18 Recommendation: Support for students who withdraw**

- Need to develop supports and outreach for students who leave college early to support them in transition to further training. This can be an extremely vulnerable time for students and it needs to be the responsibility of someone, the role needs to be well resourced. This role benefits the student and not the individual service / institution.

### **3.19 Recommendations: Placements**

- Development of national resources to support students on placement that develop educators’ and placement providers’ understanding of the needs of students on placement in particular. Students on placement can be subject to racism from

placement supervisors, their peers on placement (students or staff) and clients or patients.

Resources need to:

- Raise awareness and develop an understanding around racism and the different forms that it takes.
  - Highlight responsibilities of placement providers to address racism and create an inclusive working environment.
  - Develop placement supervisors and team members capacity to challenge racism
  - Show students what to do if they experience racism on campus and on placement.
  - Develop students' capacity to challenge racism.
  - Share useful resources and include case studies of responses to lived experiences of racism in practice settings.
- Work with employers - Students not considered for work placement because they do not have a Leaving Certificate
  - Consider how best to support students on programmes with practice placements with a high level of hours required. This can limit the time available to take up paid part-time work and this can impact on student decision-making about accepting places on or completing programmes with a high level of practice placement hours.

### **3.20 Recommendations: Graduate Transitions and Success**

- Need to build on examples of good practice to focus on transition from third level into labour market. Students often do not have the social capital or contacts to take the next step. This could be a joint venture with Careers Services in higher education.
- Education outcomes can vary significantly in families, particularly in SED areas and in families where one or more siblings have a disability. How do siblings as students navigate these relationships and navigate these relationships in adulthood? Do we acknowledge this in higher education and do we provide any support in relation to this area of transition? Are there any identity costs to participation?
- Providing both leadership development for students and liaison with employers
  - Even where people are invited to self-identify rather than having labels or categories placed on them can be problematic for marginalised people/group where discrimination in the labour market, education system, and wider societal settings can be profound, entrenched and widespread. For instance, in relation to disability disclosure in both a pre- and post-employment context is a major issue and some people might be reluctant and fearful to self-define as disabled even if it meant they could access greater supports and flexibility. This may be even more marked amongst mature students who have already had experience of the labour market.
  - Requests for CAO points on employment applications (full-time and placement) does not promote inclusion
- Focus on levels of representation in postgraduate qualifications. Data is now available and useful to extend this data to monitor under representation at postgraduate level.

### 3.21 Recommendations: Data

- **Review tracking systems for pre-entry work**

It can be difficult to track progression through pre-entry programmes. A national review of best practice and key data issues would be helpful.

- **Data Frameworks**

Any planned actions will rely on availability of accurate data. Therefore, a framework for capturing the necessary data to capture the diversity and social mix is a crucial first step. There should be appropriate communication regarding the importance of such data for the current and future development of both pre-entry and post-entry tracking of performance and highlighting of impacts and even sub-optimal performance where they occur to enable appropriate focus on corrective measures.

### 3.22 Recommendation: Useful Research

- Area-based case studies examining education decisions in that area, school choice,
- How does change in education patterns occur in families over time? This is a key issue.
- Life course study and longitudinal study in areas would be helpful, including examining the consequences of not going to higher education at school-leaving stage.
- Newspaper league tables – a different focus is needed. Are such schools simply reproducing the education levels of parents? It would be interesting to see league tables that show which schools are actually transforming education levels – e.g. where students achieve education outcomes that are higher than their parents, where children with disabilities are supported to achieve.

### 3.23 Recommendations: Shared Learning

- Continue the National Access Forum as very helpful
- Cross training and information sharing of pre and post activities made available to all staff in the area together with other HEIs
- Create a virtual learning environment with other institutions and countries to share their experiences
- Establish /re-establish the Access Research Forum

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

### 4.1 Recommendations: Funding for students

As the SUSI Review is underway, some key recommendations were submitted to that review, thus, most are not included in this submission. Additional specific recommendations:

- **International Protection System**  
Increased funding and supports for students in the International Protection System including extension and further development of the Student Support Scheme for Asylum Seekers
- **Impact of Covid**  
Ensure Susi Grants and state funding will cater for any student to repeat or defer as a result of the impact of COVID
- **Consistency of SAF Processes**  
Funding for students and application processes can be different across the sector. There should be consistency in processes and access to supports and funding. The Student Assistance Fund application process should have a common application form across HEIs.
- **Flexibility and Evaluation**  
Greater flexibility of supports and regular evaluations are required
- **Streamlining of all supports to one Financial Support Agency**  
Consider streamlining delivery of all/most financial supports to one agency. The 1916 Bursary scheme was very welcome and is having a positive impact and the Student Assistant Fund is very important but are only available post-entry and students cannot rely on these when making a decision about the financial viability of going to college/university. With assessment processes involved, students won't know at the start of higher education if they will receive funding. This can result in them taking on more part-time work, which impacts their studies and may ultimately cause them to fail or drop out, at worst, and not perform to their full potential, at best. Advance notice of their full financial support would enable students to make better decisions about accessing higher education and make better transitions.
- **Acknowledging costs of higher education**  
Whilst higher education has become more accessible with the abolition of tuition fees in Ireland in 1996, there are additional costs of registration fees, transport and living costs, IT and broadband access which prohibit students from poorer families affording college.
- **Financial Supports for Leaving Cert Students**  
The 1916 grant has been very successful. Consider providing student scholarships during the senior cycle in second level school.
- **Financial Advice and planning for young adults at pre-entry stage**  
Many students underestimate the cost of attending higher education and should be supported with planning and links to financial aid. The student assistance fund can be

late in the academic year and there is no centralised agreed date of payment, which makes it difficult to plan for both the student and HEI.

- **Laptop and connection**

Provide a state commitment to leaving no learner at any stage of education without a laptop or internet connection

- **Strengthen research base for understanding relationship between finance and participation in education**

Assessing household income is very challenging and the relationship between income, access to suitable information about financial supports at an appropriate time for each applicant, identity and access to and participation in HE is complex (Callender and Jackson, 2004; Connor and Dewson, 2001). Do we have adequate research on this issue? Will the current SUSI review provide this research? If not, comprehensive research is required in relation to this complex issue.

#### 4.2. Recommendations: Funding Models within Higher Education

- **National Funding Guidelines about the allocation of funding to achieve equity of access within HEIs** and information about allocation of funding

Autonomy within HEIs in how funding is allocated and where and how it is spent is important. There is a need for flexibility in allocating funding across multiple areas and at different pressure points across the year. It is also the case that practices vary considerably between HEIs in the allocation of funding for equity of access. While the requirements within HEIs can differ, some balance is required. Further clarity is needed about the purpose and use of the funding. Broad national guidelines and a requirement for each HEI to outline its approach to the use of the funding are important steps forward.

The following could all be included in the National Funding Guidelines

- **Allocate resources for research**

- **Allocate resources to provide supports for students from underrepresented groups who do not enter through dedicated access entry routes**

Progression rates show that providing additional, tailored, high-quality supports by skilled staff to meet the needs of students from underrepresented groups are effective, however, such additional supports are often limited to students who have entered through access entry routes due to low staffing levels. Where there is clearly dedicated funding (e.g. FSD), this issue is better managed. Allocating additional staffing resources would allow the success of existing supports to be made available to other students who under represented groups who would benefit from additional supports.

- **Allocate resource for small grant applications**

Open small grant applications (< 10k) for staff to tackle identified areas requiring support, create pilot projects with potential to go university wide or national projects. Such funding could be provided to any area of a HEI that might assist with efficient delivery of such projects. This approach could be included in the National Funding Guidelines.

- **Allocate resources to create belonging**

Funding should be provided to create spaces on our campuses to which students of under-represented groups feel they belong, be it images on the walls, languages and cultures represented around the campus, accessible spaces etc.

- **Allocate resources for Intercultural Universities**  
Dedicating funding for the development of intercultural universities.
- **Allocate resources for managing reporting on the various funding streams.**  
It is important to recognise the time and skills involved in reporting with resourcing allocated in the relevant departments to support work involved in reporting.

#### 4.3 Recommendations: FSD

- **Align funding with current student needs**  
Current FSD funding Model does not align well with supporting current students as funding is allocated based on students availing of support in the previous year. If an applicant with a disability requiring high support attends this year, the HEI may not have funding to fully support the student if the funding model is based on last year's students. For example, if there is no need for Irish Sign language Interpreting services in an academic year, and then in follow on year there are three deaf students, then the funding will not be sufficient.
- **Timing of FSD Payment**  
More advance notice of amount allocated and one allocation received at beginning of January rather than two allocations in March and October. HEIs need to receive money at beginning of the calendar year.
- **National System for FSD reporting**  
Recommend a National platform/system available where HEIs submit data as students with disabilities register with the Disability Support Services. HEA can extract data directly for funding and Resource Allocation. HEIs could extract data for statistical purposes.
- **Include funding for students with intellectual disabilities in FSD**  
The Fund for Students with Disability (FSD) has a range of categories of disabilities to determine eligibility - Intellectual disability does not appear on this list, meaning that funding for students with intellectual disabilities is often ad hoc and comes from individual arrangements with disability service providers or time limited grants. The current programme for students with intellectual disabilities provided on the Blanchardstown Campus does not receive any core funding and students are not eligible to apply for a SUSI grant. Funding for programmes for students with intellectual disabilities should be part of core funding for the university with students on these bespoke programmes counted in total student numbers and support for their specific needs funded through the FSD.

#### 4.4 Recommendation: Advance design and notice of Reporting Requirements

Reporting requirements and structures for funding packages need to be planned in advance with funding, data requirements and reporting deadlines made available to HEIs at the start of the year. Data requirements should be known by the HEI in advance of the funding application design. Administration and reporting requirements should be minimised to facilitate more effect use of existing resources.

#### **4.5 Recommendation: National Procurement Frameworks and Group Licences**

- More national procurement frameworks for HEIs.
- Group purchase software licenses across campuses and colleges. Include associated secondary schools in the group purchase (to prepare students in the use of the technology used in college).

#### **4.6 Recommendation: Identify effective partnership resourcing models for achieving equity of access and overview of relevant funding across government departments**

- Partnership work is critical for success in achieving NAP. Some key questions:
  - How do you effectively resource partnership work? How do you ensure that you resource the programmes + the staff time it takes to do the actual partnership work + research?
  - What is needed – more interventions or more co-ordination of existing interventions? Are we prepared to resource greater co-ordination of existing initiatives?
  - Which organisations do you resource and from which sources of funding? How is funding for HEIs aligned with similar funding for FE, for second level, for primary, for early years, for the community sector? An overview of such funding across departments would be helpful. Providing additional funding to HEIs for partnership work requires matched funding for the relevant education and community sectors.
- Use funding to support networks between 2<sup>nd</sup> level, FET and HE institutions which can work towards a systemic handling of challenges and opportunities rather than any institution-specific initiatives.
- Identify key successful programmes, roll them out nationally, mainstream them.

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

### **5.1 Recommendation: National Review of Access structures and approaches in HEIs to inform mainstreaming**

In order to inform decision-making about mainstreaming, a focused national review or research project on the current organisation structures for Widening Participation in HEIs would be valuable, addressing the following questions:

- What structures are in place in HEIs in Ireland? What are the pros and cons of each model? Why are the different structures in use and how do they link to the mission and culture of HEIs?
- Access structures were established in HEIs in the 1990s. Two related areas have since been established and developed in HEIs - Civic Engagement and EDI. What learning can be captured and shared from each of the three areas in terms of the structures to best develop and mainstream Access?

### **5.2 Recommendation: Consider a standardised template for HEI Access/Widening Participation Plans**

HEIs to include the following in their Access/Widening Participation Plan:

- Objectives and rationale;
- Evidence-based approaches – aligning actions with evidence and approaches to monitoring progression to ensure equity of access for students from underrepresented backgrounds;
- Targets; Funding allocation; Structures and staffing; Key actions
- University-wide approach; Staffing Profile and recruiting diversity
- Teaching, learning, curriculum diversity, assessment
- Intersectionality – how are supports provided to students who are from a number of underrepresented groups? How is research data capturing their outcomes?
- Include a focus on transitions to higher education and the diversity of approaches and supports to enable student belonging, progression and success

### **5.3 Recommendation: Whole of University Approach**

TU Dublin commits to the tenet that diversity fosters excellence and that our staff and students will reflect wider society. The TU Dublin strategic plan “Realising Infinite Possibilities” sets out ambitious objectives relevant to the National Access Plan:

- TU Dublin will be recognised as an exemplar in Equality Diversity and Inclusion
- TU Dublin will be the most accessible university with the largest number of diverse learners
- TU Dublin will celebrate our connected graduates
- TU Dublin will be one of the most flexible universities in meeting the needs of our stakeholders

As part of the new University, a Dean will have responsibility for leading a University-wide portfolio one of which will be Widening Participation. This pan-university role will set a University strategy and corresponding implementation plan, monitoring processes and modifications, as well as identifying opportunities for collaboration across faculties, schools and services.

#### **5.4 Recommendation: Address structural inequalities within the system**

Structural inequalities and disparities within the system need to be addressed. The issue of cognitive diversity is one such structural inequality. A more balanced approach to supporting and promoting underfunded disciplines and areas is required. Another disparity is the binary divide and the relativity of higher education institutions.

#### **5.5 Recommendation: Universal Design and Equality of Condition**

- **Universal Design**  
The ‘universal design’ approach should be developed across Higher Education access and widening participation functions. This involves thinking through from pre-entry to post-entry to graduation, the learning journey envisaged for members of each of the under-represented groups and actions taken at institution level, senior management, faculty leadership and discipline-specific course content and delivery methods to ensure inclusion.
- **Equality of Condition**  
Whilst higher education should be open to all, the reality is that it is not and that many students from under-represented groups do not gain access to higher education. Equality of opportunity, access, participation and outcome is not sufficient without addressing the underlying ‘equality of condition’ affecting the lives of students in many under-represented groups and communities in our society (Lynch 2002 & 2018). Higher Education Institutions should not pretend that a universal approach will include all. Under-represented groups need to see that they belong, therefore they need to be recognised and named in policies, programmes rather than hidden.

#### **5.6 Recommendation: Curriculum Diversity**

There are also hidden barriers which continue to impact on under-represented groups. The culture and content of the curriculum of many degree programmes and the language used is often not relatable to under-represented groups. This is more longer-term change. Whose economics, whose history, whose culture, whose technology, language, laws and values are being taught? An inclusive curriculum should be integral to the diverse university.

#### **5.7 Recommendation: Staff Learning and Development for Awareness and Empathy**

Many academics (coming from predominantly white, middle class, affluent backgrounds) and other staff in HEIs may not have an understanding of the circumstances of disadvantaged and marginalised under-represented groups. HEIs needs to take steps to proactively mainstream. If educational practices are exclusionary, then HEIs needs to take responsibility for addressing this. Access (and EDI) is the responsibility of management, faculty leadership, programme boards, all staff (PMSS also) not just the Access Officers, Disability Officers, Mature Student Officers etc.

There is a need for continued professional development of staff (academic and professional services) with regard to dealing with a diverse student population with diverse learning styles and needs. This includes training for all staff in Disability Awareness, Reasonable Accommodations, UDL, Inclusive Language.

Facilitating gatherings and events to break down barriers and increase awareness of disabilities with staff and students is also important.

### **5.8 Recommendation: Publish existing staff profile of HEIs, targets for staff diversity and recruit to ensure diversity**

A key objective which would transform higher education in Ireland to attract more students from under-represented groups would be through proactive recruitment of graduates whose backgrounds are from under-represented groups to the role of lecturers and other academic positions. Ireland has a long way to go in achieving gender-equality across the academic staff cohort, yet this must also translate to other intersectional grounds such as race, disability and ethnicity. Irish academic leadership is still predominantly white Irish male with very few staff from black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds. This needs to change if young people and adults from under-represented groups are to find role models to whom they can look up to in our higher education system. The HEA Race Equality survey for staff is a welcome first step but far more actions are needed to address structural inequalities.

- **Publish staffing profiles**

It is essential that steps are taken to ensure that the staff profile of each HEI is more representative of society. A higher education sector approach to this would be helpful. Publishing relevant staff profile data in areas relating to the NAP groups would be a useful step.

- **Race and Ethnicity reporting**

What gets measured gets done. There could be a HEA race and ethnicity reporting requirement similar to the annual Gender returns to the HEA. (This is currently or shortly in place but will take universities time to be able to return figures as only data by nationality captured historically for example).

- **Staff diversity targets**

Each HEI would have specified minority ethnic targets for students and staff and associated action plan and initiatives to achieve these.

- **Positive action measures**

Positive action measures required to increase the number of staff, for example, student counsellors from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are needed.

### **5.9 Recommendation: Funding for Intercultural University**

Dedicate funding for the development of intercultural universities. Activities funded could include:

- Supports for universities to make a realistic commitment to diversifying the curriculum, developing staff racial literacy and ultimately decolonising the curriculum. To include:
  - Staff training on developing a culturally sustaining pedagogy and curriculum
  - Short-life working groups to examine what diversifying and then decolonising the curriculum would mean in each School/area

- Requirement for Higher Education Institutions to provide EDI training to student support service staff including groups which may not have IT access such as those in Estates services, that includes developing their capacity to identify and challenge racism.
- Requirement for Higher Education Institutions to provide EDI training for all staff (academic and professional services) to understand the role they play in creating an inclusive campus and ensuring the retention of minority ethnic and under-represented groups.
- Supports and best practice guides for developing internal reporting systems and appropriate support services that address incidents of discrimination. Reporting systems and the associated supports and processes need to be compatible with human rights, the needs of vulnerable groups, and consistent with national and international best practice. A national Speak Out tool will launch shortly but it is mainly focused on data collection – reports are anonymous and no follow up options are available. Higher Education institutions need to further develop internal robust reporting systems and follow up supports for students.
- Supports for the development of trauma-informed student counselling. Student counsellors need to be able to recognize racism as structural and be able to name and deal with racial trauma and abuse.
- Increased supports for students whose first language is not English

#### **5.10 Recommendation: Diversity of teaching, learning and Assessment approaches**

- Alternative ways of assessing students rather than timed exam with similar outcomes
- All classes/lectures to be recorded and password protected for students enrolled in the modules, so that they may revisit the lecture as required, especially relevant for students with disabilities.
- Provide access to up-to-date technologies for students to meet the widest variety of student’s needs. More national frameworks.
- Encourage HEIs to provide greater access to labs, e.g. for 16 hours per day
- Implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offering a hybrid model of delivery/blended learning approach. (Specifically for some categories of disabilities, e.g. students with ASD, Significant Ongoing Illnesses – SOI, Physical Disability).

#### **5.11 Recommendation: Increase Health and Wellbeing for all students**

Increase Health and Wellbeing Awareness - Include a small ‘sports fee’ in registration fee to provide free access to sports/gym facilities for all students.

#### **5.12 Recommendation: Encourage transferable skills within HEIs**

Create portals of progression for staff e.g. assigned to one department yet their skills are transferable and useful to another department. Or consider ‘staff loaning’. This would help mainstreaming as ‘gaps in skills’ could be addressed and student retention increased.

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

### **6.1 Recommendation: Develop Pathways through education**

- Some attention needs to be given to the extended journey from primary school to higher education and how children's routes are mapped from the early stages of education with support through DEIS and similar initiatives. A more co-ordinated system of reaching under-represented groups from early years education through to higher education should be developed. A systemic mapping and system of supports that are interlinked and progressive should be developed and introduced.
- There is also a need to map the journey for different under-represented groups and design specific interventions to complement general interventions for those groups.
- Clear pathways to and through all levels of higher education, and the supports require for people from underrepresented groups to access them, need to be explored, delineated and highlighted – it shouldn't just be about getting people onto primary degree courses.
- Greater links between apprenticeship and HE, working with relevant bodies i.e. SOLAS, industry lead bodies, HE institutions, etc. to create higher levels of craft awards and routes into other academic disciplines at a variety of levels.
- Delivery of courses off campus in community settings as a steppingstone, these can be both in class and online.
- Building of regional partnerships and support mechanisms that consider education as a lifelong process. Considered this way, this should nurture progression and/or advance entry to different NFQ levels, based on both certified learning and recognition of experiential learning where appropriate on the basis of sound criteria for success.

### **6.2 Recommendation: Develop Higher Education, FE and Education and Community Partnerships at all levels in areas with high levels of disadvantage as part of the new NAP**

Area-Based Childhood Programmes provide a good example of an area-based approach involving all relevant statutory, education and community organisations. ABCs used target deprivation index data in 2013 in order to secure funding and were required to apply as a consortium, with consortium agreements. There is both valuable learning from this approach and also an opportunity to work with ABCs and develop consortia approaches at all levels of education in areas with demonstrated high levels of disadvantage.

Path 3 is a very welcome approach to Access but it is based on clusters of HEIs. Consider reversing this and instead setting up clusters based on identifying the most disadvantaged areas using DIS data. Provide support for an area-based access plan including HEIs, FE, Schools, Early Years, Adult Education, community sector, statutory services. The work of establishing and operating the partnership must be resourced.

### **6.3 Recommendation: Apply a whole of education, learner-centred approach**

- It would be great to see a ‘whole of education learner-centred’ approach applied. This would involve moving away from the various current education silos; providing learners with seamless pathways, shared approaches, targets and values; developing appropriate and effective policies, supports and interventions that don’t compete or work against each other; addressing wider societal, cultural and economic issues; and building aspirations and expectations across the whole lifelong learning journey.
- Develop courses in consultation with learners.
- Recognise prior learning and experience (work, volunteering)
- There is also an opportunity for closer partnership working and connectivity not just between HE and FE, but also with community educators who are often the first port of call for ‘non-traditional learners’ (i.e. people with few or no qualifications who lack confidence in their ability to learn) on their learning journeys. The same holds for HE/FE and employers in creating vocational, HE/FE based pathways for these learners delivered flexibly in settings other than educational institutions. Education providers need to be willing to ‘follow the learner’ to where they are, physically and virtually, rather than automatically expecting teaching/learning to take place in the institution where the teaching staff are located. In addition to providing greater flexibility of access, this approach can also neutralise the real and often disabling fears and doubts people in disadvantaged groups may have in taking the first steps back into formal education in what they may view as intimidating and exclusionary settings.
- The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) scheme helps people who are unemployed, are in receipt of the One-Parent Family Payment or have a disability, to attend approved second- or third-level education courses. Increasingly access to the BTEA and the decisions as to what may constitute a suitable course/direction for an applicant is increasingly controlled by generic Department of Social Protection/Intreo Case Officers who are likely to have less knowledge of the education sector or may not have received any meaningful training in guidance. As a result, decisions around eligibility will be influenced by the social welfare status of the applicant and the educational status/experience of the Case Officer rather than the interests of aptitudes of the applicant.

### **6.4 Recommendation: Inclusive Education throughout all stages of Education**

- Curriculum diversity is a key issue throughout education in Ireland. Providing support for more diverse curricula at all stages of education is an essential step.
- Training for all staff on widening participation and how to support these students using a UDL approach at all stages of education.
- There needs to be ongoing recognition of the reproduction of inequalities as structural – socio-historical norms, law, policy and institutions all combine to advantage and disadvantage key cohorts of students.  
Developing equity of access should include targeted initiatives to enable access to university, ongoing supports offered to students, and broader awareness raising programmes within higher education institutions so all staff and students attain a level

of fluency in terms of how inequalities are reproduced and how to interrupt these processes and practices.

Initiatives designed to develop understanding of the origins and bases of various forms of discrimination, (e.g. anti-Traveller racism as rooted in the assumption that nomadism is not a valid way of life and needed to be eliminated via law, policies etc); their historical, structural, institutional and individual dimensions; and how to take an intersectional approach to analysing and addressing inequalities are also needed. These need to be a part of training programmes for all educators particularly those involved in early childhood care and at primary school level but right up to higher education.

- Achieving the inclusion of students from a Roma, Traveller, Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds involves working with educators at all stages – particularly those involved in early childhood care and primary schools.
- Special attention should be paid to including students with intellectual disability in higher education and mapping routes to active participation in society post-graduation. Wherever possible students with intellectual disabilities should be supported to take modules and classes which form part of the mainstream provision in the University. This inclusion provides a rich learning environment for all students.
- Address the mindset regarding access to education. Run National campaigns. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/children-with-disabilities-much-more-likely-to-be-bullied-in-school-1.4562368>
- Make Inclusive Education available as a high priority for all students –this will look like structured compulsive training for working in the HEIs

### **6.5 Recommendation: Address issues of Access to Assessments in Early Years**

Embedding supports within the education sector is crucial for widening participation in higher education. Currently children with additional needs have to go through the HSE Assessment of Need Process and then are placed on lengthy waiting lists for assessment, diagnosis and intervention. Current models in education means that certain supports are contingent on having a confirmed diagnosis. Those able to afford private therapy can access diagnosis and intervention but those unable to afford this lose vital years of early intervention and support. Embedding interdisciplinary supports such as Speech and Language Therapy and Occupational Therapy within the yearly years, primary and secondary education sectors and implementing a needs-based rather than diagnosis-based model of support in schools would enable all young people to meet their full potential.

### **6.6 Recommendation: Provide required supports at all stages of education**

- A large cohort of students availing of foundation level subjects in a given secondary school should be a flag that this school is in dire need of extra supports. It is not the students that are failing but the system. If reduced timetables are in effect, again this is a flag that the system is not working.
- Out of term extra tuition if student is failing in core subjects. Must pass in order to move on?
- All schools to be resourced to offer supports required. Providing supports in some schools only can reinforce disadvantage in communities.
- Language support is key at every stage of education.

- Access to Educational Assessments: Dyslexia Assessments – more access is needed for people who are socio economically disadvantaged with funding for Educational Psychologists fees. Early diagnosis and knowledge of supports can be a deciding factor when considering HE. Such assessments should be subsidised for people returning to education at any stage and for people applying to or in HE, including mature applicants and apprenticeships or these resources available in all HEIs for applicants and students
- Support DARE and HEAR and community awareness.

### **6.7 Recommendation: Continue focus on achieving representation in teacher training and extend to specialised training**

The focus in Path 1 on increasing the number of students from under-represented groups entering initial teacher education is very welcome. Extending this to specialised roles in schools, such as guidance counselling would be a useful step (if not already in place).

### **6.8 Recommendation: Further develop role of Special Needs Assistants or develop Equality roles in Schools**

The role of Special Needs Assistants would benefit from further consideration. A profile of SNAs would make for an interesting research study. Anecdotally, it appears that significant numbers of people who are SNAs are:

- i. People from areas local to the school who have continued with their education to some level but possibly not degree and who have a strong belief in the value of education, extensive knowledge of their community and a strong commitment to helping children belong and progress.
- ii. Women returners - women with many qualifications and experience who re-train as SNAs and bring high levels of experience to the role.

How could we build on the understanding, commitment and experience of these two groups? Is there a wider role for SNAs or an additional role in terms of promoting inclusion and access? Ensuring SNAs are representative of the diversity of communities with children in school is important. Is there a pathway for SNAs to include their experience in considering teacher training if they wish to do so?

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

In the forthcoming access plan, greater focus needs to be placed on engagement between further and higher education. This should be greatly assisted through the new dedicated department for Further and Higher Education (DFHERIS). There is a traditional connection between ETBs (formerly VECs) and Institutes of Technology and Technological Universities (formerly RTCs). This collaboration for practice-based higher education (including apprenticeships) can make concrete links between higher education programmes and students taking level 5 and 6 programmes in colleges of further education and community education.

### 7.1 Recommendation: Develop existing and new Pathways

- **Existing Higher Education Links Scheme and Campus Community Collaboration**

Higher Education Links Programmes should be further developed based on links between academics on campus and practitioners in community and industry and identification of relevant courses which are community-based and which could provide pathways to higher education for under-represented groups.

- **Coherence in Progression and Pathways through the National Framework of Qualifications**

Better use of the National Framework of Qualifications and a more coherent interface between further education qualifications and progression to higher education.

Removal of barriers to advanced entry from FE to HE. Opportunities to progress from further to higher education have effectively been introduced by the Health Service regulator CORU for example. There is a need to look at the routes and map them for students who may progress from FE to HE.

- Develop specific pathways from Further Education to Higher Education.
- Increase quota places in all programmes nationally for students into FET programmes.
- Initiation and maintenance of linkage with further education institutions under each university' regional remit. This could be enhanced by tailored mentorship of FETs towards meeting specific entry criteria of the HEs in each region, and supporting a partnership mechanism for pre-entry bridging to courses where deemed necessary in order to enhance potential for student success.
- More opportunities for part-time study with the same supports as full-time.
- Provide one of the modules on each of the FE courses within the university/ college.
- Provide an introductory module to HE on FE courses/employability etc
- Transition to HE programmes offered by FE – linked to HEIs
- Give credits for previous FE courses completed in relevant disciplines.
- **Learner-centred**

There is a need for FE and HE sectors and institutions to work closely together in a learner-focused approach to build pathways between the sectors, including foundation programmes and access courses which meet learners where they are rather than at some arbitrary starting point which may remain inaccessible to a proportion of learners in the target groups.

## **7.2 Build greater awareness of existing and new pathways**

- Provide clearer information to identify pathways
- Deliver skill-based workshops, build knowledge, career presentations
- Resourced Staff - specific positions dedicated to creating awareness of this pathway
- Encourage University lecturers/retired lecturers accompanied by students to give guest lectures to students in the FE establishment.
- Encourage 4<sup>th</sup> year students to mentor an FE student for additional credits.

## **7.3 Recommendation: Continue to increase the availability of Apprenticeships**

## **7.4 Recommendation: Conduct research on the decision-making about FE and HE**

More research on FE-HE decision-making would be helpful: for example, how many students who entered FE also received HE offers? What were the reasons for choosing FE or HE? What decisions are made when completing FE qualifications about next steps? How do we communicate to learners that FE provides both key qualifications for employment and also functions as a gateway to HE?

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

### 8.1 Recommendation: Increase awareness of relevant Policies

There are a number of policies which have been developed (and are being developed) by the state through various departments with relevant stakeholders which seek to address poverty and social exclusion. The key programmes in this regard include the following and this list is not exhaustive. Higher education institutions need to be cognisant of these policies at national and international level.

- *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 – 2025 Ambition, Goals, Commitments* (Dept. Social Protection, 2020).
- *National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017 – 2021* (Dept. Justice & Equality, 2017).
- *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021* (Dept. Justice and Equality, 2017).
- *A White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service* (Dept. Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021).
- *Further Education and Training Strategy 2021-2024* (Solas, 2020).
- *National Anti-Racism Strategy (Forthcoming)* (Dept. Justice, 2020).
- *Implementing the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty* (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2019).
- *Sustainable Development Goals 2030* (United Nations 2015) (Goal 4 to ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’).
- *Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) – administered through Department of Rural and Community Development, Pobal and managed by Local Authorities.*
- *Social inclusion aspects of LEADER funding - administered through Department of Rural and Community Development, Pobal and managed by Local Authorities.*
- *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (Tusla)

#### Public Sector Duty

TU Dublin’s draft Access and Widening Participation Policy states that due regard be given to the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) public sector duty <https://www.ihrec.ie/our-work/public-sector-duty/>

### 8.2 Recommendation: Draw on interconnectivity between government departments

The interconnectivity across government departments and civic institutions should be leveraged for example the Department of Rural and Community Development (administers SICAP and LEADER) and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability and Integration for example. These departments have a role to play in education from early years to higher education. Ensuring interconnections in policy is important.

### 8.3 Recommendation: Further develop evidence-base

In addition to social inclusion initiatives, there needs to be an informed evidence base on under-representation and under-represented groups. For example, racial inequality is one area where data collection is needed (both quantitative and qualitative) to provide an

evidence base to inform national policy (Ni Chonail 2021) but is pertinent to lots of other groups.

#### **8.4 Recommendation: National Campaigns to promote Inclusion**

A whole of society approach, align with other national campaigns in sport and retail etc. A stronger message that racism won't be tolerated in any part of our society.

#### **8.5 Recommendation: Establish a national all-age, high-profile Guidance Service**

Career education, guidance and development is available in many sectors and agencies in Ireland and provides key support for people. Expanding the provision of guidance to develop a national service would be of benefit in supporting people through existing and new pathways at all stages of their learning and career. This could be free for some clients with a fee charged for those who are in employment.

#### **8.6 Recommendation: Regular reports on Diversity of Professions in Ireland**

Increasingly, information is being provided about the representativeness or not of professions in Ireland and globally. Organisations recognise the value of diversity. Regular publication of the diversity data of publicly funded professions/organisations, including the socio-economic background of staff, is a key step in ensuring there is a pull-factor from employers in further promoting the importance of representation in higher education. Requiring every profession/organisation in the public sector to publish such data would be a helpful step.

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

The key challenges for an inclusive higher education system presented by Covid-19 have not as yet been fully researched. There have been some notable attempts to conduct research on the impact of the pandemic on secondary education, most notably, the ESRI's *Learning for all? Second-level education in Ireland during COVID-19* (ESRI, June 2020). However, the anecdotal evidence across the higher education sector suggests that Covid-19 has exacerbated the inequality which existed before the pandemic. The key factors are the digital divide and study space.

The pandemic has had a particular impact on students with special educational needs. Lack of access to campus, to study spaces, and to positive learning environments. The pandemic appears to have disproportionately impacted certain groups of students, e.g. those living in homeless accommodation.

### **9.1 Challenges and Solutions: Digital Divide**

The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic saw Ireland move rapidly online and brought the digital divide into sharp relief. It has highlighted not only a deficit in digital skills amongst some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged individuals and groups but also their limited access to the necessary technology and connectivity. The publication of the Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy 10-Year Strategy for Ireland within the next month will hopefully create opportunities and resources to support meaningful engagement by community, FE and HE educators in this area.

Both access to technology and also the skills to use it effectively are needed.

Laptop loan scheme: Students have indicated that they would prefer to have their own laptop and would rather receive funding to support the purchase of a laptop.

### **9.2 Challenges and Solutions: Space**

- Lack of appropriate/safe physical space for learning in the home – those experiencing homelessness or living in challenging domestic situations, dealing with anti-social behaviour in the home, lack of heating, electricity, internet connectivity.
- Students did not have required private study space, particularly where sharing accommodation or in the care of the state, or in direct provision centres.
- Lack of access to appropriate study space in the home leading to students engaging in learning from their bed.
- Provide COVID vaccinated bookable hot desks/ pods for students who do not have access to space at home.

### **9.3 Challenges and Solutions: Online Delivery within HE**

- Difficulties that practitioners are experiencing in continuing to deliver those supports and their programmes more generally.
- Highlighted the lack of experience of online delivery across university.
- Intense timetables for online learning leading to students sitting in online live classes from 9-6 with limited opportunities to move/take breaks – detrimental impact on mental and physical health

- Students with intellectual disabilities often needed tailored support to access and take part in their synchronous classes. It was challenging for them to build relationships and to feel fully part of the university experience while learning remotely.
- Restrict the number of live classes, create break times that must be adhered to by all schools.
- Students have indicated that they would like a blended learning approach to education, particularly if they have a disability or medical condition and could access materials online where attendance on campus is not possible.
- Reduced opportunities for informal communication with faculty, as is enabled by in-person teaching, has placed students at a remove from educational institutions and made it more challenging to ask for help/advice/support

#### **9.4 Challenges and Solutions: Broadband Access**

- Broadband access
- Negotiate with broadband providers to extend coverage to students at the university, (links via student's phones).
- Students who are Irish travellers indicated that their accommodation location did not have access to Wi-Fi/broadband and was often not in future governmental plans.

#### **9.5 Challenges and Solutions: Supports for Students in Higher Education**

- Loss of environmental factors which aid participation in education e.g. peer support, social learning environments e.g. the library, informal "reminders" regarding workload demands which come from in-person interactions.
- Loss of practical and interactive aspects of in-person learning has made sustaining focus and attention and learning more challenging for some learners.
- Students did not have access to part time work which funded them while in higher education. The student assistance funding increased but the number of applications also increased.
- Students who were parents could not home school children or supervise children and attend university synchronous sessions, they needed a combination of synchronous and asynchronous sessions and flexibility around deadlines.
- Each student be allocated a student advisor to meet regularly.
- Create students group meetings with School Year Head- to discuss progress of modules and interactive learning.

#### **9.6 Challenges and Solutions: Outreach and Support for Schools**

- Delivery of many access/outreach activities halted or stopped. ICT skills across schools varied – some schools could not engage at all - both skills and technology an issue.
- The Dept of Education is in the process of developing a new Digital Strategy for Schools. <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/7d09a-digital-strategy-for-schools/>. This needs to take into account the lack of ICT equipment/broadband coverage and ICT skills among staff. Expectation on staff to do technical support as well as carrying out their teaching role.

### **9.7 Challenges and Solutions: Wellbeing and Mental Health at all levels of education**

- Not enough support for student's wellbeing/mental health in schools which meant they dropped out prior to sitting leaving cert and possibly junior cert.
- Students feeling lonely/isolate with an impact on mental health

## REFERENCES

- Brooks R (2005) *Friendship and Educational Choice* London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Callender C and Jackson J (2004) *Fear of debt and higher education participation* London: Families and Social Capital ESRC Group.
- Connor H and Dewson S with Tyers C, Eccles J, Regan J and Aston J (2001) *Social Class and Higher Education: issues affecting decisions on participation by lower social class groups. Research Report No. 267* Norwich: DfEE.
- Fahey, É., McGinnity, F. and Quinn, E. (2019) *Data for Monitoring Integration: Gaps, Challenges and Opportunities* Dublin: ESRI.
- HEA (2015) *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019* Dublin: HEA.
- Higher Education Authority (2018) *Progress Review of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education* Dublin: HEA.
- Hutchings M (2003) 'Information, advice and cultural discourses' in L Archer, M Hutchings and A Ross *Higher Education and Social Class, issues of exclusion and inclusion* London: Routledge Falmer.
- Kashefpakdel E., Rehill J. Hughes D. (2018) *What works? Career-related learning in primary schools* London: Careers and Enterprise Company & Education and Employers
- Law B (2002) 'Careers Education and DOTS: Time for the quantum leap' in *Career Guidance: Constructing the Future* Stourbridge: Institute of Career Guidance.
- Liston, M., Frawley, D. and Patterson, V. (2016) *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education 2012/13 to 2013/14* Dublin: HEA.
- Loke, G. (2018) 'So What Next? A Policy Response', in J. Arday and H.S. Mirza (eds.) *Dismantling Race in Higher Education Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ní Chonail, B. (2021) 'Black Lives Matter and Higher Education in Ireland', in L. Michael and E. Joseph (eds.), *The Sociological Observer 2 (1) Black Lives Matter* Maynooth: SAI. Available at: [https://www.sociology.ie/uploads/4/2/5/2/42525367/sociological\\_observer\\_2.pdf](https://www.sociology.ie/uploads/4/2/5/2/42525367/sociological_observer_2.pdf)
- Reay D, David M E and Ball S (2005) *Degrees of Choice: Social Class, race and gender in higher education* Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham.
- Royal Irish Academy (2020) *Race, Ethnicity and Change in Higher Education*. Available at: <https://www.ria.ie/news/policy-and-international-relations/race-and-ethnicity-higher-education-ireland-and-uk>
- Sennet, R. and Cobb, J. (1977) *The Hidden Injuries of Class* Cambridge: Polity Press.