



# NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN 2022 -2028

Consultation submissions

Submissions made by individuals

## Contents

Submission 1.01.....	2
Submission 1.02.....	2
Submission 1.03.....	2
Submission 1.04.....	2
Submission 1.05.....	3
Submission 1.06.....	3
Submission 1.07.....	3
Submission 1.08.....	4
Submission 1.09.....	4
Submission 1.10.....	8
Submission 1.11.....	9
Submission 1.12.....	17
Submission 1.13.....	17
Submission 1.14.....	21
Submission 1.15.....	24
Submission 1.16.....	29
Submission 1.17.....	34

### Submission 1.01

... I don't think there is enough help for stay-at-home mums to get back to the work force...cost of putting [children] through college is so expensive so there is no chance for me to be able to think about re-educating myself as we can barely afford to pay for [children]. I think there should be fee waivers for parents that have children in college who are looking to educate themselves to get back into college!

### Submission 1.02

... I was awarded €263.89 a month which is ridiculous. I was lucky that this year's college was all online for myself. If I did have to travel to the college, it would have cost me €60 a week to get to college. This is €240 a month. Each month I would have €23.89 to buy food, books (which are expensive) and ink and paper for my printer for notes I would have to have in hand. On average I'd have €6 for these a week. I missed out on getting the higher grant by 0.5km. I live 44.5km away from the college. I think this should be reconsidered for everyone. If you really want to make higher and further education better start with grants. Everyone should be entitled to a grant. Everyone should be entitled to have an easy life the whole way through college. College is hard enough without having the pressure of money on top of it.

### Submission 1.03

I have also had great difficulty with my SUSI application. My application is still at the appeal stage. I have had to send an unbelievable amount of paperwork to them, and the latest request is to prove that I have been a resident in Ireland in the past four years. I have never lived anywhere other than Ireland. This seems to be something that they could easily have access to. As I am classed as a Mature dependent, my mother also had to submit many documents. I can understand why this procedure is the case, but it also lacks fairness in certain circumstances. It seems unfair in many circumstances that your parents' earnings can greatly affect the outcome of your SUSI application and it is especially unfairness when you cannot receive any form of social welfare payment. All I ask is for you to consider this other category of students when you are introducing your policies. My graduating Class of 2011 seems to be the forgotten year. We graduated into the recession with no hope or opportunities so now all I ask is that we are not forgotten again when we are now older and wiser and wish to finish were we left off but in hopefully better circumstances that allow for opportunity and progression.

### Submission 1.04

Allow people on the pup to do full time courses and keep their payment. Thousands of people want to take part in these courses but are being financially punished for doing so. Most that work inside education training boards share the same opinion. Increase the grants available for further education as the cost of third level education has risen over the years. The grants and the btea have not kept up with this. Allow students to sign on to jobseeker's allowance when they are not in college. Youth unemployment is currently over 60%. Not all parents are willing or have the ability to support their children financially! Cut regulation on

safety standards for older buildings. I'm all for safety but the current system completely disincentives people for refurbishing old buildings. This would help towns and cities and provide more affordable housing. Which is essential for students. Stop taxing petrol and diesel to the high hill. More students could afford cars and live farther away which would increase the availability of housing for them.

#### Submission 1.05

hi i would like to see people with id consulted on how college like should look for them

#### Submission 1.06

I am an asylum seeker and would like to do nursing studies at level 8. However, I was told that only Irish citizens could do it. If you could allow non-eu members to do the course. That would be fantastic as this means we have opportunities to develop and not stay stagnant.

#### Submission 1.07

I wish to make a submission regarding access to third level education. I have been lucky to be employed for most of my working life. However, on many occasions I would have loved to pursue a degree which could lead to better job and greater working satisfaction. Unfortunately, third level fees were not financially possible for me due to mortgage and childcare costs. If I was unemployed or in receipt of social payments for other reasons, I would qualify. Access should be for All. Working disabled unemployed not only those society views as disenfranchised. Many working people are disenfranchised also. We can't access homes unless we provide for ourselves where others can have several children having no regard for childcare costs or housing and are provided with housing and social welfare benefits to stay home or have substantially reduced childcare. Education needs to be equal access for All and available free of charge (third level) at least once in a lifetime to all from the state and these courses should become available in evenings and Saturdays for those of us who work. Please consider working people in your plan who contribute all their working lives to this country. I work closely with the Travelling community and wish to make a submission for the next HEA National Access Plan, which is underpinned by feedback that I have obtained from working with the Travelling community in Tuam. Please see the recommendations below. Understanding and providing for the particular needs of Travellers students and parents as they seek to access higher education is critical to ensuring that children and young people from the Traveller community can fulfil their potential through education. Having a whole education approach is essential for enabling participation by Travellers in higher education. Therefore, a full-time post Traveller Education Officer must be established in each third level institution, or in partnership with institutions, to work closely with the Travelling community, school and FET communities to deliver a targeted approach while furthering the agreed actions and recommendations outlined in numerous Travellers in Education reports and strategies. Traveller students have identified a gap in supports during the transition process into higher education. The transition can create additional barriers (Academic, Financial and Wellbeing) which act as a deterrent for the progression and retention of Traveller students in higher education. Therefore, a Pre-University programme should be established by Access offices with a multi-disciplinary team

of professionals supporting Traveller students and parents from pre-entry. This will empower Traveller students and their families to overcome the barriers and be in a stronger position once they commence their studies at university. The programme would represent an essential intervention in ensuring Traveller students access to higher education. The new National Access Plan needs to build on the long-established strong engagement of Travellers in further education and build coherent incentivised pathways from further education to higher education. In 2019, the total number of Traveller enrolments reported in further education and training was 1,527. Of these learner enrolments, 43% were men, and 57% were women. The majority (59%) of these learners were younger than 25 years of age (FET In Numbers – Traveller Community, SOLAS, 2019). The current FET to HE model creates additional barriers for Traveller Youth and hinders any significant progress. A key barrier is financial, an 18-year-old Traveller student in further education at Youthreach in Tuam Co. Galway receives a weekly payment of €203 weekly, but if the same student progresses into higher education (NUI Galway or GMT) which is within 45km from home, the student will receive a SUSI grant of €297 per month. This is a severe financial barrier for Traveller students and families that needs to be addressed. This is a common issue brought to the attention of our office by Traveller parents and students daily. Travellers want to progress into higher education, but the financial burden is too much to handle; more needs to be done by the department to deal with this issue. Pathways from further education to higher education must be incentivised. If this is addressed in the next National Access Plan, the number of Traveller Youth progressing into higher education through a further education route from Tuam Co. Galway will drastically increase.

#### Submission 1.08

I have recent experience of returning to study as a mature student. I received zero financial support. There were no funding types available to me. I phoned SUSI and was told there was no point in applying as I already had an MA. Otherwise, I would have qualified on income grounds. It is notable that I have NEVER received ANY SUSI or similar funding before. I paid for all previous education costs myself. Also, that this was an MA in an entirely different academic area. We are being told by the government to upskill and change direction, but the funding system does not reflect this. Most people studying in the institution did not pay their own fees. Either they got a SUSI grant, or they or their parents could offset the fees 100% against tax and so pay nothing. As I was on a very low income the tax offset option didn't apply. As a result, I am still paying off the costs of studying several years later and have large debts. The institution wants to be paid and - to my horror- makes no concessions to those not covered by funding. There were also no other sources of funding, awards etc. So, the point is this. If you want equality of access, then provide realistic funding to cover fees and living costs. And make access more equal.

#### Submission 1.09

This submission is focused on the needs of socio-economically disadvantaged young people while recognising that there are other categories that also face barriers in progressing through the education system. It is half a century since the HEA was assigned responsibility for promoting equality of access to higher education. The fact that it is still struggling with

achieving that objective is evidence that the issue of educational disadvantage is deep-seated and not amenable to easy solutions. It could be argued that the HEA and DES have not tackled the issue with sufficient skill and determination, particularly in the early decades. However, while this argument indeed holds water, the reality is that most of the obstacles which need to be overcome in order to improve access to HE are outside the remit of the HEA and the institutions with which it is associated. It is important to acknowledge this key point out of respect to those involved, however, more importantly it is critical to emphasise the fact that unless action is taken by other branches of government, progress will continue to be very limited. Prior to reaching the stage of filling in a CAO form, a young person progressing through the education system experiences a series of transitions. Progress through these various stages and the attainment levels achieved are largely determined by parental socio-economic status. Research both nationally and internationally testifies to the importance of recognising the challenges young people face at these key transition points in the education system and the need to support these pivotal junctures. The kinds of supports required are often absent in disadvantaged contexts, and hence this group of young people lack the necessary supports or scaffolds to progress from one transition point to the next. Whilst many may fall at the final transition point, second-level to third-level, a framework for supporting transitions through all key stages is required if tangible progress is to be achieved. Moreover, it is important to emphasise the point that while schools are central to supporting young people through the education system, schools alone cannot be expected to cope with the myriad of complex challenges educational disadvantage entails. Educational disadvantage is a symptom of a far deeper problem, that of poverty. Any effective policy response will therefore be multi-faceted and will view education within the wider societal context of social and economic disadvantage. It is only in recent decades that target setting was introduced to publications on the issue of access to higher education. The National Plan for Equity of Access 2008-2013 was notable in this respect, specifying targets to be achieved by 2010, 2013 and 2020. To anyone reading those at the time who was familiar with the issues, the targets for the most marginalised socio-economic categories were totally unrealistic and this has proved to be the case. Missing targets is not a major problem in and of itself, provided a detailed assessment is carried out in order to determine the reasons for this failure and steps are then taken to address this. This is why we set targets in the first place. There is no evidence of any such analysis contained in the subsequent National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2015 – 2019. Of course, any such exercise would almost certainly have focused on deficiencies in provision at the earlier stages of education as well as a failure to provide adequate resources to students at third level. This would have involved a thorough examination of the policies being implemented by the HEA's governing department the DES. Serious errors in target-setting, when many of the issues were outside the ken as well as the remit of the HEA, are understandable. However, the failure to address the issues and outline the lessons learned is inexcusable. It is not that the HEA has ignored the need for reform at earlier stages in the cycle. Rather, it is the case that it has not been robust enough in highlighting the need for such action. Whether the HEA will display more courage now that it is under the aegis of a separate department, the DFHERIS, remains to be seen. The current targets for HE participation of those from the non-manual sector are for an increase from 23%

(2012) to 32% (2021) and for the semi-skilled sector from 26% (2012) to 40% (2021). These seem more realistic but again it is important not to see targets as ends in and of themselves. The exercise is not to assess the ability of the HEA to set and reach targets. Rather, it is to ensure that we are doing our utmost to bring about equity in Irish education. So, whether these targets are reached or not, the opportunity to learn lessons must be embraced. A further key issue around the target-setting process in Irish education is that all the metrics relate to access, and this tends to overshadow the differing qualitative experiences available to students. As the rates of participation and completion approach one hundred per cent in post-primary education and indicate an increase at HE and FE level, including full participation for some social classes, the type of education received becomes more significant for employment and other outcomes in later life (Byrne and McCoy, 2017; Smyth, 2018). Research into the DEIS Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools programme indicates that progress is being made in closing the attainment gap between those in the schools involved and their peers elsewhere, however this increase is both marginal and slow. As currently structured and resourced, the DEIS Programme will ensure the perpetuation of advantage based on social class (Fleming, 2020) for decades to come and as such disadvantaged students will not achieve either equality of access to or participation in HE. This obtains despite the fact that equality of participation is what has been promised in legislation for almost a quarter of a century. One of the objects of the Education Act (1998) is 'to promote equality of access to and participation in education' (Section 6. c). Although the remit of the HEA is limited, there are a number of steps it can take to improve the prospects for socio-economically disadvantaged young people. Progress to date has been very slow and, meanwhile, generations of students have been unable to fulfil their full potential. Accordingly, the HEA and the DFHERIS must be prepared to embark on new strategies in addition to funding existing ones to a greater level.

- 1. In the 2018 review of the current plan, one of the recommendations calls for a 'whole of education approach' Lower case in the original and suggests that a wider Equity of Access to Education Plan would be a useful enhancement. This is an important idea worth prioritising and fighting for in the public arena. Such a plan, if comprehensive in its design and appropriately funded, could have a transformative effect. One of the most enlightened ideas brought forward by a minister for education in recent years was Micheál Martin's decision to include in the Education Act provision for the establishment of an independent expert group on educational disadvantage to be set up on a statutory basis. The first Educational Disadvantage Committee served from 2002 to 2005 but was never replaced. No convincing reason has ever been provided for the failure to replace it. If revisited, such a structure would be the ideal mechanism for advising on policy and undertaking evaluation on a whole of education strategy as it unfolded.
- 2. For many disadvantaged students the grant available, even before the cutbacks of 2011, was inadequate. Financial considerations determine whether HE is a realistic aspiration for some. In cases where these difficulties can be overcome the choice of college and course to be followed often depends on family finances. Also, these considerations are likely to impact on the prospects for successful completion. The

cost of living has increased since 2011 and more meaningful and realistic levels of grant need to be made available.

- 3. While it has weaknesses and is inadequately resourced, one real strength of the DEIS plan is that schools are identified to avail of it in an independent and objective manner. It is designed to assist those students' attending schools where the intake is such that the 'multiplier' effect is at play: 'the social class context of a school has an additional effect on pupil outcomes, over and above a pupil's individual background' (Smyth, 1999, 217). The objective of providing additional resources to DEIS schools is to try to help students to 'bridge' the attainment gap with their peers elsewhere. It is important that state and other funding being expended by access schemes operated by HEIs is consistent with this policy. The fact that the DES is diverting funding in order to close the attainment gap whilst access schemes, in some locations, provide resources which are used to preserve it patently does not make any sense. The review of access schemes envisaged in the Progress Review of the National Access Plan in 2018 should be initiated immediately. Also, social inclusion initiatives targeting educational disadvantage under the aegis of other government departments should award funds in a manner consistent with DES policy.
- 4. In the early years of this century, the DES introduced its Guidance Enhancement Initiative. Recognising that many disadvantaged students would not have access to cultural capital within their extended families to the same extent as others, additional ex-quota guidance counsellor posts were assigned to some schools in disadvantaged areas. Sadly, these disappeared in the cutbacks about a decade ago. In the meantime, DEIS schools (and others) are reporting a serious rise in student wellbeing issues and guidance counsellors are reporting less time available to devote to career progression, CAO and course choice. The guidance role for many young people living in disadvantaged areas extends beyond the question of course choice. Issues such as lack of confidence that s/he will 'fit' in, a sense of not being 'good enough' and absence of role models in the extended family and local community all have an impact. The different factors at play that impact on the working-class student in a DEIS school and her/his peer elsewhere are clearly outlined in research (e.g. Smyth and Banks, 2012). It may be that the only solution to this is for staff in HEIs, including academics not directly involved in the work of access departments, to engage in more direct contact with schools by providing support, advice, and information to intending students possibly using online links.
- 5. Foundation courses provided in the HEIs have provided a suitable 'bridge' to many from under-represented groups. HEIs should explore the possibility of providing these on a pilot basis in one or two of the most disadvantaged areas in co-operation with local post-primary schools/FE Colleges. Separate funding should be provided by the HEA to enable such an approach to be explored. In addition to some students of Leaving Certificate age, this should prove a realistic option to others living in the area whose commitments constitute a barrier, including lone parents, carers, and mature students.



- 6. The Schools of Education in our HEIS should be resourced to form a partnership with a number of DEIS post-primary schools. Principals of DEIS schools are under particular pressure and don't have adequate time to devote to the important role of devising and implementing a school improvement plan based on research findings. A partnership of this nature would allow the personnel from the Schools of Education to share their skills and insights with their colleagues at post-primary level on a wide range of issues to the benefit of the students and indeed teachers.

#### Submission 1.10

##### **Visually/Hearing impaired, wheelchair users:**

Many aspects of the present and previous plan have been successful in achieving and exceeding targets and government and policy makers are to be commended. However, despite the widespread practical supports (PA's, technology etc.), many students with sensory and physical disabilities could be financially penalized because if they are classed as full-time students, a flexible and free mode of study is not available to them. While many colleges will give exam deferrals on medical grounds, this student cohort should not be in a position where they have to continuously apply for such an allowance. A simple no cost policy whereby students with physical and sensory disabilities are provided with a flexible mode of study by colleges is the way forward. The greatest challenge for some of this cohort is the physical and psychological demands imposed by full-time study. Providing a flexible programme of study and a pro-rata system of supports will alleviate many of the challenges faced by these students.

##### **Care leavers:**

The broad definition of a care leaver is any adult who spent time in out-of-home care as a child e.g. in foster care, residential care, or other arrangements outside the immediate or extended family. Care experience children have among the worst education outcomes of socially disadvantaged student cohorts, and are less likely to pursue courses in further or higher education. Much of their education journey has been hindered through a variety of factors including placement instability, lack of family support, persistent school changes and trauma associated with past abuse and neglect. My proposal involves a whole of education support package which would involve identifying children in care throughout their education journey from as early as pre-school/early years/primary education. In a similar process to supports for children with special education needs, the journey of a child in care should be tracked with the requisite supports in place throughout the entire educational journey. Such a scenario would ensure that a care leaver has the necessary supports in place.

In the further/higher education sector, international research has shown that care leavers typical routes in educational and training were characterized by delayed entry to education, pursuit of vocational pathways, short-cycle vocational training, and a pattern of enrolling and dropping out of courses. Such patterns are not surprising considering the traumatic life experiences of many young care leavers. While tangible resources in the form of aftercare financial supports are a major factor in assisting prospective students, the presence of

tailored support packages and emotional support networks are also seen as crucial. Strengthening these networks has been identified as a significant factor that supports transition from care to education, employment, and successful independence.

Care leavers like many other disadvantaged cohorts are susceptible to dropping out of college. In recognising the long-term implications of educational disadvantage for vulnerable young adults, many of our European neighbours have maintained a strong focus on the further and higher education participation of care leavers for the past several decades. Many of these policies were prompted by leaving care studies which revealed unacceptable levels of educational underachievement with many leaving with no formal educational qualifications. Care leavers are formally recognized as an under-represented group in higher education and their participation is closely monitored in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. These policies have helped to drive sectoral change, and a range of initiatives including: prioritising care leavers in outreach university programmes, personal support advocates for care leaver students, bursaries and accommodation support have ensured increasing education success rates for care leavers.

While all higher education institutions in Ireland already have comprehensive student services to support a broad range of diversified student cohorts, a tailored support package specifically aimed at care leavers is the most effective way forward to ensure education success. This evidence is based on the practical and emotional requirement needs of many young care leavers who cannot rely on family for financial and emotional support. Care experienced students are already severely underrepresented in higher education, so it is particularly important that colleges improve their support for this group to ensure that they stand to benefit from the experience when they enter college. For students to access and succeed in further and higher education 'wrap-around' pre-entry supports to include tailored packages of career guidance, financial supports and assistance with accommodation are necessary pre-requisites. In addition, post-entry on campus personal support advocates composed of suitable academic staff working alongside the existing student services function will ensure a student-centred and successful college experience for all.

#### Submission 1.11

For the last 20 years, in the industry of Ecology and Wildlife Conservation, an ever-growing divide has formed between prospective graduates of the nature sciences and the professionals who make a living in this industry.

Most professionals who have been in this industry for more than ten years would describe how they got their science degree in botany, zoology, or environmental science. They then either tried to find freelance contracts with local councils and companies or went on to apply for research funding. Applying for research funding can be challenging but was doable if you achieved the high grades in your primary degree. Others sought volunteer opportunities or started conservation initiatives to protect our natural capital in Ireland. This was much more feasible in the past where there was a different kind of competition for nature type career paths in Ireland.

In more recent times, the landscape of this industry is drastically different. There has been a wave of students specialising in environmental and natural science degrees to meet the ever-building crisis of species extinction and climate change, all such jobs in this industry consider a primary degree in ecology or environmental-like science topic to be a minimum requirement. As the number of graduates with these degrees has grown, so has the competition.

In considering an applicant now, a list of not so insignificant requirements has become a common in job descriptions. Most important being 1-3 years' experience in a professional ecology/environmental consultancy setting. This minimum requirement for a graduate level position creates circumstances where high performing graduates do not meet the basic employability requirements for a job with "graduate" in the job title. Despite in the description seeking applicant with 1-3 years professional experience. Is this not a contradiction of terms?

Regarding the requirement of a degree, it demands significant time and effort to attain good grades and gain the skills necessary. In Ireland, this is an attainable goal. Most universities and institutes have some kind of suitable course on offer, the standard of our science departments is high and produces highly trained graduates. These highly competent graduates with training in publishing reports, habitat assessment training, governmental policy training and strong scientific practice are then met with the concrete wall of the experience gap. Many then look towards a Master's degree or PhD in order to get experience and bolster their qualifications. With regard to some Master's courses at least, these courses are not well received by the professional sector and typically, are either lacking in the practical experience desired or simply not up to the task of preparing their students with the relevant industry skills in the eyes of recruiter. Master's courses have been created haphazardly to accommodate mature and recent third-level non-science graduates looking for scientific training and recent third-level science graduates looking to expand their skills and afford them an edge in a competitive job market.

After my own undergraduate course, the common theme of discussion among fellow students from my course and among friends who also were taking other taught master's courses was the worry that these courses lacked clear tangible targets and training outcomes that would give us the much-needed edge in getting hired in the ecology/conservation field. Additionally, there was a sentiment that the lecturers showed little interest in getting us realistically prepared for professional positions - Regularly failing to provide feedback of our biweekly assignments for up to 6 weeks after submission and other times 3 months. Not all lecturers were at fault in this regard but consistently we postgraduates felt we were not being given helpful feedback to improve our field skills and report writing which in the ecology industry is an essential skill. If these courses had 50-80 students such time delays in getting constructive feedback would be understandable. But these classes are typically comprised of 15-17 students all with undergraduate degree in science, arts, or other such disciplines. This lack of clear guidance and little relevant practical experience beyond a couple of field exercises practicing individual methods, we were regularly left in an environment where a high fee course merely existed to give you a rubber

stamp MSc which on paper is impressive and could in theory help gain employment but as far as consultancies and companies are concerned, in applying for jobs as graduates, we had nothing substantive in the eyes of the industry recruitment beyond theoretical knowledge. The job description is evidence of the concrete wall stating plainly that a 1-year minimum experience in a professional setting is the bare minimum. On presenting our resumes, people in conservation and ecology industries, we were told we had great resumes and training but lack the specific experience criteria to get the paid work we were seeking. Many of my fellow graduates attained 1st class honours in their MSc. Of the 16 students in my course, less than half are now working in conservation/ecology type positions. Three-years on from our graduation and as impressive as an MSc may look on a CV, only 4 of us who successfully completed our MSc are, at the moment, successfully continuing our efforts to stay in conservation or environmental careers. However, the prospect of a relevant job with a reasonable wage in this area is demoralizing in effect. There is significant preference on practical experience and regularly valued more than a topical degree from a prestigious university. This includes some of the top universities in Ireland that offer this kind of taught masters.

Regarding the concrete wall of experience. It is exceedingly difficult to gain practical and professional field experience simultaneously with your degree. As a recent graduate how can you gain the required experience to get the job you spent 4-5 years studying for and worked summers to afford the day-to-day cost of college life and then go looking for an unpaid internship? Most opportunities for graduates are unpaid internships and volunteer positions. Most people seeking a career in conservation and ecology would have no issue in working for free initially to gain experience and in-work training. The issue is that doing so over many months puts huge pressure on these graduates.

I personally took out a bank loan to pay for my course which was in excess of €6000 and depended on my single parent to cover the cost of day to day living. On the week that I was due to submit my MSc thesis towards my final grade, I was also required to start making significant payments on this bank loan. I took the first type of work I could get because I could not afford to not be earning a steady wage straight out of this MSc. This meant that while writing my thesis I was also working a full-time science teacher schedule in a UK school. Had I not taken this loan out and had I not pursued an MSc and instead worked as an unpaid intern/volunteer in an ecology consultancy or any of the many conservation groups who take on dozens of volunteers every year for seasonal nature type surveys. I would now have much better environmental career prospects than what the MSc provided in that regard. I and many of my fellow students would now have much better career prospects had we gone into debt to be unpaid volunteers for the year.

Together with this type of the debt that has become the norm that many students must incur in order to attend college. There are essential resources you need if you want to work as an intern or volunteer. Most ecology jobs require a "full-driver's license" and access to a car for field work. This costs money. Between paying for your mandatory 12 lessons, getting insured as a young graduate driver and the cost of your first car, you may end up incurring up €3000 or more before you can even get on the road.

If your academic degrees required you to incur almost €10,000 in debt straight out of college with interest bearing down fast, would you be comfortable working for free for months to gain the required experience? An increasing reality in Ireland is that students do not just need these loans to cover the cost of the course, they also need loans to afford the cost of living. An undergraduate science degree lasts 4 years. On average a student renting in Dublin or Cork city will spend €700-1000 per month on the cheapest properties.

Question- What student can afford these costs without incurring debt?

How can you work for free for up to a year with student debt incurring interest, rent costs, car costs and general costs of living if you are not earning some kind of income? It can make any enthusiasm you may have for this career path difficult to maintain. As recent graduates we are ineligible for the jobseekers' allowance for many months post-graduation. We literally cannot afford to work for free in order to get the experience needed to compete for a job.

Unpaid internships have become unsustainable. Many ecologists, professionals and academics rely heavily on volunteers eager to gain experience. This resource is becoming increasingly more difficult to utilise because young graduates are being priced out of these opportunities because of the financial pressures. With an international problem with many centres throughout the globe charging their interns €400-1000 a week for the privilege of working for them. For charities and essential facilities that do the heavy lifting of conservation work in many countries where government funding is not available, these "pay to work" internships are vital to their financial sustainability but are becoming increasingly unrealistic of what these interns can afford. Creating a clear disparity between who can and cannot pay to volunteer. Many scams and predatory internships have popped up in the last few years exploiting ecology graduates in Europe and the US who are desperately seeking practical experience wherever they can find it.

Despite undergraduate students and graduates wanting to work in the field if the only thing they can get is at best unpaid positions for months or at worst a trip to a "centre" in the forest expecting €2000 for one month's experience. It will simply force them out of the industry. They will have no choice but to seek alternative jobs to earn a living. This has and will continue to drive capable ecologists with drive, passion, and desire to preserve wildlife out of the industry because they simply cannot afford to work for nothing in order to gain a theoretical edge that the job descriptions are making abundantly clear. If a graduate seeks to find opportunities abroad, they are faced with fee based "pay to work" internships. Then their choice is either they take on further debt to pay these internships, save up for a year by working in another industry to pay or if they are lucky, family financial backing. Pressure is added by the sentiment in job advertisements making it clear "Do not apply unless you've already had a similar job for at least a year" despite the job title stating the position is a "graduate/entry level position".

If one does not have family to fall back on for the required finances to take out a large enough loan or are simply not able to earn enough of an income from a low wage job to save up enough, within the space of a year, to pay for an international internship. So, where do we go from here for solutions?

One of the unfortunate effects of covid-19 is that dozens of graduates and undergraduates alike have found that their volunteering opportunities have just vanished. Plans more than a year in the making have now been disrupted amidst prospective ecologists and wildlife biologists who are now left without the essential experience they need to seek employment this year. Is there hope?

The governments covid-19 payment scheme has softened the blow for these graduates and I myself have utilised the resulting unemployment benefit and time to research my subjects of interest for conservation of nature in Ireland and write while having a consistent income. This has enabled me to attend more online courses, invest more time in reading relevant papers and to network extensively by attending as many conventions as possible. These normally would have been out my price range and too distant to afford to attend. As we have moved to the virtual realm and video calls, it resulted in many conferences that cost time and a significant cost of funds to travel, stay in the hotels and attend them are now accessible and affordable in the virtual space.

This extra time has also helped me to focus seriously on preparing my PhD project idea without having the option of field experience. I had to become much more adaptive in reaching out to experts and professionals who have in turn become more open to corresponding with graduates and citizens as access to students and in person training has become impossible due to COVID-19 safety concerns. The roadblock with scientific PhD's in Ireland is that the funding opportunities for PhD research are few and far between. The pathways to gaining funding is either achieving 1st class honours in your undergraduate degree or having the aforementioned experience in the field to affirm your ability to complete the project.

To get a general PhD funding scholarship is highly challenging and can be restrictive in the options available to people seeking to conduct research. A key example is an unofficial sentiment and attitude from academic circles that of an applicant makes an application form funding for scholarships like the Irish Research council they will have only one shot at being considered for the being awarded the funding. An unsuccessful application in the past is enough grounds to rule you ineligible for any future applications for such scholarships. For applicants, without a high achieving 1st degree honours in their undergraduate and post-graduate courses, their only option is to provide evidence of their abilities with ample field experience. This does not come cheap. To get a grant for a PhD project there is the requirement that your research and field work is making significant discoveries or is contributing important information to the relevant field of study. This creates a huge pressure on graduates to be perfect in their application which accentuates the occurrence of imposter syndrome in graduates and PhD applicants. That expectation for a prospective student to already have the research fundamentally ready for publication before they even start their PhD is excessive and prevents us enabling pure scientific research and studies to be conducted. We are too busy adding grand and sweeping discoveries to address the nuance and potential of undirected studies, especially in the natural sciences. In ecology and conservation, this is not easy, and it makes it difficult to communicate essential conservation practices to communities and governments that needs this small-scale, long-

term habitat information in order to make policy decisions. This conflict of favouring grand unifying studies over small-scale, long-term studies has been addressed by experts in conservation all over the world. A genuine disparity exists at the Masters, PhD, and even post-doctoral level in the natural sciences. Gaining funding is harder for long-term, small-scale studies focusing on giving a clear break down of a specific habitat or species study. In contrast, it is easier for a short-term study that promises to deliver a theory or assessment that unifies dozens of habitats interactions, despite the feasibility of such a data collection being impractical for such a short-term study. This disparity is not universal. The key distinguishing factor is that absent attaining a 1st class honours in your undergraduate course you must pitch significant scientific contributions to get a seat at the research table with ample evidence of experience to support your case for leading the research. This experience is becoming as expensive as a PhD to attain. To attempt a PhD just to get the “required experience” is not an advisable and is not feasible for the volume of graduates that need this professional level experience. What are graduates meant to do then if there is no pathway to experience through more academic study and the professional pathway is blocked by the concrete wall of experience?

In the last year due to Covid-19 my experience in the field was significantly reduced. I gained zero field experience but have built relationships that when restrictions are fully lifted, there will be some prospect of positions to apply for. The challenge we must tackle is no wage positions that yield short term benefits but are economically unsustainable in the long-term. I have benefited from this steady income and time to reach out. Obviously, this is not financially sustainable. The free-labour biologist work force cannot continue indefinitely!!! What is important to highlight is that there is a serious issue in this sector and professions in this industry. Specifically, with graduates leaving university without the practical scientific expectations of the professional pathway they will be seeking, we are creating a disheartening career path for the next generation.

A new strategy for Nature Conservation recruitment.

So, what are we to do? How can we change our practice of volunteering and unpaid internships to a more sustainable option? We can keep our graduates in Ireland by introducing graduate training programmes for these young “academically qualified” science graduates to embark upon. Training is an essential part of the science discipline. If we are choosing to only employ graduate students who have somehow miraculously attained professional, academic, and field experience at the age of 24? then we are limiting our recruitment and retention of the people that care about the natural world and are prepared to work for the betterment of our natural environment. One way to structure a new kind of programme would be to utilise the governments’ latest plans for the coming academic year. Apprenticeships are used in many industries to train up prospective professionals looking to get practical skills training while earning. The government has announced plans to provide significant grants to facilitate retraining of people whose livelihoods have been lost by using apprenticeships as a solution. So why not a graduate apprenticeship programme for nature biologists to get the skills, expand the professional bench of consultants for nature conscious businesses and to abolish the ever-increasing concrete wall of practical

experience? The conservation and ecology industry should be encouraged to use these grants to take on apprentice ecologist or wildlife biologists. A single year as an apprentice ecologist would facilitate significant experience and solid income for the apprentices to make their contribution to our natural environment strategy and job market. It creates a solid experienced work force for Firms and Local Councils to provide year-round positions nature monitoring and management. This could significantly increase the number of contracts employers can take on in a year while increasing the overall standards of ecologists in Ireland.

Apprenticeships are intended to support individuals in a career that they can utilise their experience in a company or as a self-employed expert like a mechanic or electrician. Such career practices could be applied in the ecology sector, similar to how mechanics and electricians are trained and employed in their respective sector. In ecology we are missing the essential professional training that apprenticeships provide in these other professions. Arguably ecologists and nature science jobs are the professions that need an apprenticeship style approach to ensure that graduates seeking this as a career have a viable option that does not demand taking on a major debt or poverty-level wages to get one's foot in the door. The problem for the ecologists and wildlife biologists is of course, how can firms in this industry afford to pay these apprentices? It is simply renaming the no wage internships something else and giving them a wage. Arguably, yes but the government incentive to back apprenticeships and the renewed promise to tackle climate change and native wildlife there is an opportunity to favourably consider a government supported paid apprenticeship programme to make apprenticeships common practice and normalise the training of the next generation of ecologists.

Would universities and colleges be willing to co-ordinate with the professional ecology and conservation sector in a truly meaningful way to create an apprenticeship pathway for recent university graduates? Would the government utilise the renewed investment in recruitment for National Parks and Wildlife Services to utilise a system like this to get the soon to be bolstered ranger numbers and administrative personnel additional support. To then take on apprentices based in locations throughout the country which will both support the newly founded Wildlife Crime Unit and also facilitate the next generation of rangers and conservationists to grow within the industry and give these individuals confidence that the government is investing in our national capital. For example: A step in this direction has been taken with Waterford Technology Institute and Leave no Trace Ireland. Their recently announced certificate in Nature Animation is designed to prepare trainees with leaving certificate or higher qualifications with the skills to work within the NPWS and conservation investment here in Ireland. This includes a stipend and professional placement in a position in the NPWS. Would the government support these endeavours on a larger scale? Would graduates embrace this method of training? Would long departed graduates return to this industry for this kind of system? Would the government consider grants and/or employer tax incentives for graduates to have a year long wage while working on conservation and ecological projects? Why not?! There is a simple reality that in the coming years we will need more ecologists and wildlife focused scientists than ever to facilitate ecological friendly and climate conscious development at the rate necessary to revive and maintain Irelands



economy in an eco-conscious way. To this end, we need to facilitate a genuine pathway for graduate ecologists and early career wildlife biologists with recently attained degrees and those with a degree who left the sector due to the concrete wall and ever rising costs of living. We must get rid of the generalist advice of “hang in there”, “get experience however you can”, “be patient”, “you’re going to have to do some unpaid field work to get this experience”.

These sentiments create a sense of exclusion and result in an unbalanced representation of Ireland’s communities. Prospective ecologists may not be able to afford these periods of unpaid work. This will exclude people from communities that cannot get their perspective addressed fairly and can make conservation management strategies less successful. For instance, in various African communities close to game parks and reserves, the communities did not share the ideal of protecting the big dangerous animals because not having representation in the key developments and strategy decisions weakened the compliance and co-operation for these conservation projects and measures to succeed. Why would they comply or support those decisions if their welfare were not considered or represented? In Ireland, communities that have regular contact with habitats of concern or a familial connection with ecologically harmful practices cannot be mitigated or addressed unless members of these communities have the financial freedom to train in these fields to better represent their perspective in strategies as Ireland moves forward. We cannot preserve our natural capital without community engagement. If we are making it financially difficult for lower income households and communities, then we are risking creating a resentment in these communities for prioritising animals and plants over their economic livelihood and heritage. We must have representation of these communities which in the current climate is not happening. The old practice of pay to work and work for free in exchange for “experience” will only increase this divide between the industry of conservation and ecology and the communities that choose the leaders that direct these funds. This is a social and political issue and requires an in-depth discussion on how to move forward. It cannot be ignored how this factor in our society may be making these apprenticeships more necessary than we might think at present.

We must start looking at alternatives that will ensure prospective natural scientists have a pathway to becoming ecologists, surveyors and wildlife biologists beyond the UNPAID INTERNSHIPS AND VOLUNTEERING AVENUES. Apprenticeships may be the possible solution to these financial roadblocks. From a personal perspective. An apprenticeship that paid an agreed wage that was less than €15000 per year and as a recent graduate I would have signed up for it in a heartbeat. And as someone who has travelled to Central America for conservation internships, has worked at a wildlife centre for 2 years and who attained a BSc in Zoology and an MSc in Conservation and Biodiversity...I would sign up for an apprenticeship of this kind in a second. As recent graduates we are pleading with decision makers to let us apply the skills we have been trained to conduct and we are asking for a supportive programme to prevent our academic training becoming worthless. That training is worthless to the professional sector because we have not been given the chance to use it in a professional setting. This is the roadblock I and many graduate zoologists, botanists, ecologists, and Environmental scientists find ourselves stuck in. High end degrees, not

insignificant debt and an industry asking us to have a year to 3 years' job experience in the industry before getting a paid job in the industry.

I will conclude my proposal with two questions for the decision-making groups that we need to support such action. These are groups that ideally hire people with our qualifications and would be relevant to these apprenticeships.

Will the Ministers for the department for Education, of Environment, Climate and Communications and of Housing, Local government, and Heritage, respectively, support an endeavour to create a graduate apprenticeship programme within your environmental monitoring and NPWS departments respectively in the coming year?

Will the various ecological and environmental consultancy firms and Universities based in Ireland, respectively, embrace such a programme where you as employers take on the many volunteers and unpaid interns. Which you use each year to conduct monitoring and field surveys, and instead will you take on the much-needed support to serve as mentors to an apprenticeship style programme? With a per annum wage with clear training and field experience to create a stronger experience portfolio for these graduates?

In order to help them meet the standards you are setting for your full-time staff positions.

As we move towards an environmentally aware Ireland, we must create solutions that tear down the concrete wall of experience for our graduates and increase our efficacy in protecting our natural resource and biodiversity capital.

#### Submission 1.12

I work in higher education and from my experience I feel that all universities and IoTs should be incentivised to accept part time applications and there should be means tested funding for those who wish to attend as part time students. Universities and IoTs should also be incentivised to develop blended learning and flexible delivery methodologies. These measures would really encourage lone parents and students with other caring responsibilities, as well as those who for a variety of other reasons cannot attend as full-time students, to progress to higher education and would enable them to complete their studies. Focussing on this aspect of inclusivity alone would have an enormous impact on people's lives and would also significantly benefit the economy.

#### Submission 1.13

### **1. National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (NAP) and Progress Review and Priorities to 2021.**

The NAP published in December 2015 was guided by a vision to ensure that the student body entering, participating in, and completing higher education at all levels would reflect the diversity and social mix of the population of Ireland. The Foreword states that access to higher education is a national priority and is required to build positive social change and tackle inequality in our society. It was asserted that the plan offers the basis for 'equality of opportunity for citizens – both in access to higher education and in sustainable jobs' (HEA, 2015, p. 1). In the Preface, it was contended that there are 'still groups in our society who

are under-represented in higher education'. To meet the needs of a 'more diverse student body', additional approaches are required (HEA, 2015, p.3). At European level, it is also agreed that higher education should be representative of the whole of society (HEA, 2015, p. 6).

The benefits of higher education outlined in the plan stated that 'our educated workforce is Ireland's greatest economic asset' and that an educated workforce is vital to resolving skill shortages and in driving economic growth (HEA, 2015, p.15). Target groups were identified which were under-represented in higher education and a commitment made to increasing participation rates. They were defined as 'entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education, first-time mature student entrants, students with disabilities, part-time/flexible learners, further education award holders, and Irish Travellers (HEA, 2015, p. 34).

A Progress Review of the NAP in December 2018, recommended an extension to 2021. Progress was reported in respect of each of the priority goals, however challenges were identified regarding the pathway from further to higher education and mainstreaming. A review of the National Target Groups was recommended to 'reflect the current landscape' (HEA, 2018, p. 35) and that there should be '...scope for flexibility in the introduction of additional sub-groups within the target groups over the lifetime of the NAP' (HEA, 2018, p. 28).

The significant challenge that Covid-19 was to present in terms of access to higher education and sustainable employment could not have been foreseen.

## **2. Response to Covid-19 and the Access Divide.**

On the 12th March 2020 following advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team, an announcement was made of the closure of schools, pre-schools and further and higher education settings, to support efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19. Schools were advised to minimise the impact on teaching and learning by continuing to plan lessons and, where possible, to provide online resources and lessons for students. They were asked to be conscious of students that did not have access to online facilities and to think about their response. Universities and higher education facilities were required to make alternative arrangements for teaching and learning in accordance with their business continuity and contingency plans.

In a Briefing on Covid-19 on the 8th April 2020, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) acknowledged that education had changed to a model based on digital and remote teaching. Special attention was to be given to those at risk of educational disadvantage. To address the challenges faced by higher education, a mitigating educational disadvantage (including community education) working group was established. Feedback received from institutions in the tertiary education sector was that online learning was operating well and was being engaged with actively by both learners and teachers. However, several challenges emerged for disadvantaged students. The focus was on targeting the hardest to reach cohorts, including the Travelling Community and learners in direct provision centres. The working group examined challenges being experienced by students including assistance for

learners with no access to teaching and learning online due to issues with broadband and/or lack of ICT equipment.

This period of online learning was described by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as an 'extraordinary semester'. Reflecting on the challenges online/remote teaching presented in higher education during the Covid-19 crisis, they reported that it was not a systemic response that led the charge in the response to education requirements, instead it was 'individuals and teams motivated by a desire to help' (National Forum, 2020, p. 4). At this time many students fell between the gaps in national policy.

### **3. Covid-19 Challenged those Targeted by the NAP and Left Others Behind.**

As the pandemic was experienced, the impact on those across the target groups was wide ranging not just in terms of their educational opportunities, but also socially and economically. Issues related to the reality of job losses, reduced income, the lack of broadband access, the lack of or limited access to IT equipment, and limited IT skills. In addition, the experience of being confined to overcrowded houses and trying to meet the competing demands of home-schooling, working and caring responsibilities presented a challenge for many. The overarching economic consequences of Covid-19 led to many difficulties for those targeted by the NAP such as those in the Travelling Community and those disadvantaged by socio-economic barriers.

According to Bernard Joyce (2020), of the Irish Traveller Movement (ITM), the poor standard and crisis in Traveller accommodation resulted in the greater likelihood of a poor outcome from the pandemic. The ITM wrote to the DES in April 2020 to express concern that Traveller children had been disproportionately affected by the emergency response to Covid-19. It was asserted that Traveller students had limited or no access to appropriate devices and Wi-Fi coverage, and no suitable space to study for the Leaving Certificate. Joyce contended that a continuation of the current situation will widen the educational gap between Travellers and the rest of the population. He appealed to the DES not to leave anyone behind during the national health crisis and demanded that support should be given to all young people.

In May 2020, Social Justice Ireland published a report titled Poverty Focus 2020 which cited the recent Department of Finance Stability Programme Update projections for unemployment and predicted that unemployment will remain high for the next 12-24 months. Following the economic recovery, it is probable that many low-income workers, and employees with precarious employment conditions, will be the last to experience it. Social Justice Ireland contend that without a concerted policy effort many will be stuck in poverty for some time. Covid-19 has challenged the poorest in society and education, coupled with other policy priorities outlined in the Poverty Focus 2020 report, can play a key role in levelling out the uneven impact of the pandemic.

As Ireland battled Covid-19, it became apparent that equity of access to education was not 'everyone's business' (HEA, 2018, p.2) and many were left behind. The challenges faced by those targeted by the NAP were considerable, however Covid-19 revealed access issues for

vulnerable groups beyond the target groups, therefore, the identification of new target groups is required. In addition, the redefinition of existing target groups should reflect the needs of society today including those in direct provision and recognise outstanding gender issues. Serious consideration should also be given to the commitment to support students in other categories of disability and to the reevaluation of those who should be included in the target group defined by socio-economic barriers.

According to the Irish Refugee Council, for those living in the Direct Provision system there is no automatic access to third level education in universities and colleges, or to non-vocational further education courses such as post-leaving certificate courses. Access to third level education and non-vocational further education is only possible if protection applicants can pay the fees, get the fees waived or access private grants or scholarships. Additional resources and support are required for unaccompanied minors living in Provision Centres who wish to further their education. For most in the asylum system, a third level education remains financially inaccessible.

While Gender appeared as a specific target group in the 1995 White Paper which provided a legislative framework for policies to improve access for students from a range of different backgrounds, it was omitted from the NAP (Fleming, Loxley & Finnegan, 2017, p. 74). It should be reintroduced as a target group and its definition must be inclusive of all gender identities as terminology and language evolve and identities can mean different things to different people. The Gay and Lesbian Equality Network produced a comprehensive document in 2016 to assist schools in addressing homophobic bullying and supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students. Recommendations are that consultation and support between the student and their school is imperative as the student might not have support in their home circumstances. This support ensures that the student can reach their full educational potential (GLEN, 2016, p.10). Gender as a target group would ensure accurate statistical data can be gathered and analysed at a national level to identify patterns in access to education.

The disability community which was a focus of the 2008-2013 NAP was limited to those with physical, sensory, and multiple disabilities. The 2015-2019 plan continued to focus on this target group. A commitment was made at that time to provide support for students in other categories of disability including students with learning disabilities, mental health, or neurological conditions. The targets evaluated in the Progress Review to 2021 only assessed participation in higher education by people with disabilities as originally defined. The AHEAD report published in May 2020 highlighted the difficulties of students during this time with a mental health condition, ADD/ADHD, or a specific learning difficulty. The recommendations made in this report provide a framework for the expansion of the definition of disability included in the NAP.

The nature of work is rapidly changing, and many find themselves employed in the gig economy. The World Economic Forum reported in April 2020 that over half of gig workers have lost their job and another 25% have seen a reduction in their income. This vulnerable population of contingent workers may have flexibility but have low levels of income and protection. They will require upskilling to meet the demands of the economy and to obtain

sustainable employment. A redefinition of the target groups of those disadvantaged by socio-economic barriers is required. Government schemes in conjunction with the HEIs are required to provide access to target groups to education coupled with the support of employers in providing work experience and employment.

Targets are central to evaluate progress and to implement the required supports but if they are narrowly defined or do not reflect the current social and economic reality, they can be both limiting and lead to further disadvantage.

#### **4. NAP- Where to From Here?**

The key objective of the plan involved ‘building positive social change and tackling inequality in our society’ (HEA, 2015, p. 1). It is now time for all stakeholders to evaluate the performance of the NAP against the identified goals. Covid-19 has caused changes to be rapidly adopted in educational policies and practice and has accelerated the importance of widening the definition of the existing target groups and to include additional target groups. An updated plan for equity of access to higher education could be developed using a new model based on the EquiFrame. This model presents an analytical framework for evaluating the extent to which social inclusion and human rights form part of policy and policy-related documents. This systematic approach allows for the analysis and facilitation of the inclusion of human rights and vulnerable groups in health policies (Mannen et al., 2011). This framework could provide a means of widening participation in an equitable manner.

A conclusion of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report on Education Inequality and Disadvantage and Barriers to Education (May 2019) was that ‘...the education system as it currently stands is unfair and unequal and that the consequences of this are stark’. The experience of COVID-19 has created a valuable insight into the role and responsibilities of the NAP in the provision of equity of access to higher education. Instead of being viewed as a pragmatic, utilitarian, instrumental, and human capitalist approach, a revised NAP can be a catalyst to provide change. A new vision for the NAP that reflects the issues highlighted by the pandemic would put a fresh lens on diversity, equality, and inclusion. The opportunity now exists to provide a framework for an educational system that meets the needs of all in society.

#### **Submission 1.14**

I welcome the opportunity to make a submission on the next National Access Plan which will run from 2022 to 2026, which seeks to widen participation and equity of access to higher education. In this regard, I propose the introduction of a Designated Staff Member for care leavers in Higher Education, which would improve the likelihood of a care leaver both staying in higher education and doing well in exams, as well as having the potential to shape their future and to keep them out of homelessness. We can no longer actively allow an entire cohort of Irish young people to fall behind due to the lack of appropriate intervention by the State.

## **Care-experience and higher education in Ireland**

In Ireland, though the policy attention given to educational disadvantage has grown considerably in recent years, evidence on the educational experiences, attainment, and progression of young people with experience of living in alternative care settings remains limited. International research suggests that young people with 'care-experience' typically have lower attainment and progress to higher education at lower rates than the majority of their peers.<sup>1</sup> However, young people with care-experience were not named as one of the six main target groups in the National Access Plan for 2015-2019. A recent review of the National Access Plan has recognised that "children in care have particular needs and challenges in accessing higher education" and proposes that "their status as a sub-group within the overall target groups should be recognised".

In the third quarter of 2020, there were 5,914 children in care in Ireland. 91% (5,364) of children in care were in foster care, 7% (415) were in a residential placement and the remainder, 2% (131), were in other care placements. For many care leavers, they will have had numerous changes in the professionals supporting them and may feel let down by past experiences by the time they enter higher education. As a result, they may not be confident in asking for support or advice about universities and courses, they feel be unsure about the financial and accommodation supports available, and they may find it hard to trust and build relationships leading them not to disclosing their care leaver status to fellow students, support staff, or academics for fear of prejudice.

Educational opportunity and attainment are critical to children's overall wellbeing and progress to adulthood. Yet, at present, some children are being left behind due to lack of policy and legislative focus. The purpose of a Designated Staff Member (DSM) in higher education for care leavers would therefore be to build a strong relationship of trust with individual care leaver students and to provide much needed advice and support throughout their learning journey, from pre-entry to their time studying. This relationship should remain constant throughout the student's course.

### **The role of the DSM**

The needs of care leavers are very specific. Whilst efforts have been made by some institutions to widen access and participation at third-level of under-represented groups, for example the Access Programme in Trinity College, these roles do not address the lack of social networks, digital poverty, uncertainty over accommodation, and the fears and reluctancies care leavers have to build relationships and seek help after years of feeling let down by authorities. Care leavers may have experienced childhood poverty, trauma, and disadvantage, and they may have learning deficits and disabilities which affect academic preparedness for higher education. Poverty can also limit the ability to afford the costs of higher education study and reduce the capacity to visualise an educational future. Combining educational disadvantage with limited institutional support for care leavers merely exacerbates their marginalisation from higher education. Care leavers are an incredibly vulnerable cohort who, as such, deserve and require dedicated support relevant to their specific needs.

The role of the DSM for Care Leavers in higher education should be embedded into the college's staff structure and the responsibilities of these roles should be reflected in job descriptions. Generally, the skills and experiences that staff in these roles should have would include, but not be limited to, the following:

- Experience of working with vulnerable young people.
- Understanding of issues that may influence young people to disengage from education.
- Behaviour management.
- Appreciation of relevant college and statutory processes and procedures.
- Pre-existing knowledge of care leavers is not necessarily a requirement but staff training on care and the issues affecting young people with experience of care would be useful.

The role of the DSM would vary from college to college, especially if the college has multiple campuses. For example, some might act as a curriculum manager, others a senior member of support staff, such as the senior safeguarding officer or the senior learning support manager. Some providers have student support teams that cover a range of areas and students are allocated one named staff member who they can seek out first, but others are also there in the event that the named person is unavailable.

Sometimes care leavers may form a relationship with a tutor or a mentor as the key contact. In this instance, the role of the DSM would be to manage and support the tutors and mentors and liaise with other members of staff in student services including the safeguarding teams. Processes should be put in place to pass over responsibility for supporting the care leavers from the tutor or mentor to the DMS and any other specialist staff in the college.

### **Other countries**

In the University of Portsmouth, care leaver students are provided with a DSM who advise and guide on their support needs while they're at university.<sup>4</sup> They ensure care leavers have all the necessary information to access the student support services including help with academic, disability and wellbeing needs.

The DSM can also:

- Do a 'health check' on finances.
- Help the student to create a budget and plan spending.
- Assist with access to continued local authority support.

In the University of Birmingham, there is a coordinated support system in place for care experienced students which compliments the support already delivered, from their financial and transitional support to support with accommodation. This involves a list of DSM's specifically for care leavers which they can turn to for support and guidance.

Both Greenwich University and Keele University also offer DSM contacts who can offer tailored, individual and sustained support prior to arrival and throughout the student's time



at university. Having such a person available to help a care leaver student should they need it, and with the student's permission to act as a link between them and the University to ensure they are accessing all the support that is available, is potentially life-changing in their quest to pursue higher education.

## **Funding**

According to the Gov.ie website, there are currently thirty-three Colleges, Universities, and Institutes of Technology in Ireland. I propose to pilot the scheme in each of these thirty-three higher education authorities, with the intention of ultimately extending the scheme to include Education and Training Boards.

The cost of implementing a pilot scheme of one, two, three, four or five DSM's per thirty-three higher education authorities, at the sample starting salary of €39,984 as per the Executive 2 salary in Trinity College, would be as follows:

- One DSM per Institution: €1,318,472
- Two DSM'S per Institution: €2,638,944
- Three DSM's per Institution: €3,958,416
- Four DSM's per Institution: €5,277,888
- Five DSM's per Institution: €6,597,360

## **Conclusion**

Educational attainment of Irish care leavers is weak. The data available is limited, and little analysis has been done on that which is available. Participation in higher education is often cited as being one of the key factors associated with lifelong wellbeing and poverty prevention. In fact, education is often described as a "passport out of poverty". For care leavers, higher education access can create powerful social and economic protection, but the complete lack of support available here often creates both material and cultural barriers to this access. Every intervention must be made to ensure all young people are given equal opportunity.

## **Submission 1.15**

### **Introduction**

The following submission has been developed in response to the consultation on the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education. There are many issues and groups that need attention in the next National Plan for Equality of Access to higher education. Our interest relates to the experiences of young people and young adults who have been in the care of the state (foster care, residential care etc) often referred to as 'care leavers'. This submission is influenced by our experience in relation to this issue across several domains. We are both social work academics and educators and as a result have taught and supported students with care experience in this context. Dr. Eavan Brady's PhD research examined the educational pathways of care leavers in Ireland, and she continues to be active in research relating to care leavers. She has also been a committee member of the Irish Aftercare Network for the past four years. Professor Robbie Gilligan is a former foster

carer, has been a social worker with children in care, and has been active in research relating to children in care and care leavers over a long period. We are both connected to international research groups concerned with issues related to care leavers and educational progression. In 2016 and 2017 we ran events as part of College Awareness Week to highlight the range of educational and training options and pathways open to young people in care after they leave secondary school.

## **Context**

### **1. Who are care leavers?**

Approximately 500 young people leave care in Ireland every year upon turning 18. At any one time, there are close 6,000 children in state care in Ireland living in foster families or residential care centres (see Gilligan, 2019). Children and young people are placed in care for different reasons which may include being exposed to abuse and/or neglect, the death of a parent, or a parent having a serious long-term illness or addiction which leaves them unable to care for their child (Child & Family Agency, 2016). Given the steady annual flow of care leavers at the age of 18, and the fact that many children may leave care at an earlier age after an extended number of years in care, the number of adults in the population affected by extended periods of time in care as children is considerable. For simplicity, we use the term 'care leaver' in this submission to denote 'learners who have experience of being in care' having i) left state care at age 18 or ii) spent extended periods in care as a child but left care at some point before reaching the age of 18.

### **2. What general challenges do care leavers face?**

Upon leaving care, many young people face additional challenges in comparison to their peers across various domains. We know from international research that many care leavers experience difficulties related to mental health, housing, involvement with the criminal justice system, and employment (Gypen et al., 2017, Stewart et al., 2014). Care leavers also tend to have lower educational attainment than peers in the majority population (Harrison, 2017; Jackson & Cameron, 2012). While some care leavers go on to further and higher education, many do not, particularly in the early years after leaving care (Brady & Gilligan, 2019; Harrison, 2017).

## **Key Issues related to Care Leavers Accessing Higher Education**

### **1. Low educational attainment**

While there is very limited evidence on the educational attainment of care leavers in Ireland, international literature suggests that care leavers typically have lower educational attainment and progress to higher education at lower rates when compared to their majority population peers (Gypen et al., 2017; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Sebba et al., 2015). The evidence suggests that the educational progression of care leavers is influenced by a range of pre-care, in care, and post-care factors. These include birth family perspectives on education, the impact of possible abuse and neglect on cognitive development, carer aspirations, placement and school (in)stability, and the impact of competing demands post care (e.g. housing, finances, work) that may impinge on care leavers' ability to focus on

education (Brady & Gilligan, 2020; Brady & Gilligan, 2019; Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Evidence from other jurisdictions points to the under-representation of care leavers in Higher Education. For example, in England 13% of care leavers participate in higher education by age 19 compared to 43% of the general population (Harrison 2017; 2020).

## **2. Diversity of educational pathways**

Irish and international evidence suggests that while care leavers may be less likely to pursue higher education in the years immediately after leaving care, some do return to higher education in later years (i.e. beyond the age of 24). Evidence of these diverse pathways was identified in recent life course research carried out by the authors identifying four 'pathways' into and through further and higher education that were experienced by 18 adult care leavers in Ireland:

I. A typical pathway (as in entry to higher education directly from the Leaving Certificate).

II. A typical pathway 'plus' one year (as in one year of study in a further education directly after the Leaving Certificate followed by entry to higher education).

III. A short-term 'disrupted' pathway which included a short period (1-3 years) out of education before an actual or planned return to education, generally beginning with further education.

IV. A long-term 'disrupted' pathway which included a period of 3- years out of 4-10 years out of education before an actual or planned return to education, generally beginning with further education.

Most participants in this study (12) had either a short or long-term disrupted educational pathway and for some participants these pathways also involved leaving school early (Brady & Gilligan, 2019). Factors that shaped study participants' educational journeys included early parenthood (many participants were also lone parents), the assumption of carer roles in their family soon after leaving care, and experiences of addiction and homelessness prior to recovery or the resolution of such difficulties. This variation in pathways into and through higher education points to care leavers' experiences of progressing to, and accessing, higher (and further) education via diverse routes in comparison to many peers. In this regard, care leavers may share such experiences with other adult 'later returners' to education, but arguably many care leavers are making that return in the face of additional cumulative challenges encountered in their educational and wider life journey.

## **3. Issues with information relating to access / options**

Access to information regarding possible entry to higher education was found to be an issue for some participants in research carried out by the authors (Brady & Gilligan, 2019) and has also been identified in international work on this topic (Ellis & Johnston, 2019). Without clear, tailored information sources it can prove challenging for care leavers to know what their options are regarding possible pathways into and through higher education. Research also suggests that various barriers (including low expectations of key influencers in their

lives, limited support from universities etc) and enablers (financial support, accommodation support) may have specific effects on the accessibility of Higher Education for care leavers (McNamara et al., 2019).

#### **4. Challenges of progressing through higher education**

Where care leavers have accessed higher education, they may face additional challenges when progressing through their studies. In a recent study of pathways to university of 234 care leavers across England and Wales, difficulties related to workload, health, finances, and personal and family issues were cited as reasons care leavers considered dropping out of university (Ellis & Johnston, 2019). From his work in England, Harrison (2017) has found that care leavers are nearly twice as likely to leave their course in their first year as other students and are 1.38 times more likely to withdraw early compared to otherwise similar students. From a policy perspective, issues of disadvantage, access and retention loom large in the case of care leavers. Nevertheless, there is also evidence that under the right conditions, care leavers can overcome challenges and achieve (albeit sometimes delayed) positive outcomes educationally.

#### **5. Lack of data relating to the Irish context**

In Ireland, while there is emerging interest in the educational attainment and progress of children in care and young people leaving care, there are no official data available to describe or track the educational attainment and progress of care-experienced young people i.e. those who have spent time in care during childhood. While we have access to data on care-experienced young people's entry to higher education via reporting on the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) since 2016 this data only relates to those students who 'tick the box' (who self-identify as care-leavers) in order to apply for the HEAR 6 programme. Importantly, this entry data does not tell us whether students went on to register for their offered course or how they progressed through their course (Brady, Gilligan, & Nic Fhlannchadha, 2019).

#### **6. Partnership in promoting access for care leavers**

There are a number of bodies who are important institutional actors and natural allies in support of measures promoting access for this group, beyond the universities, colleges and other providers. There is Tusla the national public authority responsible for child protection and welfare, and responsible thereby for children in care provision and for after care support to eligible young adults. There are NGOs such as the Irish Foster Care Association, EPIC – the national advocacy group for young people in care, the Irish After Care Network. There is Aontas – the national NGO promoting adult education. In addition, there is Solas which promotes and supports further education. For effective policy development, it is important to ensure full information exchange and policy discussion among these stakeholders in relation to the specific needs of care leavers

#### **Proposals**

Having identified some key issues relating to care leaver access to higher education, we propose several policy measures in response.

### **1. Name care Leavers as a target group in the forthcoming Higher Education Access plan**

‘Children in care’ were named as a ‘target group’ in the Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021; an addition that we welcome. Building on this progress, and in response to question 4.3 in the call for submissions consultation document, we propose that ‘care leavers’ should also be named as a **priority group** in the forthcoming National Plan for Equality of Access to Higher Education.

### **2. Gather data related to educational attainment**

A key obstacle to understanding and responding to the needs and experiences of care leavers’ educational progression in Ireland is the lack of sufficient policy data on this issue. Alongside prioritising this group in the forthcoming National Plan for Equality of Access to Higher Education, we suggest that there is an urgent need to inform policy with system level data on entry, progress, and retention, as well as with studies of the experience of care leavers in higher education. In addition, there is a related need for comparable data on educational attainment, retention, and experiences among young people in care.

### **3. Accommodate diverse pathways for care leavers into and through higher education**

Evidence pointing to diverse pathways into and through higher education suggests a potential need for more flexible ‘access’ routes for care leavers. Naming ‘care leavers’ as a target group in the forthcoming National Plan for Equality of Access to Higher Education would allow care leavers to benefit from targeted measures to promote access to higher education among all target groups for example increased targeted financial supports and support to pursue ‘non-linear’ educational pathways (Higher Education Authority, 2021: xxi).

### **4. Increase the availability and visibility of adult career guidance information**

Given the challenges that care leavers can experience in seeking information about Higher Education options and supports we recommend that the HEA seeks to increase the availability and visibility of information related to adult career guidance and the various pathways into and through higher education. For example, development of a website devoted to adult career guidance with a dedicated section for ‘care leavers’. We also recommend that training on both the needs of care leavers related to education and information regarding accessing higher education be developed and provided for foster carers, residential care home staff, teachers, and social workers, who should be seen as important potential ‘ambassadors’ for further and higher education among care leavers.

### **5. Develop targeted efforts to support care leavers once they enter higher education**

For care leavers who enter higher education, we propose that a suite of specific support measures should be offered including mentoring support, financial support, and ‘safety net’ measures e.g. year-round accommodation (since care leavers may not have back up accommodation from family to which to return during academic vacations etc). Universities in the UK often provide care leavers with the contact details of a designated member of the university staff who acts as a ‘care leaver contact’ – a potential model to pilot and evaluate in Ireland. We understand that a pilot of a programme to support care leavers in higher

education is underway in Munster Technological University. We also recommend that any initiatives that are developed are piloted in the first instance and evaluated in order to identify any issues with the initiative, to ensure the best use of resources, and to understand the experience of care leavers availing of the initiative.

## **6. Promote partnership in supporting the educational progress of care leavers and children in care**

Given the many stakeholders in the arena of care leavers, and the importance of an effective and integrated approach to policy development and integration for this group, we recommend the establishment of a national coordinating group to have oversight over the issues and ensure effective communication among the relevant stakeholders.

### **Conclusion**

Education plays a key role in promoting positive outcomes over the life course. It is central to adult health and well-being and is one of the primary mechanisms for promoting social inclusion (Hammond & Feinstein, 2006; Nicaise, 2012). While existing evidence highlights low educational attainment and progression to higher education among care leavers, there remains considerable potential to support this group into and through higher education. Focused measures for consideration include naming care leavers as a target group, committing to gathering data to guide future policy development, accommodating diverse pathways into and through higher education, increasing the availability and visibility of career guidance information, developing targeted measures to support care leavers once they enter higher education, and promoting partnership among relevant stakeholders. These measures have the capacity to ensure that care leavers are supported to realise their full potential, despite their experience of cumulative adversity, over time.

### **Submission 1.16**

*Disabled, non-EU students are being recruited to Irish Higher Education that is overwhelmed by discriminatory, ableist, and burdensome practices. International education opportunities are designed and promoted as critical for the education process and are particularly valuable for socially disadvantaged groups. However, this reflection describes how various institutional obstacles in Ireland make these essential opportunities inaccessible to those who would most benefit from participation, namely, Disabled students. It is based on the social model of Disability and aligns with the Disability rights principle of Nothing About Us Without Us and takes the form of an Open Letter. The author is a Disabled American who studied in Ireland and has pursued the 1G Visa postgraduation during the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic. Her letter is in equal parts an exercise of emancipatory research and a proposal for change order to achieve equality in education for Disabled international students in Ireland. Policy makers, higher education officials,*

*Disability rights organizations, and Disabled people themselves are targeted audiences.*

Dear Reader,

Thank you for your dedication to and support for developing an equality driven, accessible, and diverse Ireland. In an increasingly interconnected and interdependent global society, commitments like yours are more necessary than ever. I am writing today to express my concerns about an issue crucial to ensuring that no person in Ireland, regardless of nationality, is victimized by discriminatory practices. I hope to call your attention to gaps in policies and protections that translate to insurmountable obstacles prohibiting Disabled, non-EU student participation in Irish Higher Education.

Growing up, I came to know Ireland from the songs my grandparents sang, from time with my family and my local Ancient Order of Hibernians. There were fundraisers, St. Patrick's Day parades, and visitors from Project Children in summer. As a young adult living in the Bronx, NY, my Ireland came from trad sessions, GAA matches, and J1s telling stories about real crisps, real rain, real pints, and their Mammies. This Ireland was my out-of-reach dream. To be honest, the only place I ever imagined visiting was Mayo. Outside of our AOH is a statue of Our Lady of Knock and I learned about the history, shrine, pilgrimage, how people would visit, and leave cured of all kinds of illnesses. That's what I wanted.

I was born with Hydrocephalus and I had 5 brain surgeries between ages 9 and 14. Overwhelming fear and pain made long-term planning a difficult concept. I especially struggled with any possibility of a big trip away, far from my doctors and family. Hydrocephalus is a chronic neurological condition that involves an abnormal build-up of cerebrospinal fluid putting pressure on the brain. Hydrocephalus has no cure. The only available treatment is a shunt (one of the most likely to fail medically implanted devices in existence) implanted through brain surgery. It is not uncommon to require hundreds of brain surgeries over the course of a lifetime. There are a variety of reasons Hydrocephalus can develop -- aging, traumatic brain injury, a result of different condition -- and its impacts also vary from person to person. (Hydrocephalus) I was diagnosed during a routine ultrasound and had my first brain surgery a few days after I was born. I would go on to have five more brain surgeries, including a second shunt placement, before I turned 16. I have additional physical and mental health concerns, including chronic migraines. But then, year after year, I had more false alarms than stays in the hospital. I lived in student accommodations for undergraduate studies. I moved to a new state for a post graduate service program. With each small taste of confidence and independence, the feeling that I could do more grew stronger. And, after a chance conversation in a Bronx pub with a UCD alum visiting from Ireland, I put in an application to live my dream. It was decided: I would go to grad school in Dublin.

I have now lived in Ireland for over two years. Dublin is my home. But it breaks my heart to say that if another Disabled student from the United States asked me if they too, should study here, I would probably say no. There has not been a single day that I have felt

completely safe since arriving in Dublin. These anxieties have only grown with the current circumstances surrounding COVID-19. That is not to say I have not loved Ireland or regret coming abroad, or even that I'm rushing to go back to New York. I do love Ireland, going abroad was the best decision I have ever made, and I have aspirations to remain in Ireland long term. But I genuinely feel as if I am putting my life at risk by remaining. I don't know that I could easily recommend that to someone in a similar position. I can't get adequate health insurance for my needs. My Disability accommodations for school, at times, were more of a cost than a benefit. Most governmental disability supports are inaccessible because I am a non-EU citizen. I've made it to Knock a few times now. But what I have come to realize is that even if I did walk away with a miracle cure, never having another sick day in my life, it was never me who needed to be "fixed." I know now that my Hydrocephalus was not what kept me from Ireland or what might force me to leave. **I need you to understand that no matter how much I want to be welcomed in Ireland, there are policies that say, we don't want people like you.** These policies need to be fixed – not Disabled people – and I hope to start a conversation about it. There is a pervasive and growing movement, specifically in third level education, to internationalize learning and to promote diverse student participation in international education experiences. This includes varied practices ranging from short-term study abroad programs, volunteer service trips, long term research placements, and more.

For my Master's Thesis, I extensively reviewed Irish policy and procedure in this area and, combined with research and my personal experiences, have identified numerous gaps and discriminatory practices related in Disabled non-EU students. According to *Irish Educated Globally Connected An International Education Strategy for Ireland, 2016-2020*, "Internationalization of education can be described as a comprehensive approach to education that prepares students, academics and staff to be active and engaged participants in an interconnected global world" (Irish Educated 7). At no point does Irish Educated Globally Connected An International Education Strategy for Ireland, 2016, 2020 directly mention Disabled student participation in international education opportunities. It does address that:

*...there is a particular imperative to support outbound mobility for disadvantaged students. Observing 'the already powerful social selectivity of international student mobility', van Damme notes that schemes, such as the Erasmus programme, 'fit young, full-time students from families who can afford the substantial surplus expenses associated with living and learning in another country', and that, 'for the more affluent students, international mobility can become a competitive advantage in a higher education system in which 'massification' has diminished the number of avenues open to differentiate oneself on the market of credentials and qualifications.'* (Irish 32)

Despite no explicit reference to incoming students facing social disadvantage, I believe that the points made about Irish students going abroad are transferable to international



students coming to study in Ireland. As such, there is precedent to consider how Disability will impact pursuing international studies and why it is critical for Irish internationalization policies to address these impacts not only for outgoing Irish students, but incoming international students. Evidence has shown a recent increased level participation of Disabled students in third level education throughout the world. (Konur 351)

This increase can be largely attributed to:

*...two major driving forces...The first one relates to the introduction of public policies requiring better access to school education for disabled children...The development of public policies regarding direct access to higher education by disabled students has been the second major driving force for the increasing participation of disabled students (Konur 351).*

This assessment reaffirms the role inclusive policy plays in the lives of Disabled students. Considering the prominence of international exchange programs and building on the relationship between inclusive policy and Disabled student participation in education, I implore you to take a critical look at the Irish policies introduced in this letter. These policies directly influence the access and quality of participation for Disabled, non-EU students in Irish Higher Education. I contend that it is reasonable, justified, and necessary to appeal for more equal conditions for Disabled non-EU international students in Ireland. Ireland has expressed commitment to offering high quality, internationalized, accessible education. I greatly appreciate the efforts in developing key strategic policies, including: The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019, Action Plan for Education 2016-2019, Irish Educated Globally Connected an International Education Strategy for Ireland, 2016-2020, National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021, CUMASU Empowering through learning Statement of Strategy 2019-2021, National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, and this consultation process itself.

These strategies, the *National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021*, and recent ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, emphasize Ireland's commitment to challenging the notion that Disabled people all over the globe are "only" meant for "certain" things. Unfortunately, other policies such as: requiring Irish-based private healthcare with extensive waiting periods for pre-existing condition coverage, mandating full time student enrolment, excluding noncitizens from Disability accommodations (travel cards, medical cards, and the long-term illness scheme), effectively negate these efforts. Such policies are prohibitive for Disabled non-EU students pursuing studies in Ireland. Above restrictions are contrary to the equality driven, internationalization initiatives outlined by overwhelming Irish policies, including, "the development of global citizens through Ireland's high quality international education system, by attracting talent from around the world to our education institutions, equipping Irish learners with the skills and experience they need to compete. According to Ireland's Department of Justice and Equality, American students do not need a visa to study at an Irish Higher Education Institution. Provided such students are enrolled in a full-time course, they are permitted to study in Ireland. Upon entry to Ireland, students will register with their local immigration

officer to be granted permission to remain in Ireland for longer than 90 days and, if they are studying in Ireland for longer than 6 months, they must provide proof of 3,000 euro in a bank account and proof of private medical insurance. To successfully gain entry to Ireland students may also be required to present immigration officers at the airport with an offer letter from their respective institution, evidence of tuition fees paid, scholarship details or US Financial Aid, evidence of private health insurance, and accommodation details. (UCD Global, Trinity College Dublin).

In a further step towards internationalization, the Stamp 1G stay back visa is available to graduates to pursue working in opportunities in Ireland (Irish 15). internationally, engaging in world-class research and international collaborations, and addressing global challenges.” There is wide consensus that flexibility in academic scheduling—including the option to enrol in parttime courses, is pivotal to success for Disabled students. Part-time enrolment does not meet the requirement to study in Ireland. (Dessoff) Additionally, acquiring the mandatory Irish private health insurance is impossible for many Disabled non-EU international students. In my attempts to access health insurance, I consulted with each individual insurance agency, Citizens Information, ICOS, AHEAD Ireland, UCD Global, and various Disability rights organizations and ultimately met directly with the Health Insurance Authority – all while balancing work and my studies. It was explained to me that there is a mandatory five-year waiting period before private Irish health insurers would cover pre-existing condition medical expenses. As a non-EU citizen, Americans are also ineligible for enrolment in the long-term illness scheme, medical cards, GP cards, disability travel cards, the fund for students with disabilities, the special assistance fund, and limited work permissions impact the prospect of your employer contributing to your healthcare.

Disabled Americans are limited to a needs assessment conducted by their university, and, by extension, whatever accommodations are deemed necessary based on that assessment. It is possible that these accommodations will not be the same as the accommodations from their home institution. In sum, Disabled Americans students are considered “the same” as Disabled Irish students when studying in Ireland, despite the clear differences in available accommodations. The lack of adequate access to accommodations presents undo strain for Disabled Americans and other non-EU citizens and makes the prospect of studying in Ireland unattractive if not impossible. Discrimination extends to pursuing the 1G stay back visa, which I am currently experiencing first hand. The level of means testing involved in the application process, the restrictive nature of the Critical Skills occupation list, no direct path to citizenship, and more, further exclude Disabled non-EU students from availing of opportunities readily accessible to their non-Disabled peers, ultimately contributing to an ableist Ireland.

Policies that exclude Disabled student participation contribute to negative social misconceptions that Disabled people are not valued talent and that Disability is not a celebrated contribution to a diverse global society. Further, these policies deprive Irish learners, especially Disabled Irish learners, of meaningful interaction with diverse international peers while depriving Disabled non-EU learners the opportunity to collaborate with Irish-based persons and institutions. Socially constructed barriers to inclusion, and by

extension the implication that Disabled students are not valuable contributors, must be changed. This need for change is reflected in Ireland's various commitments and strategies for internationalization and inclusion, but, unfortunately, is negated by gaps in protections for Disabled non-EU students. A full commitment is required, and this includes the contribution of Disabled persons themselves. I am imploring you to further investigate, collaborate, and rectify these gaps and their impacts on Disabled non-EU students, engaging these students directly in the process.

I look forward to continued progress and more inclusive policies for all students and I greatly appreciate your time and consideration. I am hopeful to continuing to discuss these issues and solutions with you in future

**[Footnote included in submission]** Hydrocephalus is a chronic neurological condition that involves an abnormal build-up of cerebrospinal fluid putting pressure on the brain. Hydrocephalus has no cure. The only available treatment is a shunt (one of the most likely to fail medically implanted devices in existence) implanted through brain surgery. It is not uncommon to require hundreds of brain surgeries over the course of a lifetime. There are a variety of reasons Hydrocephalus can develop -- aging, traumatic brain injury, a result of different condition -- and its impacts also vary from person to person. (Hydrocephalus) I was diagnosed during a routine ultrasound and had my first brain surgery a few days after I was born. I would go on to have five more brain surgeries, including a second shunt placement, before I turned 16. I have additional physical and mental health concerns, including chronic migraines.

**[Footnote included in submission]** According to Ireland's Department of Justice and Equality, American students do not need a visa to study at an Irish Higher Education Institution. Provided such students are enrolled in a full-time course, they are permitted to study in Ireland. Upon entry to Ireland, students will register with their local immigration officer to be granted permission to remain in Ireland for longer than 90 days and, if they are studying in Ireland for longer than 6 months, they must provide proof of 3,000 euro in a bank account and proof of private medical insurance. To successfully gain entry to Ireland students may also be required to present immigration officers at the airport with an offer letter from their respective institution, evidence of tuition fees paid, scholarship details or US Financial Aid, evidence of private health insurance, and accommodation details. (UCD Global, Trinity College Dublin). In a further step towards internationalization, the Stamp 1G stay back visa is available to graduates to pursue working in opportunities in Ireland (Irish 15)

#### Submission 1.17

**Student Success** – yes there needs to be mainstreaming and universal approaches but all students are not the same; “treat everybody equally, treat some a little differently”.

**Social engagement, belonging** – HEI managers demonstrate a willingness to ensure students are totally engaged but often don't know how; don't know how to implement NStep with respect for students with a disability.

**Hearing the student voice is critical to implementing the widening participation agenda**— are students with disabilities on committees? Are students' part of decision-making structures in HEIs? What supports are enabling it? It can't be tokenistic/box ticking. Need to evaluate that approaches are meaningful. HEIs bear responsibility for the environment that they create.

Student engagement (focus on students with a disability) needs to be embedded in all aspects of college activity and embedded in thinking:

- Student voice
- Civic life
- Volunteering roles
- Social engagement (friends, involved in activities, active participants)

It needs a structured approach, including policy, to make this happen and need indicators to assess how this is happening and how successful it is. Students need to belong in the Department that they are part of in the HEI (feel part of it, be part of it). Disability awareness training required – research finding that staff are more aware than students. There are examples of positive developments, e.g., Maths programme in MU and Student Ambassador programme; Ability Co-op TCD, UCC Fund to support Disabled Student engagement; AHEAD Student Voice Group; DCU – Autism-Friendly University; establishment of Disability Peer Groups.

**Key Principles:**

- Transitions (orientation)
- Student Engagement (social, academic, civic, representation)
- College Climate (belonging, attitudes)
- Structures
- NStep – role in creating voice and leadership.

**Postgraduate Study:**

- Outcome from TCD Forum for Staff and PG students with a disability:
- UG and PG require different things and needs to be more awareness in HEIs of this.
- Approach for funding PG supports needs to be more nuanced.
- HEIs need to build up a better structure for supporting PG – needs to become more part of the culture and the 4th level strategy of HEIs.
- More work to be done in HEIs to encourage students to disclose a disability.
- Part-time opportunities for students with disabilities
- A need to establish disabled postgraduate targets within HEI.