

Submission 2.19 Carlow College

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

The overall vision should be informed by the conceptual understanding of equity of access within the wider scope of equality of condition and outcomes. A key point is that a universal approach may not produce the required outcomes as progressing equality is premised on responded to differentiated needs. The vision has to be informed by data and evidence regarding the student experience inclusive of access, barriers, attrition, retention and progression issues and effective interventions and good practice approaches. This recognition allows for targeted, multi-faceted and tailored initiatives and resources in response to the particular issues that arise for students with regard to access, engagement and outcome. The scope of the plan should include the spectrum of higher education from undergraduate to post-graduate and part-time programmes.

Within the overall context of higher education, there are often invisible or intangible cultural and social barriers which can prevent equity of access. Cultural and social norms which are often deeply ingrained in all levels of education need to be examined.

2. Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan?

The target groups should continue to include under-represented socio-economic constituencies and first generation learners, mature learners, members of the Traveller community and from diverse ethnic backgrounds, learners with disabilities, learners from diverse gender identities. Current data which illustrates the persistent inequity in higher education with regard to socio-economic background which often intersects with ethnicity and/or disability. The proactive approach to data gathering, for example the deprivation index scores, is a positive measure in terms of creating awareness of the socio-economic profile of learners. A key issue is further analysis of the types of strategies and interventions which can address the persistent barriers. In addition to social and cultural norms, financial support remains an essential factor in terms of access.

The emphasis on higher education should include the spectrum of the National Framework of Qualifications from level 6 to 10. There should also be a consideration of part-time programmes and the process of transition from second level and further education and the types of supports which would enable access.

Finally, the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) should be examined to widen the potential for increased access, including higher education institutions which are funded

directly by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS).

3. How do we ensure that vulnerable members of our society are included (e.g., learners currently in care or who have experience of being in care)?

There is a substantial risk that learners in care will not be able to access the levels of supports required and a support worker with designated responsibility for education would be of benefit. The support worker will need to have an in-depth knowledge of educational options. These learners need to be given specific supports on an individualised basis, educational guidance from counsellors and a fully informed understanding of educational options, financial and emotional supports.

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

Pre-entry could include targeted information campaigns at second level and in community and further education settings. A partnership approach to equity of access is required among all stakeholder organisations to address the persistent barriers to equal opportunities. This requires outreach initiatives as well as potential on-campus projects prior to and post-entry.

Post-entry activities need to be orientated towards the differentiated needs of the student cohorts in order to create equitable conditions within the learning environment. Again this requires targeted resources which directly respond to data and evidence regarding the most effective interventions and approaches to support equity of outcome which is a more accurate measure of the success of embedding an inclusive approach within further and higher education.

Student support services are critical to the learner journey once in higher education. However, they are often under-resourced and not recognised as a major aspect of student retention and the achievement of programme outcomes for learners. Ensuring adequate funding for the range of student services which support learners is an important aspect of post-entry. Academic, social and psychological supports have proven to be essential to the success of learners with diverse needs.

Peer mentoring and learning as well as student advocacy should be an integral aspect of the higher education experience. A key issue is to amplify the student voice to be representative of diversity and this is an important factor for student unions.

Attention to personal development and confidence building is also integral to the achievement of outcomes and the potential for progression to further education and employment, and to the achievement of graduate attributes.

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

Current funding programmes have to be examined in the context of those learners that are still not benefitting from the opportunities to progress to further and higher education. As referenced above, the PATH could include more institutions to widen

access and supports. This is similarly the case with the Student Assistance Fund, HEAR and DARE schemes. In addition, student perspectives have referenced the importance of SUSI grant support as an essential factor in ensuring access to higher education. However, it is recognised that there is significant variation in student circumstances and in some cases the SUSI grant is inadequate to support students. At the same time, there are students who may not qualify due to being on the margins of cut-off points for qualification, despite having a real need. Our previous experience illustrates the impact that changes to the student grant supports have had on student retention. It is therefore recommended that all funding programmes inclusive of student grants are examined for evidence of meeting required needs to support access and outcomes.

Regular evaluation of existing funding programmes tracking the student journey could also be beneficial in determining where changes or further interventions are required. The dissemination of funding should also be measured against institutional accountability and the achievement of objectives.

The generation and analysis of data which traces equity of access to outcomes is an important evidence base for examining the effectiveness of current programmes and/or the necessity of introducing additional measures to support the learning journey (e.g. technical, financial, psychological supports).

6. How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded within HEIs?

Mainstreaming can be further embedded through a systematic and specifically designed process within the higher education sector informed by principles of access, participation and outcome. Taking a whole institution approach as part of higher education strategy and development within individual institutions is required to support equity of access, participation and outcome in higher education. Leadership at executive and senior management level is integral to taking a whole institution approach to mainstreaming equality and inclusion in higher education. The adoption and implementation of Universal Design for Learning principles and practices can assist the process of mainstreaming but this also required leadership and commitment in order to be effective in practice. Underpinning this, the generation and analysis of data and learner feedback is critical to progressing a mainstreaming approach.

The infrastructure to support the goal of mainstreaming could be considered in the context of an equality framework akin to the process of gender mainstreaming which has adopted a comprehensive series of complementary approaches to support equality in policy and practice. This requires each department and function within higher education institutions to undertake staff training, to have identified targets and to monitor, review and evaluate outputs and outcomes taking into account the learner experience. A whole-institution approach may benefit from undertaking an institutional audit to identify good practices, gaps and continuing barriers and challenges for

learners. This would assist in developing institutionally appropriate strategies and initiatives which address particular deficits in terms of equity of access and outcome.

There are also some existing good practice initiatives to promote gender equality at institutional and departmental level in higher education. While primarily focused on staff experiences there

is capacity to adapt such initiatives to proactively tackle the objective of mainstreaming across the broad spectrum of diversity and inclusion.

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

A whole-of education approach has to be located in national strategy, policy and practice. This requires resources and interventions to address the systemic inequalities which prevail. The education journey has to be addressed from the very earliest stages for learners. For example, initiatives which have supported access to pre-school illustrate how early interventions can widen participation at the outset. Supports for learners with diverse needs cannot be introduced on an ad-hoc basis at different stages of their educational cycle but must be consistent with learner needs throughout all stages of education from pre-school to post-graduate level. In effect the supports must follow learner needs as opposed to the learner attempting to follow available supports.

In practical terms, as with mainstreaming, it is important to use existing data and to identify new fields of data which would assist in creating a comprehensive picture of participation in education at all levels. This data could further support an evidenced based approach which would assist in the identification of what works in practice and where the current gaps remain, therefore enhancing current practice.

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

The further development and enhancement of pathways between further and higher education is premised on a number of interrelated factors and conditions. At national level, strategy, and policy must articulate a clear set of objectives and processes which support practice between further education and training institutes and organisations and institutions in the higher education sector. This requires a partnership approach from SOLAS, the HEA and DFHERIS.

Engagement with students who have progressed from further education to undertake higher education programmes at Carlow College indicates that their transition was successful as a result of the quality of information, guidance and available supports to learners to make that transition. This includes the articulation of appropriate and relevant pathways which have a direct correlation between further and higher education.

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

The strategy and policy position on social inclusion articulated by the Department of Social Protection in the publication of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion (2020-2025) has identified a number of goals and ambitions for progressing social inclusion which are relevant to higher education. These include increasing employment opportunities in addition to education and

skills training to support access to employment. The objective of poverty reduction is inextricably linked to educational attainment which is directly linked to employment opportunities. Policy objectives such as flexible welfare benefits, affordable childcare and supports for carers can also support learners with caring responsibilities to access higher education.

Funding for part-time programmes provided under Springboard+, Skillnet and the more recent July stimulus package, can also support equity of access objectives if the programmes offered are relevant and targeted towards the needs of under-represented relevant learner groups.

Social inclusion initiatives developed and delivered under the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme have the capacity to work in tandem with higher education initiatives to support equity of access objectives at individual and community level such as capacity building, bridging studies, personal development and foundation programmes.

The existing funding programmes which support equity of access in higher education should also be evaluated to determine if the supports in place are adequate to achieve the objectives of equity of access. Some factors to consider include the application of the student assistance fund, the HEAR and DARE schemes, the 1916 Bursary Fund and University Scholarships. These initiatives are very beneficial however not all students who are within the parameters of socially, culturally and economically excluded communities can avail of these programmes as there are higher education institutions where these schemes do not apply.

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

Covid-19 has presented challenges in terms of equity of engagement and participation owing to the digital divide and the resource implications associated with accessing higher education programmes online from access to broadband, digital devices, course materials, spaces to undertake coursework and attend lectures, social isolation. For many learners, particularly mature learners, caring responsibilities and the multi-tasking required with home-schooling, academic course work and caring for extended family members isolating as a result of the pandemic became a significant barrier in

achieving academic outcomes. This impact was often gendered in nature with a disproportionate impact on female learners and mature learners. The introduction of targeted funding supports as a result of the impact of Covid-19 were not universally applied to all students in need. For example, students in third level institutions that did not qualify for the grant supports allocated for ICT were potentially further disadvantaged unless their institution made separate grant supports available.

There were also some advantages for learners who did not have to travel on a daily basis or relocate for the academic year which led to a saving of those costs. Some learners with disabilities also found it easier to learn in their home environment. However, in all contexts the provision of student supports and access to the full range of student services, academic and counselling supports were essential. Therefore, a key consideration is the continuation of the delivery of student support services and an examination of how best to meet student needs in an online or hybrid learning environment.

Carlow College Student Focus Group Responses

1. What aspects of equity of access to higher education currently work or do not work from a student perspective?

Provision of information and supports

- Need for targeted guidance and support in the transition from FE to HE.
- Importance of being well-informed before accessing higher education.
- Fear of the unknown.
- FE/HE environment where FE students feel they can ask for advice to assist them with taking the next step.
- Supportive key staff (Career Advisers in FE, provision of information by staff on SUSI applications, Back to Education allowances and financial implications of progressing to HE).
- Clear information available about deferral/progression options is helpful.
- Supports for international students to navigate the system.

Cost

- Financial implications.
- SUSI system is welcome but thresholds are quite low. Students who are just above the cut-off point miss out.
- Minor changes in a student's circumstances can lead to them losing their SUSI grant for the next year.

- o Status of part-time students is problematic (fees and no SUSI grant). Some can only study on a part-time basis.

- o Splitting one academic year over two due to disability or extenuating circumstances means a SUSI grant may be lost.

2. What is the biggest challenge for students in accessing higher education?

Financial Barrier

☒ Accessing SUSI

- o Difficult process which encourages deception in order to qualify for maintenance grant.

- o Mature students who live in rental accommodation with bills included have had to change their status from 'independent' to 'dependent' on family in order to have appropriate residential bills with an address.

☒ Supplementing SUSI

- o Back to Education Allowance is essential for mature students.

☒ Working almost at full-time while studying full-time

- o School-leavers without SUSI whose parents cover their student contribution work 2-3 part-time jobs to cover their living costs. This has an impact on their studies as they are trapped in a cycle.

☒ Access to Student Assistance Fund

- o Not all colleges have access to this.

- o Eligibility for laptop scheme or on-going supplementary financial support is essential for students to participate fully.

Inclusion

☒ Sense of belonging

- o Needs to be established for different groups (Travellers, First in Family, disability/learning differences etc.)

☒ Representation within modules

- o Curriculum should be reflective of diversity

☒ Personal Confidence

- o Understanding what HE is and managing expectations for mature students of what is required.

- o Being assisted to develop confidence in ability to succeed.

- ☒ Quotas/Targets

- o Quotas for different categories of students to encourage diversity is not helpful.

Points Race

- ☒ Barrier to access

- o Unequal system – there are other socio-economic barriers to achieving high points.

3. What can make a difference for students accessing and completing higher education?

- ☒ Information and guidance at all stages. Need for a bridge between school/FE and HE to develop core skills.

- ☒ School-leavers, mature students, Travellers etc. are accessing HE from different starting points so different types of supports required.

- ☒ Multiple layers of disadvantage within FE. E.g. Ad-hoc funding, out-dated facilities, short-term tutor contracts but are seen as invaluable in assisting students' progress from FE to HE.

- ☒ Need for FE sector to be resources in a fair and consistent way.

- ☒ More flexible financial supports to support the learning journey across all years.

- ☒ Accessibility for students with disabilities/learning differences.

- ☒ Reasonable accommodations for students that need them.

- ☒ Access to childcare for students who are parents.

- ☒ Not all students should go to HE. Other options such as apprenticeships should be promoted.

4. How has Covid-19 impacted in students, e.g. academic, financial, health, college experience and how can we address these impacts?

Academic:

- o 'Worst results to date'.

- o 'Considered dropping out as I had so much to deal with'.

- o Difficult to manage family life and learning.

- o Timetable issues with online classes.

- o Take-home exams were stressful. Some students have had more THEs than actual in-college exams.

- o Fear of taking exams on-site next year as out of practice.
- o Stage one students have not been in library or lecture halls.

Financial:

- o Loss of part-time job.
- o Buying a Laptop.

Health:

- o Impact on mental health (locked in same room each day, loss of connection with others).
- o Isolation (not leaving house).
- o Online classes and family life/responsibilities- burned out by Christmas trying to balance commitments.
- o No respite – blur between home and college.
- o Uncertainty about next year.
- o Fatigue.

College Experience:

- o No real college experience outside of online lectures.
- o Lack of connectivity to college and classmates.
- o Readjustment plan needed for students for re-entry to HE.
- o Need for more clubs/societies/events on return.