Submission 2.07 Dublin City University

Introduction

DCU acknowledges this opportunity to make a submission into the next five-year National Access

Plan (NAP) 2022-2026. It is encouraging to see the positive upward trend in student numbers from

target groups over the lifetime of the existing plan. DCU commends all those involved at a national

and institutional levels who have worked to increase diversity in our higher education institutions.

However, we are acutely aware that a lot more work is required to improve the inclusiveness in

higher education. Therefore, it is reassuring to see inclusion as a priority action for the Department

of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). Widening

participation is also prioritised within DCU's Strategic Plan 2017-2022, including enhancing existing

pathways and developing new routes into the University. We are committed to ensuring that DCU is

accessible to all regardless of background, financial circumstances, ethnicity or disability.

We look forward to continued collaboration with DFHERIS and the Higher Education Authority (HEA)

to ensure that our campuses reflect the diversity of society.

Consultation questions

What should the overall vision for equity of access for HE in

Ireland be for 2022-2026?

● Seamless progression through all stages of education: We need to follow the students through

their entire educational career and provide an infrastructure for tracking the progress from

school, through to third level and on to employment. Students can be disadvantaged in different

ways at different stages of their journey (financially - culturally - social capital).

● Early intervention: The higher education (HE) conversation needs to begin in primary school.

Adequately fund and support early inventions with an emphasis on transition points — primary

to post-primary; post-primary to HE.

○ For example, in relation to members of the Irish Traveller and Roma Community,

feedback from our Darndale/Coolock and Kilbarrack Outreach Hubs is that late primary

school is the optimal time for targeting supports for local Traveller and Roma students as

part of a long-term access initiative to higher education. This needs to include

afterschool supports that would include Traveller and Roma students as part of wider

groups of students. These afterschool supports need to combine some academic work

with arts, sport or other meaningful and enjoyable activities, including for example,

working with nature, animals etc., in order to develop various interests. A lifelong

learning focus on meaningful outreach classes and supports for Traveller and Roma

adults, including parents, is also an important aspect for a multidimensional response.

● Enhanced intergovernmental collaboration: Increasing targets and improving access must take

into consideration wider barriers hindering access to education and develop a joint plan to

tackle them. Higher education cannot solve systemic issues facing students such as childcare,

accommodation and transport.

Who are the target groups?

1. Students from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education

2. Students experiencing multiple disadvantages (i.e. disability & socio-economic)

3. First time, Mature Students*

4. Further Education and Training Award holders**

5. Members of the Irish Traveller and Roma Community

6. Young people in the care of the state***

7. Young lone parents

8. Students with disabilities (with an emphasis on the following sub-groups)

a. Students with a physical/mobility disability

b. Students who are deaf/hard of hearing

c. Students who are blind/ have a visual impairment

d. Autistic students

9. Students from diverse ethnic backgrounds for particular professions, e.g., teaching****

10. Protection applicants and refugees*****

*The definition of the mature student group needs further refinement, as not all are disadvantaged.

**Suggest further refinement, similar to mature students, not all FET students are disadvantaged,

this needs to be recognised and acknowledged.

*** People with experience of care often do not feel ready to start further or higher education

immediately after leaving school. The Scottish government has recently announced the removal of

the age cap of 26 on the care-experienced student bursary in time for the start of the 2020-21

academic year. This will support them into either further or higher education at whatever point in

life they feel they are ready, regardless of their age. A similar approach should be explored in

Ireland.

**** There is a need to develop flexible entry routes based on parental education attainment and

being first generation in the immediate family to access higher education. This recognises that there

is a need to go beyond simply economic barriers to higher education but also socio-cultural barriers.

The need to overcome these socio-cultural barriers may be especially important in targeting specific

professions for developing access initiatives, e.g. teaching. This may also be important in targeting

specific ethnic minority groups who are above income thresholds but significantly underrepresented

in higher education and specific professions involved in supporting the needs of their minority

groups.

*****While refugees will qualify for mainstream funding after three years, there is growing

awareness that this group needs substantial pre-entry support to navigate the Irish educational

system, including help to have previous qualifications recognised; meeting English language

requirements for HE; guidance counselling and information provision.

How can pre- and post-entry activities be developed as part

of funding?

● Provision of ring-fenced funding for outreach activities.

o Currently, private funding has to be sourced by universities to develop outreach

programmes in schools (with the exception of TCD). While this funding is welcome, it can

sometimes dictate the nature and timing of programmes rather than result from a

strategic outreach programme based on identified needs. Dedicated on-going outreach

funding from the government to all HEIs, within an agreed set of broad criteria, would

enable Access services to be more strategic and have more control over how this

funding is being allocated.

o Pre-entry work has to be valued and acknowledged. It takes substantial time to build positive relationships, especially when working with under-represented communities e.g. one area of learning from the experience of the PATH 1 project to attract Irish Sign Language (ISL) students to primary teaching was that they require significant pre-entry support to prepare them to meet the eligibility criteria for teaching and the required standard of ISL competence. There are also significant resource requirements postentry.

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● Assessment of the impact of pre-entry activities on access to university by students from priority target groups.

This would necessitate a robust Engagement Record System which would enable pre- and post-entry

staff to measure the progression of under-represented students throughout their engagement with

the University. For instance, the DCU Access service operates a Life Cycle of Engagement, whereby a

student may engage with the service from Junior cycle through to college entry and to the

completion of their degree. At present, due to GDPR restrictions, there is no comprehensive way of

tracking the students' progression from pre- to post-entry, or of measuring how pre-entry activities

impact a student's decision or motivation to come to DCU, or indeed another university.

● Supporting students to reflect on their achievements from post-primary through to university

Students gain valuable personal, interpersonal and academic skills throughout their engagement in

pre- and post-entry activities and supports. Providing adequate self-assessment tools for students to

reflect on their achievements and progression would empower them to become more self-aware

and take more control over their future. This could be built into the school Careers curriculum.

● Academic skills preparation at secondary level

o Outreach supports provided to secondary school students in preparation for their

transition to HE should be expanded. In DCU, our U First and mentoring programmes are

providing valuable social and study support to senior cycle students but the number of

students we are reaching is restricted due to resource implications.

o Additional support with academic skills required for HE such as essay writing, notetaking,

critical thinking, would be very beneficial. The introduction of a 'college

experience' programme in TY similar to the 'work experience' component of many TY

programmes could help to raise aspirations among under-represented groups.

o Develop peer support and mentoring networks between existing access students and

younger students in DEIS schools to promote access to higher education through

informal word of mouth and relational supports. This would require resourcing.,

o Reduce culture shock (overwhelming change) amongst autistic students by developing

transitions programmes which help develop realistic expectations of university life, and

guide their management of independent life and study.

How can current funding programmes be better utilised to

further the objectives of the NAP?

● Ensure that the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM) funding is ring-fenced within

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

● Build in funding for human resource capital, too often funding comes without recognition of

the need for people to implement the programmes.

● Provide additional ring-fenced funding for outreach activities, including, crucially, funding for

staff.

● More strategic planning around funding at a national level. Avoid short-term, quick turn-over

pieces of funding that frequently lead to duplication and divert from existing work plans.

New funding calls should support and develop existing actions. Is it possible to develop a

national financial plan in terms of what will be available over a longer period, identifying

particular areas which will be targeted?

● Longer lead-in time for funding calls. A calendar of funding calls planned for the year ahead

to ensure the impact of the funding is maximised, rather than the current ad-hoc and

sporadic method.

● All funding for programmes should have a percentage of the fund allocated for research and

evaluation, so we are continually measuring impact and value for money.

● Provide more guidance and clarity around measuring impact. How can we measure the

effect of once-off initiatives in schools and communities? There is a need to evaluate the

impact of the collective supports provided to individuals rather than looking at the impact of

each of the supports in isolation.

● Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD): changes to how NEPS provide confirmation of

diagnosis and the related supporting evidence can allow a more effective allocation of

resources.

● Examine funding opportunities for mature students and simplify them. Financial constraints

continue to be the most significant obstacle to HE for this group.

How can the goals of mainstreaming be further embedded

within HEIs?

1. Define mainstreaming: 'Mainstreaming' is a very broad term and sometimes used in a negative context.

a. Mainstreaming, while applicable to primary and second-level education, does not hold the same understanding in HE. Be clear about what we mean by mainstreaming in HE.

b. Many supports and structures are mainstreamed but specific initiatives and supports are often also required for specific groups in order to ensure student success. We need to maintain the balance between mainstreaming and pilot/once-off initiatives.

2. Universal Design for Learning (UDL): UDL needs to become an integral part of educational provision in each of the institutions.

a. Consider the area of UDL, and in particular the promotion of best practice in teaching through the adoption of UDL techniques.

b. Consider adding a UDL/Best Practices Action plan to the compact agreements as a Key Performance Indicator (KPI), where it goes beyond teaching practices but covers application processes, communications, service provision etc.

c. Work towards the principles of UDL — whereby universities are accessible for everyone, as this could mitigate issues for undiagnosed neurodiverse students at university.

3. Awareness raising: actively strive to make inclusion an integral part of university life.

a. Provide staff training to create awareness of the diversity of our student body, including how to support and engage with students from diverse backgrounds. Staff tend to be drawn from middle class backgrounds and may be unconsciously biased.

b. Student Ambassadors who promote the university should be recruited from across all student types. Prospective students should be able to identify with Ambassadors.

c. Create more awareness that the university should be inclusive and allow students to be proud of their background. There should not be pressure on students to integrate into the "mainstream" which can lead to struggles with imposter syndrome.

4. PATH 1& 3: Plan for mainstreaming successful PATH 1 and PATH 3 pre- and post-entry

activities into HEI planning, especially outreach work with under-represented communities.

How can a whole-of-education approach to WP in HE be

achieved?

● Tracking: It is currently impossible to track the success of outreach activities because we cannot

'follow' the student from secondary to third level and through to employment. Therefore we

cannot track successful initiatives or weak points in our work.

● Greater access to HEA data: The HEA has access to a lot of excellent data and they do a good job

of sharing it. However, going forward, allowing institutions to access a database at short notice

would be useful, for example, knowing the number of people in certain categories and the areas

they live in, would be very helpful.

How can pathways between Further Education and Training

(FET) and HE be better developed?

● Recognise FET as a potential bridge to education but also as a qualification in itself to improve

employment opportunities. Set a realistic target in terms of progression to HE.

● Provide additional academic support to bridge the gap between FET and HE e.g. Foundation

programmes/Access Courses/Online modules on specific topics eg academic writing.

Evening/weekend study courses could help FET students reach the proper requirements and

would combat "shadow" education benefits.

● Build stronger relationships between FE colleges and HEIs. FET students need to see HE as a

realistic option. This would require outreach to FE colleges; using student role models who have

come through FE to tell their story; the provision of clear information about pathways, funding

and access to HE; and the opportunity for FET students to come on campus (not just a quick

campus tour) but time to explore and get a feel for the campus.

How can social inclusion initiatives outside of the HE sector

be harnessed to support equity of access objectives?

● By creating pathways for learners to move up through the system, particularly in local and

regional areas. There should be alignment of programmes and obvious paths to progress.

● Harnessing social inclusion initiatives outside of HE requires time and resources. Time would

have to be allocated within a person's job description for networking and interagency

cooperation. The possibility for enhanced partnerships between HEis and local social inclusion

initiatives could be greatly facilitated going forward by online meetings.

● Be more cognisant of the inter-governmental nature of access to HE. Access to HE cannot be the

sole responsibility of the Department of Education and the Department of Further and HIgher

Education, Research, Innovation and Science. If we are truly committed to promoting access to

HE, then we need to think outside this and look at developing collaborative actions with local

communities that build confidence and social skills etc

● Examples:

○ The DCU Access Service is successful because of the time and energy invested in building

relationships with local schools and communities.

○ DCU Access have recently signed a Service Level Agreement with the local NTRIS group

in North Dublin to deliver Traveller and Roma specific measures to encourage

engagement and retention in schools.

○ Similarly, a key success factor for the Hubs developed under PATH 1 has been to have a

Local Darndale-Coolock-Kilbarrack Task Force as Advisory Group for the Hubs, involving

local key stakeholders and schools, in conjunction with DCU Educational Disadvantage

Centre and Northside Area Partnership. From a baseline of extremely rare entry to

primary teaching across Darndale and Kilbarrack in the previous two decades, the

funding provided through PATH 1 and working in conjunction with DCU Access has

resulted in a total of 16 Darndale/Coolock and Kilbarrack hubs' students gaining entry

over the 3 years (2017-20): 11 BEd and 5 Professional Master of Education (primary) in

DCU Institute of Education. There is evidence of a cohort effect where a culture of

aspiration and expectation of doing primary teaching is being developed in at least some

of the participating schools. Whereas initially in Autumn 2017 only 2 students across the

6 local DEIS schools with service level agreements for the hubs indicated a possible

interest in primary teaching, this has radically changed with large numbers attending

sessions at the hubs since then. A large majority of the hub attendees are successful in

obtaining Honours Irish due to the hub sessions and it is their other Leaving Cert scores

that are hindering their entry to primary teaching. This has brought an increased

emphasis on hub sessions on maths and academic writing skills. These outreach hubs

and activities should be expanded to other universities and local areas in Ireland.

What challenges has Covid-19 presented in relation to an inclusive HE system

and how can they be addressed?

Technology Divide

● Lack of broadband

- Lack of laptop availability

- Using mobile data to hotspot as no wi-fi in the home

- Not all the students were comfortable accessing and using online teaching

- Rural students have limited access to fast broadband

Accommodation

- Some students are living in cramped accommodation, sharing rooms with other family

members.

- Lack of suitable study spaces (this may be more of an issue for students with larger families /

younger siblings / cramped accommodation)

- Students are experiencing anxiety and stress around paying for accommodation in the next

academic year due to loss of earning opportunities over the summer.

- There has been an increase in the number of students becoming homeless during the

pandemic due to domestic violence and intolerable conditions in the home. This has been

really noticeable amongst the applications for the 1916 bursary.

Health

- Having a learning disability, e.g. Dyslexia and Dyspraxia, impacts negatively on concentration

levels when having to work from home in a noisy environment.

- For Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) students structure is everything. Special interests help

autistic individuals retain some sense of control and calm. When all else is unpredictable,

the individual will take up their particular interest; this may be gaming, art etc.. Usually, this

would be time-limited, but during lockdown, it has become very intense for many, and

hinders their ability to do anything else.

● Introverted students who had minimum engagement on campus pre-Covid-19, may struggle

to re-engage.

● Students with ASD or mental health issues are very concerned about Covid-19. Not leaving

the house at all and not feeling well enough to engage with their studies.

● The impact on students' mental health is well documented — this is going to be on-going

and will be seen amongst incoming students.

Online Learning

● Having to study at home with no access to the library has impacted on the capacity to focus

and produce quality assignments.

● Assignments replaced many exams leading to assignment overload —many were due around

the same time, which put severe pressure on students.

● The use of online and digital technology has enhanced learning and that should be built on

i.e. recording of lectures, zoom captioning.

● The current generation of secondary school students are also "digital natives" and NAP

should acknowledge that online resources can be a huge benefit and can help us reach out

beyond linked schools. The development of online resources and platforms should be a

priority.

Career opportunities

● Uncertainty of getting a job and challenge attached to online interviews.

● Uncertainty about whether a graduate job will translate into an actual job.

● Apprehension about the future, leading many to apply for Masters' programmes out of fear

of a recession.

● Difficulty in accessing INTRA (work) placements and internships. Many who did access

internships did not get to work in a physical work environment.

Social Skills

● For First and Second year students, most of their interaction with University to date has

been through screen. Students have predominantly been working and socialising in isolation.

A lot of students have not met their classmates or physically been on campus. For some,

adjusting to the University environment and having the confidence to immerse themselves

in social activities will be a challenge post Covid-19, especially if they are first generation to

attend third level and haven't had the support in this regard at home.

● Some students have missed out on the important 'transition' phase into university life and

may struggle to find their feet when they arrive in second year, especially when they should

already be settled. Learning to manage their time, multi-task, will be a challenge for some.

Others areas not addressed above

● Alignment: The government departments need to be more aligned in terms of their policies

and commitment to assist entry into HE. The Department of Education and Skills, the

Department of Justice and the Department of Social Protection need to have clearer

communication channels to support access to HE for under-represented groups.

● Data sharing between post-primary and HE: It would be helpful for HEIs to have a picture of

completion stats at post-primary level.

○ We need to be realistic about the fact that some target groups have particularly low

completion and matriculation rates (e.g. travellers / some disabilities) at postprimary

level. We cannot entice students into university who are not available for us to entice and this needs to be recognised.

○ Improving access for sensory and physical cohorts would be improved with data from second level. Understanding where these students are would enable more targeted approaches.