

Submission 2.13 University College Cork

INTRODUCTION

University College Cork welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process for the next National Access Plan. Equity of Access to Higher Education is a key priority in UCC, as demonstrated in UCC 2022: Delivering a Connected University. Pillar 3 of this strategy focuses on Student Success and commits to delivering a high quality and flexible student experience which is inclusive and responsive to the needs of all students setting out the following actions:

3.1.1 Offer an equitable experience for all students.

3.2.1 Deliver universal accessibility of student support and academic services including enhancement of the digital hub and the library.

3.2.2 Align support for our diverse student body with changing needs.

This submission has been informed by consultation with students, staff, and community partners.

WHAT SHOULD OUR OVERALL VISION FOR EQUITY OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND BE FOR 2022-2026?

- The current vision “To Ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population” is an appropriate vision, that moves beyond access to completion.
- In order to realise this vision, it is important that there are appropriate opportunities available to access University, appropriate supports to enable participation and completion, regardless of the mode of delivery, level of study or duration of programme.
- The vision should align with the aim of UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

WHO ARE THE TARGET GROUPS THAT SHOULD BE SPECIFIED IN THE NEXT NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN? HOW DO WE ENSURE THAT VULNERABLE MEMBERS OF OUR SOCIETY ARE INCLUDED (E.G., LEARNERS CURRENTLY IN CARE OR WHO HAVE EXPERIENCE OF BEING IN CARE)?

- Further progress is required for all the target groups identified in the last plan; it is important that these categories remain a priority.
- The area of targeting and supporting ethnic minority groups presents some challenges and greater guidance is required. Many HEI’s have become institutes of Sanctuary and

would welcome the further development of policy around supporting refugees and asylum seekers.

- Emerging target groups such as care experienced persons, justice involved persons and people experiencing homelessness warrant additional consideration.
- UCC has worked to support students with intellectual disabilities through the Certificate in Contemporary Living programme since 2009. UCC welcomes the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities as a target group and is committed to working with the HEA and colleagues across the sector to identify pathways, supports and resources required to enable the provision of progression opportunities for this cohort of students.
- Identifying target groups in policy documents is useful for prioritising areas where more progress is required, however collecting measurable data is challenging. Further work is required on the HEA Access Data Strategy to create appropriate data definitions and identify consistent and measurable sources of data for target groups. The strategy should recognise the importance and value in capturing the intersectionality of target groups. It is important that there is an appropriate balance between the need to collect data and the impact of repeatedly asking vulnerable people to identify which target group they identify with. There are issues with identification due to deficit labels for target groups.
- Regular, meaningful engagement with community partners is essential in ensuring that Access services reach the most vulnerable in our society. Flexibility is required to ensure an appropriate response can be developed to meet to the needs of target groups.
- Many of the most vulnerable members of our society are not able to access full-time undergraduate degrees. Higher Education Institutions need to be resourced to develop and deliver part time programmes to meet the needs of learners. Students should be able to access financial supports regardless of mode, level, or duration of study.

HOW CAN PRE-ENTRY AND POST-ENTRY ACTIVITIES BE DEVELOPED?

- Significant progress has taken place in the development of both pre and post entry support programmes. In University College Cork, valuable relationships have been established with schools, community partners, advocacy groups and students to inform our approach to both pre-entry and post-entry work. A whole of student lifecycle approach has been taken to the development of a substantial programme of supports delivered in primary and second level schools, in the community and in further education, and to the delivery of tailored post-entry supports for UCC students.
- Our position as an inclusive HEI should be evident to learners from their very first engagement with UCC. Marginalised and vulnerable students and their families need to

hear and see strong messages of inclusion and belonging prior to ever setting foot on campus in UCC. This can be achieved by reviewing and adapting our approach to both pre-entry and post- entry work to ensure that the principles of UDL are interwoven into everything we do. Access services can lead by example, but a whole of institution approach is required to achieve an inclusive university.

- At a pre-entry level, a key challenge is the capacity of community partners (including schools) to engage with HEI's in pre-entry work. A whole of education vision, from pre-school to higher education which focuses on equity of Access to Higher Education is required to embed pre-entry work. Perceived barriers to progression held by students/parents/guardians and teachers need to be addressed and challenged early in the education system.
- To sustain real and meaningful pre-entry engagement, Access staff need to be available to listen and engage within the community. It is challenging balancing the needs of increasing numbers of Access students in HEI's with the need to work outside of the university developing and delivering pre-entry programmes. The goals in the new plan should be reflective of the importance of this engagement.
- At a post-entry level, the focus in UCC has moved beyond retention to ensuring belonging, inclusion and success for students. The support needs of Access students are complex and multifaceted and required specialised responses from Access practitioners and other students support professionals to ensure participation and completion. Collaboration and engagement across academic and professional services is key.
- Embedding the principles of UDL across the University is key to meeting the needs of diverse learners, enhancing accessibility of learning opportunities and increasing student success. University College Cork is committed to mainstreaming good practice in post-entry support for the benefit of all students, while simultaneously enabling Access practitioners to focus their efforts on supporting the increasingly complex needs of Access students.
- It is important that Access students have equitable access to placement and travel opportunities and are supported to overcome barriers and obstacles. Shared Targets for Inclusive Student mobility under Erasmus programmes should be set in both the National Access Plan and the Internationalisation Strategy. Additional financial supports should be available to support and facilitate placement opportunities.
- Challenges in accessing the labor market need to be addressed as part of the post entry work in HEI's. This work is multifaceted and involves building capacity amongst students while also educating employers on the benefits of diversity. Access UCC is currently expanding a very successful Employability programme, focused on increasing graduate employment rates for students with disabilities.

HOW CAN CURRENT FUNDING PROGRAMMES BE BETTER UTILISED TO FURTHER THE OBJECTIVES OF THE NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN?

- The range of additional funding opportunities for Equity of Access have been warmly welcomed by University College Cork. Strong foundations have been built and consolidating the funding streams available will enable HEI's to build on the momentum and positive engagement which is in place. The recent investment in new funding programmes is reflective of the national commitment to equity of access.
- A key challenge is continuity of funding streams, and it is desirable to have a funding model which reflects and values the long-term nature of the work required to enable equity of Access. The delivery of services with a "whole of student lifecycle" approach is not a project with a finite end date. Funding commitments reflective of the longer-term nature of this work will enable the development and maintenance of key community engagement relationships.
- Students identify inadequate financial supports as the greatest barrier and obstacle to access and progression in higher education. Appropriate levels of financial support which reflect the true cost of attending higher education are required if equity of Access is to be achieved. The additional financial needs of particular target groups need to be addressed, e.g., childcare costs for lone parents, additional accommodation costs for students with disabilities accompanied by a personal assistant.
- There is a considerable administrative burden on students to submit multiple applications for financial support to enable their participation in higher education. Greater collaboration and cooperation across government departments and key agencies is required to consolidate financial supports for students. This will reduce the burden on learners and increase certainty around funding personally available.
- An evaluation of the 1916 Bursary fund and its impact on awardees in the South Cluster points to the importance of appropriate financial supports for students experiencing pervasive economic hardship. A substantial increase in this level of financial support for students is required.
- Financial support needs to move beyond funding for full time programmes. The Student Assistance fund for Part-Time students is broadly welcomed, but in the absence of fee-waivers or SUSI grant support for Part-Time students, priority target groups are challenged to access higher education and avail of Student Assistance Funding.
- Progression to post-graduate study for Access students should be prioritised. The key barrier at present is inadequate financial supports.

HOW CAN THE GOAL OF MAINSTREAMING BE FURTHER EMBEDDED WITHIN HEI'S?

- A systematic approach to policies and procedures is required to ensure that the principles of UDL are embedded in the delivery of academic and support services. The principles of inclusion and equality must be at the forefront of everything we do. The mantra of “access is everyone’s business” must be championed at every level within the institution.

- The pivot to online learning in 2020 brought about an unprecedented shift to using technology for learning, teaching and assessment. This was a significant challenge for the university, and it responded by delivering a quality blended learning experience for UCC student. Under very difficult circumstances UCC staff ensured that all students were accommodated in the move to online learning and assessment. We now have an opportunity to retain and build on much of the good practice which was fast-tracked in 2020.

- Continuous professional development is required to empower and enable all staff to prioritise inclusive practice.

HOW CAN A WHOLE OF EDUCATION APPROACH TO WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION BE ACHIEVED?

- An evidence informed response to the challenges of participation in Higher Education is needed at a national level. A research/evaluation unit should be established in the Department/HEA with specialist knowledge in Access to Further and Higher Education. Working across the Department of Education, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, this unit could play a pivotal role in reviewing and assimilating the rich data and research being produced across all sectors to inform future developments.

- Embedding equity of Access into the curriculum at primary and post-primary, would ensure that a whole of education approach is achieved and that there is a shared vision right through the system on equity of access. There is too much dependance on guidance counsellors in second level, research shows that early engagement is what is required to raise aspiration and awareness of opportunities. Additional capacity within the primary and post primary system is required to ensure that this valuable work is embedded in schools, and not seen as an optional add-on.

- Information from Primary and Second level systems should be used to assist with targeting of resources and supports for students with the highest level of need. Targets for participation in higher education need to be informed by outcomes for target group students throughout their education. • Considerable progress has been made in terms of data collection in recent years, it is essential that connected and comparable data is utilised throughout the student lifecycle to inform targets and policies.

HOW CAN PATHWAYS BETWEEN FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING AND HIGHER EDUCATION BE BETTER DEVELOPED?

- University College Cork has undertaken a significant amount of work in progression from further education and training (FET) to higher education (HE). Admissions pathways have been streamlined and move beyond linking one course in a local FET college to taking a national approach to admission based on discipline areas, this has yielded considerable success with admissions numbers growing year on year and 6% of Admissions in 20/21 being from Further Education.
- UCC is currently working with Cork ETB on a successful pilot initiative in the Cork City Further Education Colleges. A member of the Access UCC team is working within the FE colleges, supporting the retention and progression of students from DEIS city schools and Traveller students. The pilot is replicating the post entry supports available to Access students in UCC, to see if this will enhance progression to Higher Education. Early indications are very positive, and the initiative has been embraced by partners in second level and further education. Feedback from the first cohort of students has highlighted the importance of having dedicated staff supporting progression in FE settings.
- Streamlining of admissions routes between FE and HE is key to removing barriers and increasing understanding about this valuable alternative route to Higher Education. A national approach to this is required.
- Continuous dialogue and engagement with the FET sector is essential to ensure that there are mutually beneficial pathways between FET and HE. The development of new programmes and pathways which provide greater flexibility and choice to learners is desirable.
- The potential of Micro-credentials to provide valuable lifelong learning opportunities and support skills development for priority Access students should be developed.

HOW CAN OTHER SOCIAL INCLUSION INITIATIVES OUTSIDE OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR BE HARNESSSED TO SUPPORT EQUITY OF ACCESS OBJECTIVES

- To harness and engage other social inclusion measures, Access practitioners need to build authentic relationships and networks of trust with community partners. Access staff need to listen, to be visible, accessible, and available to work with partners in their community. The real time and resources required to build meaningful partnerships is often unseen and may not immediately result in increased student numbers. The core emphasis of Access work must be student centered and focused on finding the best pathway for students, it cannot be about meeting performance indicators focused on intake to higher education alone. Dedicated time for Access practitioners to work outside of the institution needs to be prioritised.

- There are several key examples in the Cork region where interagency work has resulted in a renewed focus on enhanced education outcomes for learners. The Cork Learning City structure provides great opportunities for interagency working. The recently established Cork Access Network (CAN) aims to co-ordinate efforts to tackle Educational Disadvantaged in the City. The Cork City Traveller Interagency Education subgroup is a fantastic example where stakeholders from all sectors of education, City Council, Social Welfare, Cork City Partnership, Tulsa, come together with a focus on education and progression. This group now has strong links with the NITRIS Star Project, and the PATH funded SOAR Travellers in Education Workstream.
- Engagement with the Southern Traveller Health Unit a regional Traveller Community development network for five Traveller projects: The Traveller Visibility Group (TVG), Travellers of North Cork (TNC), The Cork Travellers Women's Network (CTWN), West Cork Travellers (WCT), and Kerry Travellers Health and Community Development Project (KTCP), has resulted in the successful delivery of a Level 6 and Level 7 'Leadership in the Community' programme for Traveller Women. Sustained relationship building with key partners over a significant period, ensured that this programme has been a huge success.
- Industry/Business partners can also play a key part in contributing to the goal of equity of access; successful partnerships with companies such as the Johnson & Johnson through the Bridge to Employment Programme & the DPS Engineering's Inspire2 programme have had a significant impact on DEIS schools and their communities. The Employability programme for students with disabilities in UCC would not be possible without the mentorship supports offered by industry partners in the region.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAS COVID-19 PRESENTED IN RELATION TO AN INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM AND HOW CAN THEY BE ADDRESSED?

- Covid-19 has heightened the impact of the digital divide. Access to devices, internet connection and digital literacy skills are challenges faced by many Access students.
- The Covid-19 Laptop Loan scheme provided much needed access to devices for students from Access target groups. This scheme should be continued for all incoming first year students.
- UCC is delivering a Digital Passport Digital Badge programme during the summer. It is targeted at incoming students to support the development of digital skills required to succeed in higher education. The scheme is being strongly promoted with DEIS schools and existing Access UCC links.
- Access UCC purchased pre-paid sim cards for students who did not have broadband access at home and this support will continue for the coming academic year.

- Access to an appropriate study space was a challenge faced by many students. The library in UCC and study rooms across campus remained open during the pandemic closures to provide access to study spaces for those who could travel to UCC.
- Peer support is a key contribution factor to retention of Access students. The absence of opportunities for face to face engagement has increased the number of students experiencing social isolation. While significant efforts have been made to engage with students virtually and support engagement and relationship building, Access practitioners are eager to get back to campus to deliver face to face supports.
- Financial challenges have presented for many students, particularly those not eligible for the pandemic unemployment payment and who could not source part-time work. Additional Student Assistance Funding, along with the continuation of the PUP payment supported students to continue in education in 2021. Additional financial supports are essential to retain students in 21/22. Consultation should take place between the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science to consider the impact on students of transitioning off the PUP payments.
- Family responsibilities have impacted on the studies of many students, particularly childcare responsibilities, and home schooling. The provision of high-quality support and guidance to students is key to ensuring their retention and progression in their studies.