

Submission 2.09 University College Dublin

UCD is pleased to respond to the request from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) regarding the development of the next National Access Plan. Our commitment to access and inclusion is articulated in UCD's strategic plan - Rising to the Future, (UCD 2020), along with the EDI Strategy and Action Plan 2018 - 2020 – 2025, and the Education and Student Success Strategy (UCD, 2021). In particular, Rising to the Future foregrounds the provision of 'an inclusive educational experience', highlighting the centrality of a mainstreaming approach in fostering inclusion, appreciating diversity and the contribution of all students, and removing barriers to access, participation and success (UCD 2020 p. 22).

The new National Access Plan is an opportunity to build on and accelerate the access and inclusion of Ireland's diverse student population at all levels in post-secondary education. It is in this context, that we think it essential that both 'access' and 'inclusion' are included in the title of the new plan: this would be an important change that signals clearly that the work of access **transcends entry and admissions considerations** and encompasses **all aspects of the student's higher education experience**. Critically, the development of the next plan also affords an opportunity to address key access and inclusion issues in a more integrated and coherent way that meets the needs and expectations of all students, regardless of background, circumstances, mode or level of study.

The last National Access Plan (HEA, 2015, 2018a) prioritised the participation of designated student target groups: it also underscored the importance of mainstreaming, where access is no longer seen as a marginal activity in higher education. While significant progress has been made to increase the participation of some target groups, such as students with disabilities, and school leavers from disadvantaged communities, challenges remain. Most significant among these is the below target rate of participation by mature students, in parallel with the slow progress made in offering equitable part-time and flexible higher education to all. (Notably, these two issues may be related). Of concern also is the relatively slow pace in advancing mainstreaming of access in higher education (HEA, 2018a). 8

A further area of opportunity is to better understand the participation of Irish Traveller, Black, Asian, minority ethnic and migrant groups in higher education and to support enhanced rates of participation (RIA & BCI, 2020).

At institutional level, UCD achieved considerable success during the last National Access Plan and are proud to record that 32.5% of our undergraduate student population is drawn from access groups. Most notably, the University consolidated its wide range of mainstream and specialist supports, which are available to all students,

not just those coming from under-represented cohorts, recognising that academic, personal, social and practical supports may be needed by any student at any stage of their academic journey. Underpinned by the philosophy of ‘a student is a student’, **UCD’s ‘University for All’** initiative has moved access and inclusion from the margins to mainstream. Now, it is recognised as everyone’s business.

“Every student, wherever they come from and whatever their background, will have specific needs and requirements and we need to tailor that to what we do, to really meet the full range of requirements students have, without labelling them in a way” - Professor Mark Rogers, UCD Registrar & Deputy President, September 2020.

What should the overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2020-2026?¹⁰

2. What should the overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2020-2026?

We believe that higher education should welcome, embrace and value all students equitably, regardless of background, age, disability, circumstances, mode or level of study. Crucially, it should recognise that higher education is both “an engine for economic growth and an instrument to promote diversity and enhance social cohesion” supporting “learning for all” (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science - Statement of Strategy 2021 - 2023.), and ensuring that all students can participate fully, reach their potential, with no student being left behind.

We believe that the next Access Plan should promote inclusive higher education (See Section 5) and enable participation by students from the designated target groups (See Section 3), facilitating their seamless progression from both secondary and further education, to study at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, on either a full-time or part-time basis. 11

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

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

The increased participation of under-represented groups in higher education continues (HEA, 2018a). The last Access Plan identified specific target groups and focussed primarily on their participation in **full-time** undergraduate study. The next plan provides an opportunity to build on the progress made and as outlined previously (See Section 2), promote the participation by students from the designated target groups at all levels of education, **on a full time and/or part-time basis**.

3.1 Target Group recommendations

In this context, we recommend that the targets groups in the new National Access Plan be defined as follows:

Socio-economic disadvantage, in particular students who have attended DEIS schools, are from areas of designated disadvantage, and are eligible for SUSI (special rate)

Students with disabilities, in particular, those with significant physical and sensory disabilities, with a specific target for ISL (Irish Sign Language) users.

Members of Irish Traveller and Roma communities

Students of colour, and those from ethnic minority groups

Mature students that have no prior 3rd level qualification

Students who have caring responsibilities, including parenting/elder care.

3.2 Data collection and reporting

During the operation of the last Access Plan much progress has been made to gather consistent national access data; the next plan offers an opportunity to build on this progress, incorporating data on the complete student experience regardless of the level, mode, or programme of study.

In UCD, evidence shows that the collection and dissemination of timely and relevant access data is a key lever to drive institutional transformation and embed inclusive strategies across the institution. Through the leadership of Director of Institutional Research, Maura McGinn and the work of the UCD Access & Lifelong Learning Data Group, led by Dr Bairbre Fleming and Dr Lisa Padden, we have developed and refined our approach in this area. Our data focus has moved from the collection of entry information to tracking retention and completion rates: this approach relies on analysis and interrogation at individual programme level, which greatly enhances and embeds 'access' ownership across Colleges and Schools. It also avoids the disadvantage of a 'one size fits all' and allows for those closest to assess the situation, to highlight the progress made, and to generate solutions where difficulties emerge. We are persuaded by data transparency and democratisation and know the importance of all stakeholders seeing the data, setting realistic targets per programme/group and measuring progress overall, and at the level of individual programmes. UCD gathers and reports internally on admissions, participation, progression, outward mobility, completion, and graduate outcomes, overall, and at the level of individual programmes. The next stage of our access data plans includes the development of a systematised multi-indicator approach to identification, collection and reporting on outreach and pre-entry data, 'offers/accepts' data, as well as internships and work placements. In Section 3.4, we provide recommendations on how this increased granularity and visibility of data could be utilised in the new National Access Plan.

3.3 Agreed qualitative and quantitative data metrics and multi-indicator approach

We welcome the work done by the HEA to further refine the definitions of particular target groups. We believe that the next Access Plan needs to build on this work and provide an agreed set of data metrics, using a multi-indicator approach. The recent change to the HEA Equal Access Survey (EAS) and the use of the Deprivation Index Score (DIS) have necessitated a change to UCD's data collection methodology. We had relied on a range of data sources - one such is the EAS; however, the question tracking socio-economic groups is no longer asked. Previously, the Access Plan identified specific socio-economic groups as under-represented in higher education: questions in the EAS allowed the University to identify students in these groups. This has been replaced with the DIS, assigned to students based on census small area data of their home address. According to this measure, in 2018/19 5% of UCD students were designated disadvantaged, 59% from areas designated as 'average', and 35% from affluent areas (HEA, 2020). In 2018/19 however, we recorded that 10.4% of students were from disadvantaged backgrounds. This difference stems from the fact that the UCD methodology uses data based on the student and the HEA uses data based solely on a measure of relative socio-economic position based on the Census small area of the students' home address. We have now replaced the EAS data with the following multi-indicators of socio-economic disadvantage –

Students receiving means-tested scholarships (e.g., Cothrom na Féinne/1916 Bursaries)

Students progressing from DEIS schools

SUSI grant status (special rate)

Students entering through the HEAR pathway

Students in receipt of relevant Social Protection payments, such as Lone Parent, Carers Allowance.

Data showing SUSI grant levels provides a transparent and robust picture of the socio-economic status of our student population. Haase and Pratschke note that “This is a precious source of data on family income which could complement other sources or be used to validate proxy indicators of socio-economic position” (2017, p. 14). We also endorse the use of qualitative data: in June 2020, UCD undertook an inclusion survey among staff (n=368) and students (n=2866), which offers a baseline on the student experience of inclusion and access. At a national level, the inclusion of a mixture of quantitative data and narratives in surveys such as [Student Survey.ie](#) and the [PRG StudentSurvey.ie](#), would offer avenues to explore and understand the students' perspective, to identify issues arising, and allow the inequities of access and inclusion to be addressed.

3.1 Data collection and reporting recommendations

In this context, we recommend that the new Access Plan –

moves the focus of access from **entry** to considering the **full student experience**, through the collection and dissemination of additional data demonstrating the educational journey of access students in higher education, spanning pre-entry to career success

promotes a sector-wide agreed set of data metrics and multi-indicators for socio-economic disadvantage target groups

promotes the inclusion of a mixture of quantitative data and narratives in surveys such as Student Survey.ie and the PRG StudentSurvey.ie

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

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

4.1 Pre-entry and outreach activity

UCD has a long tradition of pre-entry and outreach activity (McNally & Downes, 2016). More recently, UCD has been the Lead Institution for the PATH Leinster Pillar 1 Cluster (NCAD, Trinity, IADT, RCSI, MIE and UCD) collaborating to promote greater access to higher education. Our experience of working with community groups and organisations tells us that much time and resources need to be devoted to the developing and sustaining stakeholder relationships. There is considerable investment by the State in funding initiatives to address social inclusion, but regrettably there is an absence of ‘joined-up’ thinking: the potential for overlap and duplication of effort is therefore considerable. Furthermore, the approach is over-reliant on individual relationships, and limits widespread sharing of knowledge, information and systems. As there are no agreed measures and metrics for pre-entry and outreach supports, the current approach leads to **inter-institutional competition** rather than advancing **systemic collaboration and co-operation**.

Based on our experience therefore, we propose that pre-entry and outreach needs to be radically reimagined. Fundamental to this is the concept of systemic ‘knowledge transfer’, which requires building community capacity and systematically fostering the knowledge and skills of local communities. This would require formal structures, which ‘reach back’ along the educational continuum, drawing together all the education and community partners, such as primary (DEIS), secondary (DEIS), FE, HE, community education, advocacy groups and local authorities, working collectively in designated areas of social and economic disadvantage. This in our view, would greatly enhance the development of a sustainable long-term approach that would embed system knowledge in the community and thus enable everyday conversations about college to take place in all communities.

The development of an agreed sector-wide set of metrics to track and report on pre-entry impact and outcomes is also needed. In particular, we recommend that a ‘tagging’ system be developed that would track students from the point entry to the formal educational system – i.e., primary level. This tagging (with the appropriate safeguards/GDPR compliance) would then follow the student throughout their educational journey. Such a system could be achieved through utilising PPS numbers, with informed parental/guardian consent. For example, students currently at primary and secondary level from the Irish Traveller community are tracked, but because of a lack of a data sharing agreement with relevant stakeholders, this tagging is not extended to further and higher education. This is a primary example of where the use of a consistent, **whole of education approach** would benefit the student, provide accurate information, remove duplication of effort, and enable greater efficiencies in the use of the State’s resources. A nationally validated tool to measure more broadly the outcome of outreach programmes e.g., raising awareness, raising aspirations, community development, change of school culture, is also needed. The use of such metrics would provide consistency in reporting and support strategic targeting of programmes and associated funding.

4.2 Entry pathways

An important feature of Irish society is the national attention given to entry to higher education. The sector has experienced considerable success with the development of supplemental entry pathways such as the HEAR and DARE schemes. There are many entry routes to higher education, and we believe it is important to afford parity of esteem to all of these. The new Access Plan offers an opportunity to reframe the language associated with various entry routes. In particular, we recommend that the criteria for routes such as HEAR and DARE should have ‘**bonus points**’ attached, (as is the case with Gaelige, Mathematics). The current ‘**reduced points**’ practice conveys to students that they have not earned their place and that their educational achievement, and the impact of their circumstances, is neither recognised nor valued.

Furthermore, we also recommend that additional HEA funding should be provided to enable the ring fencing of a minimum of 20% of places in supplementary undergraduate admissions schemes, such as HEAR, DARE, Mature Years, QQI-FET, to enable access to professional ‘high-points’ programmes, including medicine, engineering, teaching, law, veterinary medicine, etc. This would help address the findings of the HEA Deprivation Index data, which suggest that area of study, courses such as finance, banking and medicine have more affluent students, with just 4% of medical enrolments being from disadvantaged areas.²¹

4.2.1 How can pathways between further and training and higher education be developed?

The development of coherent pathways between further and higher education is yet to be fully realised, though progress has been made. For example, UCD has published information about the [QQI entry and progression requirements](#). UCD also offers access or bridging courses designed to prepare adults, who do not have formal qualifications, for successful study at university. These are Special Purpose Awards ([Level 6](#)), offering a path to undergraduate study in UCD. Two courses are offered, 1) Access to [Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences and Law \(AHSSL\)](#); 2) Access to [Science, Engineering, Agricultural Science and Medicine \(SEAM\)](#). These are part-time courses and receive no state aid: however, students from eligible low-income households receive a university bursary.

In this context, we believe that the next National Access Plan should prescribe a clear structure for collaboration between FE and HE, jointly led by SOLAS and the HEA, which will build on ongoing progress. Furthermore, we recommend the development and funding of joint foundation programmes, leveraging the expertise of both the FE and HE sectors.²²

4.3 Recommendations on entry pathways

We recommend that the next Access Plan -

- develops a national outreach and pre-entry approach, building on existing good practice, which ‘reaches back’ along the educational continuum, drawing together all the education and community partners, working collectively in designated areas of social and economic disadvantage

- develops an agreed set of metrics to track and report on pre-entry activity that address both the measurement of progress and impact of outreach interventions

- provides additional ring-fenced funding for a minimum of 20% of places in supplementary undergraduate admissions schemes, such as HEAR, DARE, Mature Years, QQI-FET, to enable access to professional ‘high-points’ programmes, including medicine, engineering, teaching, law, veterinary medicine

- advocates for ‘bonus points’ approach for supplemental entry routes such as HEAR and DARE

- develops a clear structure for the collaboration between FE and HE, jointly led by SOLAS and the HEA to complete the progression articulation and the development and funding of joint foundation programmes.

4.4 Post-entry activity

There is national and international evidence that the first year of undergraduate studies is a crucial year for students ([Irish Universities Association, 2019](#)). Student success and the factors that impact on this are increasingly important in higher education policy and

delivery (HEA et al., 2018). Students' experience is shaped by many issues and challenges including prior educational attainment, finance, part time work, institutional services and facilities, information guidance and support in addition to labour market and policy issues that impact on student non-completion (Morgan, 2012; Yorke & Longden, 2004). Participation by under-represented students continues to grow (HEA, 2018a). These students are more likely to need additional support and guidance in navigating and negotiating their way through college (Fleming, 2010, 2017, 2021; Thomas & Quinn, 2007).

UCD is committed to the continued enhancement of educational experience so that every student may be fully supported in reaching their potential. Overseen by the Dean of Students, Professor Jason Last, we have developed a structured set of student supports that are mainstreamed and available to all. Support includes advice and guidance at various points of transition and progression and encompass the various skills, practical, generic and specific, to the programmes undertaken. These also feature the specialist skills and services required by some students, for whom successful participation is challenging. We developed early interventions and strategies to facilitate students to 'fit in' and engage. Prior to entry, incoming access students are invited to the ALL Welcome Programme, which gives students a clear map of all available supports. The language of support is normalised, and role modelled by the UCD Student Access Leaders, who demonstrate the logic and value of engaging early with the many supports available. The value of 'belonging' is nurtured through early 'onboarding', as incoming students are encouraged to link up with the UCD Peer Mentors. All incoming students are invited to participate in the UCD Orientation – 'Welcome to Inclusive UCD' module, developed, to introduce them to their role in an inclusive university: 3,200 students completed this module in 2020.

4.4.1 Specialist supports targeting under-represented students

The efforts in attracting and admitting under-represented students must continue to be matched by initiatives and resources to support completion and success. There is a significant body of research and experience recognising the merits of supporting student transition to university (Coogan & Sweeney, 2017; Padden & Tonge, 2018; Tormey, 2018). UCD targets these supports at first year students, and they are designed to complement, rather than replace, the significant range of students supports available across the University.

One of the challenges is to frame the supports in a way that students are attracted to them, without feeling diminished or in deficit. Similarly, students who are only accessing specialist supports need to be encouraged, where possible, to avail of more general programme-specific supports. This reflects research that students indicate low awareness and little take-up of institutional support services and high take-up of specialist or departmental support (Dhillon et al., 2008). The challenge is to

mainstream where possible, while scaffolding and bridging where appropriate. In our experience it is vital that we communicate key messages on time and when relevant. Students learn from each other and from their networks, and the use of Student Access Leaders and Student Digital Ambassadors to communicate positive and accessible messages around post-entry supports has been favourably received.

4.4.1.1 Personal supports

Guidance and support are offered to access students, including mature students, those with disabilities and students from low-income households. Students regularly note their challenges in connecting and networking: in a study of our university access students, the participants from low socio-economic groups presented as alien or unfamiliar with their new environment (Fleming, 2013). Several initiatives have been identified to maximise students' opportunities to link in and meet other through various social events and activities. These include, Walks and Talks, Chat Cafés, Film at 5 Club, Mature Student Society events, Access Leader gatherings, pizza parties and ALL Welcome events at the start of each semester.

4.4.1.2 Academic and learning support

Additional academic supports are critical for some incoming access students as they transition to independent learning. We have developed expertise in teaching study skills to under-represented groups, particularly to those who have been absent from formal education for a period or lack the college knowledge at the start of their studies. Supports include a series of academic workshops, scheduled to coincide with the times students need access to specific study skills or material.

4.4.1.3 Students with disabilities

As has been noted earlier, UCD has adopted the mainstreaming model, recognising that specialist services could not, and should not be relied on, to support increasing student numbers. This is particularly pertinent in the case of students with disabilities: the continued growth in such students has warranted a whole-university approach. Consequently, consolidated and enhanced support mechanisms have ensured that information was shared systematically, and that consideration is given to all students with disabilities, and not just those who have a visible disability or have the confidence to make themselves known to faculty and other staff. Knowledge of the diversity in the classroom has encouraged faculty to consider **Universal Design** in the construction and delivery of their courses. Pockets of good practice have led to widespread recognition that this approach is not only beneficial to students with disabilities, but to the entire student population. Relevant support systems include an integrated student record and Needs Assessment, the use of Class Lists to share information to target groups, and an examination reporting system; the use of such has led to a streamlined service with minimal administrative requirements.

Students with disabilities are invited to take part in the Needs Assessment process during which a Support Plan is developed. Students are provided with Reasonable Accommodations as well as Assistive Technology, one-to-one advice from a Disability Adviser, Occupational Therapist and Learning Support Specialist. Irish Sign Language Interpreter, Personal Assistant and/or transport arrangements are also available. Mental health supports are offered. The growth in prevalence of mental ill health among at risk groups has been highlighted by Dooley et al (2019).

The entire range supports offered to students with disabilities are designed to facilitate their transition to higher education, to promote the development of independent learning skills and enable all students to engage fully in their education. The Disability Officer liaises with the UCD's mainstream supports, ensuring these are accessible, including Student Advisers, Programmes & Schools, Assessment, Student Health Service, Library, Maths Support Centre and Writing Centre.

4.4.1.4 Career Support

UCD has recognised that under-represented students face additional challenges in achieving early career success. Hence, a dedicated Careers Consultant supports the inclusion of under-represented groups in professional roles. UCD's **Pathways to the Professions** Project (funded by Rethink Ireland and Mason, Hayes & Curran) is an initiative, spanning pre-and post-entry supports, designed to enable and empower students to succeed in their chosen profession. This model of best practice will be applicable across a broad range of professions and is a collaboration between the university community, professional bodies, employers and the wider outreach community.

4.4.1.5 Accommodation

UCD strives to provide a range of campus accommodation and facilities. Notwithstanding, the issue of accommodation and its affordability is a constant theme. For under-represented students in particular, accommodation availability and cost are particular barriers to participation. The current SUSI grant system is insufficient to cover the cost of student accommodation. Students with disabilities, who need a specific adapted room, experience significant pressure and disadvantage. For example, those students who use a Personal Assistant (PA) are required to fund the cost of their own accommodation and that of their PA. This places these students, for whom the HEA Access Plan considers a key target, at a significant disadvantage, and the cost of accommodation in such circumstances is punitive. For students from low-income households, the university experience includes the additional complications and distractions of long commutes, and/or excessive part-time work to meet rental costs. These additional burdens substantially impact the extent to which these students, similarly prioritised in the National Access Plan, are able to engage in both curricular

and co-curricular activities, and hence the overall benefits of their higher education experience.

4.4.2 Recommendations for post-entry supports

We recommend that the next Access Plan -

promotes a **continuum of student support provision** - recognising that students will have distinct needs at pre-entry, on transition, and on progression to postgraduate level education and to careers

supports the targeting of supports at those most in need, at risk, and those with complex needs - using the intersectionality of equity groups as a guide

sets targets and tracks Access Graduate Outcomes to ensure that graduates who have come through an access pathway can access, progress, complete and succeed professionally in line with their peers, including in Erasmus placements, Study Abroad, Internships and other co-curricular activities

ensures the costs of accommodation are addressed for targeted students from low-income households and those with disabilities, who use a PA.

How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded with HEIs?

5. How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded with HEIs?

We believe that mainstreaming access and inclusion is critical to implementing this vision for equity of access. The importance of mainstreaming was addressed in all three previous Access Plans (HEA, 2004, 2008, 2015). Acknowledging the commitment of higher education institutions to access, the HEA recommended a need to “integrate the principle of equity of access more fully into the everyday life of the HEIs so that it permeates all faculties and departments, and is not marginalised as the responsibility of the designated access office” (HEA, 2015, p. 25).

Notwithstanding this clear policy objective, implementation of mainstreaming has yet to be fully realised across the sector. Kelly (2017), conducted a study of the implementation of access policy in Ireland’s universities, and found an absence of institution-wide policies and practices to foster and inculcate inclusion and diversity. Anne Rabbitte, T.D. and Minister for Disability speaking at the [IUA Inclusive University – moving access, diversity and inclusion from the margins in higher education](#), also noted the absence of progress in the area of mainstreaming. The HEA, in its review of the access progress, noted the “uncertainty in higher education institutions as to the meaning of mainstreaming and its operation in practice” (HEA, 2018a, p. 14).

Despite this pessimistic assessment, UCD has pioneered the development of mainstreaming and the integration of access into all aspects of university life. The [UCD University for All](#) initiative is the first whole-institution approach in higher education in

Ireland. It offers a model of best practice that addresses all the key components to realise the institutional transformation and culture change needed to fully embed and mainstream access and inclusion (Kelly & Padden, 2018). Critically, the UCD University for All initiative is embedded in the University's governance structures including, the UMT Education Group, chaired by the Registrar and Deputy President, Professor Mark Rogers, with

a 'dotted line' to Professor Colin Scott, Vice President for Equality, Diversity & Inclusion. The University Widening Participation Committee (WPC) chaired by Professor Grace Mulcahy, oversees and monitors implementation of this initiative, while UCD Access & Lifelong Learning enables and supports the University to realise its ambition to be a University for All, where access and inclusion is everyone's business (UCD, 2020)

Universal Design is a central component of UCD's University for All initiative (CAST, 2018). In August 2020, UCD Access & Lifelong Learning agreed a strategic partnership with AHEAD to deliver a nationwide roll out of the National Forum's Digital Badge in Universal Design for Teaching and Learning from October to December. Over 550 staff from HE and FE were awarded the Badge in January 2021, with over 100 of those staff also awarded the accompanying Facilitator's Badge.

In April 2021, UCD Access & Lifelong Learning, in collaboration with UCD Teaching & Learning and UCD Equality Diversity & Inclusion, launched the HEA-funded University for All Faculty Partnership Programme. This is designed to support and accelerate the implementation of University Design for Learning (UDL) and offers faculty a structured opportunity to undertake the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) training, to qualify as a UDL Facilitator, and become academic role models who will persuade and influence others as to the merits of inclusion for all students. The development of bespoke Universal Design training for other professional groups in higher education is underway.

Another key component of UCD's University for All initiative is the recognition of all incoming students and their role and contribution to an inclusive university. In this context, we developed and embedded a module in the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for all incoming students at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Using interactive scenario-based learning materials, students learn about the University's approach to inclusion and, vitally, how they can fulfil their role in an inclusive university. Finally, the implementation of UCD's University for All initiative relies on a formal Action Planning process, the availability of access data (See Section 3.2), as well as the use of accessibility tools, such as Ally and Sensus Access, which improve the accessibility of course content and facilitate the provision of accessibility reports.

5.1 Recommendations for Mainstreaming of Access and Inclusion

We recommend that the next Access Plan -

actively supports, enables and monitors the implementation of a whole-institution approach to access and inclusion

promotes a Universal Design for Learning approach to be used throughout higher education to promote and reinforce access and inclusive practice.

supports the development of a sector-wide development and implementation of a Universal Design professional development programme for all faculty and staff

promotes the development and provision of an orientation module to introduce all incoming students to their role in an inclusive university

develops a set of agreed metrics that enable the implementation of mainstreaming to be tracked and reported, including the number of staff trained in the principles of Universal Design, student feedback of their experience of inclusion, and the development of Mainstreaming Implementation Plans.

How can current funding programmes be better utilised to further the objectives of the National Access Plan?³⁶

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

UCD welcomes and appreciates the various funding streams that support access and enable to higher education for under-represented student groups. These have enabled the development of access infrastructure, and an enhancement of services and provision. As participation of students from under-represented groups continues to grow (HEA, 2018a), there is a need to match this with increased levels of financial support, and to consolidate and streamline access funding streams.

The University welcomes the increased financial allocation for the 1916 Bursaries, the extension of these awards to graduate students, and the commitment to develop Central Applications System to manage these Bursaries. Notwithstanding this enhancement, the numbers of students that need financial supports remains high and so additional state bursaries are needed. UCD's own Cothrom na Féinne scholarship programme, is Ireland's largest donor-funded scheme for under-represented groups in higher education, currently supporting 335 access students.

Recently, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris, T.D. initiated a review of the SUSI scheme. In our submission to this review, we highlighted the need greater coherence in financial supports, and the enhancement of the SUSI system to ensure that it is 'fit for purpose', enabling the participation of students from the designated target groups, enabling them to study at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, on either full-time or part-time basis (Tormey & Tracey, 2021). The Student Assistance Fund (SAF), provides a 'financial safety net' but needs to be further augmented to take account of the increasing costs of

higher education, posing significant challenges to participation of students from low-income households (TU Dublin, 2021).

Other financial supports, such as those provided by the Department of Social Protection (DSP), the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) are also critical in enabling participation. Students would benefit greatly from greater coherence, clarity and promotion of the full range of range of financial assistance.

Building on the success and growth of the National Access Plan, additional funding is required to enable participation of under-represented groups at undergraduate and graduate levels. To fully reflect the diversity of Ireland's population, we are recommending the provision of additional ring-fenced funding to allow a minimum of 20% of places be designated for under-represented student groups. As discussed, (See Section 7), we recommend that part-time students should be treated equitably; and therefore, recommend that funding pro rata per volume of accredited learning, expressed in terms of ECTS, should be applied, including the provision of student fees, grants, capitation and other financial supports.

The new Access Plan affords an opportunity for streamlining, consolidation of effort and a reduction in administrative burden. We welcome the extension to the PATH 3 funding stream, and the development of a central applications facility for PATH 2, (1916 Bursaries), which it is anticipated, will significantly reduce the administrative burden on individual institutions, as well as improving the clarity for applicants. The PATH strands (1,2,3) were conceived as three standalone initiatives, but we recommend that their effectiveness could be greatly enhanced if the PATH 1 and 3 strands were to be aligned, with a common approach, structures and reporting mechanisms. As discussed earlier (See Section 4.2.1), we also recommend an alignment of the State's resources and efforts to address the development, provision and funding of joint foundation programmes, leveraging the expertise of both the FE and HE sectors.

6.1 Recommendations on better utilisation of current funding programmes

We recommend that the next Access Plan -

further increases the number of 1916 Bursaries available at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels

enhances and ensures that the SUSI system is 'fit for purpose', thereby enabling the participation of students from the designated target groups, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, on either full-time or part-time basis

promotes greater coherence, clarity and promotion of the full range of financial assistance, including the Department of Social Protection (DSP), and Back to Education Allowance (BTEA)

provides additional ring-fenced funding to allow a minimum of 20% of places be designated for under-represented student groups at undergraduate and postgraduate levels

promotes the alignment of the State's resources and efforts to address the development, provision and funding of joint foundation programmes, leveraging the expertise of both the FE and HE sectors

streamlines and align PATH 1 and 3 strands, enabling a common approach, structures and reporting mechanisms.

Part-time and flexible study⁴⁰

7. Part-time and flexible study

It is recognised that the provision of part-time, flexible, higher education is integral to diversifying the student population in higher education (DES, 2011; HEA, 2012). The intent to provide full equality of provision and support for all learners, regardless of mode or duration of study was signalled by the HEA as early as 2016. UCD's **Open Learning** programme is an innovative approach aimed at enabling learning to fit around the student's life, making it a viable option regardless of the circumstances (Fleming, 2017).

Nationally, some progress has been made with the extension of the Student Assistance Fund, Fund for Students with Disabilities, the PATH 1916 Bursaries, together with the addition of Springboard to address the needs of part-time students.

Notwithstanding this progress, fundamental issues remain unaddressed at policy and system levels. Proportionately, part-time students have remained steady at just 17% of all enrolments since 2012/13, with remote (distance learning) students increasing from only 1% to 3% in that time (HEA, 2018c). This falls considerably short of the 22% by 2019 target in the National Access Plan, which was maintained by the Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021 (HEA, 2018a), and the 25% by 2021 target in the Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018-2020 (HEA, 2018b), from a 20% baseline in 2016/17.

Enabling flexible participation of under-represented groups, and in particular, students in employment, those with caring responsibilities and disability and health considerations, warrants urgent attention. The debate on part-time/ flexible higher education has gone on for far too long. The sector has signalled its commitment to such provision and advocates a reimagined approach that is coherent, systemic and viable and moves from 'othering' students who study on a part-time basis to an institution-wide, equality of provision and support (IUA Part-Time/ Flexible Subgroup (Chaired by Dr Anna Kelly, 2020). This sectoral commitment would be greatly enhanced by the development of a lifelong-learning policy. Currently, participation in lifelong learning in

Ireland is significantly below the EU average, and participation rates for those in employment is even lower. The IUA's 'A Charter for Irish Universities', reflects the sector's commitment to expanding capacity to drive adult (25-64) lifelong learning participation from the current 6.5% to the EU average of 10.7% by 2030. 41

7.1 Recommendations for Part-time and Flexible Study

We recommend that the next Access Plan -

equitably funds all students by volumes of accredited learning, expressed in terms of ECTS, at state-funded HEIs in the provision of student fees, grants, capitation and other financial supports

sets stretch targets for the parity of treatment of access students who would benefit from studying part time, including students with disabilities, mature students, and students with caring responsibilities

promotes a coherent, systematic and viable approach that moves from 'othering' of part-time/ flexible students, using a Universal Design approach, and in line with the HEA's 2012 recommendations, and the report of the IUA Part-time/Flexible Sub Group, 2020.

What challenges has COVID-19 presented in relation to an inclusive higher education system and how can these be addressed?44

8. What challenges has COVID-19 presented in relation to an inclusive higher education system and how can these be addressed?

The oft quoted "Never let a good crisis go to waste" attributed to Winston Churchill, is appropriate when considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the higher education system in Ireland. The crisis prompted a range of flexible and innovative solutions to student support and challenged many assumptions and practices, prompting more flexible models of delivery and learning.

The UCD Report on Learning at-distance during COVID-19 Autumn Trimester 2020/21 (Clarke et al., 2021) captures the adaptations and lessons learned. This report offers a series of recommendations that coincide with the remit of this access plan consultation. The authors captured the experience of students through a survey, and noted the benefits of leveraging the experience of the Autumn trimester to inform future planning for the upcoming academic sessions, in response to the prevailing public health advice. This report also notes the importance of planning how to provide a campus-based experience for students in a 'hyflex' environment, where some students remain learning virtually, and others have an opportunity for face-to face interaction. The authors emphasise the need to consider 'implementing innovative approaches to support students in staying connected and to provide channels for increased interaction, especially in the teaching and learning context'.

A post-COVID-19 campus will require students to adapt anew to face-to-face learning and this poses challenges as they transition from remote learning. Critically, those students for whom a remote learning environment was positive, will have to either adapt or negotiate a more flexible approach to their learning.

One clear benefit of the adaptability of COVID-19 has been the demonstration of the merits of flexibility. Those students for whom full-time engagement in higher education is not an option due to work, family commitments or health factors, have demonstrated that they can effectively engage with the academy remotely. This illustrates the potential of a flexible higher education provision that addresses the need of those for whom previous provision, requiring on-campus presence, was a barrier to access. The COVID-19 crisis also highlighted the divide between those students who are resourced, and those who are not. This was particularly evident with challenges around internet connectivity, as well as the absence of an appropriate place to study. The [HEA Laptop Loan Scheme](#) was a welcome support initiative, although accompanied by significant administrative burden.

8.1 Recommendations arising from experience of the COVID-19 crisis

We recommend that the next Access Plan -

leverage the learning from COVID-19 and continue to offer a flexible approach to accommodate students with a need to learn remotely

replaces the Laptop Loan Scheme with a permanent Laptop Scheme, as a necessary support for targeted low-income students.

Consultation Process

The consultation process that informed this paper was led by Dr Anna Kelly, and comprised a survey of:

UCD Widening Participation Committee (WPC)

UCD Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Committee

UCD Access & Lifelong (ALL) team

Current access students

UCD Student Union

UCD Outreach partners.

A total of 36 staff and 118 student responses were received. In addition, focus groups were held with ALL staff, UCD Access Student Leaders, as well as consultation with the UCD Registrar & Deputy President, the Chair of the UCD Widening Participation Committee, and the Vice-President for UCD Equality, Diversity & Inclusion.