

## Submission 2.10 University of Limerick

The University of Limerick welcomes the opportunity to comment on the National Access Plan 2022 - 2026 consultation paper. The University of Limerick has a long and well-established commitment to working with communities challenged by social and economic exclusion in Limerick city and county, exemplified in over 25 years of dedicated work aimed at increasing access and widening participation from groups under-represented in higher education. It is important to highlight the context in which the University of Limerick operates for the purpose of this consultation.

Limerick is characterised by higher degrees of social and economic inequality in comparison to national norms. According to the CSO (2016), some of the most disadvantaged Electoral Districts (EDs) in the country are concentrated in Limerick. Such is the deeply entrenched, and complex nature of social and economic exclusion in Limerick, parts of the city have been undergoing an intense government mandated programme of physical, social and economic Regeneration, since 2008. Whilst some progress has been made to date, it remains the case that the most disadvantaged EDs in Limerick continue to lag behind national norms on every indicator used to measure disadvantage including levels of unemployment, educational attainment, and dependency on Social Welfare.<sup>1</sup>

Against this backdrop of a deep historical legacy of low employment and education attainment levels, the Limerick Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) 2016-2012 highlighted the 'strong educational infrastructure at 3rd level' as one of City's core strengths. In this context, there have been some increases in the number of students progressing to 3rd level from the most disadvantaged EDs in recent years.

Whilst these rates fall short of what we would like them to be, it underscores the need for sustained commitment and investment in pre-entry activities and programmes, particularly in the most disadvantaged EDs. This is necessary if we are to contribute to the objectives of National Policy in respect of access and widening participation and significantly disrupt the deeply entrenched nature of social, economic and educational disadvantage that exists in the wider Limerick context.

Limerick also occupies a unique position in the Post Primary educational landscape. Limerick is the only city in the country, which operates a common application system for entry into Post Primary schools. This system was introduced in 2005 in response to the historical legacy of refusing Post Primary school places to some students coming from the most disadvantaged ED areas in Limerick. The intention of the system is to ensure more equity and transparency on the part of local Post Primary schools in the allocation of school places and to ensure that no student would be without a Post Primary school place. This further highlights the sensitive and challenging context in which we are working in to promote and implement the access and widening

participation agenda. The Limerick context also reflects wider evidence that highlights the organisation and composition of schools as ‘advantaging some and disadvantaging others’<sup>3</sup>. For example, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme remains orientated towards socio-economically disadvantaged students, with some evidence that these cohorts of students are being ‘assigned’ into LCA, an unintended consequence of which is social exclusion that continues into the post-school years, as such students are precluded from entering higher education, at least directly. This accentuates the importance of a whole-of-education approach in realising the objectives of the National Access Plan 2022 - 2026.

### **Observations and Recommendations**

UL makes the following observations and recommendations towards the development of the next National Access Plan:

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

To ensure that all members of society irrespective of economic status, social class, ethnicity, geographical location, disability and/or other personal circumstances can access, and are supported to participate in higher education.

#### **Question 2: 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)?**

Socio-economically disadvantaged students, mature students and students with a disability should remain priority target groups, as maximum levels of participation among these groups have yet to be achieved nationally. In addition, we recommend that learners who are in the Care of the State, Travellers and other minority groups be specified as target groups in the new National Access Plan.

We would also like to make a point in relation to the statistics highlighted in the consultation document as they relate to rates of access of target students who are categorised as coming from extremely disadvantaged communities, as follows:

Through its inclusion in the Regeneration Programme, Limerick has experienced changing population patterns, particularly the communities categorised as extremely disadvantaged, over the past ten years. Levels of depopulation within in the communities of O’Malley Park (Galvone B), St. Mary’s Park (John’s A) and Ballinacurra Weston (Prospect A and B) have all seen significant decreases in population. In particular, the population of O’Malley Park has fallen by half since 2006<sup>4</sup>.

This has implications for capturing the actual profile of under-represented learners who have experienced disadvantage because of the area they come from. It also has

implications for measuring success in relation to progression rates to higher education among this cohort of students.

First, the data does not capture students from these areas who were relocated under a regeneration programme prior to entering 6th year of school. Nevertheless, such students may have spent their entire childhood and majority of their adolescence living in an extremely disadvantage area. It is important to acknowledge that the associated disadvantage that comes from living in an extremely disadvantaged area is not simply erased by relocation. This needs to be recognised in official data. Second, through government-induced Regeneration measures aimed at depopulating extremely disadvantaged areas impacts the number of college-going age students who are currently living in these communities at any given time.

To reflect the actual situation, we recommend that the official data metrics for collating statistics include a question asking if the student has been relocated under a local authority housing/regeneration programme and if so to include the postcode of that area. We also recommend that measures of success in attracting students from extremely disadvantaged areas are benchmarked against the actual percentage of students who live in such communities, and who are of college going age in annual assessments as opposed to an overall generic percentage being used.

#### **Disability Student Data:**

We welcome and acknowledge that the previous National Access Plan target of 8% for students with disabilities has now been exceeded. However, it should be noted that differences exist between DEIS and non-DEIS schools in rates of progression through the DARE scheme.

With regard to DARE and school profile, a considerably higher application rate comes from 'other schools', the majority of which are fee paying schools. The data also indicates that applications from these schools are more likely to be deemed eligible for DARE.<sup>7</sup> This warrants specific targeting of DEIS schools as such students are particularly at risk in this group with very few gaining access to higher education. Pre-entry activities for this group must start early and may require specific targeted career guidance support.

#### **Mature Student Data:**

The participation rate of 7.1% covers all mature students. In this respect, the university welcomes the recent HEA publication 'Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education - What are the Challenges? Recommendations for the Future'. Sections 3 'Trends in Mature Student Participation', and 4 'Barriers to Participation' of the report provide a critical roadmap for HEIs into where additional pre-entry work is needed and what modes of delivery would be most suitable for this cohort of students going forward.

#### **Question 4: How can current funding programmes be better utilised to further the objectives of the National Access Plan?**

The university acknowledges the funding streams which support Access infrastructure and the progress which has been made by the provision of additional funding, for example, through the PATH programmes, which have supported increased capacity to carry out additional activities and programmes to enhance and extend upon our existing work in the area of access and widening participation.

The university can report significant engagement in government initiatives for non-traditional disadvantaged learners, including programmes that specifically bridge the learning gap between levels 6-9. For example, UL is the only university in Ireland engaged in the National Apprenticeship System, and it has expanded Springboard provision to assist the unemployed to gain new skills for the workforce over the last 5 years. Uptake in such programmes would be improved by student support frameworks (pre and post-entry) that assist transition back to education, from course selection and application to assimilating to a new learning environment. It's notable that access for candidates without standard academic entry qualifications is facilitated through the university's Recognition of Prior Learning Policy.

#### **Resourcing the National Access Plan – Sustainable Access Measures:**

In relation to resourcing the National Access Plan, the access infrastructure required within the HEIs needs to be reviewed. This is to ensure that the infrastructure requirement to deliver on the plan is in place in the HEIs. We recommend a national benchmarking exercise to ensure that the access infrastructure within HEIs is sufficient to deliver on what is going to be a very ambitious plan. The current situation of relying on additional funding is not sustainable. What is required is a consistent and reliable funding stream for access and widening participation. This funding stream would then allow HEIs to receive funding to support its access infrastructure in creating the necessary professional service that is required. The certainty of funding would enable us to attract and retain high quality and experienced professional staff.

The university also welcomes the timely review of SUSI. We recommend that all funding for students should be mainstreamed through SUSI and that this system be student centric. We recommend SUSI maintenance rates be increased and benchmarked against the poverty threshold.

#### **The revised SUSI financial package should take account of and reflect the cost of:**

Laptop and technology set up

Increased cost of living for some students with a disability

Childcare

Transport

Meals

Accommodation

We recommend that the Student Assistance Fund be integrated into SUSI to support the plan. A smaller student assistance fund to be available in HEIs to respond to individual cases of emergency/unexpected financial hardship for students in accessing their higher education.

We also recommend a review of the policy that only allows a student to be in receipt of either Back to Education Allowance or SUSI.

### **Question 6: How can a whole-of education approach to widening participation in higher education be achieved?**

New perspectives need to be explored to encourage a whole-of-education strategy to create pre-entry activities that are clearly defined for progression through the education system. We recommend that the idea of going to college becomes part of the curriculum from primary school with pre-entry activities delivered by the HEIs as part of the curriculum. This would embed the idea for young children to start thinking about ‘what am I going to be when I leave school’, whilst also reinforcing the idea that they will ‘be’ something and going to college is one of the possibilities. Pre-entry activities need to be explicitly stated as an objective in the DEIS plans. This will require greater synergy between primary, secondary, adult education and HEIs.

Furthermore, a continued emphasis on the delivery of pre-entry activities in partnership with other stakeholders who have a remit for supporting access to education, school retention and progression to higher education among key target groups is an essential component of this strategy. This will enable a wider reach to target students and the building and sharing of knowledge between HEIs and community partners in education. Hubs operated in communities by HEIs are a valuable resource. They provide both opportunities to engage and work with target students and to allow the flow of accurate information and knowledge between HEIs and community partners. One approach to increasing the number of these hubs would be for HEIs to have a dedicated space at all their geographical locations for the work of access and widening participation. In addition, it is important that other social initiatives such as School Completion programmes and the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP) particularly the Education Pillar, continue to provide for individual support for potential target students to realise the aims of the new National Access Plan.

The principles underpinning access and widening participation are ones of fairness and equity. The purpose of post-entry support for under-represented students is to level the playing field. It is important to recognise the target groups are not homogenous but

instead have varying different needs and abilities. Therefore, it is essential that a system of supports for under-represented students is available in all HEIs. These supports need to be responsive to the individual needs and circumstances of target students thus ensuring no one is left behind. This will make sure that target students are supported throughout their studies to successful graduation leading to graduate employment.

**Question 7: How can pathways between further education and training and higher education be better developed?**

The Midwest region has a strong skills architecture linking education providers (UL, LIT, MIC, private providers and the Education Training Boards) with regional employers under the Midwest Regional Skills Forum (MRSF), Explore Engineering and Limerick for IT and the Limerick Lifelong Learning Festival targets community integration with the MRSF and education providers. Through this architecture, curriculum planning across NFQ levels has been achieved and the university has made significant gains in reaching the unemployed through new course developments to meet specific skills gaps. Such initiatives can be delivered by the university only if funding is sustained over time thus enabling long term planning and enhancing access.

We recommend an increase in the number of places available in HEIs through QQI. In addition, priority for places on the QQI course should be for students who are within specified target groups. The HEAR/DARE schemes, for example, could be adapted to identify and assess target students for priority allocation.

We also recommend the development, in partnership with FEIs, of an Access QQI course for delivery in the FEIs nationwide.

**Question 9: What challenges has Covid-19 presented in relation to an inclusive higher education system and how can they be addressed?**

It is true to say that COVID-19 has created challenges and provided opportunities. In respect to the challenges, feedback from the students is as follows:

Some struggled with technical modules and were unable to attend laboratories or learn in person;

Some students found that attending a class virtually at a prescribed time was made difficult by the circumstances in which they were living;

Many students reported a drastic reduction in family income due to COVID-19 job losses. Thankfully, this was somewhat alleviated by the additional funding through the Student Assistance Fund;

The social aspect of the college experience was eroded;

The inconsistency of broadband coverage across the country hindered students ability to engage with their learning;

Some students reported a negative impact on their physical and mental health caused by learning in isolation and the lack of social interaction;

Some students found it difficult to concentrate on their studies because of lack of dedicated study space in their home;

Some students had to share technological devices with other members of their families who were also working from home;

Some students reported the difficulty of balancing care responsibilities and their studies.

Many sectors of employment have been adversely affected by COVID-19 (e.g. aviation, retail, hospitality). Some suffering job loss or on reduced hours returned to professional education to maximise available time and avail where possible of funded places at the university.

Some sectors of employment have been positively affected by COVID-19 (e.g. manufacturing, pharmaceuticals and ICT). Professional students in part-time education report higher stress levels in maintaining work – life balance in the context of busier working demands.

We also highlight the unexpected opportunities that COVID-19 has presented:

There has always been a Digital Divide for some students, which became more apparent during Covid-19. We acknowledge the timely and effective response by the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in the roll out of the Laptop Loan Scheme. Students reported that this scheme was extremely beneficial and essential to access their learning.

Sessions previously held in a physical space had to transfer to online platforms. This provided an opportunity for more participants to access information sessions and programmes. Barriers, which could have previously prevented attendance in person, such as travel were eliminated. A blended approach should continue post Covid-19, including supporting learners to acquire the skills to engage with learning.

Covid-19 provided an opportunity to explore new ways of learning and assessment. As a result, this presents the opportunity for a blended approach post Covid-19.

For students with disabilities, online meetings worked well and were more accessible for them. A virtual option should be available post Covid-19.

Communicating the National Access Plan:

We recommend developing a National Communications Strategy to communicate the National Access Plan. The publicising of the Plan should include why the Plan is important to Irish society and the country. It should also highlight pre-entry activity carried out by the different HEIs, entry routes to Higher Education and the post-entry support available to target students. The target audience should include potential students, their parents/guardians, schools and key education partners to learn more about access and widening participation.

Cross-government integration and communication between departments with responsibilities for supporting equity of access will be necessary in meeting the objectives of the National Access Plan.