

## Submission 2.21 Waterford IT

General Remarks 1. Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the National Access Plan 2022-2026 (NAP). 2. We believe that in order for the new national access plan to be fully inclusive, it needs to embrace the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal 4: Quality Education. The Goal is to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" and this needs to be strongly endorsed at national level with a robust and well-funded access plan supported by appropriate national policy and legislation. As the European Union has stated, "Widespread access to quality education and training is a driver of economic growth, social cohesion, research and innovation - and dramatically increases citizens' prospects for personal development."<sup>1</sup> WIT fully subscribes to this position and in particular supports access to quality higher education, whilst aspiring to equity of outcome, at a regional level as critical for community and citizen empowerment, social cohesion and economic growth within the South East. 3. The comments below may be contextualized within the Institute's most recent Strategic Plan (2018-2021) which sets as a strategic priority the goal of becoming a more accessible institution that offers a wide range of learning opportunities, access and progression routes and flexible modes of engagement with learning that reflect learner needs and societal change. The WIT plan makes provision for • targeted approaches to meet quotas of specific access cohorts identified in National policy; • vertical integration from pre-school to post-secondary through supporting early intervention programmes and key transitions in education; • recruitment activities based on accurate data pertaining to local and regional participation rates of under-represented groups; • the consolidation and expansion of our pathway programme; and • the implementation of universal design in the curriculum to ensure its accessibility.

The Institute's prioritisation of these goals informs the remarks that follow.

4. The remarks below are set out according to the questions presented in the consultation documentation.

Overall Vision 5. WIT supports an approach to equity of access where equity for all is mainstreamed as part of the day-to-day activities and culture of the organization. In order to achieve this, it is critical that in terms of organizational approach, systems, and activities that "access" cohorts are not treated as exceptional but that equitable access and outcomes to education as a general principle is more visible and more embraced within the organization and the wider HE landscape. The response to COVID has shown, in fact, that many of the issues traditionally faced by access cohorts (flexibility in terms of delivery and assessment, access to study facilities and IT infrastructure including broadband, for instance) are shared across the broader student population; "access" needs are largely the needs of all students. At the same time, the

NAP access cohorts experience intersectionality of disadvantage and therefore need to be treated as exceptional in terms of attaining equality of outcome. 6. We note that equity of access does not mean equity of outcome. It is vital that emphasis is placed not just on securing access to education but on securing successful outcomes for individuals and that the requisite supports are in place to ensure those successful outcomes. As an Institute we are committed to examining the underlying philosophies that inform our policies and practices so we can identify our best practice and adapt where necessary in order to create the conditions in which all our diverse groups can access, participate and achieved equality of outcome in our Institute.

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7. It is important there is a cohesive, whole-of-education approach to access; there must be a consistent vision and structure in support of access from primary school through to PhD. There must be seamless and flexible transition mechanisms and pathways between elements in the education system. In particular, we suggest increased investment and support for pathways and flexibility between Further and Higher Education, in both directions. It is imperative that the next NAP fosters transition pathways from early years to higher education especially for already identified NAP target groups and additional cohorts who will require pre-transition interventions in these areas. There must also be policy consistency across the entire system; policy that encourages extending lifelong learning opportunities, for instance, must also find expression in funding support for these same cohorts, a consistency in this particular case not evident at the moment. 8. It is critical that decision-making in relation to access is data-driven. There is currently a dearth of reliable and comparable data—for multiple reasons, including GDPR—and appropriate instruments must be developed to remedy this. Tracking student success through data is critical in supporting the Institute in achieving the NAP targets.

Target Groups 9. We suggest that there needs to be flexibility in determining access target groups at institutional level; institutions have established partnerships from which they have gained shared knowledge of the groups, schools and communities that we are working with. For instance, in WIT's experience, there are many students who we know are disadvantaged attending non-Deis schools and yet national schemes direct us to deal with Deis schools only. It is important that the principle of dealing with individual people and not classifications informs access initiatives; the more prescription there is around target groups, the more inflexible institutions are obliged to be, the less able we are to support students and applicants in meaningful ways. 10. We note a number of cohorts that seem to fall between various national funding and support schemes. These groups include asylum seekers, Youth Reach/early school-leaver groups, and disadvantaged part-time students. Again, as indicated above, it is important that there is flexibility in dealing with such groups as they are not currently identified as NAP target cohort and also but still require support and facilitation. 11.

Access to higher education for lifelong learners is not solely focused on the economic skills agenda. The primary policy instruments and funding for lifelong learners have been Springboard+, Skillnet and the Human Capital initiative. These developments are welcome but are limited in terms of scope. Higher education offers more than simply access to skills and can offer individuals opportunities to engage and embrace learning that is brought back into the home, the community and the voluntary sectors, thus creating a more equal society. These types of programme need to be supported for lifelong learners and should feature in the access plan. 12. The access agenda for lifelong learners is often presented as supports for mature learners who are accessing third level education on a full time basis. Mature learners increasingly seek part-time, flexible options to pursue and engage with third level education. It is imperative that access supports for disadvantaged mature students extend to lifelong learning students accessing part-time programmes. 13. The goal of increasing diversity amongst our third level population is very welcome. One area where this is extremely important is teacher education. Role-modelling and mentorship are accepted as means of encouraging students from socio-economic disadvantaged areas to pursue careers as teachers. Widening participation on teacher education programmes is an access issue and further supports and initiatives that support HEIs to ensure diversity in this domain are to be welcomed. WIT offers a range of teacher education programmes for the further education sector and suggests that further support could be leveraged here to address diversity in teacher education. We recommend that Path 1 and Initiatives addressing under-represented groups and role models in Initial Teacher Education should include Teacher Education qualifications introduced for the Further Education sector (and not be limited to primary and second level teacher education programmes).

14. RPL has a critical role to play in widening access especially for lifelong learners. Greater awareness of RPL routes and how RPL can be used for access to third level programmes is required. WIT has a HEA funded project that is developing a portal for lifelong learners that applies RPL for access and progression. HEIs need to open up access routes and use RPL as a means of encouraging lifelong learners to progress their learning. A national RPL portal would be desirable here and a clear national requirement for HEI's to apply RPL to all programmes. 15. A focus on pathways through education to employment for under-represented groups is required, for instance, supporting students with disabilities and members of the travelling community and other cohorts named in this document to successful outcomes and employment.

Pre-Entry, Entry, Student Success and Progression 16. We suggest pre-entry supports should include (a) Increased outreach initiatives, (b) early interventions with high support needs e.g. disability, and (c) pathways for transitioning from primary school upwards through education. As indicated above, this requires a coherent, whole-of-education approach to access and success. The NAP could strengthen the focus on Community Education as a mechanism to support equity of access in higher education.

17. It is important that appropriate structures and supports are available through the education lifecycle for the student. With regard to post-entry supports, we suggest the need for (a) life skills courses that teach students how to live away from home and how to communicate with the institution (writing appropriately worded emails, for instance); (b) academic support for access students similar to what is delivered by disability office (and an allowable category of funding under the FSD), and which was achieved this academic year because of Covid fund; (c) support and advice on becoming members of social networks and developing social capital; (d) strong support for mentoring and guidance programmes. We note that, in WIT's case, we have been able to support these types of initiatives only through funded projects. It would be far preferable and more sustainable to be able to have dedicated, baseline resources in support of these programmes. 18. Specific supports are required for students moving between FE and HE. 19. In all cases, it is important that students have opportunities to reengage and that engagement in one programme does not prohibit future engagement in another. We must, in other words, facilitate second chances in access, and it is especially important that supports to engage in second chance education are targeted to cohorts who have experienced previous educational disadvantage. 20. We note the general low levels of involvement of access cohorts in international mobility activities. Such activities represent a rich, sometimes transformative opportunity and the access plan should consider means better to support the involvement of access students in internationalization.

Funding and Support 21. A comprehensive review—involving all the relevant stakeholders—should take place into the supports available in support of educational access. In our view mainstreaming supports for all learners regardless of mode of study and duration is recommended. 22. While the Student Assistance Fund was doubled in 2019/20 for full time students, there was no change in the SAF allocation for part-time students. This would appear to be at odds with any policy that supports an inclusive approach to learners. We suggest that this is reviewed and supports are offered to all learners in third level. 23. The model of funding allocation from the HEA does not allow for strategic sustainable development of services. Funding allocations are year to year most often tied to specific student need. This does not allow for service development which in turn effects the resources that we can align to individual students under our funding model. We recommend that there is multi-year funding so that longer term planning can

take place. It must be recognized that there is significant additional work created for staff to monitor and co-ordinate ad-hoc funding and there is very great difficulty in developing sustainable and strategic initiatives when funding is granted for a specific period of time. 24. More autonomy in how funds are utilized would be welcome. The very Rigid guidelines on how funding can be spent and by whom needs to be revisited. 25. The FSD is based on previous year and budget allocated is based on the profile of

the previous year, which does not match the needs of the current cohort. A more nuanced instrument needs to be developed. 26. We note the additional administrative burden associated with the management of multiple funds. Access and support services are better deployed working directly with students and yet have in our case to absorb the administrative load. There should be some consideration given to staffing appropriate to these functions. In addition, the NAP needs to lead at policy level in driving the HEI infrastructural staffing frameworks to support a whole of institution approach to equity of access and outcome.

Mainstreaming UDL 27. The Universal Design for Learning ethos needs to be adopted in a whole institute approach, that is, everyone is responsible to ensure equitable access is achieved. In turn this requires a whole of education approach to UDL. 28. UDL adoption must be a core Institutional goal integrated across departmental policies as it benefits everybody including but not limited to students with disabilities, students with low literacy levels and those with caring, work or family responsibilities etc. 29. Adopting a UDL whole of education approach is advocated as it provides an evidenced based framework for equitable access.

HEIs and Partners: Access in Context 30. We advocate above for a more holistic approach to access embracing a whole-of-education approach. We strongly support partnership, therefore, as critical to delivering on access opportunities. However, building pathways and partnerships needs a commitment of funding to ensure partnerships can be sustained once developed. Multi-year funding is necessary to sustain partnership as well as to plan strategically. 31. Data sharing between sectors and across education remains problematic. It would be helpful to have the capacity to share data on students in order to track student progress and intervene at the optimum time in support of students.

COVID-19 and Access 32. Covid-19 has involved a major shift in the delivery of education across all education sectors, with consequently a profound impact on access. On the positive side, many students have re-registered to complete exams / modules which they would not have otherwise because of geographical location for example. In addition, academic workshops have seen the greatest numbers in attendance since its development and more accessible times e.g., late evening / Saturday morning because of the mode of delivery. However, there are issues around the availability of technology e.g., connectivity and equipment (laptops). Mental Health and fatigue have been critical issues which are evidenced throughout the student population. 33. Covid has seen an increased need for individual support with students – often this was the only link a student had to access information and ask questions. Many students were not given the opportunity to become members of social networks and to have opportunities to interact with their peer inside and

outside of the classroom. Peer interaction is a core element of developing a sense of belonging and developing social capital 34. The need for academic learning support has increased significantly. Expectations of support around the provision of, for instance, laptops will need to be managed; the removal of certain provision when it is expected can be very damaging. 35. Many outreach activities with primary and second level schools were impacted by Covid. It remains to be seen what the long-term impact on these cohorts will be.