

Submission 4.36 AONTAS

About AONTAS

AONTAS is a long established (1969), non-governmental membership organisation that promotes that value of adult learning and advocates for the rights of all adults to quality learning across the tertiary education system. We have an unwavering commitment to educationally disadvantaged adults, we offer solutions-focused advocacy that is evidence-based drawing on research and our extensive meaningful learner engagement activities. Our Strategic Plan: A Vision for Educational Equality (2019-2022) is informed by principles of: social justice, feminism, partnership, valuing diversity, advancing equality and supporting social inclusion. We continually strive to be offer work of the highest quality as an inclusive, informed, dynamic organisation which will act as a cooperative, trusted, critical friend to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. We continually engage with learners and educators from further education and training, community education and higher education on a weekly basis, affording us key insights into practice. We have expertise in educational equality and we advocate strongly for community education, as the most inclusive, yet underfunded part of the education system. Our work covers: Research: Authentically hearing learner voice, particularly those marginalised, through a mixed methods research project, The National FET Learner Forum. Some recent examples of publications in this area are the 2019 Annual Synthesis Report and the COVID-19 FET Learner Report. Democratising relevant academic work in our well-established peer reviewed journal, The Adult Learner. Promoting lifelong learning and access: first week of March the annual AONTAS Adult Learners' Festival (circa 300 events/open days across Ireland), STAR awards recognising excellence in inclusive education projects -and an annual Policy Day event. Encouraging people to engage in learning: Freephone information referral helpline and website www.onestepup.ie. Building capacity and supporting professional development in community education through the AONTAS Community Education Network (Est. 2007). We have strong European links: designated by the then Department of Education and Skills as the National Coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning. We lead or partner in 8 European funded projects across all levels of Erasmus+, are on the Board of the European Association for Education of Adults (EAEA) and are linked globally. Co-established the Network of Adult Learning Across Border (NALAB), bringing together national adult learning advocacy structures across Ireland, 3

England, Scotland, Wales and N Ireland in response to Brexit. Ultimately, all our work, and communications activities aims to advocate for the rights of all adults to engage in learning so to fulfil their aspirations. Who we represent: Organisations and individuals committed to educational equality for adults: 500 members [all 16 ETBs, over 120 community education organisations, adult learning/access departments of Higher Education Institutions, social justice NGOs, educators and learners across the Island of Ireland].

Introduction

AONTAS welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the public consultation process for the new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2022-2026. The recommendations made as part of this submission are underpinned by the central themes of equity, educational equality, and social justice. At present, our society faces many complex political, international and health challenges. This includes the fall-out of BREXIT, the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of

conservative right-wing political agendas and much feared upcoming austerity measures. The values of increasing social inclusion and generating greater educational equity must be seen as urgent drivers for adapting to and overcoming whatever challenges lie ahead for the people of Ireland. Education is key to creating social change and forming the bonds of understanding, care, and respect for thriving local communities.

AONTAS held a webinar with our members on May 19th 2021 to identify their perspectives and experiences in order to inform this submission. This included representatives from community education, literacy, Further Education and Training, and Higher Education sectors. Participants responses have been collated and are used to inform this paper. In this submission, AONTAS argues for an integrated and inclusive education system with clear and defined pathways across the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) that support, encourage and enable marginalised and vulnerable learners to succeed in higher education.

We recognise and amplify diverse voices and experiences from across the sector with recommendations made from our esteemed colleagues in organisations including the Irish Refugee Council, the Irish Traveller Movement, Pavee Point and One Family. We draw from key documents such as the White Paper for Adult Education (2000) and the National Strategy for Higher Education 2030 (2011) echoing their ambitions for equality in education policy.

The White Paper on Adult Education is 21 years old and yet it was ahead of our time in its ability to recognise and value different areas and key stakeholders in the education system. The paper recognised that low educational attainment was very often a result of a systemic deficit, rather than a deficit at the level of the learner or their community. In response to Q1, we outline our vision for the future of higher education and argue that a system with such low representation of disadvantaged learners is unacceptable. Institutions have a responsibility to welcome and support underrepresented groups. Public and transparent reviews should be conducted that inform the access discourse and allow for critical engagement on why some providers such as RCSI have only 5% of disadvantaged learners in their student population compared to LYIT with 25%. Overall, the research shows Institutes of Technology are more successful including disadvantaged learners than Universities.

AONTAS calls for an increase in public investment in the adult and community education sector as part of this submission and outlines the vital role community education and Further Education and Training plays in meeting the National Access Plan's (NAP) overall 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. (HEA, 2015).

Q1 What should our overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022-2026?

The vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland for 2022-2026 should be a learner-informed transformative approach to access where all parts of the tertiary education system have a role to play in making equity of access to higher education a reality for all.

Evidence, which will be described further, clearly points to the need for interlinked pathways across community, further and higher education. Given our learning from the pandemic, taking a collaborative approach, such as through the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working

Group, is vital for addressing the lost learning. The impact of COVID-19 in exacerbating disadvantage will have a knock-on effect on higher education participation levels going forward.

Therefore, the following is required:

- I. Take a tertiary-wide approach to educational access, by ensuring learners can engage in appropriate accredited provision across the National Framework of Qualifications prior to progression to higher education
- II. Recognise and name community education as key to supporting access to higher education and include in access policy plans and funding opportunities
- III. Include representative structures for community education and educational equality on the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science working groups
- IV. Provide part-time learners with full HEI supports, including the SUSI grant to enable access for the most marginalised and vulnerable learners including lone-parents and Travellers

The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 also known locally as ‘the Hunt report’ provides a hopeful and ambitious vision for the future of higher education in Ireland. It outlines how higher education has played a key role in the economic advancement of Irish society and drives forward well-known concepts such as a knowledge-based economy, social transformation and the quality of the student experience. Concepts that are still prevalent in the access discourse today. It highlights the complexity of ambitions under this policy agenda and the entanglement of social and economic objectives. The access agenda is problematic as it continues to proffer two core themes; one of higher education building economic competitiveness and another of strengthened social equality (Fleming et al., 2017). This may suggest marginalised and vulnerable people are as a means for meeting economic skills shortages and potentially in areas where middle- and upper-class people are less likely to choose their vocation. This new employment prospect if viewed as success in social stratification may be seen as addressing deep-rotted inequalities experienced by disadvantaged learners through the means of increased income. We cannot provide a detailed argument against this in a short policy paper. However, we suggest that on a surface-level it is clear from the current data that learners from lower-socio economic groups are underrepresented in third-level education with an average of 10% and those who do enter are disproportionately in Institutes of Technology studying social-based programmes. Moreover, the degree programmes with higher-paid incomes such as medicine and economics are attended by affluent and marginally above average income learners with only 4% of disadvantaged learners in medicine and 5% in economics respectively (HEA, 2020). Therefore, despite welcomed improvements to access for underrepresented groups in higher education in the current National Access Plan, a deep-rooted inequality and hierarchy still exists within third-level education (and parts of the broader education system). It is suggested that it is necessary to see the current situation and status quo as problematic in order to be comfortable making radical and meaningful changes to meet the social and educational needs of our learners in addition to putting these first and foremost over economic objectives.

If the future of higher education in Ireland is to experience genuine change and be successful in encouraging, funding, and supporting underrepresented groups to engage higher education, it

must address institutional culture and practice. Third-level education and institutional practices are designed and implemented by the dominant group in Irish society. It is a system that worked for them and their families and therefore it may be perceived as a fair and sufficient mechanism to meet adult learning needs. It can be difficult to see failure in a system that worked for them. Higher education must include the voices of a broad and intersectional diverse learner cohort and a diversity of staff to ensure it understands the lived experiences of underrepresented groups and decision making is fair and in the best interests of everyone.

Governance and leadership play a fundamental role in the perceptions of access, mainstreaming of access policy, and the successful inclusion of underrepresented students in higher education. The Hunt Report (2011) also provided a clear message on the autonomy and accountability of institutions. While autonomy is necessary for intellectual growth and facilitation of a critical academic voice, institutions must also be held accountable against 'clearly articulated expectations' (p.14). During the COVID-19 pandemic we have witnessed several challenges in creating a consistent and fair response for learners including the sharing and timing of information, assessment practice, lecture and tutor engagement and internal guidelines for health and safety. It must be said that many practitioners and institutions went above and beyond to protect and support their learners. However, our rationale for highlighting these challenges is to suggest that where there is

Funding and operational autonomy must be matched by a corresponding level of accountability for performance against clearly articulated expectations. This requires well-developed structures to enable national priorities to be identified and communicated, as well as strong mechanisms for ongoing review and evaluation of performance at system and institutional levels

The National Strategy for Higher Education (2011, p.14).

autonomy and freedom it must not be at the expense of the most marginalised and vulnerable learners. Institutional governance and leadership must be held accountable for student participation rates, fair and equitable decision-making practices and representative bodies, and learned-led inclusive education pedagogy.

Q2. Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan and how do we ensure the most vulnerable members of our society are included?

Target Groups

The current National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 states its vision 'is 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' (HEA, 2015). However, at present the student body in third-level education continues to represent a higher majority of affluent and above average income learners.

Target groups in themselves are problematic as there is an inherent inequality built in, in that we accept that proportionally marginalised learners are less represented in the higher education population. However, in terms of focus on investment and actions to widen participation, specific cohorts of learners are helpful to identify in addition to disaggregated data for each.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a new recognition and awareness of the inequalities and barriers faced by disadvantaged learners. The Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group (MED) which included key stakeholders from across the tertiary sector highlighted the

exacerbation of issues such as poverty, low educational attainment, a lack of access to equipment and WIFI, isolation, and domestic violence already faced by marginalised and vulnerable learners (MED, 2020). AONTAS welcomes this renewed focus on educational equality and encourages the Higher Education Authority to prioritise disadvantaged learners and ensure suitable infrastructure across the sector that will enable meaningful and representative diversity in third-level education. 9

AONTAS recommends the following target groups for the new National Plan for Equity of Access:

1. Learners with disabilities
2. Travellers and Roma
3. Home Carers
4. Women
5. Learners in Direct Provision
6. People that are homeless
7. Learners with Literacy, Numeracy and Basic Digital Literacy Needs
8. Adults with Lower-Level Qualifications
9. Individuals in receipt of social welfare
10. First-Time Mature Students

(MED, 2020).

The targets set out in the new policy must be a mechanism to address inequalities faced by disadvantaged learners in the education system. AONTAS suggests a framework that is based on principles of fairness and equity valuing and encouraging diversity. The plan must be careful not to exclude or silence subgroups within these cohorts or further marginalise other learners due to overly prescriptive criteria. AONTAS encourages reflection and learning as part of the process with learner voice embedded in review cycles throughout implementation.

“They asked me for proof of my legal separation to prove that I am a lone-parent. I explained that we don’t have any document that proves that I am legally separated. I provided an affidavit from the commissioner of oaths, and a social welfare document, I also gave permission to check with the Department of Justice to confirm I am a lone parent as my asylum claim case clearly states that I have been a lone parent since 2013. They wouldn’t accept my situation because of their rules and now I have to try and pay the fees myself somehow. I don’t want to appeal it. It is painful to and traumatising talking about it.” Adult Learner (2020) 10

How do we ensure the most vulnerable members of our society are included?

Engaging in higher education and returning to learning for adults is not a fair or equitable process. For many of these learners their ‘first-chance’ in education was problematic and their ‘second-chance’ returning to learning presents various obstacles (Fleming et al., 2017). Entry routes are highly competitive and often lean towards a suspected quality debate. This suggests

that some institutions may include affluent students and exclude disadvantaged students due to perceived intellectual capacity and an assumption of shared values. The higher education system upholds social class inequality and a culture of individual competitiveness that favours those entering with social and cultural capital. Institutions and entry routes are designed by the dominant ideology and maintain an unequal distribution of privilege (Fleming et al., 2017; Reay 2017; Lynch and Lodge, 2002).

“We were dehumanised. Imagine being told as a little girl that you would never amount to anything. You believe it. In those early years my education was knocked out of me. Back then I didn’t have the words for it but it was trauma. In disadvantaged schools the teachers abused the system. They took advantage and hurt us.” (Winnie Coakley, adult learner, 2020).

The Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021 (HEA, 2018) showed success in increasing participation from a range of target groups. However, learners from the Traveller community and mature students’ numbers continue to highlight serious barriers faced in accessing higher education for these groups. According to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) Statement of Strategy (2021-2023) there is over 13 times the number of Travellers in FET compared to Higher Education and the Mature Student Participation in Higher Education report (2021) states that 72% of respondent mature students reported having participated in education and training prior to engaging in HE. Thus, highlighting the need for integrated pathways between FET and HE to enable and encourage their participation in higher education. 11

(HEA 2021, p.xiv)

Recommendations

- Core funding linked to a commitment to widening access to higher education
 - o A specific link between core funding and a commitment to widening access to higher education by marginalised groups is essential. In reporting, there needs to be an explicit link between the aims of public policy that centre on higher education access and funding agreements. Publicly funded education is a public good, and specific measures must be introduced to ensure access initiatives are implemented. Access in this sense covers access, retention, success and progression in higher education by under-represented groups of the population, mainly those educationally disadvantaged.

We recommend that all HEIs are required to report annually on the implementation of the equity for participation plan, and this is linked to core funding, an outline of targets met or otherwise stated. There are stark disparities in access levels between HEIs, with respect to the baseline rates of participation by under-represented groups across HEIs and innovation should be rewarded and underachievement in HEI targets explained. Equity in 12

participation is a fundamental aspect of the Higher Education Act, and real initiatives to ensure progress is made are paramount.

- An integrated whole of education approach connecting schools, literacy programmes, community education, Further Education and Training, apprenticeships and Higher Education

- o Clear communication and shared support structures are key for the success of seamless transitions into and across the National Framework of Qualifications

- o There must be parity of esteem between the different areas within adult education in order to ensure that all learning is recognised as valuable and integral to the sector

- o FET and community education student cohorts have much higher representations of disadvantaged learners than higher education. This must be recognised, funded and utilised for the benefit of the access agenda

- o Funding community education under PATH 3 as part of outreach activities can support the sustainability of the community education sector, address local needs, and provide pathways for groups such as lone-parents, Travellers, Roma, and people experiencing homelessness

- Increased presence in decision-making mechanisms of representative from local communities and civil society organisations

- o Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play a vital role in the local life of communities they are geographically located in. This role extends beyond the physical boundaries of the lecture theatre and campus; and HEIs have an impact on more than just their relationships with staff and the student body. AONTAS, therefore, recommends that an ecological approach be taken to HEIs engagement with, and responsibility towards, local stakeholders within the wider adult and higher education system, specifically Education and

Training Boards, Colleges of Further Education and Training, as well as local constituents of the adult and community education sector.

- Increased equality, diversity and inclusion of traditionally under-represented groups in governance structures, representative groups and the academic council

- o By legislating for actions that increase the nature and number of representatives from traditionally excluded gender, social and minority groups within governance structures the reformed HEA Act would be achieving each of the core objectives outlined in the Consultation report on reform of the Higher Education Authority Act (1971). Concepts of equality, equity, and inclusion are not new to this area. The University Act 1997 contained a number of key provisions which this new legislation has the opportunity to cement.

For example:

- Section 12.f required universities to ‘support and contribute to the realisation of national economic and social development’
- Article 18.6.b further stated that universities should ‘have regard to the attainment of gender balance and equality of opportunity among students and employees.’ Since the implementation of this Act, Ireland has seen a number of legislative changes that progressed these fundamental principles even further. The current National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015 – 2019 adopted a language of equity and inclusion, arguing that a comprehensive strategy to increase participation rates among disadvantaged populations, was beneficial to the overall social and economic advancement of Irish society. The Department of Education and Skills’ Action Plan for Education 2016-2019 described equity and inclusive education as ‘a fundamental principle of our education and training system’ (p. 26). In an effort to ensure that Ireland’s higher education sector not only survives the ongoing pandemic, but is set up to thrive post-COVID, this shared commitment to advancing educational

equality to include concepts of social inclusion with gender and racial equity as core components of the Irish educational landscape are a minimum requirement.

Q3 How can pre-entry and post-entry activities be developed?

The relationship between pre-entry activities for different cohorts of learners before enrolling in Higher Education and the successful completion of Higher Education programmes is directly linked (Thomas, 2012; Gazeley and Aynsley, 2012; McCary, Pankhurst, Valentine and Berry, 2011). Success within this context is defined as learners graduating from their course, having developed a strong learner identity and sense of belonging within the institution.

Using a holistic approach and helping to prepare students in advance for the emotional and mental demands that may accompany their chosen course is critical to the retention of 15

students within their education programmes (Thomas, 2012). In addition, statistics show a comparative evaluation of the roles of student adviser and personal tutor in relation to undergraduate student retention. In a study with 722 students surveyed at least 40% had considered leaving. However, 30% of this group felt that if they had received further support prior to entry this would not have become an issue (McCary, Pankhurst, Valentine and Berry, 2011).

Recommendation 13: Ensure lone parents receive sufficient support by implementing a targeted key-worker support role in all higher and further education institutions. This support service should be on a 1:1 basis and provide academic, practical, emotional support to lone parents. Key workers could also provide support in ensuring lone parents have opportunity to build the technical and ‘cultural’ competencies required to succeed in their course.

One Family (2021)

The power and impact of appropriate supports prior to enrolment in higher education programmes for learners coming from a diverse range of educational and socio-economic backgrounds, cannot be overstated. In 'The contribution of pre-entry interventions to student retention and success' Gazeley and Aynsley (2012) found that pre-entry and post-entry activities not only benefit the learners they target, they benefit all learners in higher education. Gazeley and Aynsley (2012) provide four successful pre-entry areas to focus on for the support and retention of learners:

1. Informing expectations;
2. developing academic skills;
3. building social capital (links with peers, current students, and staff);
4. nurturing a sense of belonging

Furthermore, post-entry activities are just as important for the continued success of learners. For many vulnerable students, losing access to supports can be an overwhelming experience. Engendering a sense of belonging, ownership and confidence within the learning journey is not a process that can be completed in its entirety two weeks before a course begins. Further and long-term cultivation and guidance is necessary to nurture the elements required for the retention of access students in higher education. Support must be consistent throughout the duration of learners' study and include follow-up activities to ensure a successful experience for the learner - academically, socially, and holistically. 16

AONTAS Recommends:

- Utilising learner voice mechanisms such as the National FET Learner Forum to identify the needs of incoming adult learners
- Engaging with community education and FET providers to support transitions between institutions and academic levels
- Developing programmes in advance of enrolment that assist in developing robust learner identities, build social capital, and support personal development before attending higher education
- Providing introduction sessions for each programme so learners know what to expect before enrolling and can make more informed course choices
- Providing communities of support for learners and capacity building programmes to promote and encourage role models from underrepresented groups
- Providing safe inclusive spaces for vulnerable learners
- Providing childcare and other wrap-around services
- Eligibility got all part-time mature students to HEI access supports

Q4. How can current funding programmes be better utilized to further the objectives of the National Access Plan?

Underrepresented learners face many barriers in accessing higher education. Funding and the allocation of funding is paramount for equitable inclusion of disadvantaged learners in third-level. However, the consolidation of allocated access funding almost exclusively to higher education, and the limits on some of these funding mechanisms, is detriment to the potential impact and success of a tertiary-wide model. AONTAS supports the expansion of true-cost access funding to all areas of the

AONTAS calls for parity of esteem between full and part-time students. All support services and the SUSI grant must be provided to part-time learners. 17

tertiary education sector, with a particular focus on community education, in order to provide equity of access.

PATH 3 Funding and Community Education

Community education is the most inclusive and accessible model of adult learning in the tertiary education system for a number of reasons. Providers are often situated in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, reaching learners in their locality. Staff are local people, many of whom, have had similar lived experiences to their learners and act as role models. Community education centres offer a supportive, holistic approach that focuses on personal development and confidence-building. They provide a wide range of flexible, part-time, accredited and non-accredited courses, often combined with wraparound supports. While they are referenced in PATH 3 funding processes, the National Access Plan 2015-2019 makes no specific reference to community education. This new iteration of the plan must recognise the reach and success of community education in engaging and supporting disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. AONTAS calls on the HEA to ensure funding for community education in order to create a more equitable, inclusive higher education sector.

While PATH 3 funding is intended to create partnership links with community and voluntary groups, a reimagining of its uses within community education could increase higher education access, while affording community education parity of esteem in the tertiary education sector. Increased focus should be placed on creating reciprocal links between community education and higher education courses, in ways that aim to support the most disadvantaged learners, including:

- Allocating PATH 3 funding to community education providers as well as HEIs
- Allocating PATH 3 funding to enable outreach as well as access, with a focus on representation from diverse target groups
- Allocating PATH 3 funding to support the provision of HEI courses in community education settings

o Longford Women's Link and An Cosán both successfully provide higher education in local communities

Allocating PATH 3 funding to community education and FET providers as well as than HEIs

Community education providers operate within the communities they serve. They often work with specific vulnerable groups, be that exclusively or as part their intake. The challenges learners face accessing higher education exist prior to their engagement in higher education. Funding in community education and FET tertiary education can provide integrated approach addressing learners needs and helping them to prepare prior to engagement.

AONTAS calls for a review on the allocation of PATH 3 funding, with the aim of distributing funding more widely across the tertiary education sector, in the hope that the challenges underrepresented learners face can be alleviated before entering higher education.

Allocating PATH 3 to focus on outreach as well as access, with a focus on representation from diverse target groups

AONTAS supports the utilisation of PATH 3 funding to increase outreach programmes to community education programmes working with underrepresented learners. Outreach is most effective when undertaken by members of a respective community, and AONTAS supports a 'see it to be it' model of outreach. While many higher education institutions have commendable representational models of access, for example, NUI Maynooth's Maynooth Access Programme (MAP) Ambassadors, funding to create local outreach officers based in communities and linked collaboratively to community education providers, FET providers and universities, would further support a smooth transition for learners throughout the tertiary sector. In addition to providing peer support throughout this process. AONTAS advocates for the expansion of existing outreach or ambassador programmes to create collaborative links between the tertiary sectors, and improved access path for underrepresented and disadvantaged learners.

Allocating PATH 3 funding to support the provision of HEI courses in community education settings

As previously mentioned, community education provides a supportive environment for underrepresented learners, often with wraparound services such as childcare, travel, or 19

addiction and mental health supports. This creates a suitable space to provide higher education for learners who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education. A successful example of this was established by Longford Women's Link (LWL). Since 2016, LWL has been in a collaborative partnership with IT Carlow, offering two QQI Level 8 Honours Degree courses and two Higher Certificate courses, with approximately 91 learners from the Midlands accessing these courses onsite in our dedicated Education and Training facility. Creating similar collaborations with other community education groups can ensure that the 'seat at the table' model can be made available in disadvantaged learners' own communities with higher education becoming normalised at local level. It would also support a fully integrated further and higher education model and a continuous tertiary transition for learners, allowing them to avoid unnecessary barriers.

Core Funding Stipulations linked to Underrepresented Groups

The National Access Steering Group in 2021 highlighted that learners from disadvantaged areas make up an average of 10% of the Irish student population, however this figure lowers in certain 'elite' institutions to 5% in Trinity College Dublin, Royal College of Surgeons Ireland, University

College Dublin, and the Institute of Art, Design and Technology Dún Laoghaire which shows a failure to include vulnerable and marginalised learners. However, Letterkenny Institute of Further Education has an average of 25% representation of disadvantaged learners. In addition, research shows the institutes of technology have a 20

higher representation of disadvantaged learners, compared to universities (HEA 2019). In access terms LKIT is the most successful institution for the inclusion of disadvantaged learners.

Universities must not be allowed to sacrifice the needs of marginalised and vulnerable learners and act as gate keepers to access. HEIs have a responsibility to support disadvantaged and underrepresented learners. Incentivising recruitment of underrepresented groups, by creating stipulations linked to core funding, would encourage institutions to actively engage with and support target groups and disadvantaged learners.

Covid-19 and funding for disadvantaged learners through the Student Hardship Funds and Device Access Funds

COVID-19 has shone a light on the existing challenges facing disadvantaged learners engaging in higher education. USI's National Report on Students and COVID-19 (2020) highlighted challenges in access to WIFI, devices, books and equipment, and access to learning spaces. While this report did not provide desegregated data, the AONTAS COVID-19 and FET Learner Report (2020) highlighted challenges faced by FET learners in Direct Provision and learners in the Traveller and Roma communities were exacerbated by COVID-19, and that these cohorts were more likely to struggle to find a suitable space for their learning. In addition, Travellers and Roma learners were struggling with their mental health as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. Furthermore, AHEAD's Learning from Home During Covid-19: A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities (2020) reported that 28% of learners struggled with accessing assistive technologies during COVID-19, and 66% of the responding students said that they had concerns about how COVID-19 will impact on their ability to continue learning in the medium and longer term.

AONTAS welcomes the additional financial support provided by DFHERIS during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as stated many of these challenges are an exacerbation of previous disadvantage. Increasing or expanding student hardship funds or institution-specific device access funding can support disadvantaged learners and this must continue post COVID-19.

SUSI Grant Expansion for Access

The SUSI grant is a crucial funding support for disadvantaged learners in higher education. In our recent Submission to the Public Consultation to the SUSI Grant Scheme, AONTAS welcomed the review of SUSI to tackle education equality in Ireland. However, therein AONTAS also highlight categories of underrepresented learners, either in higher education or wishing to progress to higher education, that should be included as a priority to provide equity of access to higher education, who are currently ineligible for SUSI. This includes:

- part-time learners (who are more likely to be mature learners and lone parents)
- learners in community education or FET who wish to progress to higher education (at all levels of National Framework of Qualifications)

- learners studying off-site learners on blended and online courses

Moreover, expansion of the SUSI grant to these learners, and particularly learners taking FET courses, would create a continuous funding stream within the tertiary education system, and allow for a smooth transition from FET to higher education. Simply put, expanded continuous funding expands access. Ensuring true-cost funding for underrepresented groups would greatly increase their ability to engage with higher education.

Q5. How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded within HEI's?

The concept of mainstreaming in higher education gained much focus in the 1980's as a positive approach led by pro-inclusion researchers and educators in the access arena. However, more recent funding and policy actions push responsibility back onto individual learners and their families portraying students as consumers which is problematic for the intended concept of mainstreaming in Higher Education (Fleming et al., 2017). 22

The Progress Review of the National Access Plan (2018) highlighted a level of uncertainty in higher education institutions on the meaning of mainstreaming and its operation in practice. It is clear that the mainstreaming ambition is not a well understood strategic priority within the higher education sector, and progress in implementing access champions within faculties has been limited (ibid, page 14). AONTAS strongly encourages a clear definition with guidelines on practice that is learner-led and focuses on the best possible outcomes for target groups.

Enabling the mainstreaming of higher education provision in a community education context through equitable collaborative partnerships between HEIs and community education organisations is needed. The mainstreaming of these effective models requires funding and the rolling out of effective models of partnership between HEIs and the community.

Q6. How can a whole-of-education approach to widening participation in higher education be achieved?

Community education and FET offer non-traditional learners what are perhaps the most valuable pathways and progression routes they need to overcome structural inequalities and systemic barriers to participation. Regarding FET progression to higher education rates, SOLAS' (2018) Progress Review of the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019 states that measuring the actual numbers of those progressing from FET to higher education remains a challenge, but it is a necessity.

AONTAS calls for desegregated data that identifies target groups and learners coming from alternative pathways into higher education

A whole of education approach can provide third-level institutions with the ability to engage with and replicate models of best practice across FET and community education. For example, there are a number of programmes that have great success in meeting the needs of Traveller learners and support them in increasing their educational attainment. In addition, these programmes benefit the broader Traveller community and may influence and enable family members to enter the Higher Education sector. AONTAS STAR Award winners, the Power in Participation Project

with NUIG, is one such model that should be invested in, learned from, and replicated. Power in Participation, a collaborative project involving the University and Galway Traveller Movement and the Community Action Network, facilitated 24 members of the Traveller community to graduate with a Diploma in Community Development Practice.

There are numerous examples within the community education sector that have a similar key focus on promoting access to educational opportunities and widening participation in higher education for under-represented groups. In fact, the main socioeconomic groups catered to by community education providers are also those groups with the lowest levels of progression to and within higher education (HEA, 2010, 38). Organisations such as An Cosán, Longford Women's Link and the Loretto Centre Crumlin present government with more than proof of concept, they present best practice examples.

AONTAS Recommends:

- Increased investment in partnership community education provision
- The provision of Access Officers in Education and Training Boards to facilitate smooth and supported transitions between FET and HE
- A whole of education representation on the NAP steering group including schools, community education and FET to ensure informed decision making that meets the needs of learners at every stage of the NFQ

Q7. How can pathways between further education and training be better developed?

The FET Transitions Reform Working Paper states “while progression to higher education is only one of the targeted outcomes from Further Education and Training (FET), it is acknowledged across several national strategies that levels of progression should increase and a more consistent approach to facilitating such progression should be put in place” (Department of Education and Skills, 2020, p.4). We also know that those who completed FET have greater retention levels in higher education. In addition, data from the National FET Learner Forum shows that progression on to a higher education is regularly cited as a reason by learners for taking a FET course. Many have entered FET as a “stepping stone” to higher education. Other have highlighted progression came as a follow-up based on success in their FET programme “I never saw myself going back to third level, but now after doing this, I’m looking at going back next year.”, and, “I’ve already thought of a couple more things I can do from the course, so it really broadens your horizons” (Dowdall et al., 2020).

AONTAS recommends that progression in tertiary education is enabled in the form of clear pathways from FET to higher education. To better develop pathways, and to capitalise on their potential for engagement, an equitable system of inclusionary, collaborative governance (with an emphasis on inclusionary, not integratory) over pathways to higher education must be designed, uniformly applied, and adhered to by all HEIs and courses across Ireland. It must be transparent, consistent and across all programmes. Such a provision should not be viewed as an unattainable utopian ideal, but rather the only sensible direction for an equitable tertiary education system to follow.

AONTAS calls for fair, transparent, and consistent pathways into all programmes in Higher Education

Pathways must be designed in a manner that embraces and celebrates FET and the diverse educational background from which this learner cohort comes from. Pathways should not be developed in a manner that attempts to assimilate (rather than maximise) the strengths of learners who have engaged in FET prior to seeking access to higher education, by predetermining what courses would be suitable to have a pathway lead to, and which would not. In fact, FET Learners are currently subject to differential treatment based on each HEI's Higher Education Links Scheme policy. For example, FET qualifications are 25

accepted on 5 programmes in Trinity College Dublin totalling in 17 dedicated places, while NUI Maynooth have 168 places dedicated for FET learners (Fleming et al., 2017). Further, programmes are capped at certain numbers, meaning places are allocated based on supply and demand. The result is that the scheme becomes a competitive, points-based race for learners, not unlike the leaving certificate model.

Furthermore, we must destigmatise FET pathways as the non-traditional route to higher education. Instead, it should be recognised as valued alternative means of access for learners attempting to engage in higher education. This framing of FET learners would increase equity of access, and crucially imbue parity of esteem for former FET learners in HEIs. The key element in this concept ease of access for all learners through multiple pathways into higher education. This model should be further developed by utilising learner voice through the National FET Learner Forum. Listening to and learning from the experiences and concerns of FET learners.

AONTAS Recommends:

- Creating national campaigns to celebrate FET and the opportunities it provides
- Establishing direct lines of communication and consultations with FET learners to understand what would best facilitate their access to higher education utilizing the National FET Learner Forum
- Expand guidance services within FET and HE
- Language used in any documentation or communication materials related to FET pathways should be plain, coherent, and straight forward. The task of reading instructions related to the access of pathways should be intuitive and not become a barrier
- FET pathways must be fair and consistent across institutions, with spaces reserved solely for FET learners on all higher education courses, such as within the higher education Links Scheme
- Access officers should exist and be available for expert consultation within ETBs
- An integrated model of adult learning that provides supported pathways between all levels of education should be created, building a parity of esteem across adult education

Q8. How can other social inclusion initiatives outside of the higher education sector be harnessed to support equity of access objectives?

As mentioned extensively throughout this submission, community education is a powerful tool that should be used to support equity of access objectives. AONTAS views community education as a process of community and personal transformation, empowerment, challenge,

social change and collective responsiveness. It is community led and values the lived experiences of individuals and their communities. Through its ethos and its holistic approach, community education builds the capacity of groups to engage in a social teaching and a learning process that is creative, participative and needs-based. Essentially, community education is delivered by local people, for local people, based on the needs of local people.

Community education addresses important elements of a learner's identity within a safe and nurturing environment, that may perhaps remain unaccounted for within certain Higher Education institutions, which would in turn would serve as a barrier to academic progression.

Its value to educational equality and addressing educational disadvantage is immeasurable. It is a powerful deterrent against the 'Matthew Effect' and has the capability of reaching marginalised learners that may not have access to other forms of education.

To extrapolate the value of community education further, this paper argues that not only should the model of community education be reviewed for its use in Higher Education, but the very provision of higher education should be considered for execution within curated programmes orchestrated by community education organisations. Community education continuously takes on the mantle of providing the flexible supports needed by marginalised learners to access education, and combining both the provision of higher education and the holistic harbour of community education could be an internationally recognised measure of best practice in the access arena.

National RPL policy to provide fair and consistent approaches for all adults returning to education

RPL in the context of access to higher education can be summarised as "the process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged" (NQAI, 2005). RPL can include formal learning, informal learning, experiential learning, and work-based learning. AONTAS plays an active role in the RPL Network and on the RPL Steering Committee, and advocates for the expansion of RPL processes in FET and community education. RPL is an important consideration when developing coursework as it acknowledges the rich experiences of learners returning to education. However, it is not used to its full potential on a national level due to a lack of a fair and consistent approach and no national policy, which may exclude underrepresented or disadvantaged learners.

AONTAS calls for expansive, inclusive RPL processes to be established across Ireland. These processes should be flexible enough to capture the diversity of knowledge, skills and experiences that learners possess, allowing them increased access into higher education. It could be used to allow learners to gain admission to programmes where an individual may not have obtained the standard admissions requirements, or to gain credit towards a programme of study, and to attain an award. Allowing disadvantaged learners to put 28

forward learnings and competencies not obtained through the NFQ is a means of allowing parity of esteem and increasing equity of access for learners while building their confidence in the recognition of their prior experience.

Q9. What challenges has COVID-19 presented in relation to an inclusive higher education system and how can they be addressed?

The impact of COVID19 on adult education around the world has resulted in the loss of opportunities for people to access all forms of learning. Those who could benefit the most economically and socially from adult learning and participation in higher education are the least likely to have access to learning opportunities, including higher education. COVID-19 has had an especially negative impact on Ireland's most vulnerable learner cohorts, namely women with low levels of education and those who lost their jobs because of the pandemic. Pre-COVID-19, learners from under-represented target groups faced an unequal distribution of privilege within the Irish tertiary education system, most starkly found within higher education. It is clear that the pandemic has exacerbated educational inequalities experienced by people already suffering due to poverty, the housing crisis, domestic violence, social isolation, mental health challenges and lack of essential supports that allow them to access education such as finance, childcare, as well as learning materials. These factors have always been fundamental indicators for low rates of participation in higher education. It is therefore of utmost importance that the new NAP help to address the negative consequences adult learners experienced in 2020 and 2021 by providing the supports needed to assist under-represented target groups access HEIs. There is serious concern that the legacy of COVID-19 will see an all-time low in the numbers of people accessing and completing higher education who are from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds and communities where overall disadvantage grew sharply over the last year.

At the last AONTAS annual policy day 2021 event SOLAS CEO Andrew Brownlee outlined the worrying trend of reductions for vulnerable learners in participation due to COVID-19:

- 24.3% drop for Learners from the Roma and Traveller community
- 13.6% drop for learners with disabilities 19
- 14.9% drop for Refugees and Asylum Seekers
- 14.7% drop for learners aged over 50 29

The lifelong learning participation rate for people with lower secondary education/Junior Certificate halved in 2020 compared to 2019 (SLMRU, SOLAS, 2021). There was a sharp drop in accreditation awards at NFQ level 1-4 (down 49% from 2019) during 2020 and minor awards (down 27% from 2019). There were 14% fewer active providers of QQI awards in 2020 compared to 2019 (QQI, 2021) meaning there appears to be fewer organisations offering accredited provision. All of these factors will have a knock-on effect on higher education participation levels going forward.

Recent AONTAS research shows that learners who suffered from economic disadvantage prior to COVID-19 (namely those in Traveller and Roma and direct provision groups) found these disadvantages to be exacerbated by COVID-19, specifically in relation to their need to access and/or purchase new technology in order to continue their learning (AONTAS, 2020). These findings reinforce similar findings in studies across higher education which have found that financially disadvantaged learners have particularly suffered from barriers to accessing resources during the transition to remote learning

Given that the OECD's Dashboard on Priorities for Adult Learning shows Ireland currently ranks 25th out of 33 OECD countries for funding adult learning, yet is in 11th place for adult learning having a positive impact means that the public investment disparity in cost-benefit is no longer tenable if Ireland is to fully recover from the pandemic's exacerbation of educational inequality.

As indicated in Action 8: Skills for life in the Skills Agenda (European Commission, 2020).

State investment in financial supports for marginalised learner in higher education over the course of the pandemic has paid dividends. There is a clear link between investment and retention. Continued financial support for learners and access departments in HEIs is needed over the course of the recovery.

Increasing the financial supports to those progressing from FET to Higher Education would ensure that socioeconomically disadvantaged learners can access and succeed within HEIs. A previous AONTAS submission in relation to reforming the SUSI grant (AONTAS 2021), for example, outlines how the long-term returns on this investment for the Exchequer, the Department, the State and Irish society far outweigh savings rooted in short-term planning. This is also outlined in *The Path Ahead* (2021) with upskilling and reskilling as mechanisms to adapt to a post-COVID society, to post-Brexit conditions, and an increasing digital industrial landscape.

AONTAS amplifies messages from other civil society organisations

One Family – in relation to higher education access needs of One Parent families

Recommendation 1: The student grant scheme should be expanded to broaden the educational opportunities available to lone parents. Full-time courses are often inaccessible to people parenting alone because of parenting or work commitments. The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in increased flexibility in how courses are offered and moved most courses online. The student grant scheme should be available for part-time, online and blended learning courses. In the context of limited resources, this can be targeted to those groups most excluded from education in the first instance.

Recommendation 2: SUSI should be available to parents engaging in education, regardless of the age of their youngest child (up to a limit of 18). There are several administrative options in how to achieve this. It is important that once a lone parent is in receipt of One-Parent Family Payment/ Jobseeker's Transition and the SUSI maintenance grant has begun that their payment continue until their course is completed. This will require cross departmental engagement with the Department of Social Protection.

Recommendation 3: Implement a more flexible and nuanced approach to the assessment of students' dependency on relatives. The current housing crisis and high rents mean many one-parent families live with their extended family. The rigidity of how SUSI classifies students as being dependent or independent causes difficulty for people parenting alone in these circumstances and may lead to them losing their grant. Reassessment is only in very restricted circumstances.

Recommendation 4: Ensure income thresholds for access to top-up grants and supports for postgraduate studies are inclusive, maintained at a sufficient level and reviewed regularly.

Recommendation 5: SUSI maintenance grants must be made payable to lone parents in receipt of Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) so the additional costs associated with accessing education can be met. The reinstatement of the maintenance grant for BTEA recipients would create a more equitable, less complicated and targeted approach for supporting lone parents in education.

Recommendation 6: In general, the SUSI grant should be reviewed, and the levels increased. The maintenance portion of SUSI education grants only provides a contribution towards the costs of participating in education and ignores the reality of caring for children.

Recommendation 7: The complicated nature of the current systems of supports can block access purely on a bureaucratic level. We recommend stronger dissemination of information, guidance, and awareness-raising regarding the ‘bundles’ of supports offered by different government departments and agencies to parents. There is a persistent need for training and awareness for Intreo case-officers who operate frontline services and supports in the Department of Social Protection.

1 Byrne, D.& Murray, C. (2017)

Recommendation 8: One Family is concerned that supports and payments from two government departments interact with each other in a negative way and we strongly recommend that the Department of Further and Higher Education collaborates with the Department of Social Protection in order to ensure that parents can access education irrespective of their housing tenure or other payments they may be receiving.

Recommendation 9: Ensure all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) fulfil their statutory obligation to implement the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty.

Recommendation 10: Develop data analytics on the access, participation and experience of lone parent students in HEI. Enhance data sharing between the HEA, DFHERIS, DSP, DCEDIY, 32

DHPLG and DES to provide a broad evidence base for the effectiveness of policies and the ‘bundles’ of supports available to lone parents in Ireland.

Recommendation 11: Develop a stream of research projects designed to increase understanding of the experiences of lone parents navigating higher education. Particular attention should be paid to research exploring the effectiveness of social welfare schemes, the benefits, challenges and supports required for blended learning, and the experiences of lone parents who complete, exit early and don’t take up a place in a HEI.

Recommendation 12: We recommend making additional funding for lone parents available, either in the form of cash transfers or in the form of a targeted scheme of universal scholarships within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The Department of Education’s 1916 Bursary Fund offered 200 bursaries for an overall target group of lone parents, first-time and mature student entrants, students with a disability, Travellers, Further Education Award holders, and ethnic minorities. Whilst this is a welcome start, this is actually a nominal and piecemeal response to the education needs of such a huge group of marginalised people, especially those of lone parents. Given that 25% of Irish families are one-parent families, 80 Bursaries set aside for lone parents appears as a gesture, rather than a systemic action towards genuine recognition and educational inclusion.

Recommendation 13: Ensure lone parents receive sufficient support by implementing a targeted key-worker support role in all higher and further education institutions. This support service should be on a 1:1 basis and provide academic, practical, emotional support to lone parents. Key workers could also provide support in ensuring lone parents have opportunity to build the technical and 'cultural' competencies required to succeed in their course.

Recommendation 14: Invest in bridging programmes, such as One Family's New Futures Programme, which directly support progression, job-readiness and incorporate wrap-around parenting and family support services as a means to create a pathway to inclusion in HEIs for lone parents. 33

Recommendation 15: Ensure PhD stipends and other post-graduate scholarships are not assessed as means. This unacceptable anomaly creates a poverty-trap for the few lone parents who currently access post-graduate degrees and doctorates.

Recommendation 16: Ensure there are a range of learning options available to lone parents including online, in-person, blended, full and part time options.

Recommendation 17: Prevent the practice of child maintenance payments being assessed as means for educational supports and apply this consistently and equitably for all applicants to higher and further education. Child maintenance should be viewed as a ring-fenced support for children and not as income.

Recommendation 17: Integrate the SUSI grant and the BTEA with all housing supports to ensure continuous access to education for parents irrespective of what housing supports they receive.

Recommendation 18: Address the anomaly by which lone parents in receipt of Rent Supplement and One-Parent Family or Job Seekers Transitional payments are not eligible for the SUSI grant scheme.

Recommendation 19: Ensure all lone parents in receipt of Back to Education Allowance can receive the SUSI maintenance grant to help meet the costs of accessing education.

Recommendation 20: Guarantee free, quality and accessible childcare for all lone parents in further and higher education in line with the EU Child Guarantee.²

2 European Commission. (2021) Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee. Brussels: European Commission.

Irish Refugee Council

1. English Language – while ESOL is provided, we recommend that each person can access a pathway to move from no English, to everyday spoken English, through to academic English where required. The lack of a clear plan for English is one of the biggest barriers to progress and the cause of exclusion.

2. Recognition of Prior Learning – we recommend that if prior learning (undergraduate) cannot be proven to the satisfaction of the HEIs in order to gain access to postgraduate study that the student be deemed eligible to start again in Ireland with state funding (SUSI/ Student Support Scheme) for one undergraduate degree.

3. Targets – we would like to recommend that targets are set for the migrant community in representation in Higher Education, as they are for the other cohorts mentioned in your consultation paper, to keep pace with the % of the population at large. Diversity cannot be truly achieved in Ireland unless and until it includes people of colour.

Irish Traveller Movement

Integrating Policy and Ensuring Priority

- Develop and implement a National Traveller Education Strategy incorporating the third level Action Plan and the NTRIS (National Traveller and Roma Integration Strategy) education actions with targets, timelines and appropriate monitoring processes. This must be supported with a ring fenced and dedicated budget.
- Name Travellers as a priority target in the next National Access Plan, continue emphasis on the implementation of the National Action Plan for Travellers with a safeguarded budget.
- Ensure the Third Level Action Plan is widely consulted on in the Traveller sector and informed by an Advisory Group comprising all relevant national Traveller organisations, and former and current Traveller students in its design and application.

Access to Supports

- Review the income threshold associated with both the SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) grant and the 1916 Bursaries for Travellers, in view of the intergenerational and historic context of unemployment, and socio economy disadvantage, extend for part-time and mature students and for all registration and associated costs
- Increase financial supports specifically for mature and part-time students
- Ensure digital disadvantage is not barrier and allow for IT supports across HEIs and access for students to study areas/ and or additional needs-based supports.

Mature and Part-Time Students

- Incorporate the recommendations of the Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education in relation to Travellers in the new National Access Plan.
- Resourcing local community engagement and pre-development post primary
- Allocate funding for local Traveller organisations to support the development of Traveller educational progression and pre-development work to support Traveller students to be college-ready.
- A priority in the DE action plan should now be a targeted, time lined and actioned focus on over 3,000 Travellers enrolled in post primary and on direct engagement in every school setting.

- Expand resources beyond the 50% of Travellers in DEIS schools in a targeted approach across other schools.
- Establish an advisory group of Post Primary Guidance Counsellors established with the DE and HEA as a partner, and HEIs to inform an action plan to create pathways to college from second level.
- For the HEA to create Traveller third level advisory committees in each county comprising Travellers and Traveller representative groups, third level representatives including access officers, and post primary teachers and ensure engagement of colleges located in those territories.
- Engagement with the Employers Sector, HEI's and led by the DE and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to implement a communications programme for Traveller parents on the benefits of third level, and for employers on equal access for Travellers, including the State Employment Services and the Public Service Employer.

Data Collection:

- Introduce a universal ethnic identifier across all education bodies and institutions to collate data on Travellers in further and higher education, to track their progression and ensure allocation of resources follows the Traveller student.
- Expand the POP and PPOD to collect data on attainment and retention.
- Ensure data connection across associated education points and cooperation between the DE and the HEA towards a targeted action plan, targeting Traveller pupils post primary and from TY to Leaving Cert.
- Fully Implement the HEA's Data Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education published in 2017
- All HEI institutions in partnership with Traveller and Roma organisations, should develop, implement and monitor a Traveller Action Plan for their institutions with specific targets, timeframes and resources.
- A communications plan could be initiated to improve Traveller awareness and accessing college grants/ schemes and courses.
- Include Travellers as role models in higher education via mentoring programmes for students in second-level and further education.
- Ensure staff of HEIs SUSI receive anti-racism and Traveller cultural competency training.
- The student assistance fund, Access Office / Officer should be visible and available for Traveller learners, and any learning support needs where required.
- Ensure Traveller identity is positively visible and part of school infrastructure and within narrative learning modules.
- Support a Traveller Graduate Network that can increase visibility and provide role models within the Traveller community and Higher Education Institutions.

- HEI's should commit to ensuring their application and administrative processes are fully accessible, culturally appropriate, and do not act as a barrier to students who may have literacy issues.

Pavee Point

- All HEIs in partnership with marginalised groups should develop, implement and monitor a Traveller and Roma Action Plan to engage with specific targets, timeframes and resources
- All Traveller and Roma students going to college should get SUSI grants
- Ongoing support for blended learning and funding to address digital poverty is needed
- Self-identity should be sufficient for proof of Traveller identity
- Disaggregated data of Traveller participation on a regular basis is needed
- Ensure Traveller and Roma are named in DFHERIS communications
- Ring-fence targeted support for Travellers and Roma
- Provide training on racism and unconscious bias to all personal and lectures in HEIs to build on EDI policies
- Support Traveller and Roma engagement as part of student life
- Support all mentoring services to part-time mature students
- Recognise the challenges experienced by Traveller women and intersectional issues
- Target Traveller students in all college induction events
- Prioritise use of resources and make access to public spaces on an ongoing basis to Traveller and Roma communities

Conclusion

AONTAS has welcomed the opportunity to offer insight and guidance within the scope of this consultation. The new National Access Plan 2022-2026 has the power to make a positive and meaningful impact on our social landscape, improve educational equality, and support the most marginalised and vulnerable learners in accessing and succeeding in Higher Education. AONTAS strongly encourages a fair and transparent integrated whole of education model that prides itself on being inclusive and representative of Irish society. A system that values and supports full and part-time learners at every level of the NFQ in order to provide access into third-level education. Learning from and working in partnership with community education and Further Education and Training providers for the benefit of

learners and educators. We look forward to the new policy and hope for a radical shift in the future composition, delivery, and direction of higher education.

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Appendix 1. Higher Education Equity of Access – Summary of AONTAS recommendations

Key recommendation:

Support community education as part of the national access to higher education strategy. In the broader scheme of access, the recent HEA research report (2021), 3 noted that 21% of mature students had previously participated in a course provided by a community education provider. The cohort of learners were predominantly lone parents, people with a disability, people from disadvantaged areas and significantly Travellers. Support includes funding for higher education provision in a community education setting, financial support under national access policy plans e.g. PATH, and naming community education as key to part of the national access agenda.

3 HEA (2021) Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education. What are the Challenges? Recommendations for the future. HEA, Dublin.

Q1 What should our overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022-2026?

The vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland for 2022-2026 should be a learner-informed transformative approach to access where all parts of the tertiary education system have a role to play in making equity of access to higher education a reality for all.

I. Take a tertiary-wide approach to educational access, by ensuring learners can engage in appropriate accredited provision across the National Framework of Qualifications prior to progression to higher education

II. Recognise and name community education as key to supporting access to higher education and include in access policy plans and funding opportunities

III. Include representative structures for community education and educational equality on the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science working groups

Q2. Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan and how do we ensure the most vulnerable members of our society are included?

For focus on investment and actions to widen participation, specific cohorts of learners are helpful to identify in addition to disaggregated data for each. AONTAS recommends the following target groups for the new National Plan for Equity of Access:

1. Learners with disabilities
2. Travellers and Roma
3. Home Carers
4. Women
5. Learners in Direct Provision
6. People that are homeless
7. Learners with Literacy, Numeracy and Basic Digital Literacy Needs
8. Adults with Lower-Level Qualifications
9. Individuals in receipt of social welfare
10. First-Time Mature Students

AONTAS Recommendations ensure the most vulnerable members of our society are included

- Core funding linked to a commitment to widening access to higher education
 - o A specific link between core funding and a commitment to widening access to higher education by marginalised groups is essential. In reporting, there needs to be an explicit link between the aims of public policy that centre on higher education access and funding agreements. Publicly funded education is a public good, and specific measures must be introduced to ensure access initiatives are implemented. Access in this sense covers access, retention, success and progression in higher education by under-represented groups of the population, mainly those educationally disadvantaged.

- An integrated whole of education approach connecting schools, literacy programmes, community education, Further Education and Training, apprenticeships and Higher Education

- o Clear communication and shared support structures are key for the success of seamless transitions into and across the National Framework of Qualifications

- o There must be parity of esteem between the different areas within adult education in order to ensure that all learning is recognised as valuable and integral to the sector

- o FET and community education student cohorts have much higher representations of disadvantaged learners than higher education. This must be recognised, funded and utilised for the benefit of the access agenda

- o Funding community education under PATH 3 as part of outreach activities can support the sustainability of the community education sector, address local needs, and provide pathways for groups such as lone-parents, Travellers, Roma, and people experiencing homelessness

- Increased presence in decision-making mechanisms of representative from local communities and civil society organisations

- Increased equality, diversity and inclusion of traditionally under-represented groups in governance structures, representative groups and the academic council

Q3. How can pre-entry and post-entry activities be developed?

AONTAS recommends:

- Utilising learner voice mechanisms such as the National FET Learner Forum to identify the needs of incoming adult learners

- Engaging with community education and FET providers to support transitions between institutions and academic levels

- Developing programmes in advance of enrolment that assist in developing robust learner identities, build social capital, and support personal development before attending higher education

- Providing introduction sessions for each programme so learners know what to expect before enrolling and can make more informed course choices

- Providing communities of support for learners and capacity building programmes to promote and encourage role models from underrepresented groups

- Providing safe inclusive spaces for vulnerable learners

- Providing childcare and other wrap-around services

- Eligibility of all part-time mature students to HEI access supports

Q4. How can current funding programmes be better utilized to further the objectives of the National Access Plan?

- Allocating PATH 3 funding to enable outreach as well as access, with a focus on representation from diverse target groups
- Allocating PATH 3 funding to support the provision of HEI courses in community education settings
- Core Funding Stipulations linked to Underrepresented Groups
- Covid-19 and funding for disadvantaged learners through the Student Hardship Funds and Device Access Funds

SUSI grant expansion for access

- part-time learners (who are more likely to be mature learners and lone parents)
- learners in community education or FET who wish to progress to higher education (at all levels of National Framework of Qualifications)
- learners studying off-site learners on blended and online courses

Q5. How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded within HEI's?

- Enabling the mainstreaming of higher education provision in a community education context through equitable collaborative partnerships between HEIs and community education organisations is needed.

Q6. How can a whole-of-education approach to widening participation in higher education be achieved?

AONTAS recommends:

- Increased investment in partnership community education provision
- The provision of Access Officers in Education and Training Boards to facilitate smooth and supported transitions between FET and HE
- A whole of education representation on the NAP steering group including schools, community education and FET to ensure informed decision making that meets the needs of learners at every stage of the NFQ

7. How can pathways between further education and training and higher education be better developed?

- Creating national campaigns to celebrate FET and the opportunities it provides
- Establishing direct lines of communication and consultations with FET learners to understand what would best facilitate their access to higher education utilizing the National FET Learner Forum
- Expand guidance services within FET and HE
- Language used in any documentation or communication materials related to FET pathways should be plain, coherent, and straight forward. The task of reading instructions related to the access of pathways should be intuitive and not become a barrier
- FET pathways must be fair and consistent across institutions, with spaces reserved solely for FET learners on all higher education courses, such as within the higher education Links Scheme
- Access officers should exist and be available for expert consultation within ETBs
- An integrated model of adult learning that provides supported pathways between all levels of education should be created, building a parity of esteem across adult education

Q8. How can other social inclusion initiatives outside of the higher education sector be harnessed to support equity of access objectives?

- Community education models of higher education provision
- National RPL policy to provide fair and consistent approaches for all adults returning to education

Q9. What challenges has COVID-19 presented in relation to an inclusive higher education system and how can they be addressed?

- State investment in financial supports for marginalised learner in higher education over the course of the pandemic has paid dividends. There is a clear link between investment and retention. Continued financial support for learners and access departments in HEIs is needed over the course of the recovery.
- Increasing the financial supports to those progressing from FET to Higher Education would ensure that socioeconomically disadvantaged learners can access and succeed within HEIs.