



Equity of Access to Higher Education
Submission to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and
Science (DFHERIS) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) National Access Plan

Department of Adult and Community Education

Maynooth University

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Our Profile

Maynooth University (MU) has been ranked as Ireland's leading university for its research on social inequalities, policies on discrimination and commitment to recruiting staff and students from under-represented groups (SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities). MU is well placed in THE (Times Higher Education) University Impact Rankings 2021, which capture universities' impact on society based on their success in delivering the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). MU is joint first in Ireland for Quality Education (SDG 4) and well ranked globally for our contribution to early years and lifelong learning, pedagogy, research and our strategic commitment to inclusive education and to achieving equity of access.

The Department of Adult and Community Education (DACE) in Maynooth University was established in 1975 and is the only academic department that specialises in adult education in Ireland. We believe education is a fundamental human right and has the power to transform individuals and change society for the better. This submission is based on forty years of empirical research and existing knowledge and experience on the structural nature of inequality and the transformative potential of higher, further and community education. As part of this work DACE has produced the largest and most sustained body of qualitative research in Ireland on widening access and participation in higher education (for an overview see Fleming et al, 2017 and recent DACE policy submissions¹. We articulate an innovative adult education pedagogy and research scholarship that is participatory, experiential, inclusive and potentially transformative.

We have provided alternative access routes into higher education for adult students for over forty years. It has facilitated the entry into higher education of mature students many of whom are first time entrants into higher education through its outreach and part-time programmes. It sets its goal to foster a culture of lifelong learning for personal, community and professional development of adult students of all ages and from all social and economic backgrounds. Programmes include the on-campus night-time/part-time degrees for adults the BA Local Studies/BA Community Studies and perhaps more importantly in terms of the National Access Plan, the many outreach NUI Certificate courses from the level 5 Return to Learning courses to level 7 courses in Addiction studies; Community Development and Leadership; Disability Studies; and Equality studies. These certificate courses provided in locations and at times that suit adult learners have acted as *de facto* access courses providing alternative routes into higher education which would otherwise not be available to a large cohort of the Irish population. This suite of NUI certificate courses form part of a higher education ecosystem that begins with the pre-access Communiversity and runs through the National Qualification Framework from Level 5 to Level 10.

¹  DACE Dept FEHE Submission 18 Dec 2020.pdf;  DACE_ SUSI Submission.pdf;  Final DACE SOLAS Literacy Submission Dec 2020 (1).pdf. Ryan, R. & Hyland, S. (2020) Submission by Maynooth University to the HEA Research on Mature Student Participation in HE.

Our expertise in further, higher and community education along with a sustained focus on equality means that we are uniquely positioned to grasp what is happening across and between the post-compulsory educational sectors in terms of widening access. We believe that access is about how students are equipped and supported to thrive and flourish in, and beyond, higher education and to bring their experiences and their knowledge into it. Access is about ensuring that disciplines and courses are inclusive and that they represent students' experiences. We are having an impact on the way curriculum is taught, on how students are positioned and on perceiving students as active collaborators. Access is also about changing how institutions work.

DACE plays a central role in the development of further education professionalism through a range of foundation to Initial Teacher Education (ITE), Continuous Professional Development (CPD) postgraduate and doctoral programmes, attending to all stages of the professional life course of Further Education and Training (FET) practitioners and shaping practice, policy and thinking on the direction of further education.

Alongside this work in FET, we are the leading centre of teaching and research on higher education and equality. This is a central focus of our Doctorate in Higher and Adult Education which is producing a wide range of innovative research on pedagogy, access and sectoral change. We offer initial and professional development programmes in adult guidance and counselling which is intended to meet the learning needs of guidance practitioners who work across a variety of settings.

Our cross sectoral expertise in further, higher and community education and interest in equality has led us to explore empirically the impact of access after graduation. Over the past decade the department conducted two extensive studies of post-graduation outcomes of access students, and this revealed that acquiring a degree in no way guarantees favourable labour market outcomes.² This indicates the need for tailored and effective career guidance as well as other post-graduation supports (such as paid internships).

² O'Neill et al. 2017; Finnegan et al. 2019

Introduction

Based on our research and experience including survey feedback from our students, we recommend that a systemic approach to access is taken in new policies and that this leads to the adoption of support mechanisms before during and after higher education, related to the following five key themes:

- Theme 1. Fees and financial resources.
- Theme 2. Further Education and Training (FET) (including Community Education).
- Theme 3. Listening to learners.
- Theme 4. Socio-cultural, economic and other barriers.
- Theme 5. Appropriate data collection and measurement.

Fees and Financial Resources.

Financial issues present one of the biggest barriers for non-traditional students and graduates especially those from disadvantaged communities, mature students, working class students and part-time students. This has repeatedly been highlighted in research over several decades.³ Of particular importance here is the availability and adequacy of grants and bursaries. We support the submission from the office of the Vice President for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Maynooth University and recommendations regarding Programme for Access to Higher Education, or PATH (Turn to Teaching, College Connect and the 1916 bursaries)⁴ PATH has made significant contributions to supporting equity of access to higher education. Inadequate funding in progression programmes of various sorts and levels is a major issue as highlighted in the findings of our research with current DACE students. Recent research indicates that as participation in higher education has increased and widened, postgraduate and professional development have a greater bearing on graduate outcomes. Many non-traditional graduates have identified wanting and needing to undertake postgraduate course for career purposes, but not being able to because of the lack of financial support. We also know that internships and acquiring professional experience during or just after a primary degree has a bearing on graduate outcomes. We strongly recommend that access policy considers how to support non-traditional students and graduates especially those from disadvantaged communities, mature students, working class students and part-time students in accessing a wide range of quality postgraduate courses, internships and professional development work which leads to good work.⁵

Part-time courses offer a flexibility for many students, particularly those with care commitments many of whom are mature students which our survey with current students highlighted. The importance of part-time provision has been recognised by the HEA but not necessarily acknowledged across the system. Only those on full-time programmes are eligible for the Free Fees Scheme, the SUSI student grant and the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) scheme, irrespective of the number of ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) being taken. We recommend that needs to be reformed with clear and progressive funding and grants

³ Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998.

⁴ [College Connect](https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/turmtoteaching) <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/turmtoteaching> 18 June 2021.

⁵ O'Neill & Fitzsimons, 2020.

open for part-time students at all levels, which is cognisant of additional care responsibilities that many students often balance.

Recommendations

- Address the inadequacy of grants and bursaries. Create more part-time options and greater flexibility within the system.
- Provide progressive funding and grants for part-time students at all levels.
- Provide progressive funding and grants for non-traditional students to access postgraduate courses and internships.

Strengthening Further Education and Training (FET) (including Community Education).

The Department of Adult and Community Education recommend the provision of community-based educational structures and processes that support clearly signposted pathways into higher education from community and further education, and the full inclusion of all people in lifelong learning as and when they need it. Expansion of the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELs)⁶ would support this. In line with this ethos, a student-centred review of how adult learners experience further and higher education systems is needed to identify gaps in supports, including funding, gaps in information and guidance for adult student progression, clearer guidance on access, transfer and progression (ATP)⁷ to and through further and higher education.

Recommendations

- Funded pathways into, from and through programmes funded within the community education and adult literacy services budget as administered by Community Education Facilitators and Adult Education Officers on behalf of ETBs. This should include bespoke initiatives for vulnerable migrants, Travellers, and people living with financial poverty.
- Funded pathways across further and higher education with guaranteed entry routes via FET-HE foundation programmes into a wide range of courses including those with high cultural capital (sciences, medicine, teaching). Promote further education as an alternative educational pathway to high quality education and employment in its own right.
- Acknowledgement, investment and expansion of resources for adult education guidance as a model of lifelong, community-based educational and career guidance which follows the learner on their ATP educational journey whatever form and time that takes.

Given the growing significance of, and the distinct and specialised approaches to teaching and learning in further education, DACE recommends that the strategy needs to strengthen the status and sustainability of FET as a distinct teaching profession. This can only be possible if the following actions are taken:

⁶ <https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Higher-Education-Links-Scheme-%28HELs%29.aspx> 18 June 2021..

⁷ <https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Access,-Transfer-and-Progression.aspx> 18 June 2021.

- Commitment to creating sustainable and meaningful career opportunities and pathways for FET practitioners.
- Ensuring parity of opportunity to professional education and development that are available to primary and secondary teachers by creating structures and processes for induction, early career and professional development throughout the FET practitioner’s career.

Listening to learners and communities.

Adult education research nationally and internationally puts a strong emphasis on democratic decision-making structures for greater student consultation and participation in institutions and classrooms. We strongly welcome the growing recognition of the importance of student voice and community consultation in recent further and higher education policy and are strongly supportive of the development of National Learner Forum in the adult and further education sector⁸. This democratic approach is especially important for empowering disadvantaged or marginalised communities who have frequently had negative experiences of education in the past. Our initiatives and research with access students and graduates has underscored the positive impact of community education, access programmes, FET courses and higher education programmes that embed consultative processes, are responsive and when educational practitioners are suitably trained to work in this way.

The FET Strategy 2020-2025⁹ states a commitment to ‘ground up initiatives’ and its desire ‘to serve the needs of particular communities’ through ‘Integrated Community-Based Responses’. This echoes the commitment to community consultation in the HEA’s National Access Plan 2015-2019 and Progress Review (2018).¹⁰ This work should continue to be supported while ensuring that access and active inclusion is preserved at community level.

This also requires further developing the capacity for participatory forms of research at a local level which explore obstacles and needs and devise strategies for widening access through active consultation. An example of such an approach is the community needs analysis of the educational need of ex-prisoners by Meaney (2019).¹¹ We are convinced that careful listening and community-based collaborative research is vital for advancing access for the least advantaged groups in Irish society. This was also evident in the Inclusive Learning Initiative (ILI)¹² which enabled Maynooth University to develop an inclusive education provision for adults with intellectual disabilities at higher education and similar initiatives across Ireland, including the Inclusive Higher Education Forum (INHEF).¹³ Listening to and developing access routes that are responsive and sensitised to the specific contexts and needs of learners is key for higher education. We recommend the provision of sustainable funding for fully

⁸ <https://www.aontas.com/learner-voice/learner-forum>.

⁹ SOLAS, 2020. Full strategy available at: [FET Strategy 2020-2025](#)

¹⁰ HEA, 2018; HEA, 2015.

¹¹ Meaney, 2019.

¹² <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/faculty-social-sciences/news/inclusive-learning-initiative-ili-representing-ireland-investt-project-2015> 18 June 2021.

¹³ <http://inhef.ie/18> June 2021.

inclusive initiatives for learners from the least advantaged groups and the continued engagement with communities to identify emergent inclusive needs.

The Department of Adult and Community Education is a leader in that notion of being able to take learners with considerable experience and to recognise their prior learning (RPL).¹⁴ RPL is often approached as an individualized access route based rather than a strategically integrated into an inclusive policy base. An inclusive policy-based system of RPL is needed to address the challenges and opportunities that arise through learners' prior experiences, and to provide relevant courses and supports for returning graduates.

Access for non-traditional students has particular aspects that are unique to adult learners and mature students. Here initial engagement is crucial and is often the missing link. The Department of Adult and Community Education has been delivering a blueprint for first contact with higher education to take place through community-based initiatives such as the Communiversities.¹⁵ The Communiversities acts as a pre-Access gateway through which the difficult job of engaging adult learners who are most distanced from formal education and are risk averse towards returning to learning especially thinking about higher education is managed. Currently the Communiversities provides key initial access points for adult learners. It is free to the user and available at times and in local libraries so providing as service responding to the learners needs. As with any intervention timing is key for the momentum to take effect however once the Communiversities programme is over there is no built-in progression route. Linking to and providing funding for part-time location based and out of hours foundation courses could be developed and delivered in partnership with local ETBs in colleges of further education, libraries or community centres, including engaging with the Adult Guidance, Academic Advisory, Access and Admissions to make the step into HE achievable.¹⁶

DACE recommends the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science:

- Work with providers of higher education and stakeholders to review how to most effectively listen to the voices of non-traditional learners and disadvantaged communities through consultation and engaged research in a sustained and meaningful way.
- Explore how the least-represented groups can be supported through innovation in curricula and pedagogies in higher and further education courses and initiatives so that these courses speak to and respond to the realities and needs of these groups.
- Recognise that participatory research and pedagogies required to actively listen to non-traditional students and their communities will require active policy measure to support

¹⁴ Finn, 2019.

¹⁵ The Communiversities is based on a partnership arrangement between MU, LEADER Partnership Companies/Local Community Development Companies and Local Development Management Agency (Libraries Section), Dublin City Council and County Librarians and is free to the participant. See Barter, D. & Hyland, S. 2020. (Clancy, 1988)[ComMUniversity](#)

¹⁶ See Communiversities Network submission for further detail on Communiversities as SICAP agents and already working with identified target groups.

specific initiative for target groups as well as professional development activity designed to enhance the responsiveness to non-traditional student groups.

- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy needs to be embedded across the higher education system as an inclusive approach.
- Adopt and fund models for initial engagement such as the Communiversity and develop next step progress to foundation level courses in further and higher education.

Socio-cultural, economic and other barriers.

Research indicates the long-standing challenges which face students coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds.¹⁷ Research also makes clear that these barriers are not solely financial: there are also significant cultural and social constraints linked to the predominance of middle-class culture and values in higher education as well as varying levels of cultural familiarity and relevant information about higher education in disadvantaged communities.¹⁸ This, to return to the point made above, is why grounded research, ongoing consultation with non-traditional learners and disadvantaged communities and responsive and culturally appropriate pedagogy are so important.

Gender, ethnicity, age and disability are all acknowledged as part of the enduring and deeply embedded inequalities in student access and participation to higher education in Ireland.¹⁹ How this is experienced by students in terms of access, identity and widening participation is vital, with students from non-traditional backgrounds often struggling to fit ever-narrowing ways of measuring learning and participation.²⁰

This is evident across many aspects of inequalities. For example, the growing number of mature students who have entered the higher education sector reveals important gender implications as many mature students are female, most of whom have families and primary care responsibilities which influenced their educational participation, with many leaving work to care for their children and later choosing to return to education when their children are older as a long-held ambition. Gendered patterns of part-time versus full-time registration of students have important implications for women. Part-time registration entails significant fees and often excludes students from fees exemptions, tax rebates and grants. By virtue of this, women from lower socio-economic and from ethnic minority backgrounds in particular continue to be under-represented and disadvantaged in higher education, demonstrating the deep impact of the intersection of inequalities for student access to education.

Participation rates for students from Traveller background remain consistently low, reflecting the dismal track record of inclusion of Travellers in Irish society. In 2013, 23 Travellers entered full-time higher education.²¹ As Pavee Point²² and the Irish Travellers Movement have

¹⁷ Clancy 1988; 2015; Clancy & Wall, 2000.

¹⁸ Finnegan, 2012; Fleming and Murphy, 2002; Lynch and O’Riordan, 1998.

¹⁹ Fleming & Finnegan, 2010; Fleming et al, 2017.

²⁰ Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2009.

²¹ HEA, 2014.

²² Pavee Point (2015) <https://www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Factsheets-Pavee-Point-EDUCATION.pdf> 18 June 2021

highlighted, inclusion targets are based on individual student access rather than a deeper appreciation of Travellers' culture.

Recommendations

- Students without 'traditional' forms of cultural capital need ongoing support, including peer to peer groups and communities to equip them with the skills to flourish in higher education. This needs to be supported by appropriate pedagogies, frequent consultation and staff trained to respond to the needs and interests of specific under-represented groups (for example young people from highly disadvantaged communities and Travellers).
- We support Maynooth University submission's recommendation regarding the continued funding of the PATH (i.e., Turn to Teaching, College Connect and the 1916 bursaries) initiatives.
- Support women from lower socio-economic and from ethnic minority backgrounds including Travellers who are underrepresented and disadvantaged in higher education due to part time fees tariffs and caring responsibilities.

Appropriate data collection and measurement.

A key issue for education policy generally and national initiatives such as the National Access Plan is how they identify the key groups, criteria, indicators and outcomes with which they work. This is a necessary and important element of developing targeted action for access but the how these categories are devised and their limitations in research and in practice is not considered often enough.²³ In fact, a review of the use of targets and the identification of target groups by Fleming et al (2017) indicates that the shifts and slippages in measuring progress. We think that there should be greater clarity about the use and limitations of setting target groups and that alongside broad patterns in participation the HEA should consider general patterns in social inequality and what is learnt from grounded community need assessment.

Grummell & Ryan (2017) critically examines the measurement capacity of quantitative analysis which is often embedded in performance measurement frameworks. How we think of the higher education student tends to be an image of the learner as a subject independent of other family, work and social commitments. This resonates with discourses of the higher education student as an independent and self-reliant individual who is required to continually 'invest' in their own up-skilling to compete in the flexible labour market. Of key concern is the fact that the individual unit basis of measurement often disguises the complex intersectional nature of how inequalities are experienced by learners.

For example, national access schemes like HEAR (Higher Education Access Route) and DARE (Disability Access Route to Education) have been key in facilitating greater access to higher education. They operate through the designation of quantitative categorization, creating an access system based on academic learning impacts that are selected by qualified professionals rather than the wider experiential, social and affective knowledge of people with disabilities.²⁴ These schemes place considerable demands on the applicant, their family and school support network to provide the necessary information and paperwork to support their application. The

²³ Bernard, 2006.

²⁴ Grummell & Ryan, 2017; Ryan, 2019.

onus remains on the individual applicant and their families/ communities to fit their experiences into the framework of indicators being used, rather than the system being truly inclusive and able to account equally for the diversity for all applicants to higher education. Byrne et al's (2013) review of DARE and HEAR access initiatives noted institutional variations in terms of student intake, recruitment, implementation, subject choice and supports for DARE.

Recommendations

- Access data measurement needs to capture the responsiveness and qualitative capacities of learners and of services to respond to the diverse capacities, contexts and varied progression paths of learners.
- Reassess the type of measurement used to acknowledge the limitations of how we identify key groups, criteria and indicators through quantitative categorization selected by qualified professionals (which is expensive and contributes to socio cultural bias within the system and hinders access).

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