

Submission 4.17 [Dublin Learning City](#)

About Dublin Learning City

Dublin Learning City is a partnership that is collaborating to advance Dublin as a learning region, as defined by UNESCO. This exciting project is a Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) initiative that is funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Dublin Learning City is CoChaired by Marino Institute of Education (MIE) and Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT) as the lead partners along with University College Dublin (UCD), Trinity College Dublin (TCD), National College of Art and Design (NCAD) and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI). We also work in partnership with Dublin City Council, City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB) and Dublin Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board (DDLETB).

The mission of Dublin Learning City is to ensure that education and learning is accessible and free for all individuals, regardless of age or cultural background, in traditional and nontraditional settings. We continually strive and advocate to revitalise learning within families and communities, enable effective learning for the workplace, create a vibrant culture of learning and most importantly enhance the quality of learning opportunities available in Dublin city and the wider Dublin area.

This year Dublin Learning City launched its first virtual online learning festival, featuring 224 free events such as workshops, webinars, tutorials and many other activities for a diverse range of learners across Dublin. Over 100 organisations contributed to festival events, which attracted approximately 8,000 participants in total.

Dublin is the newest member of the Irish Network of Learning Cities, which endeavours to create a borderless country of learning, ensuring opportunities for accessible, life-long learning throughout Ireland. Furthermore, we are an established member of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning City Festivals and UNESCO Health and Wellbeing network.

The values and mission of Dublin Learning City are deeply rooted in principles of lifelong learning, accessibility, equity and social inclusion in education. Our working group is comprised of a diverse selection of education experts from Higher Education Institutes, Dublin City Council, City of Dublin Educational Training Boards and Dublin Dun Laoghaire Education and

Training Boards. Thereby, we are well placed to support the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Higher Education Authority with advocacy,

communication and outreach activities.

Additionally, as a UNESCO accredited Learning City, our recommendations reflect the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, most specifically Goal 4: 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all', which resonates deeply with the overall vision of the National Access policies and government strategies.

Introduction

Dublin Learning City welcomes the Consultation Process of the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2022 – 2026 and endorses the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Higher Education Authority for their commitment to improving access to education for all. As outlined in the guidelines for the consultation, Dublin Learning City will concisely answer the questions asked, offering a unique collaborative insight based on the experience and ideas of our working group.

Questions

1. What should our overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022-2026?
2. Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan? How do we ensure that vulnerable members of our society are included (e.g., learners currently in care or who have experience of being in care)?
3. How can current funding programmes be better utilised to further the objectives of the National Access Plan?
4. How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded within HEIs?
5. How can a whole-of education approach to widening participation in higher education be achieved?
6. How can pathways between further education and training and higher education be

better developed?

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

We believe our recommendations can assist in achieving the original priority goals and targets set out in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2021 and support the implementation of the next plan.

Question responses

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

It is Dublin Learning City's position that the current vision outlined in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2021 is still relevant and adequately reflects national policy priority in Ireland as well as being a European priority. It is crucial that going forward the learner voice is more central in all our planning and decision making processes.

Current 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'

However, Dublin Learning City recommends that a lifelong learning policy is developed, which is inclusive of all learners and takes account of the full spectrum of need, including economic, social, cultural, and the wider benefits to society of an all age inclusive approach supporting our ageing population.

Lifelong Learning policy that is driven by economic policies can only meet some needs of some groups. Which in turn advantages some groups over others, and some disciplines and institutions over others.

We recommend the implementation of a coherent, systematic and viable approach to parttime/flexible higher education consistent with the IUA Part-time/Flexible Sub Group, 2020.

2. Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan? How do we ensure that vulnerable members of our society are included (e.g., learners currently in care or who have experience of being in care)?

Dublin Learning City supports the target groups proposed and outlined in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2021 and wishes to include our ageing population.

Current target groups:

- Participation in higher education by people disadvantaged by socio-economic barriers
- Participation in higher education by 'first-time' mature students
- Participation in higher education by people with disabilities
- Participation in part-time/flexible higher education
- Progression to higher education by holders of further education qualifications
- Participation in higher education by Irish Travellers
- Participation of ageing population

Recommendations for including vulnerable members of our society:

- Inclusive education strategies in Ireland continue to have profound positive impacts on learners they exist to benefit. Increasing levels of participation in Higher Education validates that access policies can be successful, if they are supported by adequate investment and collaboration. Historically, the most impactful inclusive education strategies are those that foster the voice of the learner and partnerships with representative statutory bodies. A primary example of a successful inclusive education policy is, 'Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004'. This act ensures further provision for the education of people with disabilities to avail of, and benefit from, appropriate education as do their peers who do not have disabilities. We believe that participation in HE could significantly increase for all target groups outlined in the National Access Plan, if all were equally supported by appropriate Government and financial arrangements. One group which we believe is underrepresented in the political sphere is part time/flexible learners.

- Thereby, Dublin Learning City urges the Department and HEA to further emphasise and promote strategies that endorse part time/flexible learning options. According to the national Adult Education Survey 2017, the most common difficulty to accessing education was 'did not have time due to family responsibilities' (43.7%). The most widespread obstacle to accessing lifelong learning for those aged 25-34 was 'training was too expensive or the cost was difficult to afford' which was

reported by almost two-fifths (38.9%) of those surveyed. Many respondents to the HEA consultation paper (2012) confirm that part-time students are treated differently to those participating on a full-time basis. There was consensus that this needs to change, and that a national goal should be a fully accessible, flexible and relevant higher education system for all students, without a part-time/full-time divide. The debate on part-time/ flexible higher education has been taking place for a decade or so. Progress has been made with the extension of the Student Assistance Fund, Fund for Students with Disabilities, the PATH 1916 Bursaries, together with the addition of Springboard to address the needs of part-time students. PATH's Open Learning programme is an innovative approach aimed at enabling learning to fit around the student's life, making it a viable option regardless of the circumstances . Notwithstanding the success of this initiative, fundamental issues remain unaddressed at policy, and system levels. Proportionately, part-time students have remained steadily at just 17% of all enrolments since 2012/13, with remote students increasing from only 1% to 3% in that time. With an obvious need to overcome such challenges, we recommend that HEI's are supported to provide accessible and fully flexible learning provisions that support the individual learner. Dublin Learning City recommends that this process is formalised across all HEI's, as discrepancies currently exist. These improvements could assist in meeting a range of policy goals within National Government strategies, including, the National Access Plan 2022 – 2026 and EU strategies such as the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, 2021.

- Dublin Learning City believes the best way to establish what the learner needs and wants, particularly learners who are underrepresented in our society, is to reach out and ask the learner directly. We recognise the difficulty in identifying and accessing hard-to-reach groups, thereby we suggest the following:

In order to achieve the objectives of the revised National Access Plan, it is critical to pool expertise from local and community-based education initiatives that represent target groups. Such initiatives cultivate a “communities culture” and reinforce its values. Dublin City Council and local education networks have efficiently mapped out community

initiatives in Dublin City and the Greater Dublin area. Through its working group and membership, Dublin Learning City creates a common platform across both. A similar approach is taken by networks such as AONTAS, Northside Partnership, An Cosán and the ACE Network. We call for the continued resourcing and support of these groups so they can continue to conduct outreach activities and create partnerships to support learners. We greatly appreciate the significant engagement with and support of community networks that the Department and HEA have shown. As an active community network, Dublin Learning City is well placed to support the Department with advocacy, communication and outreach activities.

- We believe it is important for educators at all levels to be informed of the barriers to access. Often, a learner will not recognise barriers or have the language to express the impact of barriers they face. Therefore, it is critical that our educators are informed so they can recognise a barrier and relay resources available to cater for the specific needs of any individual who finds themselves becoming detached from the education system. Dublin Learning City calls for training to inform educators at all levels about the barriers to access and provisions available to overcome them. The more connected educators are to access provisions, the better learners will progress. Inspiration for this recommendation is drawn from the introduction of an early warning system, similar to those available internationally (US Department of Education, 2016).

- Finally, Dublin Learning City calls for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and HEA to explicitly define older people as a target group. Older people are defined by the United Nations as aged 65+ and by the EU as 55+. Recent census data for Ireland show that the number of people aged 65 and over reached 637,567 in 2016 – an increase of 102,174 since 2011, making it the fastest-growing population segment. In contrast, the number of people aged 15-64 increased by 44,477, and the number of those aged 0-14 by 26,962. By 2040 26% of our population will be over 65. This has implications on a range of policy areas. The UNESCO Lifelong Learning Report “Embracing a Culture of Lifelong Learning 2020” refers to key messages to revise knowledge and rethink the purposes of education and

the organisation of learning with tips for actionable directions translating these ideas into policy, research and initiatives.

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While structures in our societies often inhibit our ability to be more inclusive - not just in the ageing space, higher education systemic issues relating to diversity and inclusion are addressed through access programmes. Having a more inclusive and diverse campus benefits everyone - the staff, students, and communities we serve.

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The EU Green Paper on Ageing refers to a life cycle approach (early years, working lives, retirement and later life) and throughout the document lifelong learning is emphasised. The underlying message in the document is - we need to work longer. In order to work for longer we need to fully engage with education. The benefits of older adults participating in education formally or informally whether for personal development, upskilling and reskilling, developing enterprises and embracing encore careers is well documented. Of course there is also the fact that higher education institutions in particular now more than ever need to examine how they engage with older learners and we refer in this case to alumni who are a target audience for continuing education opportunities to reskill or upskill. Participants are more likely to engage in professional development with entities with whom they have a trusted relationship. Providing short-term professional training and credential programmes, mentoring opportunities, alumni career networks, and academic support maintain connections.

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

- Dublin Learning City welcomes the SUSI grant review and the Department's commitment to diminishing barriers to access. Undoubtedly, SUSI has contributed to the country's educational progress, however, limited investment yields limited return. Greater investment in SUSI will ensure educational equity which results in growing economies, social change and improved health and wellbeing. Dublin Learning City endorses the recommendations outlined in AONTAS submission for public consultation on the SUSI Grant Scheme (2021).

4. How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded within HEIs?

Our response is based on findings and recommendations outlined in 'An Analysis of the Implementation of National Access Policy to Integrate and Mainstream Equality of Access in Irish Universities - through the Lens of Inclusive Design'. (2017)

- Our primary recommendation is that access is defined, understood and tangible throughout Higher Education. We believe that HEI's should promote an ethos of inclusive learning environments, where access is intrinsically linked and embedded throughout HE, and not sectioned to access offices. In order to create an inclusive culture across universities, institutions need to be supported to achieve the following:
 - Make learning supports more widely available on a needs basis, rather than applying rigid criteria.
 - Treat students as individuals rather than as a student body or a sub-group.
 - Ensure that diversity and equality agendas align with university policies.
 - Brief Higher Education Institution staff on what is meant by an inclusive learning environment and promote a culture of awareness.

The latter does not necessarily require a significant resource change but a policy and practices overview. From a policy perspective, we recommend that the National Access Plan is further emphasised in HEI's and that information and training surrounding access is disseminated more widely to learners.

- HEI's need to be supported to work more closely with the Further Education and Training sector which support a large majority of disabled learners, migrant populations and lone parent families. Dublin Learning City recommends that a coordinator role exists in each HEI to ensure that communications, outreach and collaboration are active throughout the year. This will diminish pressure currently placed on access officers. These recommendations build on a number of different strategic themes set out in Irish Integration Policies.

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

- The key is recognising the Wider Benefits of Learning (WBL). Dublin Learning City harnesses this by sparking early engagement and curiosity. All forms of learning have value and the NAP should acknowledge this.
- Dublin Learning City urges the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to initiate a review of the career guidance sector that begins at secondary level and continues through tertiary education. We acknowledge the substantial progress The Department has provided to diminish academic selection that exists in the Irish Education structure. However, academic selection is still deeply embedded in our education system and Irish culture. As it currently stands, information about vocational opportunities post-second level are dispersed and often limited and hidden. Career guidance counsellors and teachers need appropriate training to relay information about vocational opportunities to learners and parents. This is possible through investment and implementation of access strategies, similar to those that exist at Early Education stage. If career guidance counsellors are appropriately supported to provide learner and parental guidance, individuals will be better positioned to make decisions for themselves.
- Dublin Learning City calls for more emphasis and investment to be placed on Leaving Certificate Applied and similar kiosk packages at second level. Leaving Cert Applied focuses on the individual talents of a learner and specifically on how the learner can apply such talents to Higher Education and the labour market. It is essential that learners who are educationally disadvantaged or underrepresented can tangibly see the benefits of completing a leaving cert and the job prospects and productivity that derive from doing so.

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

- Dublin Learning City urges for greater linkage between Further Education and Training Colleges and Higher Education Institutes and Labour Markets. Undoubtedly, vocational training is a vehicle to access higher education. However, it can be difficult for a learner to navigate the benefits of completing a FET course. A distinction at FET level is needed to determine the outcomes on completion and the prospects

of entering HE or the labour market. Furthermore, access to appropriate supports and information at FET and HE level is needed to ensure an easy transition for the learner. In order to achieve this, a greater culture of articulation and collaboration is necessary. This can be attained through further investment and staffing at both levels. This recommendation is based on the success of 'A Network of Regional Skills Fora', as established by the Government National Skills Strategy. The approach has proven successful in contributing to better outcomes for learners and supporting enterprise development.

- The Higher Education Links Scheme gives learners the opportunity to use their QQI level 5 or 6 major award to apply through the CAO for a place in a first year higher education programme. Unfortunately, programmes are capped at certain numbers which means places are allocated based on supply and demand, resulting in heavy competition. As a result FET Learners are subject to differential treatment based on HEI policy. Furthermore, HEI's are granted the authority to choose the number of FET learners they accept. This has exacerbated indiscrepancies between HE Institutes, for instance, Trinity College Dublin offers 17 places for FET learners and NUI Maynooth offers 168. Dublin Learning City calls for the Department and HEA to conduct a review of current entry systems from FET colleges to individual HE institutes. Our vision for an equitable integrated approach is informed by recommendations outlined in Further Education and Training (FET) Progression to Higher Education (HE) Transitions Reform Working Paper (2020).

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

Educational Training Boards, Higher Education Institutes and community organisations have shown incredible resilience and innovation in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has ensured preservation of learning throughout the crisis. A response of such calibre would not have been possible without effective collaboration and consolidation of all educational experts and providers. As learners gradually return to educational institutes, it is essential that we preserve this level of adaptability and solidarity.

Challenges

The double burden of the COVID-19 crisis and existing structural inequalities has further marginalised disadvantaged learners. Furthermore, the pandemic has had a severe impact on educational institutes who have been forced to close their premises and educational providers who have in many cases made the transition to online teaching forums. With it, this brings a plethora of public health, education, economic and social challenges.

The impact of changes to the delivery of education calls for immediate and long-term action.

We ask that the following recommendations are considered across FET, HE and Community Education. Our first recommendation is overarching and encompasses all recommendations made.

- Educational Institutes are appropriately financed and resourced to provide direct support to students and staff and wrap-around supports, for example, family support, crisis care, outreach and counselling.
- Psychological and wellbeing supports are formalised across all institutes and educational providers are supported to disseminate information and provide appropriate, timely services.
- Institutions are supported to provide mentoring services to learners who have become detached from education as a result of the pandemic, particularly students with additional needs. As noted by the OECD, ‘vulnerable and disadvantaged groups will be impacted more severely and therefore require particular attention in the policy response’ during and post-COVID-19.
- Educational Institutes are equipped to work collaboratively with community support services in their area and act as a pathway for learner-centred care.

There are also opportunities - illustrated by the creativity and possibilities of engaging with learners online. This has the benefit of reaching reluctant or distant learners and fostering a culture of lifelong learning.

Recommendations outlined endorse the objectives defined in Higher Education Strategy 2030.

Conclusion

At Dublin Learning City we believe learning, formal and informal, is the single most powerful driver of opportunity, of economic prosperity, and of social

progress. It has the power to change lives, communities and countries. As a nation we are experiencing a period of unimaginable change as we tackle the COVID-19 crisis. Our learners are an essential driver in leading and building back better through sustainable and equitable solutions to education, in a post COVID-19 climate. Dublin Learning City recommends using this review as an opportunity to foster the voice of the learner and educational experts. We would like to sincerely thank the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and Higher Education Authority for providing us with an opportunity to submit a consultation response and look forward to being part of the change