

This submission will seek to address the following questions from the perspective of Institute of Technology Carlow, an institute with a growing population of over ten thousand students, on the cusp of becoming a Technological University with our partners in Waterford Institute of Technology.

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

Institute of Technology Carlow welcomes the key achievements of the National Access Plan to date, including increased participation across a number of target groups, in particular socio-economically disadvantaged groups, students with disabilities, and the incorporation of the concept of 'student success' into the Higher Education Performance Network. Along with that, the increased investment in new access initiatives through PATH funding, has afforded Institute of Technology Carlow the opportunity to forge and build relationships with community, regional and education partners through focussed access programmes. Furthermore, by extending PATH funding, this tangible commitment will ensure that the impact and benefits of PATH will be long-term and ensure better targeting of the most disadvantaged groups in society. Institute of Technology Carlow's involvement in the PATH Programme is hoped to enhance supports for students and embed models of enduring community engagement over its lifetime.

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?

The rising number of applications to CAO place increased demand on the higher education system and demonstrate the importance of targeted policy interventions to ensure that the student body reflects the diversity of the population.

Notwithstanding this, key challenges remain in improving pathways and participation from existing and emerging target groups. Travellers still remain a group with low participation in education, where long term and sustained commitments and relationships with education providers and community stakeholders can make tangible differences. Mature learners, in particular those who were early school leavers, first generation, ethnic minorities and students with disabilities also need targeted interventions and supports. Emerging groups in Ireland's changing population landscape include care leavers, asylum seekers, and those disadvantaged and disengaged through COVID.

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

The higher education funding environment, though still challenging, is more positive and there has been an opportunity for increased funding for equity of access both through core institutional budgets and also through targeted PATH funding, but sustained, long term pre-entry programmes and providing post-entry support remains a challenge. The importance of equity of access as a National Priority needs to be reflected in increased funding. The funding environment of the higher education system has altered considerably since the previous NAP was devised, resulting in challenges for HEIs in terms of resources.

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

Provision of Flexible part-time courses that are adequately funded through the fee and maintenance grant system.

The Student Assistance Fund is not a fit-for-purpose system of financial support for part-time students.

Parity of student support services for part-time and flexible learners.

While welcomed, funding for access Programmes with short-term life-spans does not allow for a long-term, sustained impact.

Reporting mechanisms for Access and support programmes (PATH, SSAF, Fund for Students with Disabilities) are time consuming in their administration and financial returns, thus limiting staff time. More streamlined processes would allow support staff more time for student engagement.

Enhanced data gathering would negate the need for repeated reporting.

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

Promotion of UDL in Primary and Secondary Schools, as well as FE Providers.

UDL must be a core role and responsibility within each academic department, with training opportunities to reflex this through CPD.

Digital advances and supports offered to students during COVID that enhanced their learning should be continued and mainstreamed

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

An individualised, 'Educational Passport' system that follows children through the whole education system, facilitating targeted and continued supports to address disadvantage.

Co-ordination at local and national level of access programmes and initiatives.

Promotion of UDL from pre-school right through to HE.

Move toward greater use of Assistive Technology Tools to enhance learning in school, through training and resources. This would foster independence, promote digital literacy and enhance opportunities for students.

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

Expanding the current HEAR Programme to include QQI-FE applicants is a welcome development.

Streamlining of FE to HE entry routes and requirements nationally.

Building on the HCI-funded National RPL project to enhance opportunity in this domain for access, exemptions and awards.

Enhancing links with initiatives such as Youthreach, BTEI.

A Preparatory Programme at FE level for students to develop academic skills needed for HE (academic writing, research)

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

Returning to education needs to be a more affordable and accessible option for Social Welfare dependants.

More long-term, sustained social inclusion initiatives would foster more enduring relationships. (eg NTRIS)

Less administration and more resources would allow more outreach and community engagement for Access Offices.

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

Connectivity issues and lack of devices (while the Laptop Loan Scheme allowed long term loan of devices, many students reported issues with poor internet).

Lack of access to quiet study spaces was a difficulty for many at home, and were not conducive to remote learning.

Mental Health and isolation experienced by students' lack of engagement with peers.

Online supports did not adequately replace the on-site supports many students (particularly those with disabilities) rely on.

For those in school, lack of engagement of student cohorts (eg travellers, students with disabilities) was an enduring issue during COVID, with very concentrated efforts needed to encourage their re-engagement.