

## Submission 4.19 Longford Women's Link

### Introduction

Longford Women's Link (LWL) is a women's social enterprise based in Longford Town. Established in 1995, LWL are a long-standing provider of Community and Adult Education in Longford Town and County with Education and Training delivered according to the principles of Women's Community Education (WCE) at our dedicated WCE Facility. LWL provides a wide range of services, including Education and Training (QQI Centre), using our Integrated Service Model (Fig 1). We are also a designated third level Outreach Centre for IT Carlow and have previously facilitated outreach for UCD and NUI Maynooth, providing much needed third level access in Longford and the Midlands. LWL's purpose is to link women with the resources to change their lives and transform their communities and we have a long history of promoting the transformative nature of community education. Over 400 students complete a wide range of accredited and non-accredited courses/modules including NFQ certification each year. LWL is a member of AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, and LWL CEO, Tara Farrell, is the current AONTAS Chairperson. LWL's Education and Training Manager Pamela Latimer is the current co-Convenor of the National RPL Practitioners Network.

Fig 1. LWL Integrated Service Delivery Model Longford Women's Link Submission to the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education June 2021

### Submission Overview

In preparing this submission, LWL referred to the DFHERIS HEA National Access Plan 2022-2026 Consultation Paper. This submission present a profile of Longford and then addresses four key questions contained in the consultation paper.

### Longford Profile

Longford is a small rural county, which experiences above higher than average disadvantage and social exclusion. The county has a population of 40,655, which represents an increase of 18.5 percent in 10 years (CSO, 2016). Key socio-economic areas of concern which impact access to higher education include:

- Longford is the eighth most deprived region in the country (CSO, 2019) and in terms of local authority deprivation rates, Longford ranks 4th most deprived nationwide.
- Longford has 1,941 lone parents with a rate of 17% (state average is 15%) however there are marked differences in the proportion of lone parents on an urban-rural basis e.g. urban areas such as Longford Town, Edgeworthstown, Ballymahon and Granard possess the highest rate of lone parents in the County, with Longford town possessing a lone parent rate of 44.8%. One-parent families make up 26.7% of all households in Longford (One Family 2017). Longford also has one of the highest number of recipients on lone parent supports per capita (CSO, 2018).
- Longford was the county with Ireland's highest unemployment rate in the most recent Census with 19.6% of its people out of work (CSO, 2016).
- Of the large towns (population 10,000 and over), Longford (30.6%) had the highest unemployment rate AND also had 3 out of the country's 79 unemployment blackspots (CSO, 2016)

- Longford has a very diverse population:
  - o Of towns with 1,500 or more persons, Tuam had the highest number of Irish Travellers with 737 persons, followed by Longford with 730 persons.
  - o Edgeworthstown is the second most diverse town in Ireland with just over 50% of the population describing themselves as ‘white Irish’
- Census 2016 saw Longford with the highest increase in members of the Traveller Community per head of population - there are 25.7 Travellers for every thousand people in Longford.
- From an education perspective, County Longford (along with Wexford) had the lowest percentage of persons with a third level qualification, both at 32.5 per cent. Almost 18% are described as having no formal or primary only education (CSO, 2016).
- Finally, and critically, there is no higher education institution in Longford County.

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

The overall vision for equity of access needs to firstly identify target groups and then examine specific pathways of engagement and support. These groups include:

- ☐ Women
- ☐ Early School Leavers
- ☐ Rural Learners
- ☐ Disabled Learners
- ☐ Learners with specific literacy (including digital) and numeracy requirements
- ☐ Members of the Traveller Community
- ☐ Mature students
- ☐ Learners in receipt of a social welfare payment

Equity of access for these target groups is often dependent on support received from independent community education organisations like LWL, who provide 1:1 support, mentoring and outreach, yet who do not receive any core funding. Therefore, it is impossible to engage in long-term planning, ensuring that FET pathways are easily accessible and fair.

Specific barriers to accessing higher education have been identified by organisations like LWL. Our experience in Longford has shown that low educational attainment rates, persistent barriers to accessing education and meaningful employment opportunities coupled with experiences of social exclusion all combine to prevent women achieving their full potential.

Access to opportunities for disadvantaged women is particularly difficult, as they must overcome barriers of rural isolation, high unemployment, domestic violence and lack of transport/childcare supports. The LWL integrated model (Fig. 1) offers access to meaningful FET pathways and wraparound services but requires supports in order to do this and ensure equity of access. A key issue is the lack of childcare support for women wishing to return to education – the closure of the CETS (Childcare Employment and Training Support) scheme presented additional issues for this cohort. The reinstatement of CETS would provide one stream of support.

Note: The HEA Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education (June 2021) notes in its conclusions that participation in FET or community education is an important pathway to Higher Education. Therefore funding is critical to support these pathways.

Therefore, an overall vision for equity of access is one based on a social inclusion model with funded and supported pathways from FET and community education to Higher Education. There are existing models of good practice e.g. in June 2021, LWL and IT Carlow signed a formal progression agreement to provide progression pathways to learners wishing to access higher education opportunities on completing their programmes at LWL. This agreement is the result of a Longford Women's Link Submission to the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education June 2021

collaborative programme of work over the past number of years and represents the kind of innovation and initiative that is taking place within the community education and FET sector, yet which often remains underfunded.

Finally, there is a need for a comprehensive RPL policy at national level in order to ensure fair and consistent approaches for all adult learners returning to education.

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

As outlined in Section 1, existing models of good outreach practice should be replicated. Establishing collaborative programmes with community education and FET providers should underpin a whole-of-education approach. In this way, dedicated pathways are available for learners who have been most distanced from the higher education system. The LWL/IT Carlow model is an example of how learners can be supported to achieve their early-stage NFQ awards in a community education setting and progress to accessing higher education, again within their own communities. This is particularly important for women with caring responsibilities or those already employed but wishing to advance their careers by attaining a higher education qualification. It is also important to provide learners with the opportunity to access higher education as part of a lifelong learning approach to education.

As part of a 'widening participation' approach, community education providers must be sufficiently resourced in order to ensure that there are supported pathways for learners from their institutions to higher education. This includes support for accreditation to ensure interconnectivity across the tertiary sector.

Rural learners are particularly disadvantaged due to geographical and infrastructural (broadband) barriers. Outreach models in collaboration with locally based providers such as LWL ensure there is a much greater chance of learners in these areas accessing higher education.

Access to finance is one of the most persistent barriers to accessing higher education. Therefore, it is vital that agencies such as the Department of Social Protection have clear information on supports and entitlements available to potential learners. In addition, there are ancillary costs such as childcare, transport, digital equipment (laptops) etc. which make up the true costs of learning, again particularly for women with caring responsibilities and rural learners. Support for these costs must be available if there is to be equitable access to higher education for disadvantaged learners. Longford Women's Link Submission to the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education June 2021

It is also important that staff within higher education institutions are aware of the barriers faced by their learners and are familiar with the additional supports that may be required. Specific training for HE staff would support this.

3. How can pathways between Further (and Community) Education & Training and Higher Education be better developed?

Existing models of practice that are already working must be supported. The LWL/IT Carlow model outlined earlier is an innovation borne entirely from the commitment of both organisations to more effective pathways across the tertiary sector for our learners. Funding support for this model e.g. dedicated outreach and mentoring support for disadvantaged learners would greatly enhance this model, which is replicable across the sector.

Therefore funding allocated to higher education must include community education/FET. If supports are not provided for learners to access higher education opportunities, then the pathways cannot develop in a meaningful and effective way.

Learners who are supported to engage in or return to education because of community education support find it increasingly difficult to access financial support. Often, it is left to already overstretched providers to try to minimise/remove fees and other costs by seeking grant support from a complex variety of sources. This places significant resource burdens on providers – the time involved would be better spent supporting learners to reconnect with learning and explore opportunities for progression to higher education. Core funding for community education providers who play a vital role in these pathways is urgently required.

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Pathways need specific supports for women. Women who are parenting alone, working part-time and women from ethnic minority groups have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19. Their pathways require targeted initiatives to progress to higher education. LWL is also a strong advocate for the need for parity of investment when it comes to female participation in education. Throughout the course of its work, LWL identifies a range of issues that affect the ability of women to achieve economic independence for themselves and their families in disadvantaged communities in Ireland. Access to opportunities for disadvantaged women is difficult particularly as they must Longford Women's Link Submission to the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education June 2021

overcome barriers of rural isolation, high unemployment and lack of transport/childcare supports. LWL's community education model offers a meaningful route to higher education and ultimately, economic independence.

Pathways need to be accessible and clear. For example, there are significant concerns at present within the community education sector in relation to the new QQI ELC standards which will mean that learners wishing to progress in a career in Early Years Care and Education will now have to complete four years of part-time education to achieve a QQI Level 6. Learner options to engage with the provider they feel most attuned to their needs will be gone. But more critically, the removal of the individual modules discriminates against part-time learners, particularly women (who make up the majority of employees in the Early Years Sector). This rows back on all of the work done within the community education sector and does nothing to alleviate fears around returning to education for learners who need the 'stepping stone' approach. It goes completely against the ethos of the DFHERIS strategy regarding inclusion and flexible learning. Identified barriers to participation in education are real – financial, caring responsibilities etc. The new award exacerbates these.

It will also act as a deterrent to those wishing to progress into higher education – in order to achieve a level 7 or 8 award on the NFQ, learners are now facing 6-7 years of study.

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

#### Overall impact of Covid-19

The impact of Covid-19 on the community education sector has been severe – from the cessation of face-to-face learning to the significantly increased mental load on learners, tutors and providers, no one has escaped unscathed. However, while everyone has been affected to some degree, not all have been affected equally. This is particularly true for women, who have been disproportionately impacted in a variety of ways e.g. increases in domestic violence and the increased caring responsibilities, again predominantly undertaken by women. There are also increased concerns in relation to female participation in education. Throughout the pandemic, LWL continued to provide 1:1 supports by phone, email and online to all learners during our transition to Emergency Remote Teaching. In March 2020, LWL supported approximately 86 learners on a mix of accredited and non-accredited programmes online along with a further 24 who were engaging with IT Carlow and crucially, retained every learner. However, this figure of 110 learners represents a much wider societal impact including women, children, families and

communities. LWL's internal research can directly attribute this to the significant engagement and mentoring from the Teaching and Learning team at LWL, despite the fact that the organisation's income generation streams had ceased overnight. However, the provision of these supports are not sustainable in the long term and the impact will ultimately be felt by learners. Longford Women's Link Submission to the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education June 2021

#### Specific input in relation to Covid-19

The overarching focus of community education providers during the pandemic was on the continuation of education. There were two key aspects.

1. Short term crisis response: This focused on 1) maintaining continuity for learners where possible and 2) maintaining a connection to our learners. Both of these activities were in line with our progression pathways approach.

2. Long term focus: Recurring question for providers were - where would the sector be in six months, or in a year? Where would our learners be if we could not maintain that connection? Many learners were already digitally and geographically isolated and were now socially isolated or are caring for children so could not participate. LWL has invested months and in some cases years of time and energy into supporting learners to engage and being that connection for those that are furthest from our system. This was critical in terms of supporting progression to higher education and the human resources expended on this are simply not sustainable. The mental load of this crisis has also been significant for learners, tutors and staff. In order to ensure that those who have been most impacted by Covid-19 have the opportunity and support to progress from community education/FET to higher education, targeted outreach and engagement supports must be put in place.

The impact on community education providers themselves was also significant. Many operate as not for profit/social enterprises and were unable to generate income during the pandemic. The fact that certain programmes were quickly implemented such as the Stability Scheme and the MAEDF indicates that there was a recognition that such supports were needed to support the most disadvantaged learners in our society. Therefore, if we wish to 'build back better' and provide real opportunities for learners to engage in higher education, services who underpin the learning journey with these wraparound supports, must be funded.

#### How Investment in Community Education supports access to Higher Education

From our perspective, Community Education is a microcosm of the entire education system – it spans the whole process of the development of the person that enables learners to progress, either on a personal level or into employment or further education or a combination of all. Community Education is about presenting equality of opportunity, a fact reflected in the Programme for Government, which outlines the latter as one of its key tasks.

Looking at the current levels of investment, we feel that there are simply insufficient resources to deliver the quality services that are necessary if we are to reach the most marginalised

learners and Longford Women's Link Submission to the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education June 2021

support their learning journeys within the tertiary sector. Community Education providers are at a critical point in their existence due to the lack of core and consistent funding<sup>1</sup>. While we recognise that community education funding is channelled through SOLAS (via ETBs), LWL does not receive any funding through these channels.

Multi-annual core funding is vital for community education providers who are essential elements of the education and training process in Ireland. Community providers have long been adept at encouraging traditionally 'hard-to-reach' learners through their doors however they need long-term supports in order to be able to do this and to support these learners through the system and to access higher education. The expertise within the sector cannot be ignored. LWL, throughout its 26 years in existence have identified key barriers to participation in education, specifically experienced by women in Longford. These include rural isolation, experience of domestic violence, lack of access to childcare and transport, lack of third level opportunities in Longford (LWL aside) and an absence of financial support for part-time students.

Supporting the most disadvantaged learner to access higher education has widespread implications for improvements within communities and society in general including increased participation in education and employment as well as improved levels of wellbeing and reduction in isolation, the latter two being particularly impacted by the recent pandemic. Community education, if properly resourced, is an effective tool for community empowerment and social change.