



National Access Plan 2022-2026 Consultation

Submission from

Munster Technological University

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1. Introduction

Munster Technological University (MTU) has an Access Service on both the Cork and Kerry Campuses. The University, through both Services provides a range of pre-entry, entry and post-entry programmes for access cohorts. Access programmes and initiatives have been designed and delivered on both the Cork and Kerry Campuses, over the last twenty years and lessons have been learned. This submission focuses on the issues and challenges faced in moving the access agenda forward within higher educational institutions. The document also highlights some recommendations that we hope will be considered in advance of the next National Access Plan. This submission is made on behalf of MTU, with input from both staff and students.

2. Overall vision for equity of access to higher education

We propose that the vision statement from the National Access Plan 2015-2021 remains relevant for the period 2022-2026 with a proposed addition:

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 creating, rich, diverse and inclusive learning environments that foster educational and personal success.

3. Target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan (NAP)

The target groups as identified in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015-2021) are still relevant for the forthcoming period. We note the following recommendations with regard to certain existing target groups and identify sub-groups that we consider to be eligible for inclusion as target groups in the plan.

Full-time Mature Students: A Mature Applicant is normally 23 years of age on or before 1st of January of the year of admission (www.cao.ie). For the purposes of the NAP, the definition of a mature student further stipulates that a mature student is a first time, new entrant to higher education. We propose that this definition be revised to take into consideration the social, economic, health and personal circumstances of other mature student entrants, regardless of whether they are first time, new entrants. The SUSI Student Grant Scheme already recognises second chance learners; mature students who commenced but did not complete their higher education studies 5 or more years prior to re-entry. In our experience, students who are returning as mature students to full-time undergraduate higher education, are primarily students experiencing disadvantage who are returning to reskill or upskill and thereby improve their circumstances. We consider it to be within the remit of a National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education to facilitate these mature learners to succeed.

There are a growing number of HEIs that are seeking *Age Friendly* status. We recommend that HEIs do not concentrate only on the younger mature students but that appropriate supports be considered for the older age groups.

Part-time Mature Students: We concur with recommendations from the HEA's *Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education – What are the Challenges? Recommendations for the Future (2021)*, which presented research on the issues and challenges faced by first-time mature students in higher education:

Full-time HE participation for all may not be consistent with the need to maximise upskilling and retraining opportunities, while full-time learning may not be feasible or appropriate for many potential mature students. Currently, only students on full-time programmes are eligible for the Free Fees Scheme, SUSI, BTEA, and this effectively disincentives part-time/flexible study. Focusing some of existing public resources on expanding the opportunities for part-time learning may be an efficient means of promoting participation. This could include examining access routes; increasing financial support for part-time learning (e.g., through an expansion of SUSI, the Student Assistance Fund or other means); institutional level targets and other measures.

However, the development and activation of measures to promote access for part-time, mature students requires closer consideration within the forthcoming NAP as, in the majority of HEIs, the part-time and lifelong learning functions operate under an independent department. Access Offices traditionally support full-time students and while initiatives such as the 1916 bursary, the Fund for Students with Disabilities and the Student Assistance Fund have been promoted to part-time students, a more strategic and comprehensive programme of pre and post entry supports in the context of the national Access agenda needs to be mainstreamed within the relevant Part-time/Lifelong Learning departments. To effect change and realise progress in this area, these departments require recognition and support through the NAP.

Overall, the numbers of **Students with Disabilities** attending higher education in Ireland has increased, however, students with physical and sensory disabilities remain significantly under-represented. These student groups should remain as a priority in the NAP. However, other groups are presenting in recent years who are also experiencing significant disadvantage. For the next NAP, we recommend further analysis of student progression and enrolment data to determine if there are other groups that should be deemed a target group. Notwithstanding whether certain groups are identified as target groups in the next NAP, there is a requirement nationally to review supports at primary and post-primary levels of education to determine if supports are sufficiently developed to mitigate against disadvantage in relation to access and success in higher education. For example, are students with ASD, mental health and dyscalculia, equitably positioned and supported by a framework of UDL and inclusion for progression to higher education?

We propose that **Lone Parents and Children of Lone Parents** are included as target groups in the plan and that the achievement of these targets is support through enabling, family friendly activities that promote a sense of belonging in the higher education. In our experience, the numbers of Lone Parents attending higher education has decreased steadily in recent years, most notably following changes in relation to BTEA, Rent Allowance and eligibility for the maintenance component of the SUSI Student Grant Scheme. Lone parent families are over twice as likely to be at risk of poverty and social exclusion than two parent families. Gaining a higher education qualification leading to well-paid employment is the only clear way they can improve their situation. Adequate funding models are essential to ensure that educational opportunities for Lone Parents are a realistic option.

We further recommend that a comprehensive definition is developed to encompass not only lone parents in receipt of a social welfare payment but also lone parents on low incomes.

The **Roma community** requires recognition as a target group in the National Access Plan. As evidenced in the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021, this group is among the most disadvantaged and marginalised people in Ireland experiencing poor education completion rates for both children and youth. Strategic placement in the NAP will prioritise equity of access to higher education for the community, deepen and widen the existing responses to specific actions in the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy and in the DEIS Plan 2017, for example, the NTRIS Pilot Projects at primary and post primary level.

Other Ethnic Minority groups e.g. migrant families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, should also be considered as a target group in their own right. Data on access and participation in higher education is required to inform the needs of this group and to determine the risk factors for this group. In our opinion, students from minority backgrounds experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are not equitably represented in higher education. To realise our responsibility and commitment to a diverse student body in higher education that is representative of our wider population, this group requires a strategic response, embedded in the goals and objectives of the NAP.

People where English is not the first language – At pre-entry, application, transition and post-entry stages, this group encounters significant challenges which mitigate against progression to higher education in some cases and against success in other cases. These students experience difficulties navigating the admissions routes and the associated application processes. Furthermore, the post-entry academic writing requirements present as a barrier to performance. These students require structured supports well in advance of entry to higher education to facilitate language acquisition and fluency, written expression and composition. The number of students enrolling in higher education seems to have increased in recent years. Data and information are required to inform a response to these students' needs and to learn of their experiences as students.

According to TENI (Transgender Equality Network Ireland), the prevalence of **Transgender people** in Ireland is difficult to determine as this data is not officially collected. TENI refers to GIRES, a UK-based organisation, which estimates that 1% of individuals may experience some degree of gender variance or non-conformity and approximately 0.2% may undergo transition (Reed, 2011). Constituting a minority of people in our society, this group experience barriers to access and participation in education from an early age for a number of reasons including access to suitable schools, availability of suitable bathroom and personal hygiene facilities, limited specific support in the community, minimal Trans Health Care in the state, lack of awareness and understanding from their community and mental health challenges. Access and Disability Services are reporting an increase in the number of Transgender students presenting for assistance. We recommend that further consideration is given to including this group as a target group in the next NAP in consultation with representative organisations.

MTU recommends the inclusion of **people who have experience of being in Prison** as a new target group. Additionally, the children and families of prisoners need to be supported. MTU Cork Campus has established good working relationships with Cork Prison and the Dillon's Cross Project (which supports the partners and families of men in prison). There is a huge appetite for educational opportunities amongst this cohort. The education services within the Prison, managed by Cork ETB, provide learning opportunities for students at various levels on the NQF. MTU Cork has very successfully piloted Taster Programmes and also Special Purpose Awards to prisoners in the last number of years.

Students supported by care of the state or previously in the care of the state (Túsla). From our experience this group of students present with particular challenges and needs in relation to access and success in Higher Education. At pre-entry stage, students need support in relation to programme choice, grant applications, financial support, etc. Outreach and awareness are needed prior to leaving care so students can feel confident that there will be supports in place for them to participate once they gain access to higher education. At post- entry, students can be disconnected from family care. This can present challenges in terms of engagement and retention.

We need to provide accessible, easy read materials for use by social care workers, child advocates, residential care workers, youth workers, teachers and guidance counsellors to ensure that entrenched societal disadvantage/s re expectations and ambitions can be addressed and over turned in time for children to aim for third level participation. In light of disproportionate numbers of those in care departing mainstream education before the junior cert this should be done in the first two years of secondary level education.

There are **students who become estranged from their parents** and as a result can find it difficult to navigate their way through third level education. Some students are too old to come under Túsla's care. Financially, it can be very challenging for some students.

People living in Direct Provision, Refugees and Asylum Seekers have very limited access to educational opportunities. Many people who have spent years in Direct Provision, are still precluded from availing of third level opportunities because they are classed as non-EU students, and as a result are faced with enormous fees and without access to grants.

Students who are homeless - Homelessness amongst the student population is a growing phenomenon. Students can very often have no fixed abode for the duration of their academic studies. Rising rent prices have made it particularly difficult for students to make ends meet. Students who are couch surfing can find themselves in secondary and tertiary homelessness. There are repercussions to this as they can get lost in the system as they don't have a permanent address. These students are often young people with family disagreements, personality vulnerability or attending mental health services. Financial supports are needed in the Access Services to provide to these students; funds that give Access Officers more discretion and speed in responding to needs.

Socio- economic target groups - Working-class access is an issue that ought to be made more visible and the term should be a prominent feature within the overall vision that embraces diversity.

4. Further Recommendations

New proposed title: Access and Student Success - MTU recommends that the title would remain as is, 'National Plan for Equity of Access'.

As the numbers of Access students grows, the need to provide post-entry supports also increases, which results in a demand for more resources within Access Offices. If 'student success' is added to the title, the supports needed at post-entry could be seen as the responsibility of the Access Services, making it more difficult to mainstream supports across academic departments and across the Universities.

Currently we provide financial, academic and social support programmes to hundreds of students. Growing the Access staff resource to meet post-entry demand is unrealistic and unsustainable. HEIs need to focus on Universal Design delivery, where post-entry supports are available for all students, not just the Access students. This approach would free up Access practitioners to focus on bespoke post-entry supports for students with complex needs.

Position of Access within HEIs - The post of Access Officer in the THEA sector was sanctioned by the Department of Education over 20 years ago. In most HEIs in this sector, the post is situated within Student Services. While this may have been appropriate at that time, over the last two decades, the remit and responsibilities of the Access Offices have grown exponentially in line with the strategic placing of the Access agenda at national levels. With mainstreaming as a key objective of this

agenda, the role of Access Officer, is no longer appropriate to its position within the HEI. To ensure that the Access agenda is embedded in the operations including teaching, learning, assessment and examination, as well as the culture of the organisation, informing new developments and existing practice, an Access Professional post is required at Executive management level.

Since 2000, the student case load, responsibility and accountability of the Access Offices has grown to the equivalent size of an Academic Department or larger but without the visibility, the resourcing and the power to effect change. Access Officers are positioned within 'administrative' section of HEIs, with most Access Officers not operating at senior management levels, not present at Academic Council level, with limited/no capacity to impact or influence institutional policy. MTU recommends that structures within HEIs be established to support a whole-of-Institution approach to access and delivery of the National Access Plan goal to mainstream the delivery of access.

Following a recent Access review carried out by PWC in Cork Institute of Technology in 2020, it was recommended that a review of the position of the Access Services within HEIs is required to determine if HEI organisational structures are appropriate and consider whether there is sufficient management resource within the Access Service, given its strategic importance within the Institution.

Staff Welfare - Access staff need to be recognised as specialists in a field - Access Officers, Disability Officers and Learning Support Tutors, Project Coordinators etc. There needs to be recognition that Access practitioners are highly-skilled and qualified professionals providing support to vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Additionally, from an employee point of view, the staff within the Access Services are stretched beyond capacity and for some practitioners, the type of work can have lasting effects on personal health and well-being. There is currently no clinical supervision in place for staff. Some of the team are meeting students one to one, supporting students through very challenging situations such as homelessness, financial hardship, difficult domestic situations, etc. This can have lasting impacts on staff and this needs to be recognised.

The emphasis on **new entrants** in the national targets is misguided. It is appropriate to broaden this definition to include students who are returning to study in higher education, especially those students who have not successfully completed their higher education qualification previously. For reasons pertaining to their circumstances some groups of students need more than one opportunity to attain a qualification, for example, students with disabilities, students with health and caring responsibilities as well as students with limited financial support, to name but a few.

Over time **students within the non-access route** are presenting with access and integration issues that have not been identified before college or may be the result of a change in circumstances. We possibly need to look at a range of assessments being made available to identify such students so they can avail of higher supports.

Potential students with **parental and other caring responsibilities** need flexible access routes. We need to provide alternatives to face to face delivery. Presenteeism generally favours men, persons without caring responsibilities and persons without a disability and it limits participation on the basis of geography.

Cultural Capital - First generation university students struggle with the language, terms and expectations at our university. We can work better to ensure that everyone has an equal chance by ensuring that each understands the 'terms, language and expectations of the game'. There is a need

to move away from language like access, EDI and succeeding to less performative-sounding language about outcomes, belonging, accomplishment, which has more meaning for people's lives.

Students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) - This area needs to be looked at as an overall educational approach rather than it being solely a third level sectoral response. Clarification is needed on the terminology used. There needs to be coordinated education and/or work opportunities created across all educational settings including third level – with clearer pathways around progression from one level to the next. There are pockets of work and courses being delivered by HEIs already, but often there's the 'what's next' question once the person has completed the programme. What should change in the interim is that ID should be covered by FSD so we can ensure that students with ID receive funding for any supports required through the DSS. In line with HEIs EDI ambition, campus engagement initiatives should be extended to include this community.

Students with high support needs should have specific individual high support funding.

Literacy, including digital literacy, and numeracy are difficulties faced by some people in availing of education and learning. Literacy is a barrier for some members of our society. There is a focus currently on building literacy skills at primary and second level but it is also a third level issue. Adult basic education is an important service and Access Services should have the capacity to allow for links and supports into this service. There have been technological advances to support literacy needs and these should be promoted by HEIs.

Literacy needs have been identified in craft apprentices. Students can also present with Mild General Learning Disabilities and Intellectual Disabilities and adequate supports need to be in place to ensure that students can successfully complete. There is a need to support people with numeracy, literacy and digital difficulties by providing more pre-entry supports here.

Parents with literacy difficulties who can't support their children to apply to SUSI and CAO can also have an impact. Many of the application process for college entry and for financial supports are text heavy and complicated and can be challenging for both students and parents. Support is needed for both parents and students.

Community Engagement

To date, many national higher educational policies have focused on economic growth, accountability and key performance indicators. The consequence of this, has been an approach to access and community engagement using targets and outputs as a way to measure success or performance.

Access policy currently results in Access Officers chasing targets, busy with bureaucracy and administration. We would welcome if the next national access policy allowed for HEIs to work with communities to address the under-lying access issues, not just concentrate on addressing the 'symptoms' of the problem. Higher Educational Access policy needs to allow for practitioners to uncover real problems and actual needs of communities. Access practitioners need to have freedom to engage with critical pedagogy and engage with students in a learning process that is not forced but allows learners to realise their power as critically engaged and active citizens. [Cork Learning City](#) and [Cork Access Network](#) are examples of how HEIs can work together on collaborative approaches with other educational partners and communities.

Essentially HEIs need to have resources which allow for adequate engagement across many different departments, faculties, schools, support services. MTU would like to engage with the voluntary, community and not for profit sector across youth work, direct provision, community legal advice, housing and homelessness supports, Travelling community representatives, community garda liaison and JLOs, domestic violence organisations and child detention/prisons and alternative education.

HEIs need to work with communities, in addition to school communities, to determine what do they need and at what stage/timescale do they need it. Hearing from them directly is vital for the development of appropriate activities.

Access Foundation Programmes

HEIs should have the opportunity and the resources to design, develop and deliver bespoke programmes for access cohorts, e.g. Prisoners, members of the Traveller Community. Programmes need to be accessible, free, appropriate to the needs of the learner.

Rural Disadvantage

While the National Access Plan 2015-2021 has witnessed significant, positive developments and improvements in the area of access to higher education by under-represented groups, the next plan requires a more sophisticated and nuanced approach to identifying and supporting 'DEIS' eligible individuals studying in non-DEIS schools.

The DEIS model operates relatively well in densely populated urban areas where the school population, in the main, represents its hinterland and eligible students can be more easily engaged in access initiatives including related out-of-school activities.

In rural areas and small towns, disadvantage is not as clearly defined by postcode as it is in urban areas and the consequences of disadvantage are not so easily identified as each school will have enrolled students from varied socio-economic backgrounds. In the case of the rural post-primary school, students will be travelling from a wider catchment area across greater distances. The student who has to travel on a prescheduled school bus does not have the opportunity to engage in the wider, curricular and non-curricular school activities, to build social capital and a sense of belonging as their engagement with school and fellow classmates is limited to timetabled academic hours. Time spent travelling to and from school leads to longer days and less time to balance study, recreation and rest. Access to supports such as grinds can be limited, not only by financial resources but also by distance and lack of independent transport.

These challenges persist through to access to higher education presenting additional costs for students because of their geographic distance from the campus. Flexible study options and learning modalities (online vs. in-person vs. out centres) may enhance equity of access.

Multiple disadvantage

There are sections of our society who experience multiple disadvantage. More research is needed in this area and a definition is required – financial needs, emotional needs, homelessness needs e.g. Members of the Traveller Community can struggle to maintain positive mental health. Maintaining mental health can be a challenge for all members of Irish society, particularly in times of such economic hardship. But when this is combined with the experience of racism, exclusion and discrimination that some of the Traveller community experience, the challenge is greater.

Visibility

MTU recommends that HEIs are supported to be proactive in their recruitment strategies so as to actively target and encourage applicants with Access backgrounds. 'If you can't see it, you can't be it'. Students need to see that they belong to their educational institution, that they are included, that they are visible. The staff population needs to be diverse, reflecting the general population e.g. Staff with disabilities, staff from the Traveller Community and ethnic minorities, staff from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds.

5. Pre- Entry Initiatives and Strategies

Early intervention

There needs to be a focus on early years education and primary schools – the continuum of education/whole-of-education needs to be looked at. If the necessary supports aren't in place at primary school, there is a danger that people will be left behind. Parent and teacher influence are key to support positive educational opportunities for young people. MTU recognises the important role that parents and guardians have in influencing their children's futures. By supporting the parents/guardians, children's aspirations will be kept alive and opportunities realized. Empowering parents by giving them the information on courses, providing them with an insight into the supports, highlighting the advantages, etc. can have significant impact.

Continuous Professional Development for Teachers, Principals, Home School Community Liaison Coordinators, Guidance Counsellors, in the area of educational access is equally important. Teachers can be very influential in a young person's life as they go through their second level education. They can provide the necessary encouragement and motivation for them to progress to further and higher education post second level. Teacher aspirations for the young people they teach needs to be high, so that the young people can also have that belief.

Transitions Work and College Readiness

Certain programmes and skills need to be addressed in post primary level, problems materialise at HE if students are ill-prepared and unfamiliar with academic requirements. These needs have to be met earlier. Transitions work is crucially important. Engagement needs to start early with second level students in preparing them to be college ready. The skills required for third level need to be imparted, such as research skills, higher order skills, communication skills. Access Services should have adequate resources to organise summer pre-entry courses for various cohorts, so that prospective students can learn new and different skills.

A Transitions programme should be implemented as a national programme where people who go through this process are more prepared for college. During this programme students learn the necessary skills and are more prepared.

Assistive technology needs to be offered as part of/and embedded within the pre-entry supports to the wider community/pre-entry focus.

Online Readiness programmes are recommended. An example of an online programme which prepares students for third level, has been piloted in UCC. This module, hosted in the Canvas VLE, focuses on nurturing reflective writing and academic skills for students in post primary. Something like this at a national level would be hugely beneficial for students coming in:

<https://www.ucc.ie/en/graduateattributes/nurturingbrightfutures/nurturingbrightfuturesforstudents/>

Guidance Service – Adult Guidance in ETBs and Schools

At second level Guidance Counsellors (GCs) have a remit to provide career guidance and counselling support. Issues in relation to the mental health and well-being of our young people are more prevalent than ever, moreover because of the pressures associated with the pandemic. GC's are spending more and more time supporting students who have mental health struggles, leaving less time to focus on career planning. Very often the career planning classes are happening in the classroom with little opportunity for one to one. COVID-19 impacted hugely on the opportunities for students to come on campus and also for access staff to go onto school grounds. Students aren't getting one to one guidance in schools and they're entering into courses with little knowledge of

what they've signed up to and are ill prepared to succeed. The impact of this will be felt for a number of years to come.

MTU recommends that the HEIs work collaboratively with the Guidance Counsellors in schools and in further education colleges to facilitate seamless routes into HE. An additional allocation of Guidance resource is required in schools.

6. Post-Entry Initiatives and Strategies

It was very clearly the intention of the most recent NAP to embed Access into all operational areas and functions of the HE sector and the term 'Access is everybody's business' was coined during the period of this plan. To further progress this objective, continued efforts are required to raise awareness amongst staff and students and to instil a culture of access and inclusion in HEIs.

As the need to make progress in this area is common to most HEIs, a suite of national initiatives is recommended to address the gaps:

For Academic Staff:

A peer-led campaign to promote ownership, facilitated by an agency such as the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, to develop modules in awareness raising and creating accessible curricula that are inclusive and acknowledges, respects and values all identities, inclusive teaching, learning, assessment and examination strategies, the principles of UDL including the effective use of Educational Technologies, induction/orientation for new staff to include signposting to support services. Support staff to liaise with and monitor student experience- progress and challenges; capacity, confidence, language and organisation capacity-building.

Continue the campaign for Access Champions in each Academic Department. Although this objective was not successful during the life of the most recent plan, it continues to be a worthwhile objective to pursue. It warrants further exploration to establish if this role requires resources to buy out some hours each week and thereby recognise the importance of the role and support the individual to dedicate time to effecting change amongst their peers, developing and sharing models of good practice and supporting peers to adopt good practice into their way of working. This is a leadership role and instrumental to the success of UDL, in particular, within departments.

For Students:

A range of one-to-one mentoring supports is needed to support students through the many transitions they experience from admission to graduation.

- A holistic approach by means of an integrated, whole-of-HE programme of engagement and support is needed to promote the overall Health and Well-being of the student, acknowledging and supporting their health, wellbeing, personal, academic, social and financial needs. If the student is not healthy and well, it mitigates against positive experiences and achievements in the other areas of their lives. The programme would constitute a professional one-to-one support, in the form of a mentor, that one good adult, assigned to the student at Orientation. The work of this professional support would be supported by a panel of peer mentors and a class-based buddy system that encourages students to look out for each other.
- Empower students through the use of educational technologies to assist students, with appropriate training, to become more independent in their academic life.

- In 2020-2021, a new initiative was launched in MTU, arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, offering Academic Mentoring to First Year and Second Year students. The Reach initiative was aimed at creating connections and supporting students in Learning, Teaching and Engagement. An Academic Mentor was a member of teaching staff who reached out to First- and Second-Year students, to provide an extra layer of positive learning support. It was automatically given to the student. Sometimes students can get lost when they are referred on to others. The REACH initiative, which was embedded across multiple departments, allowed students to be connected, engaged and supported. MTU recommends that the resources are put in place nationally to allow this initiative to be mainstreamed and adopted by other HEIs.

The Student Journey

We recommend that HEIs acknowledge and recognise the student's right to dignity and respect and minimize negative impacts on students having to seek help. Reflection and consultation facilitate an understanding of the complexity of needs and is vital for contemporary cohorts. Engagement with students must constitute an honest interaction with clear highlighting of mutual responsibility. The attainment of a degree is a transformation journey for all students where student ownership of the journey is as much about the empowering process as grade attainment.

We recommend the development of a key worker system where students who are transitioning in and out of university build a relationship with an identified person or team of people who can provide managed transitions and integration within the service.

MTU recommends that the language at national policy level is reframed and that we move beyond equity of 'access' toward a focus on belonging and consider what we need to do to impact on 'outcomes'. If access is our goal then the focus should be on access across the academic journey. We can craft our vision around belonging and engage in research at different stages of the student journey to evaluate students' sense of belonging and how we facilitate accomplishment.

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

Regarding students who are not in **Direct Provision**, are not eligible for the Pilot Support Scheme, are not on Stamp 4 and in the country less than 3 years. This cohort faces non-EU fees although they are asylum seekers. Funding is needed to support students in these positions. The Sanctuary Scholarship, as an externally funded scheme, isn't guaranteed going forward.

The **SUSI** review and supporting students who are over but still very close to the income limits threshold. The **income thresholds bands** are too close e.g. the income threshold cut off between a 100% grant and a 75% grant is just over €1000. The repercussions for the student falling into the lower grant rate is significant. We recommend that an income band be introduced for each threshold, whereby a student who presents with a family income of up to 5% over the threshold, can present a case or make an appeal to be considered for the higher rate of grant i.e. introduce a scale within each threshold band.

1916 Bursary – many initiatives are aimed at new entrants but Access students may have a number of attempts accessing higher education and are not eligible after their first attempt. We recommend that the 1916 Bursary criteria includes these students.

Access-related Funds are short-term/fixed-term and come with restrictive guidelines from the HEA. The gaps between the allocation of funds, extensive reporting, then a rush to line up with the next new initiative is putting significant pressure on service and administration functions. Can **retrospective accountability** be introduced i.e. issue the fund and account for how/where it was spent afterwards.

MTU suggests that HEIs be allocated one pool of **funding with discretion** to use the fund based on the students' needs and which allows HEIs to move in a direction that is the right fit for their institution and local and regional communities, rather than the direction being dictated nationally.

Short-term staff contracts -During their time on Access Projects, staff build up significant expertise and become completely au fait with the area of work. However, their contracts end, and thus the HEI repeatedly loses the knowledge and expertise built up and the benefit of the time and resource invested in each new staff member. This modus operandi does not offer any security to the staff filling the roles nor does it lend itself to efficiencies in project progression and development.

More mature students attend HEIs in the Technological Universities and Institutes of Technology rather than the traditional universities and represent a larger portion of student intake in their respective institution type. The greater number of mature students attending these institutions is likely to have been influenced by the duration and type of programmes provided. Similar to the DEIS school model, an adjustment to the **RGAM allocation** is required to reflect the proportion of the overall student population with Access backgrounds in any given HEI. This adjustment is necessary as the redirection of income from capitation towards Access is not an option for these HEIs.

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

Links back into funding vis-a-vis **staffing resource**.

Strategic commitment from HEIs overall is needed e.g. many **pre-entry activities** that are going on are not necessarily joined up. Some STEM activities are taking place but where's the diversity piece in these activities? These changes need to come from senior management/executive and not all fall to the Access Services.

For any pre-entry programmes that enhance any student's ability to access HE, there should be a **quota of places** set aside that are cost free for Access students.

We recommend that HEIs are held accountable for mainstreaming through the implementation of the Compact agreed under the **Strategic Dialogue Process** with the HEA.

A sector-wide understanding of the **principles and practices of mainstreaming** is required to reach all stakeholders in the process to ensure that Access is everyone's business.

There is scope for a more **mandatory CPD** that educates staff on the needs and experiences of access students. Work is underway with regard to induction training on the Cork Campus but a targeted approach for all staff is needed. Attitudinal change takes time. Stronger messages like the EDI messages need to be repeated and staff engagement in an understanding of the student

population needs to be mandatory and prioritised. We suggest that the NAP mandates for an educational plan for all HEI salary holders.

The HE sector needs a quality proofing / **access proofing measures** embedded with module and programme reviews, that would allow for programme development, pre-entry activity, how we deliver our teaching and learning and our post entry supports and everybody is mandated to take this access proofing step prior to development. There is a danger that the NAP tends to be seen as the remit of the Access Service which enables the silo effect across HEIs and undermines the mainstreaming agenda.

Add value to existing **mentoring programmes** within the community and those organised by other providers such as Business in the Community and Junior Achievement. Mentoring programmes should encourage interaction between industry/companies and college and offer support, guidance and mentoring to students as they progress through their courses.

Allocate workload allowances to academic staff prepared to (re)train in the cultural and legal dimensions to support traditionally marginalised students e.g. through both individual AND group advocacy.

Universal Design is a gift from disability activism and reminds us of our inter-dependency. MTU recommends that Universal Design and concepts and frameworks such as the ACT model of Acquire Connect and Transfer are mandated as an underlying principle applied in practice to all service and academic provision. HEIs need to focus on a meaningful resourced commitment to meeting diverse learner needs in all aspects of academic and campus life.

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

Most individuals with more complex needs are not assisted to develop an **Individual Education Plan** which they may need to experience equity of access. IEP's should also fit within an individual's bigger life plan.

Higher education impacts society in many ways. Society doesn't always recognise this. If we are able to demonstrate how HE impacts society in a more holistic and tangible way, then HE immediately is seen as being more accessible. MTU recommends a shift in narrative from one focused on career objectives to higher education having a role to play in developing **active citizens** and global citizens. Participation in higher education is not, perhaps, the most appropriate goal. The aim should be participation in education that helps students discover and develop their potential.

Funding aimed at improving equity of access to education is more available at higher education, than at primary or second level. As a result, HEIs can very often have the capacity to engage in pre-entry work, perhaps because they can get access to funding. But it may be the case that the HEIs are not best placed to steer or manage programmes aimed at impacting on second or primary school levels.

National policy (Hunt Report) recognises that at age 19, some students who have participated in full time education are still not college ready. **Classroom-Based Assessments** introduced in Junior Cycle are unfortunately not being continued through senior cycle but interventions like these are needed to prepare students for college. There is evidence within the primary school sector of holistic approaches to learning, but this stops at 6th class. Stakeholders/providers are not

communicating with others around continuity of good practice. A national strategic plan and a Senior Cycle review is needed, as there is currently an emphasis on getting through to Leaving Certificate but not on developing people. Choices are being made at post primary that determine the route a student will follow.

STEM – Many **STEM initiatives** are focused on post-primary schools, aimed at creating a pathway into a STEM college programme. By the time this initiative reaches the students, it is already too late. There is a lack of Post-graduate students available for outreach and there a lack of ambassadors for STEM. Ambassadors returning to their primary and post primary schools is very impactful.

MTU recommends that educational organisations in a region look collectively at ensuring that there is a **whole-of-education** approach to learning opportunities. HEIs, FE, second level and primary schools need to work together to instil that college is an option e.g. Cork Learning City. There is a need for a celebration of education initiatives at primary school. Teacher CPD needs to be incorporated into this providing training on educational disadvantage, disability, etc.

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

The establishment of the new Government department addressing Further Education and Higher Education is a positive move, in allowing for different sectors to work collaboratively to aid **transition and progression**. Further Education can be a great opportunity to move from a restrictive Leaving Cert to becoming more college ready. QQI, FE and HE need to work and collaborate together to look at how to improve transitions.

MTU believes that there is scope for a **national progression scheme for QQI students**. Some colleges have progression schemes but not all colleges are linked. Some QQI student's points (max 390) are not considered for entry to certain HEIs or their max points potential doesn't meet the cut off points for many programmes that cut off at 400 + points.

Further Education

Further Education for some students provides an opportunity to experience a discipline for a year or two years before transitioning onto HE. It can be a very appropriate route of entry for some learners. However, transitioning from FE into HE can still be a massive jump.

Advanced entry to year 2 is really valued by FE colleges. It's a pathway that suits a lot of learners. However, the transition can be difficult for students coming into year 2. The impact of a shaky transition may not always come to light for a number of months into the course.

Policies, procedures and mapping need to be developed which allow for the seamless transfer and progression of students. There needs to be recognition of how the FE sector has evolved and how awards at QQI level 5 and 6, allow for progression into L7 and L8 programmes. HEIs need to have a more positive attitude towards the skills that students with a QQI background have acquired.

Progression planning within the earlier education establishments make it more a continuum than a leap. The NQF levels 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, etc allow for the pathway. HEIs need to actively engage with the FE sector to design a smooth continuum between levels. In a local context looking at where there are synergies and making both parties and their students aware of those synergies. Students need opportunities to develop links in their chosen area of employment.

Outreach programmes are essential to allow students who are studying at QQI level 5 and 6, an opportunity to explore options, fostering familiarity with HE before completion of their FE courses. Many people who have low participation in HE simply won't come through the FET pathway because of the heavy 'in person' contact hours which can dissuade people from entry to FET courses too.

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

The National Action Plan for Social Inclusion outlines specific measures and goals, which can capture progress across many aspects of social inclusion— early childhood issues, health and care, drug misuse, literacy, numeracy, second chance education, lone parents, equality, unemployment, education variations, gender issues, housing accommodation (**not all listed here**). Do HEIs and Access Services need to be active in all these areas? MTU believes that we should be active in this space. HEIs are very well-resourced organisations; the physical structures and the expertise that exists across the university should be drawn upon to address social inclusion from both regional and national points of view.

HEIs need to take a proactive role in **profiling social inclusion initiatives** within their campuses. An example of this can be seen in the social awareness raising activities on both the MTU Cork and Kerry Campuses where active engagement takes place with social advocacy groups. Key speakers are invited on campus annually to address staff and students and past speakers have included Fr Peter McVerry and Conor Cusack. It is part of the university's obligation/duty to profile these initiatives.

HEIs generally take pride in creating graduates that are work ready. We need to think more broadly and more inspirationally in that we need to be **creating socially aware, active citizens**, committed to social inclusion. HEIs have a responsibility to make our staff and students aware and our staff and students active. HEIs need to act on that opportunity that we hold in relation to preparing graduates to be active citizens and socially conscious. The work of Cork Learning Cities reflects the Sustainable Development Goals and we need to focus more on creating students who recognise their part in achieving the SDGs.

Collaborations with other educational providers, community organisations and groups need to be developed to address issues in relation to social inclusion holistically. The Learning City initiative in Cork and the Cork Access Network are good models of practice and framework which allows for this connectivity to happen. Essentially, the HEI needs to come out of the lecture hall and engage with the voluntary, community and not for profit sector across youth work, direct provision, community legal advice, housing and homelessness supports, Travelling community representatives, community garda liaison and JLOs, domestic violence organisations and child detention/prisons and alternative education.

Social inclusion initiatives understand the needs of those with whom they are working with. Meaningful **engagement and collaboration** with them will help the HE sector to create suitable and sustainable pathways. Dialogue is needed to identify the communities' learning needs, what has worked for them, what supports they feel are needed etc.

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

Financial, physical, relational, belonging, emotional, mental aspects have been experienced by many students and staff during the pandemic. It can be argued that these **negative experiences** have been experienced more so by students with less advantage or privilege. MTU recommends that HEIs build in **developmental & trauma informed procedures** and practices built in to university procedures and understanding.

There has been a large variance in experiences of students and staff, with some **positive experiences and benefits** for some students. Eg. For some there was less exposure to social anxiety triggers which enabled them to focus more on learning. For others there was a lack of controlled routine and interface which they found extremely detrimental.

The pandemic highlighted the **digital skill divide** experienced by educators and students, the rigidity of some to embrace development of T&L skills. The social human dysconnectivity, for some, created freedom and restoration of professional energy when released from study/work environment, but for others highlighted a demoralisation of lack of real 'team' or a sense of belonging.

Other Challenges: Technology, and isolation. Dedicated and quiet space. Childcare or additional responsibilities. Stress and higher levels of un-wellness, Financial struggles, mental wellbeing (Identified through survey of Access students on MTU Cork Campus)

Technology is a real chicken-and-egg scenario. How do you teach technology when on-line is the only medium available? In the future we can create all sorts of online and community-based initiatives but for the moment it's a real problem.

Research undertaken on MTU Access students. Students wanted more communication with lecturers and other students, a more consistent approach across modules, a consistent template across Canvas and access to more online resources. The recorded lectures enable students to access their courses, more support (they felt so alone this year trying to engage with their course when they're sitting in front of a computer – particularly 1st years). Great learning in the move to the remote environment but there are real challenges there e.g. internet connection and suitable workspaces. If having a private conversation with a student in a shared accommodation, it can be difficult for them to find a private space to talk.

ASD and ADHD found this second semester crippling and a number of them managed up to Christmas. A response is to maximise human contact for them on return to campus. Funding is needed for this purpose.

COVID-19 has had an immense impact on **Travellers, Roma and non-EU migrants**. They have experienced a lot of unnecessary stress during the restrictions as a result of their overcrowded accommodation, lack of facilities such as internet connection and social interaction. Many of these groups need assistance with assignments and supports with literacy levels which would have been difficult to access from a remote area or area of poor connectivity. Also, Traveller students have found it extremely hard to prioritise educational work over their normal day to day duties. Connectivity issues- In some sites and locations, students needed to drive/walk down the road to get good internet signal. One parent has to drive their child to a location with good signal so that they can do their homework, in the car, with their siblings also in the car.

There are people who had not considered going/returning to university who are now doing so. COVID-19 has prompted a re-evaluation among people about their lives and what they want to achieve. HEIs can play a strong part in supporting them and allowing them to craft and realise their own visions. HEIs can look at being responsive in terms of mode of delivery in order to maximise potential students' ability to achieve together and HEI's need a greater balance between 'in person' delivery and 'by distance asynchronous' offerings.

A **Student Remote Teaching and Learning Survey** was carried out by the Department of Technology and Enhanced Learning at MTU in May 2021 with MTU students on the Cork and Kerry Campuses. This survey sought to assess their experiences of remote teaching and learning during the pandemic. Please refer to the Infographic at Appendix 2.

Appendix 1:

MTU Student Focus Group

Main Points:

- Promote the service more – what does it do? What does it mean? Who is it for? Explain more.

Finance:

- Access to college – mature student and dependent – don't qualify for SUSI so pays out of disability allowance.
- SUSI is good but more grants needed different steps and consideration for SUSI.
- If you previously attended college and got a degree or transfer of course grant is denied – paying out of own pocket. If lunch vouchers could be given (SU advised of SAF).
- Year(s) Gap between degrees should apply for SUSI i.e. For SUSI, the definition of a second-chance student should also include students who have successfully completed a higher certificate or degree and after a gap of 1 or more years want to undertake an ab initio programme of study, these students should be eligible to apply for SUSI and be assessed for the Student Grant Scheme.
- Back to Education Allowance should cover Master Studies.

Transport:

- Physical Access to college – transport amount of buses, train, lifts, taxi or walking needed to get to college. Tiredness of travel can affect concentration levels in class.
- Access to transport services to get to college – some students find learning at home easier for this reason.
- Time saved by not travelling can be up to an hour and half. Blended approach next year would be nice – half online half in person.

Impact of COVID-19 and Suggestions:

- Lectures that are live should also be recorded so students can watch back if they miss something or lecture going too fast for them.
- Sometimes due to available storage on device students cannot download the lecture so more live would be helpful.
- Missing class should not be as big of an issue, some students feel parented/babied and should be respected that all students are adults and it's their personal responsibility to attend.
- Space at home is a big issue to study/do work. Small desks may not be big enough for copybook and laptop but that's only size desk that fits in room.
- Space an issue to store/place a computer.
- Some department/modules require drawings – desks at home not big enough for sheets.
- Course specific software sometimes students do not have storage free on laptop/computer for this.
- Lack of motivation to do work at home is low as not physically with class mates. Lots of distractions at home.
- Raise more awareness around scholarships.
- Online has positives and negatives.
- Create study sessions/study clubs so students can learn and help from each other.

Appendix 2:

STUDENT REMOTE TEACHING AND LEARNING SURVEY

2021



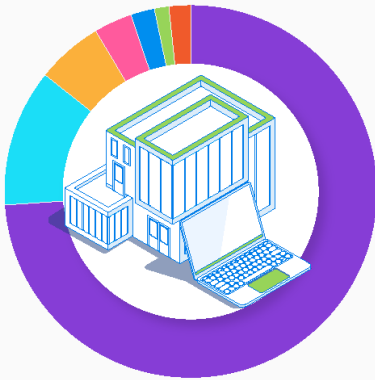
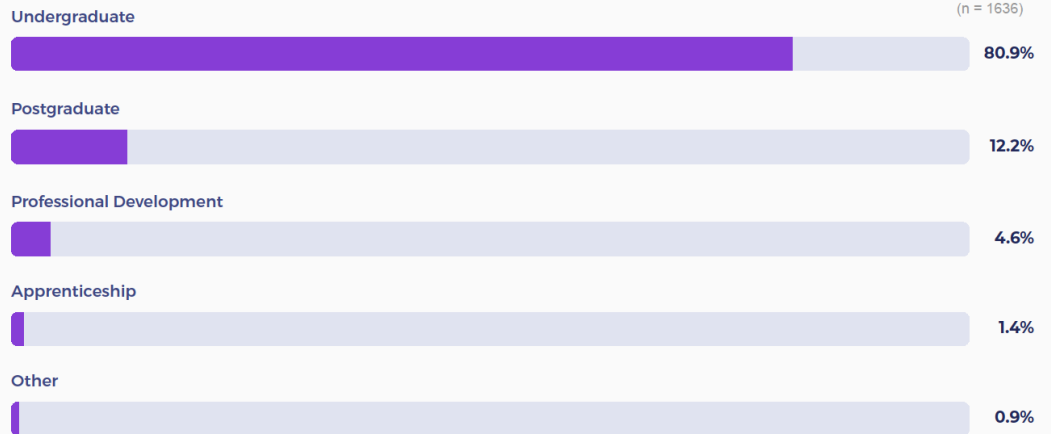
This infographic visualises key findings from the May 2021 Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) survey of Munster Technological University students. The survey covered Cork and Kerry campuses of the new university and received 1,703 responses (approx. 11% response rate).

Department of Technology and Enhanced Learning, MTU

STUDENT BACKGROUND

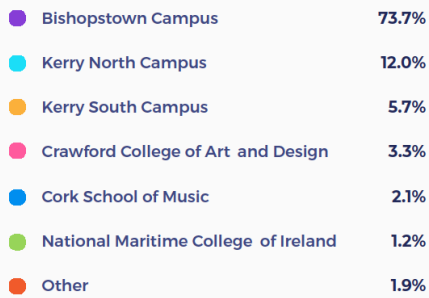


Programme type



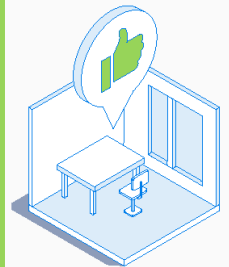
Campus

(n = 1647)



Dedicated work space

(n = 1698)

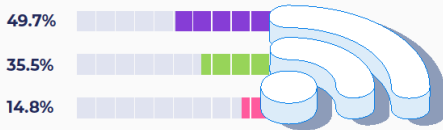


71.7% had a dedicated work space while studying remotely

28.3% did not have a dedicated work space

Internet reliability

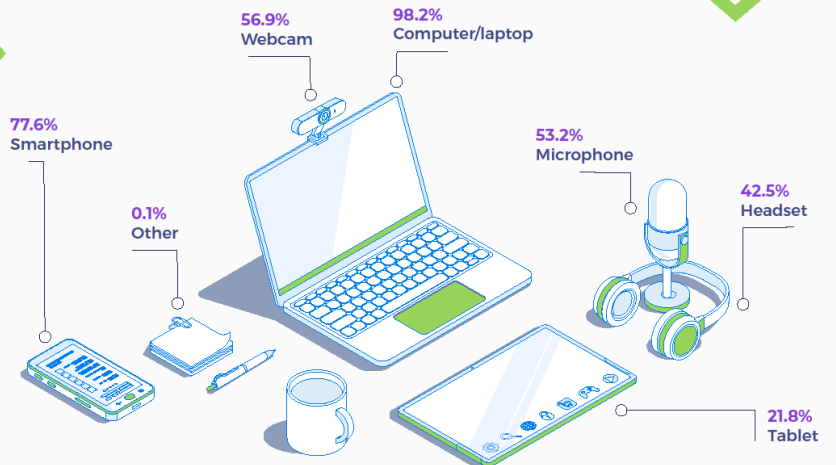
(n = 1685)



- Somewhat reliable** - e.g. speed can vary and may disconnect but does not affect my studies
- Very reliable** - e.g. fast speed and doesn't disconnect while in use
- Unreliable** - e.g. slow connection speed and may disconnect which can affect my studies

Access to suitable hardware and peripherals

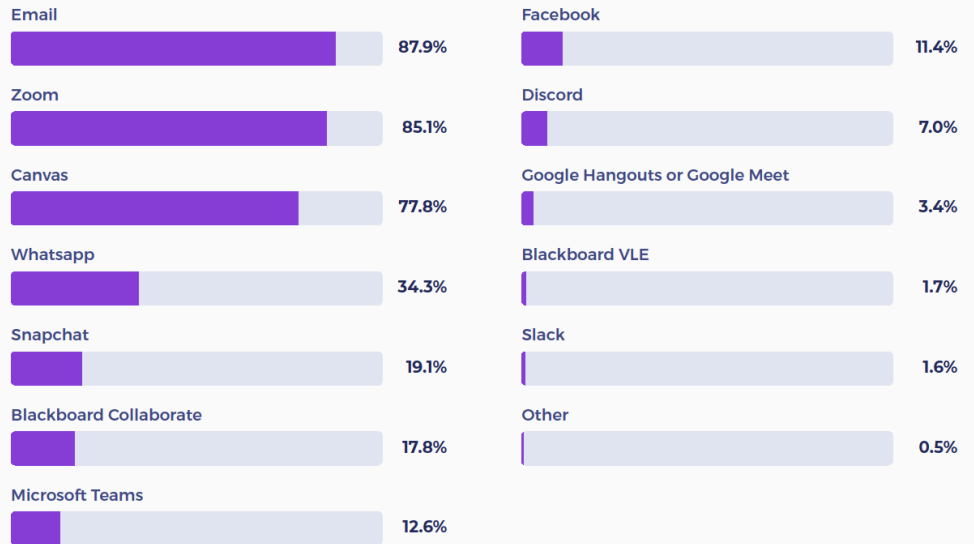
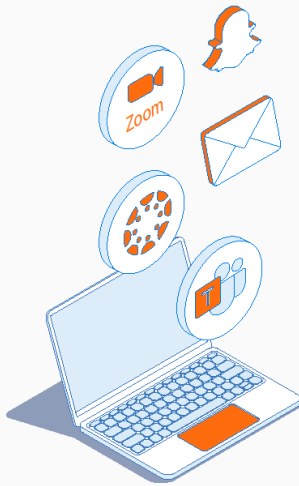
(n = 1703)



STUDENT REMOTE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

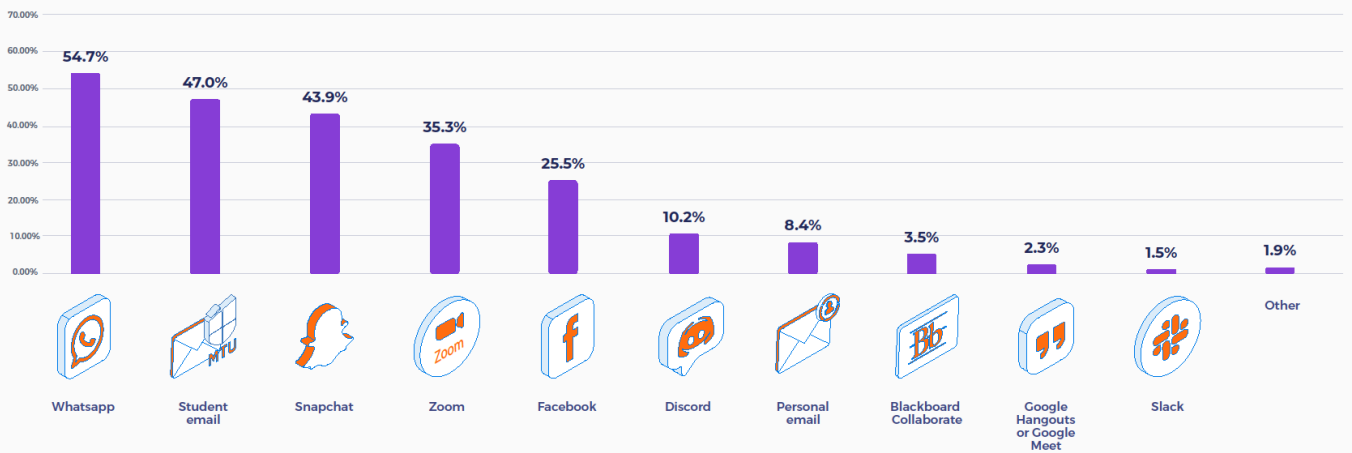
Main tools used for remote learning

(n = 1700)



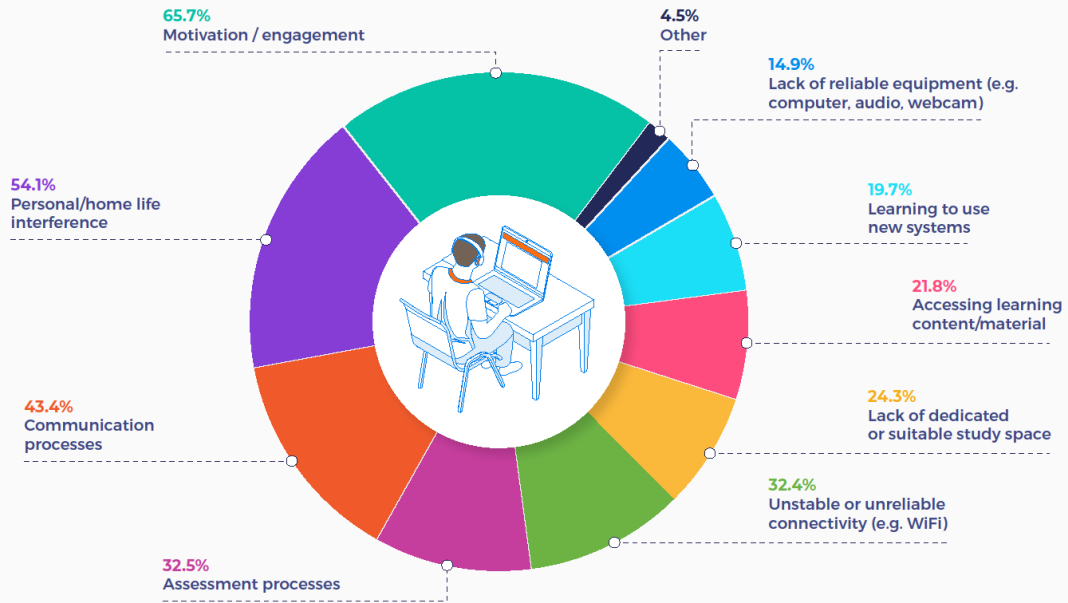
Main tools used to communicate with fellow students

(n = 1693)



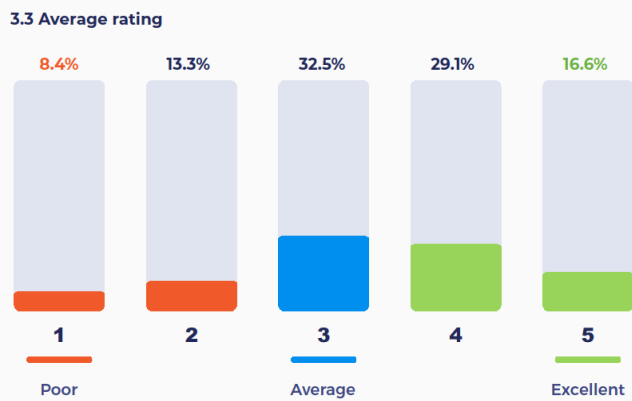
Main challenges experienced while studying remotely

(n = 1678)



Rating for the support received from the institute while studying remotely

(n = 1696)



Benefits associated with remote learning

71.3% feel there were benefits associated with remote learning

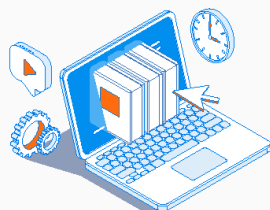


28.7% feel there were no benefits associated with remote learning

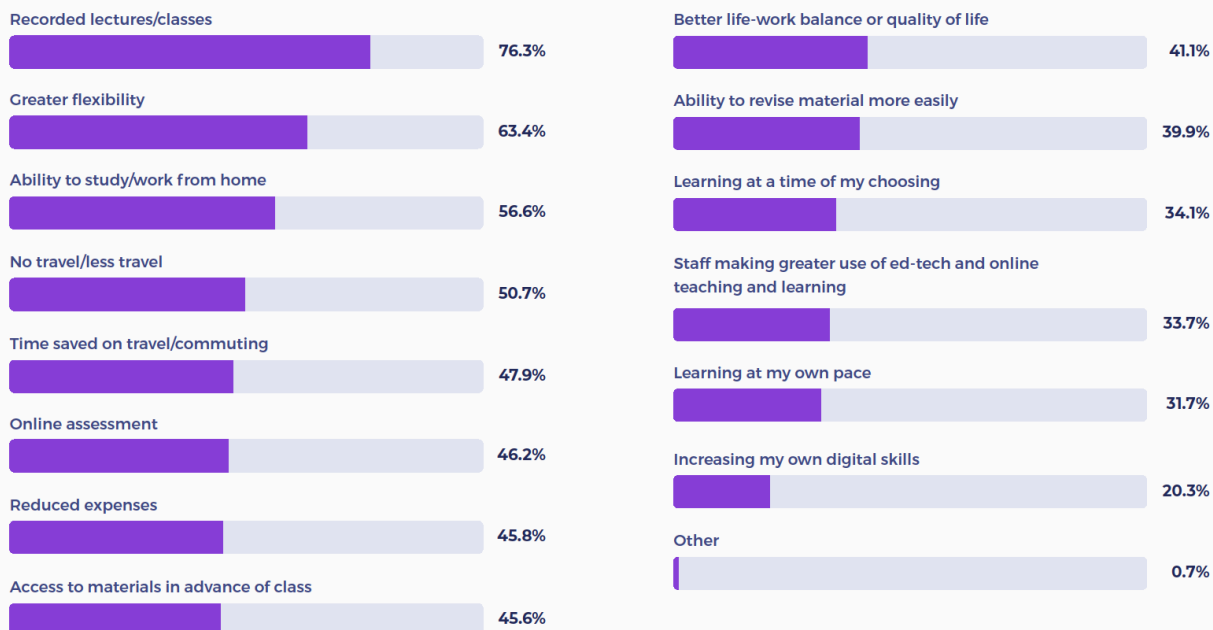
(n = 1700)

Continuation of remote learning benefits

(n = 1204)



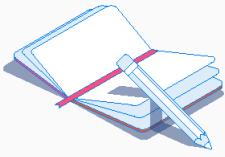
"Which, if any, of the following remote learning benefits would you like to see continued when on-campus studies resume?" *



* Question posed only to those who indicated they felt there were benefits associated with remote learning.

Preferred future teaching and learning modes

(n = 1677)



"What is your preference with respect to possible teaching and learning modes when on-campus studies resume?"

A return to traditional "pre-Covid" on-campus teaching and learning



A largely on-campus learning experience supplemented with some online learning content or activities



A more-or-less equal balance of on-campus and online teaching and learning



A more predominantly online learning experience supplemented with on-campus activities for, e.g. labs, practicals and group work



A flexible approach that allows students to study from home or campus on a class-by-class or module-by-module basis



A fully online learning experience



Other



Appendix 3:

STAFF CONSULTATION

Input received from:

(30th April) Deirdre Creedon (Facilitator), Valerie Moore, Elaine Dennehy, Louise O’Callaghan, Rachel O’Leary, Christine Nolan, Fiona Downey, Mark Burleigh, Ruadhan Fitzgerald, Jane Brennan, Siobhan MacGarry,

(12th May) Valerie Moore (Facilitator), Veronique Lostal-Davern, Ruth Murphy, Mary B O’Sullivan, Deirdre Creedon, Breda Hogan, Christina Boland, Katie Coffey, Orla Sisk, Julie O’Donovan

(21st May) Deirdre Creedon (Facilitator), Valerie Moore, Siobhan MacGarry, Veronique Lostal-Davern, Jane Brennan, Ruadhan Fitzgerald, Sharon Lawton, Ruth Murphy, Katie Coffey, Mary B O’Sullivan, David Hodge, Emily Clifford, Orla Sisk, Rachel O’Leary, Breda Hogan, Elaine Dennehy, Louise O’Callaghan, Fiona Downey

Leanne McDonagh and Julie Donovan sent their contributions which have been incorporated into the document.

Wider Staff consultation through an online survey.

Registrars and Academic Administration and Student Services Managers – 16th June 2021.

Student consultation – focus group with 10 student volunteers, facilitated by MTU Cork Students’ Union and MTU Kerry Students’ Union - 9th June 2021.

Appendix 4:

THEA STATEMENT ON ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Note for information: Inclusive Access and Student Success (suggested new title for next NAP to be presented to NAP Steering Group on 28 May 2021)

Purpose of document: This is intended to form a common statement to be incorporated into individual institution submissions to consultation on the new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education.

Over the past five decades, as our sector evolved from Regional Technical Colleges towards Technological Universities, our institutions have developed and retained a strong and successful ethos of inclusiveness as a central part of our mission, while also raising aspirations and facilitating students to realise their potential across multiple levels of the National Framework of Qualifications. As a result, national access target groups are, and continue to be, well represented in the student body within the context of our social inclusion approach.

Due to our diverse student profile, our institutions have always developed and maintained very effective teaching practices and strong student/staff relationships, as evidenced by research such as [Studentsurvey.ie](https://www.studentsurvey.ie/). Our sector spearheaded the development of teaching and learning centres, inclusive practice and pedagogy and a range of additional supports.

We will soon enter our third academic year impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our teaching and learning centres and access and disability services have been key to ensuring that our sector demonstrated an agile and focused responsiveness during this challenging period. Given our student profile, our students have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Existing inequalities in terms of housing, income, and cultural capital have been amplified by the new ways of working and living. The ethos of staff engagement with students on an individual level has been a key factor in keeping vulnerable students engaged in their studies.

One of the key strengths of our sector is its willingness to explore and adopt non-standard entry routes into higher education. In any given academic year, up to half of all first year entrants have gained a place on a basis other than Leaving Certificate points in that year. Additionally, our advanced entry agreements with the FET sector maximise the potential of the FET entry route for potential students. Nationally, there is much learning to be had from an evaluation of how the sector has worked closely with the FET sector, in particular. We commit to maintaining and further developing this relationship into the future.

Great stories of individual success have emanated from the sector over this time with many students being the first in their families to access higher education, often through the variety of non-traditional pathways used by our institutions, and to progress successfully to employment and / or postgraduate study. Many of our graduates remain within our region upon completion, thus contributing to the local and regional economy, and acting as role models to their families and communities.

We have supported, and we continue to support, the regional economy as a key driver for regional growth and development. We have established strong links with industry and community stakeholders. We respond rapidly and strategically to the needs of the regional workforce – in terms of upskilling and in response to the challenges of the changing economic cycles. For many of

these workers, this chance to upskill while in employment or due to recent unemployment is best offered by our sector.

Over the next decade, it is our firm intention that we will continue to play a major role in inclusive education provision and regional development, as our institutions continue to evolve.

During the period of implementation of the next access plan, institutes of technology and emerging technological universities collectively commit to:

- Actively sharing and dissemination of good practice
- Working collaboratively in order to develop a more consistent approach to data collection in order to enable tracking of individual student success, as students progress within and between our institutions
- Adopting and promoting a whole-of-institution approach to mainstreaming access objectives and initiatives to further student success
- Further developing and enhancing our relationships with the primary and post primary sectors
- Maintaining and enhancing, where identified, ongoing support for students throughout their studies to maximise the whole student experience of higher education
- Conducting a post-COVID-19 sectoral review of our responsiveness and evaluating our preparedness for a similarly disruptive event in the future. This review would include an examination of the positive outcomes that developed from the changed landscape, in terms of flexible delivery options for target groups (mature learners and lone parents with caring commitments, students with disabilities, etc.)
- Working closely with the HEA to refine and develop enhanced identification and targeting of underrepresented groups

In order to enable these clear aims and aspirations, we wish to emphasise the need for national policies and infrastructure to more systematically support whole-of-institution / whole-of-higher education / whole-of-education approaches.

- Genuinely whole-of-institution approaches can only be achieved when sufficient and sustainable Access resourcing is built into funding models in order to redress historic anomalies. For example, the ratio of non-academic staff to academic staff is lower in our institutions than in other HEA institutions^[2]
- The evolution from RTCs to TUs should include the evolution of access from one small but key part of inclusive institutions towards a mainstream strategic priority in order to better reflect the inclusive reality of our institutions
- The trajectory of recent improvements in data collection nationally should be prioritised to support tracking of individual students, particularly those who may transfer between programmes or institutions or who take “time out”, on their journeys towards individual success

^[1] For example, higher indicator scores for Effective Teaching Practices, Student-Faculty interactions <https://studentsurvey.ie/reports/studentsurveyie-national-report-2020>

^[2] 0.7 in IoTs, 0.9 in traditional universities, 1.4 in colleges from [Institutional-Profiles-2017-18-Jan-2021.pdf \(hea.ie\)](#)