Letterkenny Institute of Technology

Improving Equality, Diversity and Inclusion 2022-2026 – A learning dynamic

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. In the most recent study of Deprivation in Ireland Letterkenny IT's student body scored –5.2 as the most deprived of all HEI's in the country (rightly reflecting the socio-economic profile of the County and catchment region). Letterkenny IT is committed to improving Equality, Diversity and Inclusion by adopting a whole of institution approach which we will bring to our partner HEIs as we prepare for TU status. This will involve a re-conceptualisation of where this agenda fits in relation to our access offices. Many challenges will emerge from this not at least how our access offices status fits within our own Institution. Depending on how the access office is viewed internally will dictate how we are funded and structured for the coming years.

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[1]. Our sector spearheaded the development of teaching and learning centres, inclusive practice and pedagogy and a range of additional supports. The access office was instrumental in working closely with the Teaching and Learning centre to provide assistance with upskilling of staff through the MALT and more widely on the out of field Maths teaching initiative. We also provide on-going support in UDL and invite staff at the beginning of each Semester to upskill to ensure the inclusion of all students. We plan to further develop this approach with Teaching and Learning in the coming years for example with the project we are currently working on for commencement in the new academic year to ensure the inclusion of all neuro-diverse students.

We will soon enter our third academic year impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our teaching and learning centres and access and disability services were key to ensuring that our sector demonstrated an agile and focused responsiveness during this challenging period. This was a tremendous learning experience for us as evidenced by Letterkenny IT's participation in the HEA review in March 2021. To

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

highlight just a few areas where Letterkenny IT provided post-entry support, we launched on-line learning support for students with disabilities and a blended learning approach to access students using multiple platforms of delivery (whilst providing technology support to enable same). 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, for example in LYIT, we have undertaken mapping projects of Level 5 and Level 6 QQI major award programmes at Donegal ETB with the aim of creating clear and identifiable pathways from Donegal ETB programmes to cognate LYIT programmes. This project provided Further Education (FE) learners in the region with greater access to the Higher Education provision at LYIT. This project was undertaken in line with the Department of Education and Skills 2013, Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019. Similar projects have been undertaken with South West College and North West Regional College to facilitate FE learners progress to Higher Education. We commit to maintaining and further developing this relationship into the future.

Furthermore, Letterkenny IT in particular has a long-established access programme for non-standard students catering for over 2,000 students over the past 20 years. This is an important access route in Letterkenny IT ensuring we reach out and facilitate all students from very diverse backgrounds. This course ensures that any excluded target groups can use this pathway to third level education. The course initially catered for second-chance mature students however it has now expanded to cater for LCA students, Youthreach, FE, Travellers and Asylum seekers.

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 also strive to retain past access students as mentors to in-coming students.

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. Letterkenny IT envisages that there will be large scale youth unemployment in the region and so we will have to offer courses appropriate to industry demands as we did in the past through national initiatives such as Springboard.

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 into a TU.

Commitments

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. Letterkenny IT access office has a wealth of initiatives that would benefit from thorough research and analysis. To this end we would require a long-term investment in this research function.

- 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. Letterkenny IT as part of the CUA will monitor student progression by field of study within the region.

- Adopting and promoting a whole-of-institution approach to mainstreaming access objectives and initiatives to further student success. The access office will continue to seek appropriate fora within the Institute to share learning from our access initiatives at higher levels within the emerging structures.

- Further developing and enhancing our relationships with the primary and post primary sectors. Letterkenny IT is very aware that beyond our good relationship with these sectors that very little progress has been made in targeting students and putting in place resources to ensure they progress to higher education. This will require significant investment over a long period of time.

- Maintaining and enhancing, where identified, ongoing support for students throughout their studies to maximise the whole student experience of higher education. In Letterkenny IT the

needs of students are ever changing. Especially in the coming years post Covid 19 we expect many students to have mental health issues that they will require considerable support with.

- Conducting a post-COVID 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.) As we conclude our academic year Letterkenny IT has identified a number of challenges and benefits to blended learning and we will discuss these for each of the target groups later in this document.

- Working closely with the HEA to refine and develop enhanced identification and targeting of underrepresented groups. We will develop more sophisticated tracking data for students that belong to multiple target groups and so prioritise them for upcoming initiatives in the coming years.

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]. Additionally, it is essential that RFAM takes cognisance of the institutional deprivation scores and appropriate weightings are applied which recognise institutions that are supporting students from disadvantaging backgrounds.

- 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

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

Challenges facing Target Groups

We will now examine existing target groups and point to 3 challenges or opportunities per group that exist for supporting these students at LYIT:

(a)   Socio- Economically Disadvantaged

1.   Letterkenny IT welcomes the national review of SUSI and we hope that it will go some way in redressing the inadequate funding of students living in poverty. It is our experience that there persists an annual student need for financial assistance above and beyond the SUSI grant. Student finance is a very complex area with many factors needing to be taken into account to determine a student's financial well-being. Factors include, pre-existing debt, access to documentation for SUSI application, domestic circumstances, ability to fill forms, guidance etc. We are thankful that the HEA provide us with some funding to distribute through the SAF initiative. Over the past 20 years we have always distributed all of this fund to students with demand far outweighing allocated funds.

2.   A large majority of our students are financially under-prepared for college. Many students balance the cost of attending college by either commuting from their rural homes (which is expensive) or by taking up rental accommodation which accounts for up to 80% of their SUSI grant either way. Of course, we encourage students to experience the whole student experience by participating in all aspects of college life and this is impossible to do while commuting. In the coming years we strive to educate pre-entry students on the real cost of attending college so that they can have the financial where-with-all in place to succeed in college.

3.   There has been a significant growth in the specific purpose "grants" available to some students in the past 5 years. For example, the HEA's 1916 bursary but also a number of sectors especially ICT are offering grants to students in an attempt to recruit graduates in return. Letterkenny will strive to articulate the now numerous funding resources available to students so that these funds reach the most socio-economically disadvantaged.

(b)   First Time Mature Students

1.   The financial cost of going to college is the main challenge for our mature students. This ties in with the points made above. However, for mature student there is normally a caring/family role that they fulfil outside of college – this might include caring for children

or elderly parents and all of these things have either a direct or indirect financial implication.

2. Part-time mature students incur all of the costs of full-time students without access to the SUSI grant. Furthermore, mature students must balance a lot of commitments to attend courses. Thus, the more flexible courses become the more likely mature students will be enabled to partake. This has been a long standing item on the agenda of Aontas.

3. As mentioned earlier, Letterkenny IT has a proud tradition of providing access courses for mature students with an on average 85% completion rate and a 65% progression rate over 20 years. Further funds to provide these access courses would be welcome alongside sufficient funding for participating mature students.

(c) Part-Time Students

1. Part-time student numbers continue to stay low over a long period of time. The main driver of part-time numbers in Letterkenny IT is the national Springboard initiative. The gap in provision of part-time is being addressed by a new department of Flexible learning. However, the vast majority of programmes therein are within the ICT sector.

2. Given the current funding model for students it is restricting the development of part-time / flexible delivery although the institutional funding is solved by credit award. More work needs to be done to attract the target groups on a part-time study basis.

3. Many students with disabilities are better suited to part-time delivery mode. Accommodation in the funding model could be made to ensure they are not un-duly penalised for taking longer to complete their studies.

(d) FET /Access students

1. Letterkenny IT is very happy to continue its work providing access courses for students.

2. We are also committed to honouring our long-established contracts with the FE sector and colleges within our region.

3. LYIT is interested in establishing a FE college in collaboration with Donegal ETB.

(e)   *Travellers*

1.   Continue to work with Donegal Travellers project to identify needs of travellers locally. Facilitate specific learning support needs of traveller students transitioning to college

2.   Through PATH, work closely with partner NUIG to develop culturally appropriate courses for the travelling community

3.   Develop access type inclusive programmes for travellers as appropriate.

(f)   *New Irish*

1.   Continue to work with the Irish Refugee Council to enhance provision for Asylum seekers nationally. Locally represent the college on the county "friends" committee.

2.   Further enhance scholarship scheme for college of sanctuary initiative.

3.   Work with the law department to raise awareness of rights and thus to develop educational pathways.

(g)   *Students with Disabilities*

1.   Due to the annual based funding of FSD it is extremely difficult to plan support services for students with disabilities.

2.   As we move towards Technological University status we are concerned that student support services will be unevenly spread across all colleges in the region.

3.   Geographical disadvantage is a factor for students with disabilities as transportation and connectivity are serious issues for equal participation

Concluding Remarks

1.   Data collection and use

2.   Inter-connectedness of target group challenges

3.   Where does education fit into all this?

4.   How doe DES and HEA share common vision of student journey through education