

Submission 4.45 [Rethink Ireland](#)

Rethink Ireland supports the most innovative non-profit organisations working in communities across the country. Since beginning operations in 2016, Rethink Ireland has created 30 funds tackling issues such as inequality and educational disadvantage. We have supported 246 social innovations, which have reached 408,624 people. Our cash grants and business supports enable social innovations to develop and maximise their impact. Our vision is an Ireland that is more just, equal and sustainable because of social innovation.

We have a strategic focus on supporting Educational Access and progression for people experiencing educational disadvantage. We believe that standard formal education may not work for all groups of people. We seek out socially innovative solutions which offer equal opportunities to education for all citizens. We have invested €22.2 million in education since 2016, supporting 79 projects which have reached at least 120,000 people. We've supported 6,056 students to achieve a QQI qualification, 567 of whom achieved a level 3 QQI (Junior Cert level). A further 1,680 reached levels 4 to 5 (Leaving Cert level).

The following responses are based on our experience of managing Funds in the not-for-profit Education sector and also on the expertise of our Awardee organisations. In addition to answers provided below to the questions set out by the Department, we believe that overall education progression depends on also supporting the wider wellbeing and 'soft' skill development of students. Our Education Fund evaluation¹ shows that educational progression of students is also about their personal transformation and development of their 'soft outcomes', like increased independence (maturity), increased confidence, and an increased sense of achievement (see Figure 5.1). The importance of building up and maintaining these 'soft outcomes' will be important as the students transition into higher education.

¹ Link Here <https://rethinkireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NUIG-Rethink-Executive-Summary.pdf>

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Consultation questions

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

The overall vision should be to ensure that all people irrespective of economic status, ethnicity, nationality, social class, geographical location, disability and/or other

personal circumstances can access higher education. The government should pay particular attention in ensuring access to higher education is made available for minority marginalised groups including young people living in Direct Provision and young people in the care system. Finally, the vision should also ensure that higher education access is open to students who are attending alternative education schools for example Steiner schools and Cork Life Centre.

2. Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan? How do we ensure that vulnerable members of our society are included?

The target groups who should be specified in the NAP include;

- Young people from areas experiencing socio-economic disadvantage
- Travellers & other ethnic minority groups
- Young people with disabilities - sensory & intellectual
- Students with learning disabilities and neurodiversity
- Young people experiencing digital poverty
- First generation learners
- People living within or recently moved out from the Direct Provision system

HEI Outreach programmes need to develop stronger links with community-based education programmes that are working with young people from underrepresented groups to progress to higher education. These groups have already identified and supported students from primary and secondary school and are aware of the individual needs of students and the areas that they are from.

Consultation with Rethink Ireland projects that support children from disadvantaged backgrounds to progress to college reported that their service users highlighted the HEAR and DARE schemes as being very supportive to their inclusion in HEIs.

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

Having spoken to some of our awardees who are working to promote inclusive higher education, we understand that COVID-19 presented a range of challenges for students:

- Financial challenges: Many students have lost employment. Although some students were able to access the PUP payment, other students who had intended

to secure part-time jobs to fund their studies and living costs, were unable to do so.

- Capacity challenges: Caring responsibilities, lack of childcare and having to home-school children also had an impact on students' ability to focus on their studies and keep up with the workload.

- Isolation and wellbeing challenges: With the move off campus, many students mentioned feeling isolated and alone. Lots of students stated that Covid-19 has had a negative impact on their mental health. Many students felt like their motivation and studying was negatively affected and that they missed out on peer support. Many students also lacked family support and/or access to wider support networks.

- Accessibility challenges: There is a 'digital divide' among students who have unequal access to technology and connectivity. A recent study (Cullinan et al, 2021) found that one-in-six students come from areas with poor broadband coverage.

Moving forward, we need to ensure that all students have access to hardware, software and Wi-Fi and quiet and safe study spaces. There should also not be a cap on the amount of counselling or mental health support sessions that students can avail of each year. Students also mentioned that face-to-face interactions, regular check-ins from staff and a mentoring/buddy system throughout their time in college would be beneficial. As the world opens again, access students need to be prioritised in terms of gaining placements, funded internships and employment. Supports should be targeted towards those students most in need and at risk of failing within the system.

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

The goal of mainstreaming students into HEIs needs to set out to effect both cultural and systemic change in an organisation, such that an equality perspective is integrated into its day-to-day working across all functions. Mainstreaming equality and diversity must be concerned with outcomes as well as issues of process, culture change and delivery. It is a long-term, strategic approach to ensuring that equality, diversity and inclusion sit at the heart of an institution's culture and operational delivery. Tools that aid with the mainstreaming of equality in HEIs include:

- Analytical tools: Use of statistical evidence; Appreciative inquiry; Equality surveys and focus groups; Case studies; Strategy review and development, and Institutional benchmarking.

- Educational tools: Training and development modules or programmes; Mentoring and coaching; Staff development or guidance materials; Toolkits and handbooks; Information and awareness-raising tools; Privileged identity exploration (PIE).

- Engagement tools: Advisory or working groups; Advocates; Promoting effective practice; Facilitating dialogue.

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

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The importance of social inclusion and an intersectional approach cannot be understated, particularly in the context of higher education. In consultation with awardees in the Rethink Ireland portfolio, the following trends emerged:

- Engagement and dialogue with communities and representative organisations

The formation of strategic engagement initiatives and partnerships between community groups and higher education institutions would prove vital in the formation of actionable access programmes. The introduction of mentoring programmes and the integration of cultural- competency measures into programmes has proved to have positive impacts for marginalised communities.

- A holistic approach to access that examines its social determinants

It is widely acknowledged that obstacles outside of the remit of the mainstream system impact accessibility. The acknowledgement that there are persons that face unique obstacles to higher education must be accommodated for in both the application and transition processes.

- Tackling bullying for minority groups

The National Traveller & Roma Inclusion Strategy has indicated that there is a lack of culturally-competent supports and varying procedures surrounding bullying in schools which leads to a negative experience of education and less participation in higher education. Bullying and discrimination are a reality for many Traveller children especially, with schools and teachers often reluctant to,

or ignorant as to how to, combat them. 40% of Traveller children say that they have been bullied at school. Participants who had not received direct discrimination from teachers, felt that the general attitude from teachers in schools was that of indifference.² Bullying has been directly correlated with diminished academic performance and disengagement with educational ambitions³, inevitably impacting on the young person's opportunities to enter into higher education. The Inclusion Strategy clearly outlines ambitions for anti-racism education at the primary and post-primary level, but this should be integrated and offered at all levels of education and easily accessible within the associated institutions.

- Recognising the needs of estranged children

Supports for teens who are estranged from their families is limited. Persons who are estranged from their families are judged on their families income and may fall just below the mark for government support as a result.

- More dedicated support with paperwork

Often when students are applying for grants and courses, they find the paperwork very overwhelming. This is even more severe for teenage students who are not living with or in contact with their families. One Awardee reflected on how people who don't know their fathers are being asked about their

³ Ladd, G., et. al., Peer Victimization Trajectories From Kindergarten Through High School 2017 Journal

of Educational Psychology Vol. 109, No. 6, 826 – 841

²[https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/joint_committee_on_key_issues_affecting_the_traveller_co](https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/joint_committee_on_key_issues_affecting_the_traveller_community/2019-12-03/3/)

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information and it is mentally triggering for the student. The Awardee indicated that the paperwork involved with getting support to access Higher Education is a huge challenge and is one of the key supports for which they are requested.

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

The following points would be relevant when seeking to better develop pathways

between Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FET):

- Rationalisation of Entry Routes: Current entry routes across the sector are complex and confusing. Coherency of sector entry requirements for FET to HE applicants will address the plethora of module combinations for progression to HE.
 - Develop FET-HE Partnerships: The NAP must support the development of a national partnership scheme between FET and HE similar to the HEAR and DARE schemes, where FET students have pre and post-entry supports. The NAP should aim to support the development of both on-campus of pre-university access courses across all HEIs as well as supporting the development of partnership programmes with FET, providing students with the best bridging programme to suit their needs, with a model which is driven by flexibility and student choice.
 - Pre and Post Entry supports: Target FET-HE pre-entry initiative that encourages engagement in pre-entry HE activities. For example, PATH Community Mentoring has successfully linked Trinity to FETs, and funding and support for this should continue. Developing pathways for the FET cohort is important but this should be followed with targeted supports to ensure engagement and success. More transition programmes should be developed for students who may face challenges in the transition to university.
 - Staff engagement: There is a lack of awareness among HEI (Higher Education Institutions) staff on what pathways exist between FET and HE. More needs to be done to identify these pathways and to expand and promote them. Key HE and FET staff and students who have made the transition from FET to HE should collaborate on this development and act as advocates and ambassadors.
- In addition, NAP can consider;
- Fees reduction and specific FET-HE bursaries and scholarships.
 - Review of provision of places: commitment to ring fence places for FET applicants on all HEI courses.
 - Extra advertisement: more advertisement of access programmes (is needed) in all DEIS schools across the country