Submission 4.12 THEA

1. Introduction

The Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) is the representative body for the technological higher education sector in Ireland, which comprises institutes of technology and emergent technological universities, geographically dispersed across the country. THEA welcomes the opportunity, provided by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (D/FHERIS) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA), to make a submission on behalf of its members, to support the formulation of the New National Access Plan for Higher Education 2022-26.

2. Background

Over the past five decades, as the technological 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.

3. Teaching and Learning

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. We will soon enter our third academic year impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our teaching and learning centres and access and disability services are key to ensuring that our sector demonstrates 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.

4. Non-Standard Entry

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 attainment acquired in that year. Additionally, our

advanced entry agreements with the FET sector maximise the potential of the FET entry route for

potential students. A recent analysis conducted under the aegis of the National Transitions Reform

Steering Group (June 2020), and covering undergraduate entry for the academic year 2017-18,

demonstrated that a much higher proportion of IoT entrants progressed from PLC than is the case for

universities, with around a quarter of first year entrants with an FET background progressing in many

IoTs (See Table 1 below). Nationally, there is much learning to be had from an evaluation of how the

technological higher education sector has worked closely with the FET sector. We commit to

maintaining and further developing this relationship into the future.

For example, higher indicator scores for Effective Teaching Practices, Student-Faculty interactions

https://studentsurvey.ie/reports/studentsurveyie-national-report-2020

Table1: PLC Progression to HE 2017 by ETB and HEI2

ETB

PLC to

HE

Total

PLC %

Other

FET-HE HEI

From

PLC

UG

Entry %

Other

FET

FET	PLC	UG	Entry %	Other	HEI	From FET	UG	Entry %	Other
CMETB	283	1728	16.4%	17	AIT	257	1043	24.6%	19
CDETB	949	7325	13.0%	16	CIT	377	2072	18.2%	8
Cork ETB	696	4338	16.0%	19	DCU	244	3420	7.1%	-
Don'l ETB	51	115	44.3%	29	DIT	434	3557	12.2%	17
DDLETB	411	2453	16.8%	26	DLIADT	194	553	35.1%	5
GRETB	375	1277	29.4%	16	DKIT	279	1194	23.4%	10
Kerry ETB	179	701	25.5%	12	GMIT	328	1616	20.3%	11
KWETB	164	1084	15.1%	10	ITB	184	727	25.3%	7
KCETB	171	886	19.3%	12	ITC	293	1181	24.8%	32
LOETB	86	399	21.6%	10	ITS	233	1041	22.4%	7
LCETB	304	1203	25.3%	35	IT Tall	224	829	27.0%	-
LWETB	55	324	17.0%	9	IT Tral	179	725	24.7%	13
LMETB	510	1803	28.3%	6	LYIT	106	932	11.4%	25
MSLETB	245	1226	20.0%	22	LIT	369	1529	24.1%	17
Tipp ETB	92	708	13.0%	15	MIC	22	970	2.3%	6
VSCSS	283	1243	22.8%	-	MU	275	3167	8.7%	9
WWETB	278	1292	21.5%	18	NCAD	122	267	45.7%	-
TOTAL	5,132	28,105	18.3%	272	NUIG	130	3318	3.9%	5
					STAC	24	190	12.6%	8
					TCD	75	3027	2.5%	6
					UCC	294	3573	8.2%	14
					UCD	153	4387	3.5%	6
					UL	148	2519	5.9%	24

WIT 352 1976 17.8% 14

Other - - - 9

TOTAL 5,296 43,813 12.1% 272

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.

5. Commitments

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 disseminating good practice

• Working collaboratively 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 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.

6. Supports Required

To enable these clear aims and aspirations, we wish to emphasise the need for national policies and

infrastructure to support whole of institution / whole of higher education / whole of education approaches more systematically.

• Genuinely whole of institution approaches can only be achieved when sufficient and sustainable Access resourcing is built into funding models to redress historic anomalies. For example, the ratio of non-academic staff to academic staff is lower in our institutions than in other HEA institutions3

• 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 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.

3 0.7 in IoTs, 0.9 in traditional universities, 1.4 in colleges from Institutional-Profiles-2017-18-Jan-2021.pdf

(hea.ie)

7. National HCI RPL Project – the link with Access

The 'National RPL in Higher Education Project' is funded by the Human Capital Initiative (HCI) and cosponsored by THEA and the IUA, working on behalf of all 19 publicly funded HEIs. The goal of the

project is to make prior learning assessment and recognition an integral and vibrant part of higher

education, one that presents a learning experience of significant and discernible value to the learner,

the institution, enterprise, and society.

As part of its submission on the new National Access Plan, THEA would encourage the HEA to

• foreground the role of RPL in supporting HEIs to meet national access and lifelong learning

policy objectives, and

• call for an increase in RPL opportunities for learners and the mainstreaming of RPL policy and

practice across the system in a manner which is coherent and consistent.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a process which seeks to acknowledge all forms of learning

regardless of where it has occurred (e.g. in formal educational settings, the workplace or everyday

life), and to give it value in the context of a destination award on the National Framework of

Qualifications. A fundamental principle of RPL is that a learner should not be asked to relearn

something they already know. In the higher education context, this means that applicants who can

show that they have achieved sufficient prior learning may be granted access, advanced entry, credit,

module exemptions and, in some cases, full major or minor awards. RPL is sometimes described as a

bridging mechanism for learners to access and / or advance their learning in formal education and to

upskill / reskill. It is also a bridge for HEIs, offering them the opportunity to engage in new and

innovative ways with individuals and groups of learners from diverse learning and workplace settings.

In the context of the National Access Plan, it is important to emphasize the critical role of RPL in the

development of an accessible and flexible higher education system (NFETL 2015)4

. It is widely

acknowledged as an enabler for access and lifelong learning which encourages people of all ages and

backgrounds to participate in learning pathways.

RPL has been in use in Irish higher education for decades and despite considerable progress and

excellent examples of innovative practice, provision of RPL services is geographically uneven,

fragmented and often very difficult to navigate for learners. Many potential learners do not know

what RPL is or how it can benefit them. At system's level, there is significant disparity and

fragmentation in policy and practice within and between HEIs which is impeding the mainstreaming

of RPL and the enhancement of services.

The next National Access Plan provides a timely opportunity to affirm the critical role of RPL in

contributing to access and lifelong learning and to call upon HEIs to

• embed RPL as a mainstream, flexible pathway to and through higher education and

• increase RPL opportunities for all learners and in particular underrepresented learners, who

may not otherwise be able to access or progress through higher education without it.

8. Conclusion

THEA and its members are longstanding and active supporters of the access agenda in higher

education and consider that it will remain an essential element of the technological higher education

sector's mission, even as the sector itself undergoes major transformation with the advent of

4 A current overview of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Irish Higher Education (teachingandlearning.ie)

technological universities. THEA welcomes the commitments of the State to turning the focus in the

new National Access Plan towards the individual student and student success, and to extending the

Plan's reach to comprehend those parts of the higher education student cohort, in particular,

apprentices, who have not generally been considered to be part of mainstream access cohort hitherto.

The institutes of technology are committed to playing an active and constructive part in the continued

development of strong access policies in support of educational opportunities for all, and the

enhancement of social inclusion and can make a very significant contribution in the areas alluded to

in this submission. We look forward to the publication of the new National Access Plan in due course,

and to working collaboratively with all stakeholders on its implementation