

Submission 4.08 [Western Institute for Studies in Education \(WISE\)](#)

NUI Galway Consultation Process

The Access Centre coordinated NUI Galway's institutional response to the National Access Plan (NAP) consultation process. In order to provide the most comprehensive institutional response to this consultation process, the Access Centre sought individual submissions from a number of key institutional stakeholders. We would like to acknowledge all who participated in helping to draft NUI Galway's response to this National Access Plan consultation process, particularly colleagues in the following department/units/committees/roles:

- College of Science and Engineering
- College of Arts, Social Sciences and Celtic Studies
- College of Medicine Nursing and Health Sciences
- College of Business, Public Policy and Law
- Shannon College of Hotel Management
- Centre for Adult Learning and Professional Development
- Vice-Dean's for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
- Vice Dean of Civic Engagement, College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Campus Committee
- Widening Participation Committee
- Further Education to Higher Education Committee
- Access Centre Team
- Student Recruitment and Outreach Team
- The University of Sanctuary Committee
- Current and Former Access Programme Students

The recently published National Access Plan 2022-2026 Consultation Paper provided institutions wishing to make a submission with a set of 'guiding' questions. Nine of these questions were put forward as a guide for persons or organisations wishing to make a submission, with an additional four questions particularly aimed at including the student voice. Each staff member/department/unit/committee involved in NUI Galway's submission focused on either the full-set or a subset of these questions, depending on the particular relevance these questions had to that staff member/department/unit/committee. For example, as the Further Education to Higher Education committee's particular focus is on developing pathways between the Further Education Sector and the Higher Education Sector, it focused on producing a response to question seven, which directly relates to developing these pathways. The responses to these nine questions are laid out in section one.

As these questions were aimed to be used as a guide to institutional submissions and not exhaustive of the kinds of issues or questions which institutions would like to raise, section two contains additional responses which fall outside of the nine questions posed.

In line with the Consultations paper recommendation that ‘the student voice is critical to the development of the next National Access Plan’, NUI Galway recommended current and former Access students to participate in the HEA’s dedicated student consultation event on Friday, 7th May and invited former and current Access Programme students to attend an internal consultation webinar on Thursday 3rd June, which was facilitated by colleagues in the Access Centre. The guiding questions for this latter student consultation webinar were derived from National Access Plan 2022-2026 Consultation Paper (p.9) and the student response is laid out in section three.

Section 1: The Guiding Questions

The nine questions:

(HEA, 2021, p.8)

Responses to each question:

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

The previous NAP 2015-19 contained the following vision:

‘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’ (HEA, 2015, p.7).

Colleagues raised a number of important observations when it came to the kind of strategy the new NAP should contain. These included:

- As an addition to the previous vision the new NAP should add that access is not just about entry but providing a supportive learning environment which helps to ensure students have the necessary resources/supports, irrespective of entry pathway or level of study, to reach their full potential and these supports should be mainstreamed throughout the university so that access is everyone’s business, not just the access office.

It was felt that this vision would help to ensure that Universal Design for Learning would feature heavily throughout the rest of the plan, as well as other supports which are essential to a student’s progression

- As well as pointing to the values of respect and openness, which are two of the core values in our own strategic plan, the new NAP vision should mention the value of belonging. A sense of belonging is crucial when it comes to student’s progression in education.
- Any vision should be holistic in nature so as to ensure that this vision is the responsibility of the whole university.
- Any vision should have respect at its core and ensure that it reflects the emotional attachment a sense of belonging can provide. The physical experience of attending university can be life-changing and the importance of this should be recognised in any vision.

- The new NAP vision should connect with the vision and values of all sectors of the education system, so as to ensure that higher education is the next logical step in student's educational journey, no matter what background they come from.
- The new NAP vision should focus on creating partnerships both internally and externally, as these partnerships will be essential in ensuring HEI's reflect the social mix of the broader population.
- The starting point for this vision should be to create the structures and processes to adequately describe the current access situation for our various underrepresented groups. This will require diversity data similar to that captured in the Census to be captured as part of student registration in higher education. In parallel we need to adequately capture the same kind of data for teaching and learning staff (and indeed all staff) in higher education. This will allow our Institutes and their constituent Colleges and Schools to assess to what extent there may be barriers to access for study and employment in the higher education sector. An analysis of staff diversity in higher education should have equal priority, as staff have a pivotal role as leaders and role models in the University community where they have the capacity to create a culture that is welcoming and inclusive to all. Additionally in the spirit of the adage that states "you need to see it to be it", staff in higher education have an important role in instilling the belief that traditionally underrepresented groups belong and can flourish in higher education. In short, we need to describe in clearer terms where we are with access, before we know where we are going
- The overall vision should be a culture where access to higher education is viewed as a basic right of all citizens, and not dependent on your personal demographics (such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity etc) - in the same way that healthcare should be universally available, and not dependent on your ability to pay.
- In promoting and achieving national buy-in into the plan it will be important to highlight the important benefits that society as a whole stands to gain as a result of widening access to higher education. For example from a healthcare professions' perspective, selection to healthcare courses in the Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) is the single most influential factor shaping the demographic makeup of our future national healthcare workforce. Diversity in the medical workforce is welcome and is to be encouraged. There is growing evidence that a culturally diverse healthcare workforce it is linked with better access and quality health care for underserved populations (Lakhan, 2003, Saha et al., 2008) and increased patient satisfaction (Carrasquillo and Lee-Rey, 2008)
- The new NAP vision should speak to value of students from minority groups seeing themselves in their fellow students and lecturers on campus. Students from minority groups need to feel that they can identify with the University.
- The new NAP vision should aim to put the student experience at its centre.

Question 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 (e.g., learners currently in care or who have experience of being in care)?

- Colleagues signalled out a number of groups particularly in need of being a target group in the new NAP:

- Members of the Travelling Community

- Ethnic minorities

- First generation students to higher education

- Students with disabilities, particularly physical, sensory, neurological and mental health.

- Students in the care of the state

- Students with caring responsibilities

- Refugees and asylum seekers

- Rural communities/students at risk of geographical disadvantage

- Mature students/lifelong learners, not just first-time mature students

- Students with multiple levels of disadvantage

- FET students who are also socio-economically disadvantaged

- Homeless students

- Members of the prison population

- Neurodiverse students

- Young men and women who are underrepresented in certain disciplines (for example, men in the biological sciences and women in the physical sciences)

- Lone Parents

Additional feedback included the following:

- The new NAP should be clear when it comes to how it defines the above groups.

- The new NAP should recognise that many students do not wish to disclose their disability. Evidence should be gathered on why this is the case and how it effects a student's educational journey.

- The National Access Plan 2022-2026 (consultation Paper) sets out, quite clearly, in the introduction section that the focus of this plan is to create a more inclusive and equitable higher education sector. Indeed, the document states that "Access to higher education should be available to individuals independent of their socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, disability or other

circumstances.” However while metrics presented also suggest that progress has been made in relation to supporting student transition into higher education that experience socio-economic, ethnicity and disability disadvantage it is also evident that students from rural backgrounds, 36.6% of Irelands population lives in rural areas (CSO, 2019) are not identified as a cohort that require specific support in making this transition. While the plan identifies issues relating to broadband as important as being more relevant to those in remote or rural areas it is also the case, that there are quite specific challenges that rural students face. Indeed, vulnerable rural youths are often confronted with less and lower quality educational alternatives, higher unemployment statistics, precarious living and lower potential income (Simões & Rio, 2020; Flynn, et al., 2021). This can result in rural citizens, in particular, being harder to engage through outreach and engage with, particularly in the context of Path 3. This issue has been recognised with the EU Youth Strategy (EU, 2021) where vulnerable youth in rural settings have been formally identified as a demographic requiring specific and targeted measure to promote engagement with education and training.

This plan must, explicitly, identify the challenges specific to prospective and current rural students if the focus of this plan is to create sustainable pathways for students to be part of "a more inclusive and equitable higher education sector”.

- Certainly, the groups that are currently highlighted need to continue to be targeted. In addition, I would suggest ‘first in family’ to attend a HEI. However, while there is merit in targeting specific groups of people –there is a danger that this will become a list of those who can be supported and encouraged versus those who cannot. I recommend rather than exclusively targeting specific groups, establishing a dual approach that targets specific groups on the one hand, but also targets specific courses, that have a poor record of widening participation. For example, courses that require high points, such as medicine. In this dual approach model there is flexibility, and different groups that need to be targeted depending on the specific courses involved. For instance in medicine – first in family to do medicine , are a group that usually require additional support and encouragement to apply to medicine in the first instance, as there is a perception that medicine is for the wealthy (Greenlagh 2016). For Occupational Therapy and Speech and Language Therapy – attracting male applicants is a challenge that needs to be met.

We know that candidates from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are under-represented in Irish medical schools; accounting for less than 4% of all applicants (O'Flynn et al., 2012). We are not unique in Ireland in this regard. There are widespread mismatches between the socio-demographic variables of medical 8 | P a g e

students and the population at large in many Western countries (Garlick and Brown, 2008). Only approximately 5% of UK medical students have parents from non-professional backgrounds (Tiffin et al., 2012). While in the United States, racial and ethnic minorities comprise 26% of the population, but only 6% of the medical workforce (American Medical Student Association, 2014). Medical regulatory bodies internationally have highlighted the value of a more diverse medical school intake, and have called for widening access and participation strategies to redress this imbalance. The issues are complex and many strategies have been adopted

internationally to address them ranging from alternative admission routes, contextual data, quotas, pipeline projects and mentoring programmes – (See below).

There has been much research in the last number of years looking at the benefits of increasing diversity in other healthcare educational programmes. It is seen as critical to the growth and sustainability of healthcare professions. Benefits that have been found in the success of the graduates themselves but also improving society well-being and social capital. Many of the national and international associations in health sciences are actively promoting diversity in workforce and education. There is a call for “a more structured, and action-orientated approach” to diversity (Taff & Blash, 2017) which accounts for diversity in a number of areas such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and disability. National/international professional associations have committed to recruiting a more diverse population and an awareness that this will improve service and service-user confidence. Working groups addressing diversity and inclusion are in existence in some international associations (e.g. College of Podiatrists) but are not yet seen in national associations which places further responsibility on the educational institutions to act.

- The previous NAP concentrated on students with physical disabilities. While these groups should still be targeted, there should also be a focus on students with mental health issues and neurological conditions such as Autism. Rather than simply focusing on numbers, there should also be a corresponding focus on supports.
- In addition to the target groups identified in the previous National Plan, we suggest that First Generation College Students could be a new target group for the next National Access Plan. Research shows that first generation college students need more guidance in navigating the education system and therefore are in need of greater support.
- There should also be scope for the targeting of groups to be driven by student and staff analysis carried out at a more granular level such as programme level. For example, if a teacher training programme identifies an under-representation of men

from deprived socio-economic areas among their student body and in particular, if there is a problem recruiting teachers in these communities, then targeting this group may be desirable for a programme like this. Therefore targeting groups should be responsive to what current data shows and how this changes over time.

Question 3: How can pre-entry and post-entry activities be developed?

- The new NAP should aim to review the effectiveness of all existing activities. For example, we need to track students’ progress from our pre-entry schools activities to higher education. We need to see what impact these initiatives have had and adjust them, if required, if the evidence tells us to.
- The new NAP should recognise that different groups need different kinds of supports. More data needs to be gathered on the effectiveness of supports for different communities.

- Initiatives that have been proven to be successful should be expanded and funded accordingly. For example, in the context of NUI Galway, programmes such as UNI4U, Schools of Sanctuary and Breaking the Seal.
 - These activities should be developed in partnership with internal and external stakeholders.
 - HEI's should have formal links established with organisations/stakeholders/community groups which work with underrepresented students.
 - A mapping exercise should be carried across each educational sector to see what initiatives currently exist so that different sectors can learn from one another.
 - Summer schools should be developed which target students from underrepresented groups.
 - More focus should be put on peer-to-peer mentoring and ensuring that students from underrepresented group have access to a student advisor in their local college setting.
 - More data needs to be produced on the experiences of underrepresented students as they leave higher education and enter the workforce. Recent reports such as the Ethnicity and Nationality in the Labour Market report (ESRI, 2018) and the Travellers in the Mainstream Labour Market report (SSGT, 2021), outline how non-traditional students, particularly ethnic minorities, face considerable barriers in accessing employment. More data needs to be produced here to see the extent of the problem.
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- A national Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education plan should be developed which would offer clear guidelines on how to ensure teaching and learning environments are more inclusive.
 - These activities need to be co-designed in partnership with underrepresented groups. In healthcare research it has become essential in almost all projects to have patient and public partners as part of the team conducting research and developing healthcare practice and policy. Institutes of higher education could recruit and form 'experts by experience' advisory groups from among its current staff and student body or among prospective students. The members of these groups should come from groups that are known to be underrepresented at higher education e.g. members of the travelling community or those from deprived socio-economic areas.
 - Pre-entry activities in the sector are mostly front loaded to the senior cycle of secondary school (aimed at TY, Fifth Year and Leaving Cert students). It is proposed that the next National Access Plan facilitates greater levels of activity with target groups earlier in the student journey. Earlier interventions will better equip target groups to navigate the education system and make informed decisions in choosing subjects, pathways, courses and careers throughout second and third level studies. An Indecon Review of Career Guidance in Ireland (2019) explored how and when learners form their career options. Their study identified that 38% of second level student respondents started thinking about what to do upon leaving school/education during TY or later, 37% starting thinking in Junior Cycle (First, Second or Third Year) and 25% in primary school. It is recommended that the next National Access Plan facilitates greater levels of

activity with target groups during the junior cycle of secondary school and during primary school given that 62% of second level students reported that they started thinking what do upon leaving school/education during those particular years of schooling. A national access plan which promotes sustained targeted outreach activity over time (primary school, junior cycle of secondary school, senior cycle of secondary school) would lead to better outcomes in improving awareness and aspiration.

- Traveller students have identified a gap in supports during the transition process into higher education. The transition can create additional barriers (Academic, Financial and Wellbeing), which act as a deterrent for the progression and retention of Traveller students in higher education. Therefore, a Pre University programme should be established by the Access offices with a multi-disciplinary team of professionals supporting Traveller students and parents from pre-entry. This will empower Traveller students and their families to overcome the barriers and be in a

stronger position once they commence their studies at University. The programme would represent an essential intervention in ensuring Traveller students access to higher education.

- Create stronger community networks between HEI's and the youth support services working with youth at risk and offering school outreach activities via Foroige, Tulsa centres.
- Rural disadvantage could be better served by exploiting COVID remote learning opportunities such as satellite learning hubs. Local Employment Network Service is one community partner example. FET colleges and centres would also be good to link in with here
- These can best be developed in a structured, integrated way – that supports widening participation at all stages of the education cycle. These initiatives should be developed in partnership with the relevant stakeholders, most importantly potential candidates from the targeted groups- for instance with school leavers this may entail student representatives, teachers, career guidance teachers and parents .

As an example of the following is a diagrammatic representation of initiatives to widen access to medicine based on the UK model (Patterson & Price 2017). This comprises a three-pronged approach.

Pre -entry – focuses on outreach and mentoring programmes, designed to build and foster ambition and encourage applications. This is based on evidence that one of the biggest roadblocks is that potential applicants from non- traditional backgrounds do not apply in the first place.

Entry - concentrates on changes to the selection entry criteria to acknowledge contextual data and the adoption of selection tools that minimise bias. Contextual data includes evidence that the applicant submits and HEIs can consider in their 12 | P a g e

application including educational, socioeconomic, schools profile, personal circumstances (such as if they have been in care, or involved in widening participation activities). Further

information describing how this is used in the UK is available here
<https://www.ucas.com/file/86786/download?token=zVfQ-oho>

Post-entry – recognising that students from non traditional backgrounds face additional challenges and do require additional support to navigate the course and graduate. For some groups, in particular Irish Travellers, the activities need to start at primary school. The pre-entry work needs to be in conjunction with Traveller organisations.

Post entry – again this needs consultation directly with members of the Traveller community.

- The HEA need to proactively work with community organisations like Pavee point, ITM etc and work out what may or may not work.
- Current financial structures should be modified to reflect flexibility of programmes i.e., fees modified/no repeat fee/funding support
- The new NAP should look at putting in place personal advocates/mentors for the more vulnerable students particularly during their first year.
- Schools of sanctuary initiatives should be widespread across each region and adequately funded: <https://schools-ireland.cityofsanctuary.org/become-a-school-of-sanctuary>
- Sanctuary in politics – delivered currently in DP centres – should be extended to schools: <https://cityofsanctuary.org/group-activities/sanctuary-in-politics/>
- Additional supports should be provided for students with complex needs, including resources for physical changes required in the university, for example quiet rooms
- Mentoring / role models should be developed within the Students Union to support NTS students to aspire to SU roles.

• In terms of initiatives for part-time adult learners, the new NAP should consider:

☒ Expansion of offering by HEIs of individual modules or micro-credentials which may lead to an award over a prolonged period supporting learners who are at the early stages of their journey through further and higher education;

☒ Financial support to cover course fees for workers who wish to upskill in their sector, but are in lower paid employment sector (e.g. childcare, social care, community development);

☒ Extension of the SUSI grant eligibility criteria to include part-time courses;

☒ More formalised Careers Advice Service for adult learners: many prospective adult learners struggle to find the correct course of study as they lack the correct information and knowledge to make appropriate course choices. Services which provide specialised career mapping and guidance supports are required for new adult learners to assist them in making appropriate career choices and to navigate the higher education landscape.

☒ Pre-entry support courses which are non-credit and develop confidence in learners: developing their digital skills, short taster courses in regional communities to encourage

learners to consider upskilling opportunities in their local community which also provides HEIs an opportunity to engage with local stakeholders;

☒ Development of regional partnerships with industry and local communities to promote the concept of lifelong learning in our regions, promoting engagement and an opportunity to embed the wider community mission into the ethos and strategic vision of higher education institutions.

Question 4: How can current funding programmes be better utilised to further the objectives of the National Access Plan?

- A permanent funding stream including permanent posts should be established to deliver on the various PATH projects currently underway across HEI's.
- Increase overall FSD fund in line with increase in number of students registering for disability support, plus the increase in complexity e.g. multiple disabilities
- The current funding plan, in particular the FSD only applies to full time students and therefore prevents some students with disabilities for participating. This is in contrast to the SAF fund which does apply to part time students.
- FSD fund discriminates on the basis of nationality.
- Research highlights a massive issue for mature students – many of whom are carers, have child care responsibility and the cost of child care is prohibitive, the cost of accommodation is prohibitive. This should be a target group as the benefit would be two generations. There should be a specific fund providing more realistic support to this group.

- Students experiencing homelessness should be funded more appropriately. SUSI needs to take account of this when assessing student's eligibility.
- Additional funding need to be provided for the following initiatives:
 - ☒ A fund for students in the Care of the State
 - ☒ Funding for childcare/other caring responsibilities
 - ☒ Additional funding supports for the pivot to online teaching and learning
 - ☒ Development of accessible communication tools
 - ☒ Dedicated transition officers for targeted groups
 - ☒ SEAS SUAS programmes should be funded and rolled out nationally:
<https://socs.nuigalway.ie/societies/seassuas>
 - ☒ SEAS SUAS programmes should be funded and rolled out in schools and the wider community

Question 5: How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded within HEIs?

- We recommend the establishment of a charter for designation of a university as a ‘ universally designed , inclusive and accessible university’ similar to for eg the charter for designation of a University of Sanctaury, City of Sanctuary, Schools of Sanctuary
 - We recommend that Widening Participation Committees be established in each institution with representation from a broad range of departments/units/colleges, which will help to ensure that representatives across each institution understand how crucial they are to the mainstreaming agenda.
 - The new National Access Plan should recommend that Widening Participation strategies be developed for each institution, with some guidelines as to how these strategies should be developed.
 - The new NAP should recommend that a national toolkit for mainstreaming be developed, as HEI’s have expressed concerns in the progress review of the previous NAP that there is some ambiguity around what mainstreaming entails in the context of HEI’s .
 - There needs to be considerable more focus on data gathering throughout HEI’s when it comes to the Widening Participation activities they are involved in. Each institution should undergo a mapping exercise to see what initiatives relating to access and WP are currently underway in their institutions.
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- Research data should be gathered across HEI’s which can show best practice when it comes to mainstreaming.
 - The new NAP should action the development of a national Universal design for Learning strategy for all HEI’s.
 - More emphasis needs to be given to mainstreaming being everyone’s business in HEI’s, not it being just the responsibility of an access office.
 - The College of Arts, Social Science and Celtic Studies at NUI Galway will appoint a Vice-Dean of ‘Engagement and Student Recruitment’ in 2021 whose role will include overseeing the development of alternative pathways to access education by mature and disadvantaged students in consultation with the University’s Access Centre. This initiative will help further devolve responsibility for widening access to the College level. Having academic staff dedicated to widening participation throughout institutes of higher education will help ensure that this starts to be seen as a core responsibility for all staff. As Vice-Dean roles usually align with core academic responsibilities e.g. Vice-Dean of Undergraduate Studies and Vice-Dean of Research, this new role of Vice-Dean of ‘Engagement and Student Recruitment’ signals that that this is core work for all colleagues
 - Access and Widening Participation responsibilities and activities carried out at unit and/or school level should be considered in the workload model of academic staff therein.
 - Existing Athena Swan structures could be expanded to embed Access initiatives.
 - One of the most successful courses for widening participation within the health professions is nursing, and lessons can be learned from their experience.

The success of widening participation in nursing is multifactorial and in no small part due to a very concerted effort on behalf of the nursing profession nationally and internationally to widen participation. Thomas et al (2017) reported from a review of the literature that there is a lack of conceptualisation and focus regarding the mechanisms to encourage and support a diversity of entrants to Nursing & Midwifery. In their report of a conference group discussion on the issue relating to diversity in nursing, delegates focused concern on improving an awareness of the career opportunities for nurses, and promoting this to a more diverse workforce. The CNO Commission on widening participation in nursing and midwifery education and careers (Scottish Government 2017) reported that efforts on widening participation to education and careers have been relatively successful in nursing and, perhaps to a slightly lesser extent, midwifery in recent years. They recommended that the nursing and midwifery workforce should reflect the diversity of population it cares for and promote diversity. They also recommended the need to tackle stereotypical images of nurses and midwives by creating a more positive professional role model. This they see as a priority in enticing men into the profession. They recommend the need to extend existing routes into nursing for support workers, and those currently working in the health care service who want to progress their careers.

All undergraduate Nursing & Midwifery programmes are regulated by the governing body the Nursing & Midwifery Board of Ireland (NMBI). The NMBI have long seen the value in recruiting mature students (aged over 23 years) to the nursing and midwifery programmes nationally. Since the inception of the Nursing and the direct entry Midwifery Degree programmes they have set quotas of places for mature applicants each year. The quota for mature applicants currently stand at:

- Bachelor of Nursing Science (General) 15%
- Bachelor of Nursing Science (Mental Health) 35%
- Bachelor of Midwifery Science (20%)

Application and recruitment for mature applicants is through the CAO system and based on their ranking following completion of an assessment test. The NMBI also recognise the need to give opportunity to those seeking admission to the programmes via other routes including HEAR, DARE, QQI award (previously Fetac). The HSE in Ireland currently have a scheme available to those working as Health Care Assistants to apply for scholarships to undertake Nurse training through the mature application process. Each year the school of nursing has at least two students on this scheme. The experience on the ground over the past 10 years is that the ethnic diversity of students accessing Nursing in NUIG has increased significantly both through CAO direct entry but to a much greater extent the mature applicant and access routes.

Question 6: How can a whole-of education approach to widening participation in higher education be achieved?

- The principles of Universal Design for Learning should be prominent in teaching and learning strategies across all sectors of the education system.
- The principles of Universal Design for buildings, systems etc. should be prominent in across all sectors of the education system.

- Funding should be provided for a staff member to deliver on the European web accessibility directive.
- Understanding and providing for the particular needs of Travellers students and parents as they seek to access higher education is critical to ensuring that children and young people from the Traveller community can fulfil their potential through education. Having a whole education approach is essential for enabling participation by Travellers in higher education. Therefore, a full-time post Traveller Education Officer must be established in each third level institution, or in partnership with other institutions, to work closely with the Travelling community, primary/secondary school and FET communities to deliver a targeted approach while furthering the agreed actions and recommendations outlined in numerous Travellers in Education reports and strategies. The Traveller Education Officer will work closely with school principals to ensure that third level education is seen as a viable option for Travellers and provide the necessary support to guidance teacher in the schools with the relevant supports directed towards Travellers accessing third level.
- More comprehensive data should be gathered on the student experience. If the experience is negative we don't retain the students. In the US and the UK they track their groups at risk through this process, so they can see the grade disparities and so on and they can then react and are flexible – this is not the case here. We need proper data gathering throughout the life cycle of the student.
- A lot of training that students undertake in HEI's, like work placements, are often voluntary agreements that will ensure reinforcing societal prejudice. For example, student teachers need placements, often they must source them themselves. These are publicly funded bodies (as indeed are hospitals) this should be a built in requirement on publicly funded bodies. An obligation to take the student appointed to them.
- Equal focus on Access, participation and outcomes for all underrepresented groups

Question 7: How can pathways between further education and training and higher education be better developed?

- NUI Galway has significantly developed the further education entry route with over 230 places available across the majority of its full-time undergraduate for FET applicants. In terms of how pathways can be developed, the new National Access Plan should aim to incorporate HEAR and DARE eligibility into this pathway, so that

the indicators of disadvantage for the Leaving Certificate are also recognised as indicators of disadvantage for this entry route.

- While NAP 2015-19 recommended FEI's and HEI's work together to develop access and foundation courses which could be delivered through the further education sector, the new National Access Plan should continue to pursue this objective with more detail on how this is to be achieved.

- Guidance should be given on the kinds of FET programmes HEI's should to recognise as pathways. Currently, there is too much variability across HEI's with regards to what each institution views as a linked programme. A standardised set of entry criteria should be established.
- A significant number of FET students are applying for a small number of places on undergraduate programmes across HEI's, particularly nursing programmes. Consideration should be given to how these quotas can be increased, particularly in consultation with the HSE in the case of nursing, with an emphasis on ensuring that these places do not become a back-door, so to speak, for students who would not be considered disadvantaged seeking to gain admission to higher education.
- The new National Access Plan should set out an action to engage with FET providers so that FET colleges and centres provide local digital hubs for students to study and learn online. This would help to ensure that HEI's have more of an outreach in local communities.
- A common issue for students coming through this entry route is the lack of a centralised information point for all FE to HE entry routes. The next iteration of the plan should make the development of this resource an action.
- Feedback from prospective students and other school liaison stakeholders indicates that the further education pathway is perhaps undervalued in the decision making process. A barrier in the marketing of the further education pathways is the complex official title of 'QQI/FET/FETAC' and outdated perceptions of the pathway held by some students and parents. Tremendous efforts and improvements have been made in the sector to strengthen the pathway and offer substantially increased places and opportunities for students. We recommend that this pathway requires a national rebrand which includes a new identity and title that reflects the breadth of opportunity that it offers.
- The new National Access Plan needs to build on the long established strong engagement of Travellers in further education and build coherent incentivised pathways from further education and training to higher education. In 2019, the total number of Traveller enrolments reported in further education and training was 1,527.

Of these learner enrolments, 43% were men, and 57% were women. The majority (59%) of these learners were younger than 25 years of age (FET In Numbers – Traveller Community, SOLAS, 2019). It would be important that clear pathways would be developed for these young Travellers when they complete their FET programmes into HE, this obviously isn't there now, when you look at the differential in numbers when you look at the number of Travellers that attend HE.

The current FET to HE model creates additional barriers for Traveller Youth and hinders any significant progress. A key barrier is financial, an 18-year-old Traveller student in further education at Youthreach receives a weekly payment of €203 weekly, but if the same student progresses into higher education (NUI Galway or GMIT) which is within 45km from home, the student will receive a SUSI grant of €297 per month. This is an obvious barrier that impacts on the transfer, so we do need to circumvent this in order to may third level a serious option for

Travellers. Travellers want to progress into higher education, but the financial burden is too much to handle; more needs to be done by the department to deal with this issue. Pathways from further education to higher education must be incentivised. If this is addressed in the next National Access Plan, the number of Traveller Youth progressing into higher education through a further education route will increase drastically over the next few years. Specific Traveller student grants/scholarships should be established to assist Traveller Youth to overcome financial barriers.

- A particular issue in attracting students to NUI Galway through this entry route is the lack of laboratory facilities in many FET centres and colleges in the region. This means that many providers do not provide the level 5 and 6 science programmes which we recognise as pathways to our science and engineering undergraduate programmes. FEI's and HEI's should work together to address this issue, which would help to foster greater collaboration between both sectors.
- The new NAP should address FET pathways to part-time courses, as well as full-time courses. There is a great opportunity for students to progress to part-time courses with their level 5 and 6 qualifications which needs more highlighting nationally.
- FET students should be more involved in on-campus events. This would help to break down barriers to progression. A module could be developed and included in all level 5 programmes which informs students about university life and the opportunities on offer.
- Currently there is little data on the socio-economic status of FET students progressing to higher education. The socio-economic status of FET students should also be assessed so that they can avail of targeted supports.
- More guidance on advanced entry needs to be provided as HEI's are developing this in isolation from one another, rather than a clear, standardised approach existing which all HEI's can draw from.

Question 8: How can other social inclusion initiatives outside of the higher education sector be harnessed to support equity of access objectives?

- A mapping exercise needs to be carried out to inform HEI's of what initiatives are currently underway locally and nationally regarding measures to specifically support those living with a disability, the traveller community, those in the care of the state, those experiencing homelessness and new communities.
- Different sectors should continue to collaborate across localities and regions using the local community networks.
- The example from healthcare of Public Patient Involvement (<https://www.nuigalway.ie/ppi/>) is directly relevant to widening participation in higher education. PPI is a social inclusion initiative whereby patients are actively engaged and involved, in a meaningful way, in the healthcare research that affects them. The principles of PPI can be harnessed to involve the public in widening participation initiatives, that target specific groups by actively involving them in a meaningful way in the design of these initiatives, operating on a "nothing about us, without us" basis.

Question 9: What challenges has Covid-19 presented in relation to an inclusive higher education system and how can they be addressed?

- The digital divide was a major challenge for underrepresented students. HEA funding which was allocated to the development of the Laptop Loan scheme should be further ring-fenced each year for underrepresented students.
- As many underrepresented students had caring responsibilities, recording lectures proved to be essential to their progression this year. The recording of lectures should now become something that all HEI's uniformly practice as it has proven to have major benefits for all students.
- As the primary teaching and learning environment became the student and staffs home residence and the quality of their broadband and device became critical for full participation, the pandemic seriously disadvantaged both students and staff with

more deprived living circumstances or simply living circumstances that were not conducive to study or work e.g. the presence of young children in a household. One of the main ways that this can be addressed is to avoid any unnecessary delays to returning to campus and to further support schemes such as the laptop loan scheme set-up at NUI Galway. Perhaps there is also scope, if numbers need to be limited on campus, that those students or staff who can document unfavourable living circumstances or poor connectivity can be prioritised for on campus access if public health restrictions remain during the 2021-22 academic year.

- HEI's need to clarify current needs of students (Covid / post Covid). The impact of Covid may be felt by many long after the pandemic.
- Caring responsibilities need to be recognised as a significant barrier to student success. The last year has helped to shine a light on this.
- Funding needs to be provided to support those with caring responsibilities.

Section 2: Additional Responses which fall outside of the HEA's guiding questions

- The School of Education at NUI Galway very much welcomed the PATH strand 1 initiative and, since 2017, have been delighted to run the APT project, now in Phase 2 of its implementation. Through APT, the NUI Galway School of Education strand has worked with and supported 25 teachers who have already graduated and are mostly in in the teaching profession, or are just about to graduate. We have a further six student teachers whom we are currently supporting through their ITE programmes. Through our project activities, including our schools' events and our APT student teachers' practitioner research projects in DEIS schools, we have also supported hundreds of post-primary students (particularly in DEIS schools) in thinking about and planning their routes to higher education, and in thinking about the possibility of teaching as a career.

The School of Education has led the (separate) submission on the consultation for the next National Access Plan from the new Western Institute for Studies in Education (WISE) institute (consisting of three ITE providers in the West, NUI Galway, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, and St. Angela's College, Sligo), and in that extended submission, we have provided our observations and recommendations regarding access to higher education and the teaching profession in detail. In this NUI Galway institutional submission, we (the School of Education),

based a) on our research in the area over the last ten years, and b) our experience running the PATH1 APT project, wish to emphasise the following points:

☒ The focus on particular professions in the last National Access Plan, and particularly on the teaching profession, was very welcome, especially given the importance of the teaching profession in supporting the development, learning and socialisation of all children and young people in Ireland. While access to the professions has been on the international widening participation agenda for some time, this work in Ireland is really only beginning, and we need to move forward in this regard (cf. in the UK: Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009; Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2013). Therefore, in the next National Access Plan, we strongly encourage the HEA to maintain a focus on access to the teaching profession, but to also include other professions, particularly 'prestigious' professions in which individuals from lower socio-economic, minority ethnic and 'other' groups, are currently particularly under-represented.

☒ In relation to priority goal 3 in the current National Access Plan (to gather accurate data and evidence on access and participation and to base policy on what the data tells us), we argue that a focus on data, and evidence-based policy development, be maintained in the next National Access Plan. However, some refinement of this goal is needed. While a national system for accurate data collection is obviously needed and central to evidence-based policy development, existing (accurate) data need to be used by policy-makers.

☒ Furthermore, the gathering of new, and the use of pre-existing, (accurate) data, ought to be sector/profession-based. For example, in applications for PATH1 funding to diversify ITE, HEIs were advised that the target groups in PATH1 had to be the same as the general target groups for HE undergraduate as a whole, as per the National Access Plan. This is not evidence-based policy development, as the national research evidence (cf. Keane and Heinz, 2015, 2016; Heinz and Keane, 2018) has been clear about which groups are most under-represented in the teaching profession, that is, minority ethnic groups, and yet this group is not a target group in the National Access Plan1, greatly constraining equity of access and participation initiatives for this group.

☒ With regard to the teaching profession, it is paramount to take into consideration the significant impact that the composition of the teaching population has on students and wider society. Future policy needs to pay more attention to both the 'equity of access' perspective focusing on the benefits to individuals from underrepresented

groups who may encounter barriers to progression into the profession as well as the 'equity through access' perspective related to benefits of a diverse teaching profession for students, schools and society (Heinz and Keane, 2018). The near absence of teachers from minority-

ethnic groups and the impact of the lack of minority ethnic teachers on students from minority-ethnic backgrounds is of particular concern. While we acknowledge and promote teacher education that prepares all teachers to support all students, there is significant research evidence emphasising that a diverse teaching body positively impacts all students and wider society, as it best prepares all children for life in a diverse and democratic society where knowledge is not seen as the special privilege of the power-holding majority group. Furthermore, representation of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups in the teaching body has been shown to benefit minority students as minority teachers often act as ‘cultural translators’ and inspiring ‘role models’ (Villegas and Irvine 2010; Keane and Heinz, 2016, Keane, Heinz & Lynch 2020). Therefore, in the case of access to the professions, specifically here access to the teaching profession, policy-makers need to base target groups and actions on sector/profession-specific data and wider societal policy aims, recognising that the composition of the teaching (and other) profession(s) is closely linked (and can contribute to) other social and economic policy aims (i.e. anti-racism strategy, equity, diversity and inclusion policies, and employment programmes).

Further, updated data collection now needs to be conducted on the socio-demographic profiles of current ITE cohorts. We would also advise that similar data collection be conducted in relation to other professions, especially in subjects and professions identified as ‘prestigious’, including law, medicine, veterinary science, for example, in which students from lower socio-economic, and minority ethnic groups, are very significantly under-represented (Social Mobility Commission, 2016; Government of Ireland, 2007; National Access Office, 2013).

Additionally, while it is important to track entry by socio-demographic background into ITE programmes, as well as examining progression and retention rates, quantitative data tells us nothing about the lived experiences of students from under-represented groups in and beyond ITE. Qualitative research exploring the student experience of HE is vital in assessing the impact of WP initiatives in addressing equality of access to HE in Ireland.

We regard research as a key strand of widening participation in ITE. Many of the PATH1 projects contain a research strand, including the NUIG/STACS APT project,

which has already resulted in two academic publications. Additionally, in November 2019, as part of the NUIG aspect of the APT project, Dr. Elaine Keane and Dr. Manuela Heinz hosted an international research symposium on the topic of diversifying the teaching profession, which showcased not only key research findings from the PATH1 projects, but also projects from the international context. A second international research symposium will be held in 2023. As a separate activity, Drs. Keane and Heinz, along with Dr. Rory McDaid in Marino Institute of Education, Dublin, are currently working on an edited volume about diversity in the teaching profession, to be published by Routledge in 2022. A major section of this book features a number of PATH1 projects’ research findings.

In relation to ITE and teaching, and indeed, other professions, supporting students from under-represented groups into the profession (e.g. as NQTs), will be very important, and research about their early career experiences is vital in this regard. We are conducting some small-scale research in this regard as part of the NUIG strand of the APT project, and two of our PhD students are researching this area, but larger-scale research would be welcome.

Research from the NUIG strand of the APT project (Keane, Heinz and Lynch, 2018, 2020) indicates that significant work is needed with teachers and career guidance teachers regarding the impact of socio-demographic positionality on student participation and achievement, and the role of teacher expectations therein. This work is done in ITE, but generations of teachers have not had the benefit of engaging with these very important bodies of international research, and often approach their teaching and student support from deficit perspectives, particularly in DEIS schools. Our research (ibid.) also points to the urgent need for work with career guidance counsellors, as many students in DEIS schools, and/or those from lower socio-economic or minority ethnic groups, frequently report being actively discouraged from thinking about HE and the professions. Further, it is vital that early years educators, as well as all teachers, are appropriately educated in supporting the needs of diverse pupils.

Additionally, a discussion (and action) about diversity amongst HE academic staff is also needed. While much-needed work has commenced with respect to gender, there has been an absence of discussion about other aspects of diversity (ethnicity, social class, disability, for example) in relation to Ireland's academic staff. The lack of diversity in academic staff is evident to students from under-represented groups and sends an important message. As a small start, in relation to ITE, more visibility of

those from minority groups would be welcome in terms of contributions to teaching but it is vitally important that these 'appearances' are not seen as 'tokens' and additionally that such an approach would not contribute to the insecure and casualised employment patterns so evident for many in HEIs.

In the ITE context, again based on the NUIG/STACS PATH1 APT project, the importance of specific social, academic and financial post-entry supports for students from under-represented groups has been evidenced. Such supports need to be continued. In our external evaluation of Phase 1 of the APT project, conducted as part of the self-evaluation exercise required by the HEA, APT student teachers heavily emphasised the importance of the financial supports, noting that they would not otherwise have been able to complete the programme. Mentoring for student teachers and ITE graduates from under-represented groups is also necessary to support their progression into the teaching profession (as we are instituting as part of Phase 2 of the APT project).

In the context of ITE, there is significant potential for widening participation by working with the non-formal sector, including with community and NGOs, for example, through a service learning model approach. This has been done before in the School of Education, with student teachers completing the 'placement' aspect of the service learning module in various youth, community and non-governmental organisations, supporting the educational engagement of young people from lower socio-economic and minority ethnic groups, and greatly enhancing their development as teachers committed to social justice-oriented pedagogy. To be effective in an ITE context, significant administrative support and formal Teaching Council approval would be required. Conducting some of the required school placement hours in 'non-traditional' or 'alternative' educational settings would provide significant and highly valuable diverse pedagogical and student support experiences for student teachers (who, as we know from the research, are predominantly from white, middle class, non-disabled, and majority group backgrounds), whilst simultaneously providing valuable educational support for the relevant students. Importantly, this non-school placement experience would need to be a requirement

for all student teachers, in order to ensure all ITE students, and not just those drawn towards issues of equity and social justice, engage and learn from this experience. Additionally importantly, this work, and the student teachers' engagement in same, would need to be supported within the ITE academic programmes, to support student teachers' critical understandings of the work in a social justice context, as per service learning approaches to this type of civic engagement work. All of the above would

need to be supported and approved by the Teaching Council, and crucially, resources would need to be made available to ITE to organise and implement this additional type of placement experience (cf. Boland and Keane, 2009).

☒ Significant work is needed within institutions to embed inclusivity. While excellent progress is being made at NUI Galway, for example, through the Inclusive Teaching project, further work is needed within specific subject contexts. In this regard, the School of Education at NUI Galway has established an Inclusive ITE committee to examine current ITE teaching and learning practices and lead the implementation of more inclusive structures and processes. As part of this, we are working closely with the newly established AHEAD RAPP (Reasonable Accommodations and Professional Placements) project (as part of their Steering Committee) which is examining national competence standards and reasonable accommodations in professional courses, including in ITE.

☒ Engagement with professional bodies and leaders in different professions (e.g. school principals) is needed so that diverse students are welcomed, appreciated and appropriately supported on placement, during induction and throughout their careers. Professional cultures can pose additional invisible barriers for students from underrepresented groups. Schools need to be more welcoming places for student teachers from under-represented groups. In our professional practice, we have encountered several instances where a student teacher from a minority ethnic background was unable to find a school placement and had to withdraw from their ITE programme. While 'attitudinal' work is obviously necessary with school management and teachers, the relationship between ITE providers and schools, and the role of placement therein, needs to be formalised, ideally through the Teaching Council. At the moment, current working practices are such that prospective student teachers and ITE providers are reliant on schools to 'take' student teachers, and there is often little appreciation of the value they bring to schools.

☒ It needs to be recognised that professional programmes put a significantly higher financial burden on students than many other programmes. Students usually incur additional financial costs for travel, appropriate clothing and often need to purchase additional equipment (for example, school books etc.). Students on professional programmes often contribute significantly to the work of their placement institution on a full-time basis and this prevents many from engaging in other paid part-time work to support their studies. Additional financial support for students of professional programmes and/or payment for their placements (possibly during final

year(s)) would ensure that these programmes are more attractive and financially feasible for all students.

- As NUI Galway is a designated University of Sanctuary (UoS), the UoS Steering Committee will always advocate for the removal of barriers to education for international protection applicants (IPAs), refugees, vulnerable immigrant groups and Irish Travellers. In this regard, the UoS Steering Committee advocates that below requests be considered when developing the new National Access Plan:

☒ We request that the Irish Government makes all State financial supports for education open to part-time studies.

Rationale: Most research highlights the fact that a major barrier to education is financial supports. Currently, SUSI, Free Fees and other non-State bursaries are limited to full-time student supports. The Government should allow for part-time students to avail of these State supports, as well as Non-State scholarships and stipends, to reflect the diverse society which Ireland has become in recent years. Currently, part-time students are also liable to tax when in receipt of stipends and bursaries.

☒ We request that the Irish Government support all IPAs who attain refugee status to transition from IPA payment to Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) payment, so to enable integration into the private rental sector during their study.

Rationale: Once an IPA enters third-level education while their international protection application is being assessed, they are still entitled to their weekly IP payment. However, if the IPA subsequently receives refugee status, then their weekly IP payment is terminated. There should be a mechanism in place to allow for the transfer to the BTEA allowance, enabling the individual to avail of BTEA financial supports without fear of losing financial supports should their international protection application be successful.

☒ We request that the Irish Government ceases the issuance of deportation orders pertaining to NUI Galway staff and students.

Rationale: If an international protection applicants (IPAs) are engaging in employment or education then the Irish state should support their efforts rather than issue deportation orders for the duration of their employment or studies.

☒ We request that the Irish Government revoke all current notifications of intention to deport issued to NUI Galway staff and students.

Rationale: If an IPA is engaging in employment or education, then the Irish state should support their efforts rather than issue deportation orders for the duration of their employment or studies.

☒ We request that the Irish Government extend the duration of any work permit to the duration of the international protection application process.

☒ Rationale: Competing in the Irish labour sector is difficult enough without the necessity to renew a short, six-month work permit. The short duration of the current work permit system acts as a barrier to employment, as there is a lack of awareness amongst employers of the work permit system. We feel that the work permit system should allow unrestricted access to the Irish labour sector for the duration of any international protection applications. Access to the Irish labour force will, in some way, remove financial barriers facing IPAs when entering the Irish education system, and will allow for preparation to enter studies.

☒ We request that the Irish Government grants Leave to Remain to IPAs who have spent more than 18 months within the International Protection Office system (Direct Provision).

Rationale: The duration of time required to process international protection applications often results in many IPAs residing within the Direct Provision system for durations of over five years. If the Irish State sanctions Leave to Remain for IPAs after a period of 18 months then the individual can fulfil their true potential and engage in Irish society without facing deportation.

☒ We request that the Irish Government develop a fair and transparent mechanism for all undocumented individuals residing in the Irish state to undertake the process of regularisation.

Rationale: Undocumented immigrants in Ireland face high levels of uncertainty in their daily lives, are often excluded from accessing education and experience exploitative labour market conditions. The Irish Government should develop a mechanism to allow for the regularisation of all undocumented immigrants residing in the Irish state. The Irish Government regularly advocates for the regularisation of all undocumented Irish immigrants residing in the US, and the Irish Government should lead by example.

- Further reflections from internal stakeholders included:

☒ The new NAP should recognise the problems underrepresented students have in accessing student accommodation. Many are being priced out of the market. The new NAP should action initiatives such as free transport and free childcare for those students who need it.

☒ The new NAP should aim to increase funding for UDL training and the improvement of the built environment for improving access.

☒ The new NAP should gather evidence on the student experience when it comes to post-graduate study and employment.

☒ The new NAP should action greater representation for students across the curriculum and within the academic community so there are more role models for diverse students to identify with.

☒ There should be a widening of the access agenda to include pathways to higher education with a greater emphasis on part-time flexible courses enabling learners to upskill at all stages of their working lives

☒ Undergraduate degrees should be more flexible. The new NAP should explore possibilities for flexible learning in the present system

☒ COVID-19 had a significant effect on unemployment figures nationally. Students who may not have necessarily met criteria for socio-economic disadvantage prior to pandemic may now meet this criteria. The HEAR scheme should at look for income from two years previous to gauge household income.

Section 3: The Student Voice

The four questions:

(HEA, 2021, p.9)

The feedback we received from students was as follows:

Question 1: What aspects of equity of access to higher education currently work or do not work from a student perspective?

- There is no incentive for young Travellers to go to university when Youthreach offers €203 a week and this is accessed in one's local community. The costs of going to university (travel, accommodation, childcare) are not given sufficient weight in SUSI grants or any Back to Education allowance. There is little incentive to go to university when you can do a QQI level 5 or 6 course in your local town/community.
- The SUSI system of looking at combined income in a family is an obstacle to many. The appeals process is slow and almost impossible to deal with.

Question 2: What is the biggest challenge for students in accessing higher education?

- Financial
- Travel
- Accommodation
- Accessibility
- A lack of information
- The cost of travel for those who need to travel from rural areas or cannot walk/cycle/get public transport. After paying for travel they still do not have a satisfactory place to park.

Question 3: What can make a difference for students accessing and completing higher education?

- Hidden costs of higher education need to be highlighted more. Costs such as childcare, travel, accommodation, medical expenses are serious barriers to a student's success in higher education.
 - The student assistance fund should be increased and the criteria for eligibility should be broadened
 - The laptop loan scheme should be continued annually for students experiencing issues purchasing laptops.
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- Recording lectures should be mandatory across each HEI.
 - More online and blended courses should be developed. Blended learning or the option of blended learning provides solutions to both financial costs associated with travel and problems of accessibility.
 - Many Access students return to the Access Centre for additional supports. The 'learning' is being done within the various schools but the supports which make that possible are still being provided by Access. More supports should be available in local school/college settings.
 - NUI Galway is making an effort but the campus is still not physically accessible for all. Accessibility should be at the centre of the student experience.
 - Quiet spaces / sensory rooms should be developed where students can go. Softer lighting should be used in any quiet/sensory areas.
 - Seeing people from similar backgrounds in the University staff.
 - Students are not being given enough information about access as an option in school.
 - HEI's should have a traveller education officer.
 - Access should not just be about physical accessibility, campus can be overwhelming for many students. Students need to feel they belong on campus.

Question 4: How has Covid-19 impacted on students e.g., academic, financial, health, college experience and how can we address these impacts?

- No feedback received for this question.

Submission 4.09 Dyslexia Association of Ireland

The Dyslexia Association of Ireland (DAI) welcomes this consultation to develop the next National Access Plan (2022-2026). As the representative body for people with dyslexia, a learning difficulty that affects up to 1 in 10, DAI hopes that this submission will inform improvements in the strategy and services available to students with dyslexia.

People with dyslexia may experience greater stress and frustration as they endeavour to learn, resulting in heightened anxiety, particularly in relation to educational acquisition. Dyslexic difficulties occur on a continuum from mild to severe. According to the National Access Plan

2015-2019, equity of access to higher education is a fundamental principle of Irish education policy, its vision is 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. Therefore, as dyslexia affects approximately 10% of the population, it is imperative this population's voice is heard and their concerns addressed.

We hope that the new access plan will have a strong and specific focus on students with additional needs, (whether those needs have been formally identified or not). If we get it right for individuals with dyslexia and other disabilities, we will get it right for everyone. The principles of universal design for both learning and assessment of learning should underpin the new plan; however, there should also be a provision for individualised or tailored supports for those learners who require this. The needs of disadvantaged learners and those with dyslexia and other neuro-diverse profiles should be paramount. The needs and voices of these learners must be incorporated early and often within the national access plan, and its roll out.

The learning and progression goals of individuals will likewise be very different and this needs to be accommodated in both general awareness campaigns and in more specific awareness campaigns for people with dyslexia and other neuro-diverse profiles. Better understanding within the education sector, and within government on topics such as dyslexia, is critical if we are to better support the needs of the student body with dyslexia and fully enable and support them to achieve their potential. It is important to resource a 3

wide range of awareness campaigns on both general awareness and on specific topics such as dyslexia. In trying to reach groups who are notoriously hard to reach, a very wide net needs to be cast both nationally and locally using all media and social media channels, as well as linking with community groups and representative bodies.

A holistic approach is needed to enable open discussion, creating a welcoming environment for individuals identified with dyslexia and those seeking more information on dyslexia. Fear of disclosure remains a significant concern for many, and this can only be addressed if government and society become more aware, more open and more responsive to the needs of individuals with dyslexia.

As dyslexia has a range of impacts on reading, writing, comprehension, working memory and organisation skills, no two individuals are similarly affected. The same is true of other neuro-diverse conditions such as dyspraxia, ADHD and autism. The diversity of these spectrum conditions means that a one size fits all approach will not work. A spectrum and diversity of responses to meet these varying needs is essential. Universal design for learning will work for inclusion of many, but this needs to be accompanied by individualised supports for some who need that extra provision.

Those providing supports to students need to be trained in dyslexia and understand the emotional toll it can have, and their provision of support must be sensitive to that emotional aspect. Awareness also needs to be given to the language that is used. Accessible language and the provision of alternative formats should be the norm across the education sector so that students with dyslexia are not excluded.

It is critical to ensure that individuals are not alienated or excluded. Welcoming environments and positive responses are critical especially for those who may be hesitant to engage,

regardless of age or ability. Goal-orientated approaches and success stories would be key to providing examples of real-world outcomes. However, as literacy and numeracy

have different meanings to individuals, so does success. Therefore, examples of success must cover a very wide range to cater for this.

Continuous Professional Development is also key in upskilling the educational workforce to become more aware of dyslexic individuals needs and appropriate supports. DAI is working in this area, but with limited capacity. Increased resourcing as part of this new access plan could enable further development and rollout of a range of CPD courses on dyslexia. DAI currently provides dyslexia awareness training, training on support strategies for dyslexia, and dyslexia assessment of need training for HEI and FET sector staff. DAI is calling for a mandatory module on neuro-diversity for all educators, including universal design, identification of dyslexia and dyscalculia, best practice in-classroom support and useful technology to support inclusion and independence.

A significant issue facing adults with dyslexia is that many may not have been able to access a formal identification of their dyslexia previously, and there is no free public assessment service for adults with queried dyslexia. Currently, HEIs will only accept a formal identification of dyslexia when registering students and making an application to the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD). This means a large cohort of unidentified dyslexics are not getting the support they need.

Access to dyslexia identification must be available to those adults who need or want formal identification. This could be with increased funding to DAI towards our low cost adult educational psychology assessment service as well as by resourcing continued rollout of our dyslexia assessment of needs training course for education staff, to enable low cost and local identification of dyslexia. While a diagnosis of dyslexia may not be required to access certain supports, it is often very empowering emotionally, giving validity to the individuals lived experience, and enabling them to connect with others. The affirmative model of disability shows the social and emotional importance of identity. The UNCRPD enshrines the right of people with disability to have their own identity and to share their 5

experience with others like themselves. The government must fulfil its UNCRPD obligations in supporting individuals with specific disabilities like dyslexia to access their identity.

DAI has collaborated with NCBI on the Bookshare library of alternative formats which is now available to students with vision or print disabilities including dyslexia. Greater awareness and resourcing for the Bookshare library would enable a wider number of students to access alternative formats of their textbooks.

Integration of mental health supports is also critical. Mindfulness techniques in education can support effectiveness, personal development, and challenge negative self-talk. The goal should be to enable successful independent lifelong learners. Everything needs to be underpinned with a belief that all individuals, with the correct support, can succeed. The research consistently shows how the expectations of educators are strongly linked to outcomes for learners. High expectations, proper recognition, and appropriate accommodation will enable levels of success for all.