

Submission 3.3 Cork Education and Training Board

Cork ETB welcomes the Higher Education Authority and Department of Further Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) consultation process for the new National Access Plan that will run from 2022 until 2026. The consultation process underpinning this new Plan is critical to reflect the perspectives of the diverse range of stakeholders in education and civic society.

In 2020 Cork ETB hosted an online seminar with our learning city partners, Leave No One Behind¹, funded through the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund. The Education Webinar, aimed to provide a high-quality platform to engage key partners across the region, including industry, arts, and culture. This enabled a balancing of critical skills for life that supports citizenship and prosperity across communities, developing social capital.

Chaired by former President of CIT, Dr Barry O'Connor, the online seminar included excellent inputs from National and International speakers including AONTAS, UNESCO, OECD, Cork Chamber of Commerce, Cork ETB, and Cork City Council. A key outcome from the Webinar, was the establishment of Cork Access Network in January 2021, which in its short existence has hosted several focus groups, soap boxes and professional development, engaging over 300 professionals involved in education and industry across Cork City and County.

In making this submission Cork ETB focused on the key questions as presented in the HEA and DFHERIS consultation document. We consulted with our colleagues internally across Cork ETB further education and training services and hosted a learner forum, to specifically capture the voices of our FET learners.

Vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland in 2022-26

The vision for equity of access to Further and Higher Education in Ireland 2022-2026, should reflect the diversity of Irish society. Education should be understood in the broadest sense and underpinned by a commitment to education as a basic human right. It should be underpinned by the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Article 26 states

“Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit”².

Furthermore, the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda is a universal and collective commitment by governments, civil society, the private sector, youth, UN and other multilateral agencies to tackle educational challenges and build systems that are inclusive, equitable and relevant to all learners.

Who are the target groups? How do we ensure the most vulnerable members of our society are included?

People and communities not currently accessing education. It is important to recognise in identifying these groups of people, their needs are complex and their opportunity to access education involves other factors in particular housing, financial support, ability to access part time provision, language support, opportunities to access employment/work placements, health, negative experience of education, no family or social network or support. People identified need to be part of a whole system approach. It is imperative there is a wraparound response. Target groups may include but are not exclusive to - people in or exiting from prison services; people recovering from addiction. Persons with a disability; early school leavers; the unemployed; migrant communities; members of low-income families; carers; young people leaving care, members of the Roma and Traveller community; mature students.

There were 13,098 learner enrolments in further education and training who identified as having a disability. 66% were older than 25 years which indicated that many are returning to education, so there are gaps from disability services in school. It is important to recognise that FET PLC Students with a disability often need to complete a course over two years rather than one. Currently if a student qualifies for a grant it applies for one year only. There needs to be an option available for these students to complete half of the components in one year and half the following year. There needs to be recognition for students with disabilities to receive funding over an extended period and should be recognised across all FET and HE programmes³.

Data from enrolments in further education programmes showed that more than 40% of Travellers, had previously only completed primary level at most. Nationally, Traveller enrolments in further education and training was 1,212, of which 41.2% had primary education or lower, with the majority unemployed, 59% for a year or more. Furthermore, one-third of those from the Roma Community who signed up for further education programmes last year had primary education or lower⁴.

The expansion earlier this year of PLC courses to learners in the asylum-seeking process was very welcome. There has been an increasing demand for English language support from new migrants in FET, with around 20,000 learners, nationally, availing of this ESOL provision each year. This is critical in helping migrants to integrate within communities and to secure and sustain employment.

Career guidance staff and aftercare social workers can struggle to advise people as to whether they qualify to apply for a grant or not as the immigration and nationality requirements are complicated and confusing. Ireland's immigration system allows for

immigration residence permissions appear to be the same (for example Stamp 4) and offer the same access to the labour market, citizenship, and security of residence to provide for divergent levels of access to other supports such as housing and education. Non-EEA migrant children who are in the care of TUSLA, whether that is because they entered the State as an unaccompanied minor or there was an intervention by Child Protection following a bereavement of a parent or guardian, a family breakdown or abuse, may be given an immigration permission. This immigration permission places them at a significant disadvantage to their Irish or EEA citizen counterparts when applying for third level or further education as they are now deemed ineligible for a student grant⁵.

Case Study: Cork ETB Dillon's Cross Project

The Dillon's Cross Project was set up in 1995 to offer education and support to the female relatives of prisoners and ex-prisoners. The project aims to offer the female participants an opportunity to get QQI qualifications at level 3 and 4 with a view to helping them move onto level 5 Further Education and Training or into employment. The project originated in the Education Unit, Cork Prison, where it was felt that female relatives should have the same education and developmental opportunities as the men in prison, thereby fostering a positive attitude towards education and promoting education among families.

"My name is Mary Smith. My father is a Traveller, though I am settled. My partner and father of my two children is just out of prison. He is battling with drug and alcohol addiction, and we are currently trying to get him into rehab with the help of the Dillon's Cross Project. He has been in prison for most of my children's lives. My eldest child has autism, and we struggle to cope daily. I have completed both phases of the Dillon's Cross Project and the project has given me huge help and support. I hope to return to education to complete L5 and L6 in youth and community work as soon as both of my children are in full time education".

(Names have been changed)

A couple of key factors contribute to the overall success of the Dillon's Cross project and should be considered in supporting vulnerable learners –

- Proximity of the project to where learners live
- Scheduling/timing of classes allowed children to be dropped to school and then I could attend the project. The project followed the academic calendar so that when my kids were in school, so was I and vice versa.
- Support of the staff with additional tuition when necessary
- QQI approach - modules allowed a steppingstone approach.
- Holistic support of the project

How can pre-entry and post entry activities be developed?

The Further Education and Training Strategy identifies the lack of exposure to vocational learning, and vocational options or pathways during the junior and senior cycles in many schools. ETBs have the advantage of operating many second-level schools which could facilitate piloting of an innovative approach. This could look at offering Level 5 and Level 6 modules as an integrated part of the senior cycle alongside other options and components. This should be investigated further as part of the NCCA senior cycle review⁶.

Currently approximately 10% of HE places are available for FET/QQI applicants where there are equivalent opportunities to meet the entry requirements with a QQI (Quality Qualifications Ireland) award. Increasing this quota would develop the progression route from FET. From DEIS schools there are a higher percentage of learners progressing to FET and thus relying on QQI for entry to HE. (Rates of progression to HE is rising but whilst nationally 80% go from school to HE, it is only 64% progression from DEIS schools, with significantly more students going towards FET). For them the 10% quota of QQI entrants into HE narrows the window of opportunity to apply to HE. Providing a quota of HE places specifically for students meeting the criteria of applying with QQI/from FET AND from a DEIS school might increase the flow and opportunity for more disadvantaged learners.

FET supports early school leavers by offering them routes back into education and training through Youthreach centres and CTCs. There is a need to link it to pathways within FET and beyond, evolving to meet the changing and more complex needs of its learners. The Universities in Cork (UCC/MTU) have excellent access programmes to support young people coming from DEIS schools, however the real beneficiaries are those that go on to HE while those who do want to progress but go to a PLC college, often find it difficult to source continued support to enable the transfer from school to FET.

Case Study: Cork College of Commerce/ Youthreach Communications

In 2019 Cork College of Commerce initiated a programme with Youthreach centres in Cork, in which existing learners could attend the college one morning a week to complete the QQI Level 5 Communications component. This was an effort to integrate them into a college environment completing college work whilst still being supported by their centres. It reduced the workload for those who choose to progress to PLC by having one component completed. 21 learners commenced the programme in September 2019 and 17 were actively attending prior to the March 2020 Lockdown.

Through course shadowing at Cork College of Commerce prospective students gained a valuable insight into both their chosen course and what it is like to study at Cork College of Commerce. It provided information, advice and support to students who were interested in

a particular course. As well as getting to shadow the classes of their chosen course they have the opportunity of meeting subject teachers and sampling the facilities that the College has to offer.

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

A considerable number of our EU partner countries offer free education for their citizens. Ireland has one of the highest rates for third level education in the EU. While it is recognised that the funding of a free education system is a significant demand on the public exchequer, the economic and social contribution that is derived from the investment plays a significant part in national growth and development. By removing barriers that inhibit or prevent individuals from more marginalised sectors of society from participating fully in post second level education considerable progress can be achieved in areas that include social and community cohesion, improved health, and wellbeing as well as economic prosperity.

Opening SUSI for part-time learners would significantly increase participation for adult learners. SUSI's 'full time only' criteria exclude a significant cohort of potential learners who may be working, parenting or both. By opening SUSI for part time learners, people working, and parenting can still pursue an education and will repay the state multiple times over eventually.

It would be more cost effective to loosen the eligibility criteria for the Back to Education Allowance through DSP (Department of Social Protection) and allow students to work part-time while receiving the allowance. Traditionally, students in receipt of BTEA could work part time but that changed in 2017 where they now lose the day's pay from DSP if they work so much as one hour in that day. This was a regressive move and left students in financial difficulties. For those not eligible for BTEA, an increase in the SUSI maintenance grant would encourage more non-traditional learners to apply.

FET Students, including some in receipt of SUSI grant, may be subject to QQI Exam fees and course materials costs which can be considerable. These additional costs, which are not covered by the funding allocated for course delivery, relate to items specific to the course such as uniforms and kits, place a significant additional financial burden on learners. The extension of a Student Assistance Fund like that available for Higher Education should be expanded to FET.

For FET learner's ineligible for BTEA, SUSI fees and maintenance grant should be made accessible if they meet the criteria. The criteria and process of applying for student support funding should be clearer, less restrictive, and more accessible for all learners. It needs to reflect and respect the fact that many applicants from non-traditional cohorts would find current application processes and requirements confusing and intimidating.

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

Better communication that the HEAR and DARE scheme is available for FET graduates – it is advertised as a School Leavers programme, implying that it is not targeting FET students. HEIs do accept HEAR eligible students who have applied through CAO with QQI qualifications for all the HEAR supports (except for the 'reduced points entry' which applies to Leaving Cert points entry only).

More could be done to recognise the numbers of students who may have taken several years out of education after second level before returning to FE (with a view to progression to HE), particularly those from identified target groups. They should be targeted for mentoring / preparation for HE, providing support, information, experiences, and links. A presence from HEIs within FE would help to encourage these learners and their transition into FE and on to HE, as it is often a very separate experience for learners as they move between organisations (school-college-University) with little continuity of support.

Provide Traveller led outreach programmes like the Primary care model that has had enormous success and create similar models for other communities identified under priority target groups.

Build on community education approach, create outreach models connected to the FET/HE institutions in the area. The introduction of online learning creates new possibilities for off campus learning in community-based settings, where learners may feel more comfortable and have access to smaller class sizes and additional supports.

Enhance the family learning programme. Family Learning works with parents to develop their interests, abilities and knowledge in order to help them better support and encourage their children's educational attainment. This approach improves the literacy and numeracy of both parents and their children because it creates a bridge between home and school, and between home and adult learning opportunities⁷.

Equality of access cannot stop once a learner gains entry to the setting; learners also require equality of condition and equality of outcome to ensure that equal opportunities and success criteria are achieved. Factors of marginalisation and exclusion can relate to all aspects of the curriculum, school or classroom organisation, assessment, cultures, policies, and practices⁸.

Case Study: Cork ETB/UCC ACCESS+ Programme

ACCESS+ was established by UCC PLUS+ in response to an identified need to support the significant numbers of students from DEIS second level schools in Cork City who were progressing to Further Education. Many of these students were identified as having an interest in and the potential to succeed in Higher Education. However, due to a range of social, cultural, financial, and educational barriers they were not able to proceed directly to Higher Education. ACCESS+ aims to increase the numbers of students from under-represented groups in Higher Education, by supporting students on their transition through education, starting in second level (pre-entry to FE), throughout FE (post entry to FE) and then as they explore and apply for progression to, HE. Supports are provided to learner both pre-entry to FET and when they enter FET. The ACCESS+ Officer was appointed in Winter 2019. Although the ACCESS+ Officer is in Cork College of Commerce he supports learners in all the three city-based PLC colleges. The inaugural year of this initiative is currently being reviewed and feedback thus far is positive. One learner commented, “I’ve accepted my offer for Commerce in UCC. I’m super delighted and can’t wait to begin. Just want to thank you for always being there in regard to answering all my questions that I had and really someone I could talk to when I felt a bit unsure. As the ACCESS+ initiative continues to grow this will be a great support for Cork ETB learners to assist them to progress to UCC.

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

Cork ETB colleges have several Memoranda of Understanding which exist between Cork ETB centres, and HE institutes in Ireland and abroad, in addition to the Cork College Colleges Progression Scheme (CCPS) and UCC ACCESS+. Advanced entry is possible from some Cork ETB courses linked to specific linked HE programmes.

Cork ETB College/Provider , Higher Education Institute

Cork ETB , Waterford Institute of Technology

Cork College of Commerce , Advance Entry to MTU (Kerry Campus

Cork College of Commerce , Advanced Entry to Business Studies in Griffith College Cork

Cork College of Commerce , Nursing Degree programmes in the UK

Cork College of Commerce , Psychology Degrees in Scotland

Mallow College , Nursing Degree programmes in the UK

St. Johns Central College , Advanced Entry to MTU (Kerry Campus)

St. Johns Central College , Advanced Entry into the Bachelor of Science Degree in Computing Limerick Institute of Technology

St. Johns Central College , Veterinary Nursing in Edinburgh Napier university

St. Johns Central College , TV and Video Production, Fashion Design, Interior Design, University of Sunderland

Kinsale College , Advanced Entry to BA (Hons) in Sculpture and Combined Media in Limerick Institute of Technology

Nationally, FET transitions already account for around one-fifth of the annual intake of the technological higher education sector and about one-quarter of annual Level 5 and Level 6 PLC FET graduates per year. An action plan has been agreed to work towards a more strategic and consistent transitions approach between key stakeholders⁹ as part of the work of the Transitions Reform FET-HE working group. The actions identified include setting national targets for FET-HE transitions and embedding these within HEI performance compacts and ETB strategic performance agreements¹⁰.

Develop a collaborative FET/HE approach to regional skills development.

Better employer/industry engagement to support work placement modules in FET/HE. Many students do not have the necessary social or life experiences to enable sourcing appropriate work experience which now a days is a significant component of any courses in FET and HE. Employer training awareness should also be factored in.

Standardisation of university entry requirements for FET graduates, building on the common system across the technological higher education sector.

Consider the potential for greater recognition of FET awards in comparison with Leaving Certificate points within the CAO and how this might be benchmarked¹¹.

Case Study: Cork Colleges Progression Scheme

First established in 2006, Cork ETB has had a long-standing joint progression initiative with CIT (now MTU Cork) - the Cork Colleges Progression Scheme (CCPS). CCPS is available to Cork ETB learners who complete a QQI Level 5 or QQI Level 6 programme with:

- Colaiste Stiofáin Naofa
- Cork College of Commerce
- Kinsale College
- Mallow College
- St. John's Central College

Under CCPS, several courses in MTU Cork Campus are linked to certain courses in Cork ETB. MTU Cork Campus reserves a few places on these linked courses for applicants who achieve specified levels and other requirements in their QQI award. A CCPS working group comprised of staff from MTU Cork Campus and Cork ETB meets at least twice a year to discuss and review progression arrangements.

CASE STUDY: Cork ETB - Education Unit, Cork Prison

The Cork Education & Training Board began providing an education service to Cork Prison in 1978 on a part-time basis initially and has expanded to keep pace with the increase in the prison population. Education is available to all people on entry to the prison.

“My name is Joe Smith. I come from a large Irish family. I struggled in school due to learning difficulties. This led to me being expelled by first year. I then attended Youth reach but soon found myself on the streets, hanging around bored. By sixteen, I discovered drink and drugs. Very quickly, my behavior spiraled out of control, which led to dealing drugs and serious criminal activities, which led to a long prison sentence.

After 5 years in prison, I overcame addiction and decided to give education a second chance. This was my biggest step as my previous experience with education was so difficult. I received a lot of one-to-one tuition, which gave me the confidence to keep trying. I have now completed many QQI modules at level two and three. I have also completed the Red Cross program. However, I am most proud of completing a criminology course with UCC and receiving a certificate of excellence. I can now see a new path for my future and plan to continue studying.

Supporting/enabling factors

One to one tuition

Encouragement and support from family on the outside

Addiction Counselling

(Student name have been changed)

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

The SOLAS strategy identifies that the FET College of the future, will serve as a community resource, with facilities used for a range of societal and cultural purposes.

It is intended to develop a community education framework by SOLAS, ETBs, community education providers, learners, and relevant stakeholders¹² that will provide an enhanced basis to both record and promote national and local good practice, learner achievement and progression, gathering basic learner data, linking to learning pathways, and offering consistent learner support. Cork ETB has developed strong relationships with community and civic organisations for example Cork Alliance, the library service, all of which serve to support the learner through a holistic model of education. The Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Fund¹³, supported and enabled hard to reach groups engage in education through a community education approach should be long-term and provided in a sustainable manner.

Consistent learner support, investment and expansion of learner supports in Further Education. A high proportion of learners are citing mental health issues, particularly around learning at Levels 1 to 3. FET must ensure it has robust and consistent support mechanisms in place to help this cohort transition through FET.

Role of youth work to provide mentoring to 17-24 age group to return to education or transfer between FET settings. Youth work is a key enabler to supporting young people at critical junctures, particularly between primary and second level. A similar approach should be devised to attract and support older young people who may have disengaged from education or social services.

Technology also offers significant potential to build on community education and widen access to the most marginalised groups, particularly those in rural areas who cannot travel to major FET or HE colleges or who are constrained from leaving their homes due to care duties or other circumstances.

Case Study: Northside Community Enterprises

Northside Community Enterprises (NCE), philosophy is that all people have the right to integrate with others, to re-educate, train, work and gain the relevant experience to progress to future full-time employment. The aim is to promote social inclusion and provide accessible training & educational opportunities. NCE provide Community Employment Schemes that are developed to help people who are long term unemployed or otherwise disadvantaged by offering a variety of sector specific work placements as well as a range of training programmes that aim to develop individual's career pathway.

Cork ETB through the Blackspots for Unemployment and Marginalised communities programme identified Northside Community Enterprises for 2 programmes;

1. Northside Community Enterprises – Building Sustainable Futures – Construction Skills
2. Northside Community Enterprises – Workwise Skills

Each programme involved 3 phases:

Pre-Engagement Strategy Phase - including recruitment, assessment, induction, literacy and numeracy support, personal development and guidance.

Learning Strategy Phase – Development of the appropriate skills set for the learners with wide and varied taster and QQI accredited components on offer.

Progression Strategy Phase – Assist and guide participants in developing a progression plan into further education, training or employment with the support of Adult Guidance Services and CETB staff to guide on progression options.

Soft Skills and Resilience Training was provided throughout the programme as a core pillar to keep learners focused and engaged.

Transition coaching was provided to the cohort of learners who were job ready and ready to move to further & higher education.

Cork ETB provided real links and pathways for progression. Many learners found that the personal development, professional development and experience with QQI modules a great benefit and developed short- and long-term goals for their future education, training and employment needs. By linking with NCE and CETB staff, tutors and CETB Adult Guidance Service, the participants were aware of the options and supports available to them for education and training progression.

Impact of Covid 19

The impact of Covid 19 has been well documented and there are several key research reports¹⁴ now available documenting same, both in the education sector and society at large. Notwithstanding the challenges of Covid on people's emotional and personal health, poor broadband, lack of devices, pivoting to online learning etc. there has also been several success stories and opportunities emerging.

Online learning has provided unique opportunities for learners who would have been hard to reach, due to physical location and new social networks to engage in learning. Learners at all levels have been enabled to access education in ways previously thought impossible.

The Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund as previously referenced provided a welcome investment in community education, particularly in devices and I.T facilities such as white boards for remote classes, dongles for learners and laptops.

Conclusion

In line with SOLAS FET Strategy 2020-2024, Cork ETBs FET Directorate's strategic area of Active Inclusion recognises the necessity of consistent and integrated learner supports in enabling people and communities, to have an opportunity to learn and develop. Cork ETB aims to ensure that learner supports are aligned with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework. The HE sector in Ireland has recognised the importance of inclusion and Level 1 of the Inclusive Education Pyramid¹⁵ by embracing UDL as a concept, with Disability Officers and Access Officers championing its application. UDL for FET also needs to provide an approach that offers real opportunities for a diversity of learners seeking equality of success. Cork ETB advocates that fundamental to the success of the National Access Plan is creating and resourcing a learning and training environment as inclusive of the greatest diversity of learners as possible in further education and training.

“The only way to help people forward, is through building relationships and understanding where their journey begins, not focusing solely on where you want them to be.”