NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN 2022 –2026

RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION PAPER

St Angela's College welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process associated with the National Access Plan 2022-2026 and is committed to widening participation and access to third-level education within the region.

St Angela's College believes that access to higher education should be available to **all** individuals independent of their socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, disability or other circumstances.

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

Pre-entry

It is of concern that participation in HE by mature students has decreased in the last ten years, with first-time new entrants comprising just over 7% of all new entrants in 2019/20, compared to 13% in 2012/13. The challenge of increasing the numbers of Mature students in third-level education may require the provision of short 'Taster' courses run locally by individual Third Level institutions. These taster courses would allow prospective students to engage in lectures and specific classes in IT and Academic writing and provide individuals with an insight into third Level and potentially raise applicants' general confidence levels. Enhanced partnerships with the Community Education sector would assist with identifying and delivering these taster days for students pursuing further education. Specific funding streams to support the development of partnerships would be welcomed.

The barriers to participation for those with English as a second language can represent a particular challenge. Those in 'Direct Provision' are particularly affected. Students in "Direct Provision" are often ready academically but may not have the recognised English qualification to meet entrance criteria associated with Third Level institutions. Funding and other supports to enable the provision of specific classes in English and an allocation of funding for individuals to attain recognised English language qualifications would in some way reduce this particular barrier to entry.

Post Entry

Several post-entry strategies could be implemented to ensure that students who enter College from non-traditional routes continue to have the financial, social and academic support they may require. These include

- Continuation of English Language classes for students where English is not their first language.
- The continuation and expansion of Student Mentoring and Academic Tutors / Personal Academic Liaison (PAL) schemes
- Expansion of Academic Writing and Learning Support provision
- Bursary schemes and rental schemes for equipment required for their course of study

- The appointment/allocation of Access champions as advocated in the National Plan for Equity of Access Plan 2015-2020 in Academic departments and administrative services will ensure that the diversity of student needs is considered in the planning and delivery of academic provision.

Access strategies have successfully encouraged 'non-traditional' students to undertake third-level studies, which needs to continue. However, these access strategies must now be matched with changes throughout HEIs to make teaching and learning accessible to students who learn in diverse ways and have diverse learning backgrounds, e.g., scaffolding for learning in all first-year modules, flexibility in assignments, etc.

To this end, staff will require training in UDL principles; Plain English; Disability awareness, and accessible documents/presentations. Targeted funding will be needed for these initiatives to be successfully implemented

HEIs should introduce Learning to Study/Assignment writing/ICT literacy modules for all first-year students. In addition, student success strategies and mentoring programmes must be identified and embedded into mainstream institution activities.

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

The College recommends the expansion and extension of funding to support specific programmes of study that are known to have under-representation of disadvantaged groups, i.e. Teaching and Medicine.

There is a need to increase SAF funding as the SUSI grant scheme is inadequate for socioeconomically disadvantaged students. The doubling of the SAF funding was essential to support disadvantaged students. Such increased funding would be helpful over the next few years as we emerge from the financial implications of the pandemic

Schools other than DEIS schools should be considered as part of the HEAR scheme. As referenced in the Mid Term Review of National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 208-2013, Mid Term Review (2010), the increased weighting in favor of DEIS students means that students in other schools, particularly in rural Ireland, are not prioritised. For example, three small secondary schools in Sligo have a designated DEIS status. While these schools should be prioritised, other schools, often larger, where significant numbers of disadvantaged students should not be overlooked.

The laptop loan scheme was successful in reducing the disadvantage. Although the Laptop loan scheme initiative was explicitly in response to 'Covid19', its success should be consolidated. It should be continued as a way of offsetting the inequalities that are present in Irish society relating to access to IT. As we emerge from the restrictions associated with the pandemic, we need to acknowledge the permanent changes that will exist following our experiences with teaching online. A move to a more blended approach of teaching has the potential to improve accessibility for certain key target groups. To this end, the College recommends that the laptop loan scheme be continued for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds

Lack of broadband access will inevitably create additional barriers to engagement. The provision of Local 'Study Hubs' to facilitate students from backgrounds where broadband access may be limited should also be prioritised to challenge wider 'socio-economic inequalities and challenges with broadband access.

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

The greatest challenge to embedding these strategies within the HEI is the lack of both financial and human resources.

Mainstreaming can be further embedded within HEIS by the following measures,
- recording all lectures and making them available to students automatically,
- automatic captioning of lectures and tutorials,
- inclusion of UDL principles in courses,
- the provision of a mandatory Study skills/writing/library/ICT skills module for all first-year students
- Training for all staff in UDL; Plain English; accessible documents and PowerPoints.
- the ongoing provision of disability training
- Careful choice of language to avoid students who enter third-level education through non-CAO routes being labelled

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

In order to achieve a meaningful whole-of-education approach to widening participation in higher education, all stages of education (formal and informal) needs to be considered. For example, exposing primary school students to HE at an early age, particularly those students who have no family history of attending HE, is really important in raising awareness. At post-primary level students from underrepresented groups require support and advice on the value of higher education along with support on a whole range of practical issues such as accessing grants, accommodation, support services available in the HEI etc. *before* they go to HE. Guidance teachers have a key role in this, pre-entry guidance to HE and FE institutions is a really important point at which young people make decisions about their educational futures.

In that regard, further promotion of the range of financial supports available to support access to third-level education should be prioritised. This information could be distributed to Community groups and Career Guidance teachers, be provided at institutions Open Days and be included as a component of transition year programmes in secondary schools.

Additionally, the implementation of initiatives and strategies that target and encouraging parents of students with the potential to enter third level would be of further benefit

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

In the Irish context, progression from FE to HE is low (HEA, 2015), and improving pathways from FE to HE is a policy priority (HEA, 2015; 2018). The current *National Access Plan* (HEA, 2015) sets out targets to increase participation by specific categories of students, including students entering based on a FE award, which articulates as a priority goal: 'To build coherent pathways from further education and to foster other entry routes to higher education (HEA, 2015, p. 24).

Responding to a call by the HEA, in November 2016, St. Angela's College (STACS), along with NUIG, successfully submitted a bid securing PATH One funding for the Access to Post-Primary Teaching (APT) project, which focused on supporting the access and retention of lower socio-economic groups into initial teacher education (ITE). The St. Angela's strand of the APT project created a new restricted entry-route specifically for students from under-represented socio-economic groups attending partner Further Education (FE) colleges within the Border Midlands and West (BMW) region.

Students in these partner colleges who were enrolled in selected courses were invited to participate in the project over the academic year and apply via the CAO restricted entry route onto the three concurrent five-year BA /PME programmes offered by St. Angela's.

This project is an excellent example of how a pathway from Further Education (FE) to Higher Education (HE) has been successfully established, maintained, and grown over four years. A key objective of the APT project was to formalise partnerships between STACS and FE providers in the BMW region. Over the three years of phase one (2017-2020), partnerships were established with nine FE providers in the BMW region. For phase 2 of the project (2020-2023), we have grown the number of partnerships to seventeen.

In developing these partnerships, the FE colleges have participated in several blended APT seminars (including open days in STACS and FE colleges), nominated an APT contact from their staff, and encouraged them to embed the APT project in their print, digital and social media promotional content. In line with strategic priority 5.5 of the performance compact, the development of this blended approach has provided opportunities to promote the QQI-entry routes available for other programmes and the APT project.

For the second phase of the project (2021-2024), six places (two per elective) are reserved on the BA/PME Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Programmes for FE students who participate in the APT project and who meet the entry requirements. In addition, as part of the College's commitment to increasing access and widening participation among non-traditional groups, in addition to the APT places, a further three places will be reserved for FE award-holders applying for an ITE programme in STACS via the CAO

The APT project is included in our response due to its innovative approach. The design of the APT project, encompassing a range of pre-entry supports that students avail of alongside their FE studies, along with post-entry financial, social and academic supports, is a model that works.

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

The move to online teaching during the COVID pandemic highlighted the digital divide that exists for some students. The roll-out of the National Broadband scheme and the inclusion of mandatory IT skills for school leavers will further support equity of access objectives.

The membership of Regional Skills forums should be expanded to include representation from the voluntary, community and Secondary Education communities.

Access, Equity Inclusion and Diversity need to be analysed on many grounds, including ethnicity/Nationality. In April 2020, there were an estimated 644,400 non-Irish nationals resident in Ireland, accounting for 12.9% of the total population (https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/pme/populationandmigrationestimatesapril2020/#:~:text=In%20April%202020%2C%20there%20were%20an%20estimated%20644%2C400%20non%2DIrish,12.9%25%20of%20the%20total%20population).

The question needs to be asked are these figures reflect the number of non-Irish national students and staff employed in HEIs?

Further engagement with voluntary bodies, the organisation of College Fun Days, and opening the facilities for the use of local agencies will also assist in demystifying third-level education.

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

COVID 19 highlighted the digital divide that exists, the importance of face to face contact with College staff and the broader College experience. As a result, the College recommends continuing the laptop loan scheme and expanding post-entry supports for all students, including mental health and academic supports.

Student perspective – what are the challenges, what makes a difference, impact of Covid-19.

It is much welcomed that the student perspective is being sought. Funding towards qualitative research that captures the student experience would further inform policy and provision and address inequality of access to HE in Ireland.