

NATIONAL ACCESS FORUM 2024 SUMMARY REPORT



An Roinn Breisoideachais agus Ardoideachais,
Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta
Department of Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science

HEA

AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS
HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY



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NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN

The fourth [National Access Plan - A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-28](#) ('National Access Plan' or 'NAP') was published by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in August 2022.

The overarching ambition of the NAP is:

“That the higher education student body entering, participating in and completing higher education, at all levels and across all programmes, reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population.

and

That our higher education institutions are inclusive, universally designed environments which support and foster student success and outcomes, equity and diversity, and are responsive to the needs of students and wider communities.”

The implementation of the NAP is supported by complementary funding measures, including the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH), a multi-stranded funding initiative established in 2016 for the delivery of equity of access objectives.

A core structure for the monitoring of NAP implementation and for its development is the annual National Access Forum. The Forum provides an opportunity to report on progress against the commitments in the NAP and facilitates direct engagement between DFHERIS, HEA and stakeholders. The Forum is also an important mechanism for gathering feedback from stakeholders to inform future priorities.

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NATIONAL ACCESS FORUM 2024

On 22 April 2024, the HEA and DFHERIS hosted the seventh National Access Forum at The Alex Hotel in Dublin. The 130 attendees comprised access practitioners from across the higher education system, representatives from community-based organisations, students from NAP priority groups, government agencies and state bodies, and officials from both DFHERIS and the HEA.

The Forum was focused on the Inclusivity goal in the NAP. The Inclusivity goal underpins all aspects of higher education and is concerned with creating inclusive education experiences and fostering a sense of belonging for all students. The Inclusivity goal includes objectives to embed whole-of-institution approaches to student success and Universal Design; engaging priority group students in decision-making, including in the development of equity policies; improving opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities; ensuring a more diverse population across all programmes and levels of study, both undergraduate and postgraduate, including early years and initial teacher education; and supporting students through universal and targeted funding programmes.

The event also provided a platform for knowledge exchange in respect of the barriers to participation in higher education by those with experience of the care system with a presentation from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and a panel discussion with stakeholders actively engaged in related research and projects and students and former students with direct experience of the care system.

Consistent with the informing principle of the NAP, the student voice was prioritised throughout the Forum. The full agenda for the Forum can be found in Appendix 1. Short biographies for participants in each of the sessions is included in Appendix 2.

This short report is intended to provide an overview of the central themes emerging from the discussion and to capture the recommendations from stakeholders to inform the future implementation of the NAP.

The HEA and DFHERIS extend sincere thanks to the excellent speakers and presenters who shared their expertise and insights on the day, with particular thanks to the students who so generously and frankly shared their experiences. We also thank all attendees for their active participation in the Forum and for the constructive engagement to support our shared objective to deliver on the ambitions in the NAP.

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OVERVIEW OF PROGRESS TO DATE

There has been very positive progress in advancing the actions within the NAP since its publication in August 2022. This overview centres on key achievements under the Inclusivity goal, in accordance with the focus of the 2024 Forum.

Inclusivity Goal: Key Achievements

There have been considerable developments in progressing whole-of-institution approaches to **Universal Design** (UD) since the publication of the NAP. Supported by €3m investment under PATH 4 Phase 1 which launched in June 2022, institutions have implemented UD policies and practices; created quiet and sensory spaces across campuses; enhanced the digital accessibility of websites and e-learning infrastructure; and built capacity through continuous professional development programmes in UD, including Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

A key development supported through this funding is the **ALTITUDE Charter**, the National Charter for UD in Tertiary Education. The Charter is an extensive cross-sectoral collaboration involving six national agencies, fifteen higher education institutions (HEIs) and six Education and Training Board (ETB) sectoral representatives. ALTITUDE focuses on widening inclusion in tertiary education, marking the start of a national conversation about how the sector can more strategically embed a UD approach. Additional investment in PATH 4 Phase 1 to further support UD implementation was announced in 2024 in the amount of €1.8m and is expected to be launched in late 2024.

Further to co-funding from the European Social Fund (ESF+), there has been a significant **increase in the number of PATH 2 bursaries** under the 1916 Bursary Fund. In 2023/24, 600 Tier 1 and 2 bursaries were awarded to the most disadvantaged new entrants to higher education, an increase from 374 bursaries in 2022/23.

A central applications and assessment facility to support the implementation of the PATH 2 bursary scheme was piloted in 2023/24. Following significant and sustained collaboration across HEIs, prospective students will apply for PATH 2 bursaries through a **dedicated portal** via the SUSI website from 2024/25 onwards. This considerable development was only possible through the leadership and dedication of HEIs, supported by the PATH 2 National Coordinator.

Progress is also evident in the **diversification of the teaching profession**, a key action under the Inclusivity goal and supported through PATH 1 funding. There have been improvements in the proportion of new entrants from disadvantaged areas to both primary and post-primary initial teacher education programmes. In October 2023, the first cohort graduated from the landmark PATH 1 funded Irish Sign Language Primary Initial Teacher Education programme in Dublin City University.

The HEA and National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee (NDPAC) jointly hosted a knowledge exchange event in December 2023 focused on the experiences and challenges faced by students with disabilities in participating in postgraduate education. Subsequent to this and to support KPI 3 in the NAP, the HEA provided funding to **LaunchPad**, a three-year collaboration between AHEAD and NDPAC to examine further the particular challenges faced by students with disabilities in accessing postgraduate study and to identify measures to address these barriers.

In 2023, a pilot initiative under PATH 4 Phase 2 was launched, centred on enhancing **provision for students with intellectual disabilities in higher education**. An extensive consultation with students and graduates with intellectual disabilities was undertaken across the country. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science announced funding for programmes to be delivered across 11 HEIs from 2024/25 at a total investment of over €10m. The pilot will inform future policy in respect of provision in higher education for students with intellectual disabilities.

Update on NAP Targets

The NAP sets ambitious targets in respect of the three target groups – students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds; students with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities; and students from the Traveller community¹.

The baseline data that informs the targets in the NAP relates to the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years. The updated data that is presented here is drawn from the academic years 2020/21 and 2022/23. It should be noted that the data may be subject to impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, whereby longer-term trends appear to have been interrupted. The extent of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on access and participation rates may take some years to be fully understood, and as such, caution should be advised in extrapolating the data.

Table 1 below provides an update on progress in respect of participation by new entrants from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas using Deprivation Index Score² data, and broken down by the transition rate between school and higher education and mature new entrants from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas:

PRIORITY GROUP	Baseline (based on 2019/20 data)	Target for 2028	Update (based on 2020/21 data)
New entrants from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas (<i>transition rate between school & higher education</i>)	42%	54%	44%
New mature entrants from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas (<i>% of mature new entrants from disadvantaged areas as a % of all disadvantaged new entrants</i>)	11%	20%	10%

Table 1: Proportion of new entrants from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas

¹ While students from the Roma community are also identified as a priority group within the NAP, there is currently no available data to measure participation by this cohort. A suitable data source will be explored as part of the Access Data Plan.

² At the time of the 2024 National Access Forum, the latest available Deprivation Index Score data analysis for higher education related to the 2020/21 academic year.

Sustained progress has been made in terms of the transition rate between school and higher education for new entrants from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, which increased by two percentage points and is in line with the projected target for this period.

The proportion of mature new entrants from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas declined by one percentage point between 2019/20 and 2020/21. While this is disappointing, it is consistent with the downward trend in the wider mature student population in higher education. In 2012/13, the rate of mature student participation in higher education was 13%; in 2020/21, the rate reduced to 7%. There is, therefore, a significant challenge to achieve the target of 20% participation by mature students from disadvantaged areas over the lifetime of the NAP.

There may be a confluence of factors impacting on the decline in mature student participation, including the buoyant economy and the rising costs of accommodation and childcare. The data points to the need for greater flexibility in provision and supports to enhance participation by this cohort.

Table 2 provides an update on NAP targets in respect of new entrants with disabilities, and new entrants from the Traveller community, drawing on data from the Equal Access Survey:

PRIORITY GROUP	Baseline (based on 2020/21 data)	Target for 2028	Update (based on 2022/23 data)
New entrants with a disability <i>(% of students with a disability as a % of all new entrants)</i>	12.4%	16%	13.8%
New entrants from the Traveller community <i>(% of Traveller new entrants as a % of all new entrants)</i>	33 0.07%	150 0.32%	36 0.08%

Table 2: Proportion of new entrants with disabilities, and number of new entrants from the Traveller community

In 2022/23, there was a welcome continuation of the upward trend evident in successive years in the proportion of new entrants with disabilities in higher education, a growth from 12.4% in 2020/21 to 13.8% in 2022/23.

There have also been increases in the number of new entrants from the Traveller community. In the baseline year of 2020/21, there were 33 new entrants to higher education from the Traveller community, and this increased to 36 new entrants in 2022/23. While this increase may appear modest, it demonstrates a sustained increase in the number of new entrants in recent years. It is expected that ongoing measures to support the transition and progression of Traveller students in higher education,

including those funded through PATH 3 and PATH 5, alongside the measures being implemented at earlier stages of the education continuum, will help to accelerate progress towards the target over the lifetime of the NAP.

Update on NAP Key Performance Indicators

The NAP also identifies 9 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which will be monitored over its lifetime. The purpose of the KPIs is to help identify trends and areas of persistent challenge where more targeted interventions may be required.

Key Performance Indicator 1: Part-time/flexible learners

Part-time/flexible learners	2019/20	Baseline 2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
% of students studying on a part-time/flexible basis	23%	25%	23%	23%

Table 3: Proportion of students studying on a part-time/flexible basis

As shown in Table 3, the proportion of students studying on a part-time/flexible basis in 2022/23 was 23%. While this represents a decrease of two percentage points from the baseline year of 2020/21, it is consistent with the trend observable over a number of years. It is likely that the increase to 25% in 2020/21 is attributable to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is anticipated that the proportion of students studying on a part-time/flexible basis will increase with the introduction of fee support for part-time learners on approved higher education programmes through SUSI from 2024/25.

In terms of the socioeconomic profile of learners, part-time postgraduate students remain among the most affluent in higher education. There was a very slight increase in the affluence of part-time undergraduate students between 2019/20 and 2020/21, with no change in the socioeconomic profile of full-time undergraduate students in this same period.

Key Performance Indicator 2: Progression from further education to higher education

New entrants on the basis of a FET award	2019/20	Baseline 2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
% of new entrants to higher education on the basis of a further education award	5.9%	6.1%	5.7%	4.5%

Table 4: Proportion of new entrants to higher education on the basis of a further education award

There was a decline of almost two percentage points in the proportion of new entrants to higher education on the basis of a further education award between the baseline year of 2020/21 and 2023, as presented in Table 4. Since the publication of the NAP, the

National Tertiary Office (NTO) was established, and it is hoped that the work being led by the NTO to build more pathways between further and higher education will positively impact this KPI in the coming years.

Key Performance Indicator 3: Postgraduate study among selected priority groups (for example, postgraduate/mature students from disadvantaged areas, Traveller students and students with disabilities)

As demonstrated in Table 5 below, there was a slight decrease in affluence at postgraduate level between 2019/20 and 2020/21, which is most pronounced in relation to students enrolled on research masters programmes.

Socioeconomic profile of postgraduate student population	Baseline 2019/20	2020/21
PhD Mean Score	4.5	4.5
Taught Masters Mean Score	3.9	3.8
Research Masters Mean Score	1.6	1.3

Table 5: Socioeconomic profile of postgraduate student population

There has also been a decline in affluence in the mature postgraduate student population, where the percentage of mature students who are disadvantaged increased slightly between 2019/20 and 2020/21. The proportion of non-mature postgraduate students who are disadvantaged decreased slightly in this same period, as presented in Table 6.

Socioeconomic profile of mature postgraduate student population	Baseline 2019/20	2020/21
% of mature students who are disadvantaged	6.5%	6.7%
% of non-mature students who are disadvantaged	7.6%	7.5%

Table 6: Socioeconomic profile of mature postgraduate student population

While there are positive trends in terms of the socioeconomic profile of the postgraduate student population, the proportion of Traveller students and students with disabilities undertaking postgraduate study has declined from the baseline rate of 6% in 2020/21 to 3% in 2022/23, respectively (see Tables 7 and 8). Participation by these cohorts in postgraduate study will continue to be monitored closely.

Proportion of Traveller students undertaking postgraduate study	Baseline 2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
% of Traveller students engaging in postgraduate study (as a % of all Travellers)	6%	7%	3%

Table 7: Proportion of Traveller students undertaking postgraduate study

Proportion of students with disabilities undertaking postgraduate study	Baseline 2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
% of students with a disability engaging in postgraduate study	6%	4%	3%

Table 8: Proportion of students with disabilities undertaking postgraduate study

Key Performance Indicator 4: Student diversity across fields of study

A stated objective within the NAP is to increase diversity within higher education at all levels and across all fields of study. Under the previous NAP, participation by target group students in initial teacher education (ITE) programmes was a policy focus and continues to be an important objective in the current NAP given the seminal role that teachers play in building aspirations to higher education. Since 2017, PATH 1 has been supporting efforts by the higher education centres of teaching to increase diversity on ITE programmes.

As shown in Table 9, there have been positive increases in the proportion of new entrants to primary and post-primary ITE programmes with increases of 2.5 percentage points and 3.3 percentage points respectively, between 2019/20 and 2020/21. This compares to an increase of 0.2 percentage points in the overall proportion of new entrants who are disadvantaged within the same period.

Socioeconomic profile of new entrants to ITE programmes	Baseline 2019/20	2020/21
% of new entrants to primary ITE programmes who are disadvantaged	6.1%	8.6%
% of new entrants to post-primary ITE programmes who are disadvantaged	8.7%	12%
% of all new entrants who are disadvantaged	10.8%	11%

Table 9: Socioeconomic profile of new entrants to initial teacher education programmes

As shown in Table 10, positive increases are also evident in the proportion of new entrants from disadvantaged areas studying Economics and Law, with the most significant increase of 2.1 percentage points in Social Work and Counselling between 2019/20 and 2020/21. In contrast, there was a decline of 3.7 percentage points in the proportion of new entrants from disadvantaged areas studying Financing, Banking and Insurance between 2019/20 and 2020/21, with slighter decreases evident in Nursing and Midwifery, and Childcare and Youth Services in the same period.

% of new entrants who are from disadvantaged areas across selected fields of study	Baseline 2019/20	2020/21
Economics	2.3%	4.2%
Medicine	5.2%	5.5%
Financing, Banking & Insurance	9.6%	5.9%
Law	10.9%	12.7%
Nursing & Midwifery	13.0%	11.8%
Social Work & Counselling	19.4%	21.5%
Childcare & Youth Services	21.9%	20.4%

Table 10: Proportion of new entrants from disadvantaged areas across selected fields of study

Key Performance Indicator 5: Students with a disability who are supported by the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD)

Students with a disability who are supported by FSD	Baseline 2020/21 ³	2021/22	2022/23
Proportion of students supported by FSD across all categories of disability	15,670	16,699	17,526

Table 11: Proportion of students supported by FSD across all categories of disability

As in 2020/21, the largest proportion of students supported by FSD presented with ‘specific learning difficulties’ (38% in 2020/2021 and 34% in 2022/23), followed by ‘mental health’ issues (15% in 2020/2021 and 14% in 2022/23). There has been a slight increase in the proportion of students presenting with ‘autism spectrum disorder’ from 9% in 2020/21 to 11% in 2022/23. The category of disability with the most marked increase under FSD is ‘ADD/ADHD’ which increased from 6% in 2020/21 to 10% in 2022/23. The increases in the proportion of students supported by FSD presenting with ADD/ADHD and autism spectrum disorder are likely attributable to the impact of interventions at earlier stages of the education continuum and the considerable ongoing work across higher education campuses to support neurodiversity, including initiatives under PATH 4 Phase 1.

³ Please note that due to subsequent institutional reporting, the FSD figures provided for 2020/21 differ to the figures published in the NAP.

Key Performance Indicator 6: Entry to higher education for students attending DEIS schools

As shown in Table 12, the proportion of new entrants to higher education who attended DEIS schools was 10% in 2022/23. While this represents a decline of two percentage points from the baseline in 2020/21, the figure of 10% is consistent with the longer-term trend. The peak in 2020/21 may be interpreted as a Covid-19 impact.

New entrants from DEIS schools	2019/20	Baseline 2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
DEIS School Attendees	4,290	5,320	4,739	4,657
DEIS School Attendees as a % of New Entrants	10%	12%	10%	10%

Table 12: Number and percentage of new entrants who attended DEIS schools

Key Performance Indicator 7: Lone parents in higher education

The overall number and proportion of new entrants identifying as parents declined by 292, equating to a decline of one percentage point between 2020/21 and 2022/23, as shown in Table 13. As shown in Table 12, the proportion of those parents in receipt of the lone parent allowance was consistent with the proportion in 2020/21 at 23%.

New entrants who are lone parents	2019/20	Baseline 2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Number of new entrants reporting as parents	782	893	760	601
% of new entrants reporting as parents	2%	2%	2%	1%
Of those identifying as parents, % in receipt of lone parent allowance	26%	23%	21%	23%

Table 13: Number and proportion of new entrants who are parents/lone parents

The average DIS score for all new entrants remained consistent between 2019/20 and 2020/21, as demonstrated in Table 14. While the average DIS score for new entrants who identified as parents increased slightly within this period, parents remain the most disadvantaged new entrant cohort.

New entrant Deprivation Index Scores	Baseline 2019/20	2020/21
Mean DIS score of those identifying as parents	-1.6	-0.47
Average for all new entrants	1.4	1.4

Table 14: Deprivation Index Scores for new entrants

Key Performance Indicator 8: Progression and completion among selected priority groups

As shown in Table 15, the proportion of students in higher education not progressing from the first to the second year of study increased by three percentage points between 2019/20 and 2020/21. It should be noted that the non-progression rates for 2019/20 were the lowest to date, and that the increased rates in 2020/21 are more consistent with the rates in previous years.

However, the increase in the non-progression rate was more pronounced for students from disadvantaged areas at five percentage points, and for mature students from disadvantaged areas at six percentage points.

Non-progression rates	2019/20	2020/21
Overall non-progression rates	9%	12%
Non-progression rates for those from disadvantaged areas	12%	17%
Non-progression rates for mature students from disadvantaged areas	15%	21%

Table 15: Non-progression rates for students from disadvantaged areas

The baseline completion rate data in the NAP relates to new entrants in 2010/11 and the socioeconomic profile of this cohort was derived from the Equal Access Survey. The most recent set of completion data relates to the entrants from 2017/18 and the socioeconomic profile of this cohort was drawn from Deprivation Index Score data. Given this change in methodology, it is not possible to provide completion rate trend data. However, it is possible to indicate that the completion rate for new entrants in 2017/18 was 9 percentage points lower for those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds compared to all new entrants, and 9 percentage points lower for new entrants from DEIS schools compared to all other school types.

Key Performance Indicator 9: Graduate outcomes among selected priority groups

An updated dataset on graduate outcomes is not currently available.

Areas of Challenge

The updated data points to areas of sustained progress since the publication of the NAP in August 2022 in terms of the proportion of new entrants from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, new entrants with disabilities, and diversity across fields of study.

However, the data also identifies areas where participation rates remain too low and where further work is needed to increase diversity in the student population in higher education, including **Traveller students and mature students from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas**.

The targeted increases in participation across priority groups raise very immediate questions as to how to **responsibly scale supports** to ensure all students are scaffolded appropriately to succeed in higher education. This is particularly challenging for target groups for whom highly individualised models of support have been pervasive such as students with disabilities.

The current **cost of living challenges** are impacting on all students, and it is important that financial assistance reaches the most vulnerable students and those most in need of support. There have been welcome increases in financial supports for disadvantaged students in recent years, and focus should remain on ensuring that measures are appropriately targeted to prioritise the most hard to reach students.

It is also recognised that the additional supports for students have placed **additional demands on HEI resources**. Co-funding from the European Social Fund for PATH 2 has significantly increased the number of 1916 bursaries available for the most disadvantaged students. This considerable investment is welcomed by all access practitioners, however, the administration of the ESF bursaries places additional requirements on HEIs. Clusters have led the development of a central applications facility which will streamline the process of application for students, but the process of development has necessitated significant and sustained ongoing efforts by HEIs.

There have been unanticipated delays in the completion of the independent **PATH Impact Assessment**. This has created challenges to longer-term decision-making in relation to PATH, and the finalisation of the report and decisions around the future of PATH is a priority for DFHERIS and the HEA. It is expected that the report will be finalised by the end of the year and that progress can be advanced towards a more sustainable funding model.

Priorities for the year ahead

In accordance with goal 6 of the NAP, 'Evidence-driven Approach', a priority in 2024 is the commencement of work on a **new Access Data Plan** to explore robust data sources to enhance the measurement of diversity in the higher education student population.

It is expected that this Access Data Plan will inform the Mid-term Progress Review of the NAP, which is scheduled to take place in 2025. **Preparation for the Mid-Term Review** will commence in late 2024.

Further to the launch of PATH 4 Phase 2 earlier this year, supporting the rollout of **provision for students with intellectual disabilities** in higher education in the academic year 2024/25 is a priority focus.

It is essential that work toward a **sustainable funding model for PATH** progresses in 2024 and that there is timely communication of decisions in respect of arrangements beyond the 2024/25 academic year to enable HEIs to plan and implement measures effectively.

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SPOTLIGHT ON MENTORING

Mentoring initiatives are a cornerstone of access practice and have been a central aspect of the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) since its introduction in 2017. There are a diversity of pre- and post-entry mentoring initiatives and approaches across the higher education system tailored to promoting access and supporting the participation and success of priority group students in higher education. At school, community, and HEI level, mentoring initiatives enhance awareness of pathways to higher education and support the provision of practical and pastoral peer support to both prospective and enrolled higher education students.

Aligned with the Inclusivity goal in the NAP, mentoring initiatives support aspiration toward higher education and foster a sense of belonging in higher education environments. Mentoring initiatives are a powerful tool to promote and practise inclusion, creating a community of peers and enduring relationships built on shared experiences.

Moderated by Edel O'Donnell, Co-ordinator of the Mincéir-Traveller programme in the University of Limerick, the mentoring session focused on capturing the experiences of mentoring from the perspectives of both mentors and mentees. Participants were drawn from a range of mentoring initiatives across HEIs supported through PATH funding to reflect experiences of a diversity of mentoring approaches and models. There was a strong focus in the session on the student voice, and two representatives of community mentor programmes also participated to provide additional context to the discussions.

An overview of the key themes of the session is outlined below.

Diversity of models

It was emphasised that there is not a 'one size fits all' approach to mentoring, and that a diversity of models is critical to reflect the diversity of pathways to higher education and the diversity of priority groups.

Examples were provided of formal and informal mentoring and individual (1-to-1) and group mentoring approaches. It was noted that group mentoring often focuses on soft skills development, such as communication and time management, and can be complemented by 1-to-1 mentoring which provides individual and tailored supports. There were references to the potential of digital supports, including 24-hour support hubs enabled through AI and chat-bots, and the use of virtual reality to develop employability skills such as through interview simulations.

Mentoring initiatives were identified by mentors as central to tackling misinformation and assumptions in respect of higher education, and therefore serve as a critical resource to provide and direct students to clear understandable information in relation to higher education, aligning strongly with the Clarity goal in the NAP. Mentees highlighted the value of having a trusted peer check in on them, and of having somebody they identified with to speak to about challenges they were experiencing or to help them navigate an unfamiliar environment.

Participants noted that mature students often adopt an informal pastoral support role in relation to other students, however, it was emphasised that mature students often face particular challenges and therefore, it is equally important that there are mentoring initiatives and peer supports in place for mature students.

Reciprocal benefits

Across the diversity of approaches and initiatives, partnership and collaboration were identified as critical success factors for the most effective mentoring relationships, whereby both mentor and mentee are active participants. Participants emphasised that the value of mentoring is linked to the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship and the depth of partnership. Equal levels of commitment and engagement result in the most successful mentoring relationships.

Mentoring relationships based on partnership were identified as delivering reciprocal benefits for both mentors and mentees. Both mentors and mentees spoke of increased levels of confidence and heightened feelings of empowerment and empathy gained through participation in mentoring initiatives, which resulted in a fuller and more developed understanding of their own experiences and those of other students.

Belonging and validation

The shared experiences of mentors and mentees highlighted the direct and tangible relationship between mentoring initiatives and fostering a sense of belonging in higher education. Prior to participation in these initiatives, mentees indicated that they experienced feelings of loneliness and isolation and uncertainty in a new and unfamiliar environment. The connection with a peer with shared experience was empowering and served to develop the confidence of mentees and enhance their sense of psychological well-being and health. Mentoring initiatives facilitated the demystifying of processes and procedures in the higher education environment and therefore were central to tackling experiences of imposter syndrome by mentees.

Mentees emphasised that participation in mentoring initiatives meant that they felt 'seen, heard, and valued', demonstrating the impact of mentoring in validating experiences that were often perceived as individual and as a source of isolation. This also points to the contribution of mentoring initiatives to fostering a sense of mattering, 'the feeling of being significant and important to other people' (Flett et al, 2019)⁴.

The Forum heard from a mentor and mentee with experience of the direct provision system. While some of the challenges and fears faced by these students are particular to their circumstances, they were empowered by connecting with other students in similar circumstances, but also with students experiencing other forms of disadvantage and recognising commonalities in feelings and experiences.

⁴ Flett, Gordan L., Attia Khan, and Chang Su. "Mattering and Psychological Well-being in College and University Students: Review and Recommendations for Campus-Based Initiatives". *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 17.48 (2019): 667-680. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-019-00073-6>

From mentee to mentor

Both the students and mentoring coordinators highlighted the fact that most mentors were formerly mentees, who were inspired to become mentors themselves as a direct result of the significant impact of mentoring on their own experiences. The student mentors remarked that participating in mentoring is 'addictive', and that engagement with mentoring initiatives sparks a strong desire to develop this engagement further and to 'give back'. Many of the mentors spoke of coming full circle in the transition from mentee to mentor.

While mentoring initiatives therefore appear to lend themselves naturally to sustainability in terms of the willingness of mentees to becoming mentors, participants highlighted that these transformative initiatives are not self-sustaining and require funding to be maintained and developed.

Recognition

It was noted throughout the mentoring session and in the feedback session that mentoring initiatives typically operate on a voluntary basis. While this has the benefit of ensuring willing participants, it does require mentors to engage in training and engagements with mentees in their own time and amid competing demands and pressures of coursework and other personal obligations. The use of online and hybrid training models were identified as key to facilitating participation by student mentors.

The student mentors on the panel all spoke of the gratifying nature of the experience and the personal rewards in being a mentor and that this was a key motivation for continued participation. It is nonetheless important that there is a mechanism within HEIs to recognise the contribution of mentors and to acknowledge and celebrate the peer network which they support.



Figure 1: Photograph of participants from the Mentoring and Role Modelling Session (L to R) - Dr Louise Callinan, HEA; Zoryana Pshyk, MU; Natalie Chi Kei Ung, TCD; Moji Mokotso, MU; Kefilwe Nawa, MU; Edel O'Donnell, UL; Kirsten Lowe, ATU Galway-Mayo; Ronan Cox, ATU Sligo; Keith Moynes, DFHERIS; Margarita Baturova, TCD; and Mariana Reis-Efinda, HEA.

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SPOTLIGHT ON BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION FOR
CARE EXPERIENCED STUDENTS

In addition to identifying three core priority groups, the NAP recognises additional priority groups considered to be marginalised in the higher education system, including those with experience of the care system.

The NAP acknowledges that significant work is needed to enhance understanding of the particular barriers to participation in higher education for care experienced students, and to develop the evidence base.

A central objective of this session was to bring together representatives from across government departments and agencies with responsibilities in respect of the care system and care experienced students to share information with the higher education sector. The session also aimed at raising awareness of the work underway by various actors and the available data that can enhance our understanding of this priority group.

This includes the Care Experiences Programme led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) in collaboration with Tusla. The Care Experiences Programme was launched in 2022 and is a research and data programme examining the lives of children in care and adults who were in care as children. The Programme consists of four interrelated projects, including a cross-sectional study of young people who left school 10 years ago and a longitudinal study of children in care over a 10-year period, commencing when they are aged 16 years.

Enhancing the evidence base

Aideen Sheehan from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) presented on the findings of a CSO Frontier report published in August 2023, entitled '[Educational Attendance and Attainment of Children in Care 2018-2023](#)'. As part of the DCEDIY Care Experiences Project, the CSO was requested to undertake an analysis on children in care using administrative data focused on education. The CSO securely matched data from Tusla's children in care dataset with data from the Department of Education (primary and post-primary school records), Higher Education Authority (higher education enrolment data), SOLAS (further education and training enrolment data) and Revenue (employment records) to provide an analysis of school attendance, school attainment, and outcomes for those aged 18-22.

The CSO report included a cohort of 9,744 children who were in care in January 2023 or who left care since April 2018. A total of 7,534 (77%) could be linked to other administrative datasets held by the CSO. Of the cohort that could be linked, 5,112 were children in care in January 2023, i.e. aged 0-17 years and on a care placement with Tusla, and 2,422 were children who left care since April 2028 aged 0-23 years.

In 2018/19, 11% of children in care were absent from primary or post-primary school for more than 20 days, compared with 7% of all children. Children in care tended to be absent for longer periods than the general child population, an average of 43 days for children in care versus 34 days for the general child population. Children in care were also found to be more likely to face disruption in their education journey in terms of

changes to schools. Since 2015/16, 30% of children in care were enrolled at more than one primary school, compared to 13% for all children. Since 2012/13, 19% of children in care were enrolled at more than one post-primary school, compared to 6% for all children.

Of the children in care who started post-primary school between 2012 and 2015, 28% left school early without the Leaving Certificate compared to 8% of all children.

In terms of education outcomes in 2021 for care leavers aged 18-22 in January 2023, 37% were enrolled in further education; 15% in higher education and 35% were in school in 2021. For all children aged 18-22, 11% were enrolled in further education; 37% in higher education; and 33% were in school in 2021.

In terms of employment outcomes, by age 22, 47% of children who left care were in 'substantial employment' or 'substantial employment and education' compared to 70% of all children.

Care leavers who left school early were found to be less likely to be in employment, education, or a combination of both in 2021 (66%) compared with care leavers who did not leave school early (95%).

Panel discussion

Following the CSO presentation, Olive Byrne, Head of Access at University College Cork chaired a panel discussion, including perspectives from Empowering People in Care (EPIC), DCEDIY, and two members of the DCEDIY Care Experiences Expert Panel, who spoke to both their experience of the care system and the higher education system. The South cluster⁵ also shared insights into its research on care experienced students in higher education in collaboration with TU Dublin.

In addition, EPIC shared information about its Education Project, which recognises the important role that school and education play in the journeys of care experienced children. School is regarded as a sanctuary and a stable presence in the lives of children in care, and consistent with the feedback from student mentees, the children most valued having someone to check in on them and who they trust to speak with about their experiences. The Education Project aims to raise awareness in schools and to build capacity within teachers to support children in care in the classroom.

The key themes which emerged from the discussion are presented below.

> *Care aware campuses*

It was highlighted that access practitioners within HEIs do not have access to information as to whether a student has care experience, and therefore rely on self-identification by students. Panellists highlighted that this disclosure by students is frequently determined by individual relationships and the building of trust between students and academic and support staff within HEIs.

⁵ The South cluster comprises University College Cork, Munster Technological University, and South East Technological University.

It is imperative that HEIs are inclusive environments where students feel comfortable disclosing their care experience. Panel members highlighted the need for ‘care aware campuses’ and whole of institution approaches to supporting students with care experience. Panellists stressed the importance of the awareness of academics of the diverse backgrounds of the students and the complexities of their lives outside higher education, including experiences of trauma and upheaval. For example, it is recognised that the Covid-19 pandemic impacted levels of engagement across all levels of the education continuum, including higher education. However, the reasons for disengagement by students with care experience may be rooted in challenges particular to this cohort, and therefore broader strategies targeting increased engagement in the wider student population may not be effective in addressing disengagement by this cohort. A care aware campus where a developed understanding of the challenges facing care experienced students extends beyond the Access Office can best support the education journeys and success of care experienced students.

> ***Flexibility and consistency***

Students transitioning from care are provided with a number of financial and non-financial aftercare supports through Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. These supports were acknowledged as critically important by students with care experience, however, the need for greater flexibility in the provision of these supports was emphasised. Currently, Aftercare Allowance⁶ is provided to students aged between 18 and 23 who turned 18 in the care system and who are attending further and higher education.

The student panel members highlighted the complexities of navigating the transition out of the care system, and that not all individuals transitioning from the care system have the capacity to simultaneously embark on a further or higher education journey. It was emphasised that the requirement to enrol in further and higher education to be eligible for the Aftercare Allowance increases the pressure on the transition from the care system and may lead to entry to further or higher education by students who do not feel sufficiently prepared or ready. In the shorter-term this may result in adverse impacts in relation to student experience and progression, and in the longer-term, it may give rise to negative perceptions of further and/or higher education and create a barrier to or disincentivise lifelong learning.

Consistent with the Flexibility goal in the NAP, supports for target group students should be flexible and support non-linear progression paths and participation in diverse modes of study. Supports should also recognise that students with care experience may have faced considerable disruption and trauma in their educational journey.

⁶ The Aftercare Allowance is financial support provided weekly to care experienced young people to assist with living costs while attending accredited training/education. More information can be found here: [Aftercare Allowance](#).

It was also indicated that aftercare supports can vary by location, and that there is a lack of parity in the supports provided to individuals leaving the care system in different parts of the country. The importance of consistency in supports irrespective of location was emphasised.

> ***Coherence***

It was acknowledged that significant work has been undertaken to ensure greater clarity in information for prospective students on how to access higher education and on the supports available for students in higher education. However, it was also highlighted that this information is currently disbursed across various actors, potentially compromising the quality, reliability, and consistency of advice and guidance being provided to care experienced students. As per the Coherence goal in the NAP, greater co-ordination across the education continuum and between departments and agencies supporting care experienced students was identified as essential to supporting informed transitions. A central hub of information was suggested as a possible avenue to support greater consistency in guidance.

Timing was also cited as a critical factor with stakeholders reinforcing the importance of care experienced students receiving the right information at the right time. This is key to building aspiration and the appropriate scaffolding to higher education, but also to supporting lifelong learning journeys.

> ***Peer networks***

Echoing the perspectives in the ‘mentoring’ session, panel members emphasised the importance of mentoring initiatives for care experienced students. It was highlighted that care experienced students share the same motivations to enter higher education as other students (career aspirations, enhanced opportunities), but additionally, they are also motivated by their experience of the care system and the desire to change society and improve the experiences of children in care. The student panel members pointed to the benefit of care experienced students being mentored by students with care experience, and the value of peer networks to share experiences.

It was noted that the Care Experiences Expert Panel is led by those with direct experience of the care system and ensures that the work of the Care Experiences Programme is robustly informed. The Panel also offers a peer network to its members.



Figure 2: Photograph of participants from the Session on Barriers to Participation for Care Experienced Students (L to R) - Dr Louise Callinan, HEA; Tara Madden, EPIC; Keren O' Leary, Solas Project; Dr Sadhbh Whelan, DCEIDY; Olive Byrne, UCC; Jamie Adams, Care Experienced Expert Panel (CEEP); Sheila McGovern, UCC; Dr Fiachra Ó Suilleabháin, UCC; Aideen Sheehan, CSO; and Keith Moynes, DFHERIS.



STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON NAP
IMPLEMENTATION

The agenda of the Forum was designed to facilitate networking and collaboration among stakeholders throughout the day, and there was also a dedicated feedback session to facilitate broader discussion on NAP implementation. Stakeholders were invited to consider the following questions:

- > *In relation to the NAP Targets and KPIs, what factors contribute to success in increasing priority group participation in higher education?*
- > *In relation to the NAP Targets and KPIs, in areas where we are underperforming, what can be done to enhance access and participation?*
- > *Linked to the Inclusivity goal, what are the main learnings from NAP to date?*
- > *Linked to the Inclusivity goal, are there any examples of good practice that have been implemented/supported by your institution/organisation to enhance the sense of belonging for priority group students within HEIs?*
- > *As we approach the halfway point in NAP implementation in 2025, what should be our areas of focus for the next 12 months?*

The central themes emerging from the discussion are summarised below.

Collaboration

Stakeholders universally highlighted collaboration as a critical success factor in NAP implementation to date. PATH was identified as a crucial enabler of collaboration in supporting meaningful partnerships between HEIs, agencies, and community organisations, and in facilitating knowledge sharing and knowledge exchange.

The challenges inherent in collaboration were acknowledged, and it was emphasised that a dedicated role to support collaboration within HEIs greatly enhanced the value and the impact of collaborations.

The development of the ALTITUDE Charter under PATH 4 Phase 1 was highlighted as an important example of cross-sectoral collaboration. The Charter was developed on a bottom-up basis, and the continued ownership of the Charter by stakeholders was identified as key to its successful adoption.

Student voice

The prioritisation of the student voice was also identified by stakeholders as critical to achieving the ambitions of the NAP. Stakeholders called for more opportunities for initiatives to be student-led, and cited PATH 4 Phase 2 (provision for students with intellectual disabilities) as a powerful example of a student-led approach. The PATH 4 Phase 2 call document was informed by a national consultation with students with intellectual disabilities which led to a set of principles to guide the development of provision for students with intellectual disabilities in higher education.

Sustainable funding

PATH is acknowledged by all stakeholders as having a fundamental impact on access practice nationally, providing the resources to enable HEIs to target the most vulnerable and hard to reach priority groups. There have been a number of challenges with PATH since its introduction in 2017, given its scale and scope, however, the most pervasive of these is the short-term nature of its funding model.

All five strands of PATH were funded initially for one three-year funding cycle⁷, with time-limited extensions subsequently granted to strands 1-3. The short-term nature of PATH funding creates very real challenges to the implementation of the funded initiatives.

While the investment in access via PATH is considered by stakeholders as both welcome and necessary, the form of PATH funding via a time-limited project model is regarded as ill-suited to access work which is longer-term by its nature and requires sustained core funding support. Stakeholders emphasised that the provision of PATH funding via discrete project initiatives with separate reporting requirements diverts attention away from access work and means that HEIs do not have the strategic space to reflect on access practice in a holistic way to inform longer-term decision making. Stakeholders described PATH as a 'patch' and emphasised that it is not possible to mainstream and embed PATH initiatives without a confirmed sustainable funding model.

PATH is a collaborative initiative, and the success of PATH is rooted in meaningful partnerships within and between HEIs, with partner organisations, schools, FET providers, and other stakeholders. These partnerships are built on trust which takes time to engender and is often based on relationships with individuals. The short-term nature of PATH funding creates challenges for HEIs to both recruit and retain staff. This has led to a high turnover of staff across all strands of PATH, resulting in the loss of expertise, and destabilising relationships with partner organisations that have taken sustained efforts to build and develop.

The lack of a sustainable funding model for PATH was highlighted as a considerable cause of concern by all stakeholders and the need for clarity on future sustainable funding arrangements was highlighted as an urgent priority. The necessity for timely communication was also emphasised by stakeholders, as staffing challenges are becoming increasingly acute as the end of the current funding cycle for strands 1 and 3 approaches. Stakeholders reiterated the need for longer-term decision-making in respect of PATH to ensure continuity and consistency of support for the most vulnerable learners and to advance the ambitions of the NAP.

⁷ The exception to this is PATH 4 Phase 1, which was initially funded on a once-off basis for one year in 2022. A further round of Phase 1 funding will be provided in 2024.

Flexibility

Stakeholders reemphasised the importance of recognising the diversity that exists both within and among the priority groups in the NAP, and the range of external factors that impact on these groups. Greater flexibility is needed to enable students from diverse backgrounds and experiences to access and succeed in higher education, and it is imperative that flexibility in provision is accompanied by flexibility in the support infrastructure.

Stakeholders welcomed the extension of SUSI support to part-time learners, however, underlined the need for this to expand beyond a focus on major awards.

Data

The importance of the NAP goal in relation to an Evidence-driven Approach and the emphasis on data to inform decision making was reiterated by stakeholders. However, it was acknowledged that the current evidence base requires enhancement. Strengthening the evidence base was therefore identified as a priority and stakeholders welcomed the commitment to advancing the Access Data Plan in 2024.

Stakeholders highlighted the importance of an international perspective and the need to consider best practice approaches from other jurisdictions, particularly in respect of the scaling of supports.

Continuum of support

Mentoring initiatives were highlighted as a key support for target cohorts, as demonstrated in the lightning session. Stakeholders referenced the importance of the continuum of mentoring support which begins at the pre-entry stage. The relatively lower level of participation by target group students in postgraduate education was discussed, and stakeholders pointed to the need for mentoring at postgraduate level to best support student success. It was noted that mentoring initiatives are increasingly common in various employment sectors, and that initiatives at postgraduate level would close the gap in the continuum of support.

Priority groups

Reflecting on the data presented, it was recognised that further work is needed to increase participation by Traveller and Roma students, and mature students from disadvantaged areas. The ongoing PATH 5 initiatives were noted by stakeholders, however, it was also stressed that many of these interventions are targeted at earlier stages of the education continuum and therefore, the impact of these initiatives in terms of enrolments in higher education by Traveller and Roma students would take a number of years to manifest.

Stakeholders expressed the view that greater flexibility in modes of delivery and support infrastructure is required to increase the rate of participation by mature students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This cohort of students are more likely to have dependents and caring responsibilities, and therefore, require flexibility in provision and financial supports to meet costs associated with childcare and accommodation.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2024 Annual National Access Forum provided an important opportunity to reflect on progress and to consider the priorities for the next year of NAP implementation. A set of high-level recommendations emerged from the rich discussions at the Forum:

Sustainable funding model

The need for a more sustainable funding model for access interventions was consistently raised by stakeholders throughout the course of the day. There was widespread acknowledgement that the progress in increasing diversity in higher education has been enabled through investment in PATH and other access measures. However, the short-term nature of PATH funding was universally identified as incompatible with access interventions that are by their very nature longer-term.

Stakeholders emphasised that successful access interventions rely on the development and nurturing of relationships with key partners. These relationships are built on trust, which is established through sustained commitment over time, and are frequently reliant on individuals. The short-term nature of the funding means that key personnel are employed on short-term contracts, which leads to a high incidence of staff churn. This results in considerable loss of expertise and knowledge, and also has the potential to jeopardise carefully built relationships with key partners and stakeholders. Short-term funding also makes it more difficult for higher education institutions to effectively plan and manage resources strategically.

It is recommended that priority is given by DFHERIS and the HEA to exploring a sustainable funding model for PATH.

Flexibility

Stakeholders highlighted the importance of flexibility to meaningfully support target group students to enter and succeed in higher education, as captured in the Flexibility goal in the NAP. This flexibility should extend to the structure of higher education programmes in terms of part-time and flexible modes of delivery, but also to the supports that enable students to participate in these programmes.

The introduction of the part-time scheme under SUSI was welcomed, however, stakeholders highlighted that the scheme is limited to major awards and therefore, its impact on access by target group cohorts may be limited.

The need for greater flexibility in the structure of supports, including the Aftercare Allowance was also highlighted. The support infrastructure must recognise that progression is not always linear, and that for some target groups students, participation in higher education is only possible on a part-time basis due to their personal circumstances and life experiences.

It is recommended that maximum flexibility is embedded within supports for target group students in higher education.

Enhancing evidence base

Stakeholders welcomed the presentation from the Central Statistics Office and emphasised the value of robust empirical evidence to inform the design and implementation of access interventions. Consistent with goal six in the NAP for an 'Evidence-driven Approach', stakeholders echoed the need for robust data and evidence to support the implementation of the NAP.

The Access Data Plan was identified as critical to the next phase of NAP implementation and stakeholders welcomed the progress toward its development.

It is recommended that the Access Data Plan be developed as a priority and that greater consideration is given to international best practice.

Collaboration

The ALTITUDE Charter was highlighted a number of times throughout the day as an excellent example of collaboration. It was acknowledged that partnership models can present challenges, however, stakeholders identified the contribution of PATH to building capacity in collaboration.

The need for greater inter-agency and inter-departmental collaboration was emphasised to ensure coherence and consistency in measures to support access by target groups.

It is recommended that measures to support greater inter-agency and inter-departmental collaboration are explored as part of the NAP Steering Group, and that collaboration among HEIs and partner organisations on pre-entry initiatives continues to be enhanced to support the hardest to reach target groups.

Priority groups

As evident in the data presented at the Forum, increasing participation by mature students from disadvantaged areas and by Traveller and Roma students at undergraduate and postgraduate level are areas of challenge that require further efforts in the next phase of NAP implementation.

It is recommended that actions to support participation by Traveller and Roma students are considered in the context of the recommendations arising from the forthcoming Traveller and Roma Education Strategy, which is expected to be published before the end of the year.

Peer mentoring

In its focus on student experiences of mentoring, the lightning talk powerfully demonstrated the considerable impact of mentoring initiatives at both pre- and post-entry stage. Stakeholders pointed to the potential for mentoring initiatives to be impactful at postgraduate level, given their value in fostering a sense of belonging. The participation rates in postgraduate programmes by priority group students remain low, and mentoring initiatives could support increases at this level.

The importance of peer support was emphasised throughout the day, including identifiable models for mature students and care experienced students. Given the particular challenges faced by these cohorts, mechanisms to connect students with similar experiences should be explored by HEIs.

It is recommended that the extension of mentoring initiatives to postgraduate level is considered in HEIs where this is not already the practice. HEIs should also consider mechanisms to create peer support networks for mature students and care experienced students respectively.



APPENDIX 1: AGENDA FOR
NATIONAL ACCESS FORUM 2024



11:00 - 11:45	Registration - Tea & Coffee
11:45 - 12:00	Opening Address by Keith Moynes, Assistant Secretary, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
12:00 - 12:15	National Access Plan 2022-2028 HEA overview of programme to date
12:15 - 12:30	Reflections and Discussion
12:30 - 13:15	Mentoring and Role Modelling Lightning Talks
13:15 - 14:00	Lunch
14:00 - 14:45	Understanding the barriers to Participation for care experienced students Presentation and panel discussion
14:45 - 15:30	Feedback Reflections and Discussions
15:30 - 16:00	Closing Remarks



APPENDIX 2: PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES

OPENING ADDRESS



Keith Moynes is Assistant Secretary at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and is responsible for higher education policy and reform, funding, governance and quality, access policy, student support and equality, diversity and inclusion. Keith was formerly Head of Research and innovation policy, capital programmes, European Social Fund, Northern Ireland and international affairs.

NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN 2022 - 2028: HEA OVERVIEW OF PROGRESS TO DATE



Dr Louise Callinan is Head of Access Policy with the Higher Education Authority (HEA), responsible for leading and monitoring the implementation of the National Access Plan 2022-2028. She has held various roles within the HEA, most recently as Head of Research and Research Policy, and as Director of the Irish Research Council, the national funding agency for research across all disciplines. Prior to this, she was responsible for managing the higher education landscape reform process including the creation of technological universities and the associated national funding streams, and the implementation of the System Performance Framework.

MC



Mariana Reis-Efinda is a Senior Manager in Access Policy at the Higher Education Authority (HEA). She is dedicated to advancing equity in higher education—a core principle of Irish education policy. Mariana and the Access Policy team work to ensure that Ireland’s higher education system is inclusive and representative of the country’s diverse population, supporting students from all backgrounds to access, participate in, and complete higher education. Prior to joining the HEA, Mariana worked at the Irish Research Council and the Emerald Cultural Institute.

Mentoring & Role Modelling Lightning Talks

Moderator



Edel O' Donnell is Co-ordinator of the Mincéir-Traveller programme based in the University of Limerick. Prior to taking up this post, she worked as the Destination College Assistant Co-ordinator. Before joining the PATH programme, she worked for a Community Development company with a focus on ensuring equality of education.

Panellists



Ronan Cox is the Cranmore Education Mentor as part of the Path 3 West North-West (WNW) Connect Project. The Education Mentor is a joint initiative between ATU Sligo and the Cranmore Regeneration Project which began in 2019. His role involves one to one mentoring, delivering a Strengths Path programme and coordinating a Community Mentoring Advocacy programme. Ronan has over 10- years' experience mentoring early school leavers to assist them in realising and achieving their educational and employment goals.



Kirsten Lowe is the ATU Connect Programme Coordinator with the Atlantic Technological University (ATU) covering the Galway and Mayo campuses. Before joining ATU in 2022, Kirsten worked with Foróige as a youth worker, coordinating the Big Brother Big Sister programme. In 2019, she set up Foróige's Third Level Mentoring programme with GMIT (now ATU Galway Mayo) and expanded the programme to 4 other colleges between 2021-2022. In her current role she works with schools, further education colleges and communities to run a variety of initiatives and supports to help individuals gain access to, and succeed in, higher education.

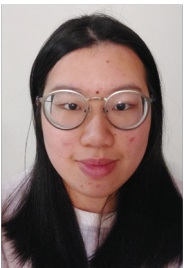
Participants



Margarita Baturova is currently a 3rd-year Business and Politics student at Trinity College. She is from County Meath and is 20 years old. She qualified for the HEAR scheme for College. She is a Trinity Access Programme Ambassador where she mentors students on various initiatives like 'Bridge to College.' She is also on the Shared Island Youth Forum. She will be representing the Community Mentoring programme on the panel.



Moji Mokotso is an International Protection Applicant, a leader of the Change Makers CleanUp group, self-organised by the participants of the Change-makers Mentoring Programme, Maynooth University. He is a musician and an anti-drug activist from Lesotho.



Natalie Chi Kei Ung is from Waterford and is studying medicine at Trinity College Dublin. She entered TCD via the HEAR route.



Kefilwe Nawa is a recipient of the University of Sanctuary Scholarship at Maynooth University and currently in the 1st Year of the Bachelor of Arts, Law, and Criminology programme. Kefilwe, who is an International Protection Applicant, was a mentor for the Changemakers Programme.



Seamus MacDubhlais came to TCD through the FET route, having attended Pearse College of Further Education. He recently mentored in Coláiste Eoin in Finglas where he was once a student.

UNDERSTANDING THE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION FOR CARE EXPERIENCED STUDENTS

Chair



Olive Byrne is Head of Access at University College Cork. She is an accomplished Access practitioner with over 20 years of experience in the area of widening participation in Higher Education.

Presenter



Aideen Sheehan joined the Central Statistics Office as a statistician in 2022 in the CSO's Statistical Systems Coordination Unit, where she is currently working on the second phase of the Children in Care frontier series report. She previously worked as a researcher with the Institute of Public Health and in TILDA, and prior to that she worked as a journalist and correspondent with the Irish Independent. She has an MSc in Applied Social Research from TCD.

Panellists



Dr Sadhbh Whelan joined the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in February 2018; prior to that she was working as an independent research consultant. In the early part of her career, Sadhbh worked as a practitioner in frontline services, in the areas of child protection and homelessness. Latterly she worked as a researcher mostly in university-based research centres where she worked on research studies and evaluations relating to the needs of children and families and services provided. Sadhbh's doctoral thesis was on child protection and welfare reporting.



Dr Fiachra Ó Suilleabháin is a tenured College Lecturer/Assistant Professor and Vice-Head of School (Strategic Data and Communication) in the School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork. He is a professionally qualified, CORU registered Social Worker and Principal Investigator for SOAR Project research and evaluation.



Tara Madden is Education Project Manager of EPIC – Empowering People in Care. EPIC’s mission is to champion the rights of care-experienced children and young people, ensure their voices inform the policy and practice that affects their lives, and cultivate a care aware society. The aim of the Education Project is to raise awareness of the situation of children with experience of the care system in schools; to highlight the potential for education to make a positive difference in the experiences of children in care; to build the capacity and knowledge of teachers to support children in care and to increase collaboration between professionals in the care and education sectors.



Sheila McGovern is Project Co-Ordinator of the PATH 3, South Cluster SOAR Project and has worked in the area of access for seventeen years. Previously she worked as a Development Worker with the Traveller Visibility Group Cork and as a Care Assistant in both family support and homeless residential services.



Jamie Adams is a member of the Care Experience Expert Panel. A father of two, he spent 19 years in state care. He is a strong advocate for people in care and is committed to fighting to improve the care system and society’s perception of people in care. He is a strong believer that our basic needs of self-actualisation, self-esteem, love and belonging, safety and security and physiological needs must be met to progress in other areas of our lives.



Keren O’Leary is currently a youth worker in Dublin’s South Inner City, having graduated recently with a Masters in Community and Youth work from Maynooth University in 2023. She is a member of the Care Experience Expert Panel which oversees and advises government on the long-term research into the care system and the experiences of young people and adults in and after care.

REFLECTIONS AND DISCUSSION

Mediator



Dr Denise Frawley works in the Higher Education Authority (HEA) as a Senior Manager in Access Policy. Prior to this, she worked as Head of Performance Evaluation and as a Data and Policy Analyst in the HEA. Before her time in the HEA, she worked at the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) in Education Research and on the *Growing Up in Ireland* study.

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