COVID-19 'Targets' the National Access Plan.

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Abstract.

This reflective piece examines the articulation of the vision presented in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (NAP) in the context of the educational challenges faced by the target groups arising from the Covid-19 emergency. In addition, the piece aims to identify those who are outside the current NAP and make recommendations to address issues identified. For many of those identified as part of the plan, their educational experience changed overnight and brought with it both challenges and opportunities. As the pandemic impacted the lives of all it became apparent that others who were outside the NAP should be given a chance for their voices to be heard. The next plan needs to reflect the immediate and longer-term impact of the changes that have been experienced in education and give voice to a wider target group.

Keywords: Covid-19; National Access Plan; Target groups.

1. National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (NAP) and Progress Review and Priorities to 2021.

The NAP published in December 2015 was guided by a vision to ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels would reflect the diversity and social mix of the population of Ireland. The Foreword states that access to higher education is a national priority and is required to build positive social change and tackle inequality in our society. It was asserted that the plan offers the basis for '*equality of opportunity for citizens – both in access to higher education and in sustainable jobs'* (HEA, 2015, p. 1). In the Preface, it was contended that there are 'still groups in our society who are under-represented in higher education'. To meet the needs of a 'more diverse student body', additional approaches are required (HEA, 2015, p.3). At European level, it is also agreed that higher education should be

representative of the whole of society (HEA, 2015, p. 6).

The benefits of higher education outlined in the plan stated that 'our educated workforce is Ireland's greatest economic asset' and that an educated workforce is vital to resolving skill shortages and in driving economic growth (HEA, 2015, p.15). Target groups were identified which were under-represented in higher education and a commitment made to increasing participation rates. They were defined as 'entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education, first-time mature student entrants, students with disabilities, part-time/flexible learners, further education award holders, and Irish Travellers (HEA, 2015, p. 34).

A Progress Review of the NAP in December 2018, recommended an extension to 2021. Progress was reported in respect of each of the priority goals, however challenges were identified regarding the pathway from further to higher education and mainstreaming. A review of the National Target Groups was recommended to 'reflect the current landscape' (HEA, 2018, p. 35) and that there should be '…scope for flexibility in the introduction of additional sub-groups within the target groups over the lifetime of the NAP' (HEA, 2018, p. 28).

The significant challenge that Covid-19 was to present in terms of access to higher education and sustainable employment could not have been foreseen.

2.　　Response to Covid-19 and the Access Divide.

On the 12th March 2020 following advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team, an announcement was made of the closure of schools, pre-schools and further and higher education settings, to support efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19. Schools were advised to minimise the impact on teaching and learning by continuing to plan lessons and, where possible, to provide online resources and lessons for students. They were asked to be conscious of students that did not have access to online facilities and to think about their response. Universities and higher education facilities were required to make alternative arrangements for teaching and learning in accordance with their business continuity and contingency plans.

In a Briefing on Covid-19 on the 8th April 2020, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) acknowledged that education had changed to a model based on digital and remote teaching. Special attention was to be given to those at risk of educational disadvantage. To address the challenges faced by higher education, a mitigating educational disadvantage (including community education) working group was established. Feedback received from institutions in the tertiary education sector was that online learning was operating well and was being engaged with actively by both learners and teachers. However, several challenges emerged for disadvantaged students. The focus was on targeting the hardest to reach cohorts, including the Travelling Community and learners in direct provision centres. The working group examined challenges being experienced by students including assistance for learners with no access to teaching and learning online due to issues with broadband and/or lack of ICT equipment.

This period of online learning was described by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as an 'extraordinary semester'. Reflecting on the challenges online/remote teaching presented in higher education during the Covid-19 crisis, they reported that it was not a systemic response that led the charge in the response to education requirements, instead it was 'individuals and teams motivated by a desire to help' (National Forum, 2020, p. 4). At this time many students fell between the gaps in national policy.

3.   Covid-19 Challenged those Targeted by the NAP and Left Others Behind.

As the pandemic was experienced, the impact on those across the target groups was wide ranging not just in terms of their educational opportunities, but also socially and economically. Issues related to the reality of job losses, reduced income, the lack of broadband access, the lack of or limited access to IT equipment, and limited IT skills. In addition, the experience of being confined to overcrowded houses and trying to meet the competing demands of home-schooling, working and caring responsibilities presented a challenge for many. The overarching economic consequences of Covid-19 led to many difficulties for those targeted by the NAP such as those in the Travelling Community and those disadvantaged by socio-economic barriers.

According to Bernard Joyce (2020), of the Irish Traveller Movement (ITM), the poor standard and crisis in Traveller accommodation resulted in the greater likelihood of a poor outcome from the pandemic.   The ITM wrote to the DES in April 2020 to express concern that Traveller

children had been disproportionately affected by the emergency response to Covid-19. It was asserted that Traveller students had limited or no access to appropriate devices and Wi-Fi coverage, and no suitable space to study for the Leaving Certificate. Joyce contended that a continuation of the current situation will widen the educational gap between Travellers and the rest of the population. He appealed to the DES not to leave anyone behind during the national health crisis and demanded that support should be given to all young people.

In May 2020, Social Justice Ireland published a report titled Poverty Focus 2020 which cited the recent Department of Finance Stability Programme Update projections for unemployment and predicted that unemployment will remain high for the next 12-24 months. Following the economic recovery, it is probable that many low-income workers, and employees with precarious employment conditions, will be the last to experience it. Social Justice Ireland contend that without a concerted policy effort many will be stuck in poverty for some time. Covid-19 has challenged the poorest in society and education, coupled with other policy priorities outlined in the Poverty Focus 2020 report, can play a key role in levelling out the uneven impact of the pandemic.

As Ireland battled Covid-19, it became apparent that equity of access to education was not 'everyone's business' (HEA, 2018, p.2) and many were left behind. The challenges faced by those targeted by the NAP were considerable, however Covid-19 revealed access issues for vulnerable groups beyond the target groups, therefore, the identification of new target groups is required. In addition, the redefinition of existing target groups should reflect the needs of society today including those in direct provision and recognise outstanding gender issues. Serious consideration should also be given to the commitment to support students in other categories of disability and to the revaluation of those who should be included in the target group defined by socio-economic barriers.

According to the Irish Refugee Council, for those living in the Direct Provision system there is no automatic access to third level education in universities and colleges, or to non-vocational further education courses such as post-leaving certificate courses. Access to third level education and non-vocational further education is only possible if protection applicants can pay the fees, get the fees waived or access private grants or scholarships. Additional resources and support are required for unaccompanied minors living in Provision Centres who wish to further their education. For most in the asylum system, a third level education remains financially inaccessible.

While Gender appeared as a specific target group in the 1995 White Paper which provided a legislative framework for policies to improve access for students from a range of different backgrounds, it was omitted from the NAP (Fleming, Loxley & Finnegan, 2017, p. 74). It should be reintroduced as a target group and its definition must be inclusive of all gender identities as terminology and language evolve and identities can mean different things to different people. The Gay and Lesbian Equality Network produced a comprehensive document in 2016 to assist schools in addressing homophobic bullying and supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students. Recommendations are that consultation and support between the student and their school is imperative as the student might not have support in their home circumstances. This support ensures that the student can reach their full educational potential (GLEN, 2016, p.10). Gender as a target group would ensure accurate statistical data can be gathered and analysed at a national level to identity patterns in access to education.

The disability community which was a focus of the 2008-2013 NAP was limited to those with physical, sensory and multiple disabilities. The 2015-2019 plan continued to focus on this target group. A commitment was made at that time to provide support for students in other categories of disability including students with learning disabilities, mental health or neurological conditions. The targets evaluated in the Progress Review to 2021 only assessed participation in higher education by people with disabilities as originally defined. The AHEAD report published in May 2020 highlighted the difficulties of students during this time with a mental health condition, ADD/ADHD or a specific learning difficulty. The recommendations made in this report provide a framework for the expansion of the definition of disability included in the NAP.

The nature of work is rapidly changing, and many find themselves employed in the gig economy. The World Economic Forum reported in April 2020 that over half of gig workers have lost their job and another 25% have seen a reduction in their income. This vulnerable population of contingent workers may have flexibility but have low levels of income and protection. They will require upskilling to meet the demands of the economy and to obtain sustainable employment. A redefinition of the target groups of those disadvantaged by socio-economic barriers is required. Government schemes in conjunction with the HEIs are required to provide access to target groups to education coupled with the support of employers in providing work experience and employment.

Targets are central to evaluate progress and to implement the required supports but if they are narrowly defined or do not reflect the current social and economic reality, they can be both

limiting and lead to further disadvantage.

4.   NAP- Where to From Here?

The key objective of the plan involved 'building positive social change and tackling inequality in our society' (HEA, 2015, p. 1). It is now time for all stakeholders to evaluate the performance of the NAP against the identified goals. Covid-19 has caused changes to be rapidly adopted in educational policies and practice and has accelerated the importance of widening the definition of the existing target groups and to include additional target groups. An updated plan for equity of access to higher education could be developed using a new model based on the EquiFrame. This model presents an analytical framework for evaluating the extent to which social inclusion and human rights form part of policy and policy-related documents. This systematic approach allows for the analysis and facilitation of the inclusion of human rights and vulnerable groups in health policies (Mannen et al., 2011). This framework could provide a means of widening participation in an equitable manner.

A conclusion of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report on Education Inequality and Disadvantage and Barriers to Education (May 2019) was that '…*the education system as it currently stands is unfair and unequal and that the consequences of this are stark'*. The experience of COVID-19 has created a valuable insight into the role and responsibilities of the NAP in the provision of equity of access to higher education. Instead of being viewed as a pragmatic, utilitarian, instrumental, and human capitalist approach, a revised NAP can be a catalyst to provide change. A new vision for the NAP that reflects the issues highlighted by the pandemic would put a fresh lens on diversity, equality and inclusion. The opportunity now exists to provide a framework for an educational system that meets the needs of all in society.

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