

# Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Group

Learner/Student Engagement across  
Tertiary Sector – *A Discussion Paper*

*Draft Paper*

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# Mitigating Educational Disadvantage<sup>1</sup> (including Community Education issues) Working Group<sup>i</sup> Learner/Student Engagement across Tertiary Education

## A Discussion Paper on Principles and Practice

**This paper sets out to highlight a range of recommendations that will support equality and safeguard the needs of disadvantaged students and learners. We would ask that such recommendations are considered when actions by the education institution are made in relation to the theme of the paper. No doubt after this crisis the education system as a whole will be collectively judged on how it mitigated disadvantage.**

The Paper is specifically focused on the theme of learner/student engagement in relation to educational disadvantage and is focused on supporting learners who are adults living in disadvantaged rural areas, first-time mature students, low qualified migrants, low qualified adults (less than upper second level), early school leavers, long-term unemployed, asylum seekers, people with disabilities, Travellers, Lone Parents, Homeless, people in receipt of social welfare, living in poverty and low income families and other vulnerable learners.

## Key Action Points

1. Disadvantaged learners face additional and specific barriers within the larger student cohort. Clearly defining and supporting these groups must be a priority during Covid-19 in order to mitigate further disadvantage.
2. Relationships with tutors, staff and institutions is an essential part of the learning experience and support framework for learners. Immediate and continued contact must be in place with resources and policies developed to support staff engaging learners.
3. It is not business as usual. Many disadvantaged learners do not have access to IT equipment, WIFI, academic support within the home or digital skills to engage in their course. Learners are removed from their programmes, isolated from their learning community and experiencing a health pandemic. In addition, some learners

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<sup>1</sup>The *Education Act* (1998) defines educational disadvantage as 'the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools'. In relation to students in the formal education system educational disadvantage has been also been defined as: 'a limited ability to derive an equitable benefit from schooling compared to one's peers by age as a result of school demands, approaches, assessments and expectations which do not correspond to the student's knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours into which (s) he has been socialised (as opposed to those to which (s) he is naturally endowed)' (Boldt and Devine, 1998, p.10). In policy, the term 'non-traditional student' is used to describe a student who by their class, educational background, race, ethnicity, gender, dis (ability) are less likely to participation in higher education. 'Under-represented' is also used (DETE, 2002; HEA, 2015) to identify particular target groups: 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.27)

may be living in overcrowded and unsafe conditions. This may cause short, medium and perhaps long-term damage.

4. Communications and outreach are a vital part of the actions needed to address the impact of Covid-19 and mitigate further educational disadvantage. Multiple channels of communication utilising plain language must be used. These should include local, regional and national media. Key messaging must be empathetic, learner focussed and alleviate further anxiety.

## Introduction

Maintaining connection and keeping open lines of communication between educational providers and learners is essential for the maintenance of positive learning communities. We need to ensure that all learners are supported, particularly the most vulnerable members of our learning communities. While nothing can replace the quality of services and support provided in a face-to-face setting, this guide is meant to help educators find ways to maintain connections with learners as best as possible in the current context.

The challenges we face ahead will have a greater impact on disadvantaged groups who have the least resources at their disposal. We already know that it is individuals from these groups who have encountered the most significant barriers to participation in the past. It is therefore the responsibility of institutions and providers to seek to ensure that the present crisis does not either copper-fasten longstanding inequalities or undo hard won gains in widening participation.

We know that educationally disadvantaged groups require a diverse range of supports. Communication is no different. Of course we need to ensure information is clear, concise and shared widely across digital and non-digital platforms but that is not the only task. In as much as possible we need to design communication strategies around the needs and knowledge of particular groups of students and specific learners. At the heart of good education is relationships and in a time of crisis relationships with learners, and between learners, can easily be lost. It is therefore important that sufficient time and consideration- and this of course draws on institutional resources- is given to maintaining relationships with learners.

The following document outlines core values and principles that should be considered in communication with learners across the tertiary education sector and offers some suggestions on diverse modes of communication that can be used to deliver these messages during the COVID19 crisis. The aim of doing this to ensure that communication is mindful of learner needs, fosters learning, support inclusion and maintains the fabric of our learning communities.

## Principles

- 1. Empathy:** This is a crisis and learners, particularly those suffering from other health-related issues and in different social situations, will be focused on issues far larger than their course concerns. Therefore, it is essential that all communication be mindful of the experiences of these learners and let them know it is okay if they need to take a pause or modify their plans to suit a time that works best for them without penalty.
- 2. Not Business as Usual:** We are in unique times and it is important to acknowledge this to all learners. Plans will need to change and further accommodations will need to be made. It is important to be clear that not all needs will be met, but that organisations/bodies will do their best to develop plans that work within the constraints of the crisis as best as possible.
- 3. Sustain Educational Relationships:** Responsive and inclusive education depends on understanding the needs and wants of learners and a capacity to understand the precise role education plays in the lives of learners. In a stressful and time-pressed period in which there has been the rapid adoption of remote learning unless we consciously seek to maintain and support established relationships it is likely this aspect of the work tertiary education will be damaged.
- 4. Learner-Centred:** Learners should be at the heart of all considerations made during this time. Communication should clearly articulate how diverse learner needs have been considered and indicate how their voice has been considered in decision making processes. To ensure you have addressed diverse needs of groups, identify the differing perspectives you have considered and link to the accommodations you have made to meet their needs. There should also be clear feedback processes for learners who have further questions or concerns.
- 5. Listening to Learner Voices in Learning Communities:** Maintaining effective communication with students serves learners but is also important for educational institutions in terms of maintaining their sense of purpose, making informed plans and being responsive. In a period of active social distancing communication with learners in tertiary education has enormous potential for building a sense of common purpose and community.
- 6. Peer Communication between Students:** Tertiary education is built upon communities of learners. To maintain these communities in crisis it is important to create appropriate spaces for peer collaboration and learning as well as ensure clear communication between institutions and students.
- 7. Plain English:** If it is for learners, it should be written with them in mind. [NALA's Plain English Guidelines at a Glance](#) are there for support if needed. Also, information

should be disseminated in a variety of forms (audio, video, print, social media) to ensure all learners can access this information.

8. **Streamlined:** There is a lot of information coming out quickly. In addition to posting information in a centralised place, information that affects a learner's course should be disseminated through a centralised source, and ideally delivered to them through the person they interact with on a normal day to day basis.
9. **Follow Up:** It is the responsibility of educational providers to ensure learners get the information they need, whilst learners have a responsibility, the ultimate onus is on the provider. If communication needs to reach a learner, have well developed systems in place that can ensure this information has been disseminated to all learners impacted.
10. **Learning from the Crisis:** If we maintain effective communication with students and reflect on what we learn from them our educational institutions can have a major role in understanding the impact of the Covid-19 crisis and to help plan and respond to changing circumstances in the coming months. Ongoing communication with learners can tell us a great deal about how to best support public health efforts and offer some indication of the issues we need to attend to as a society (such as support for mental health, career guidance, critical media literacy and so forth).

## Methods of Communication

Communication is essential to ensuring learners remain connected and feel their needs are being considered. More disadvantaged learning populations will not have access to digital tools; therefore, in the pursuit of equity, it is necessary to deliver communication to learners through a variety of platforms and methods. Below is a list of some suggested methods of communication to consider:

1. **Phone Calls:** It is important to chat with learners. Phone calls allow a two-way check in and preserve the one-to-one contact that has huge benefits for learners.
2. **Mobile Messaging:** Mobile messages can be effective to reach learners who do not have access to email in their homes.
3. **The Post:** Mail services are still in place. If you are unsure if a learner will receive an email notification, post it directly to the learner.
4. **Peer Groups:** A peer group or a buddy system empowers learners to stay connected with each other in a remote learning environment. This can have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing and creates another structure for learners to access information without having to link back in with their educational provider. These networks should be encouraged by providers. It may be helpful to give learners tips

on how to build these groups (via phone calls, WhatsApp, Zoom, etc). Digital spaces used for tertiary education course work on platforms such as Moodle or Blackboard and small group work tasks related to learning and assessment can be designed in such a way that supports peer learning and communication.

5. **Student Unions and Learner Networks:** Where student networks are in place, particularly in higher education, these bodies can be effective vehicles for getting information to learners and bring their voices back up for feedback.
6. **Local radio:** While not always feasible for all information, local radio can be a way to get out information that is important to the local community and may be effective for community groups and Education and Training Boards.
7. **Pre-recorded Video Messages:** Pre-recorded messages can be sent across social media platforms and posted online to digital learning platforms. Learners can access these at a time that suits them, ensuring the message is accessed on their terms.
8. **Social media:** social media is widely used among learners and tutors. This may provide a space for institutions to share general messages, helpful information, resources, and updates during Covid-19.

## Timeframe and Number of Contacts Made

A core part of the learning experience is the relationships between tutors and learners. This helps to build trust and break down some of the personal challenges faced by adults who may have had difficult or negative experience previously in the education system. The following points provide a guideline for engaging with students within a timeframe structure with consideration for the frequency of contact.

1. **Making initial contact:** Each learner should receive an individual check-in from their tutor or staff representative. For those with lower levels of digital literacy, access to IT equipment or literacy concerns, phone calls or texts might be better suited to their needs. This should be noted as high priority and happen as soon as possible. This should be orientated to maintaining learning relationships rather than simply information sharing and the achievement of educational goals (especially those related to assessment and exams). As noted above we cannot expect that this is 'business as usual'.
2. **Frequency of Contact:** Learners from marginalised and vulnerable groups may not have the same levels of academic support structures within their home or support network. Their relationship and contact with a tutor is vital for the provision of encouragement, academic guidance, and engagement.

3. **Needs assessment and mapping system:** Identifying the communication needs of individual learners, mapping the contact made, and their response may provide an overall picture for the organisation. In addition, this can identify the resources needed for tutors, and flag-up if a learner becomes disengaged. Where possible institutions should facilitate co-operation and communication between staff members to pool information on learners' needs. There may be a role in developing feedback systems based on contact with learners that can be used at institutional and sectoral level.
4. **Action Plan for Disengagement:** If a learner has stopped responding to their tutors a plan with suitable responses and supports (medical information or referrals for mental health helplines) should be in place. This will provide staff with a how-to guide with instructions on appropriate responses and the expectations placed on learner-tutor interventions during the current pandemic. Tutors and staff should refer to their institutions' policy for more specific information, resources and support as required.

## A Step-by-Step Guide to Communication

This is a step-by-step guide for making initial contact with an adult learner. Taking into consideration learners from disadvantaged groups and their potential circumstances. For learners who may have a disability or additional needs please refer to [www.ahead.ie](http://www.ahead.ie) for more specific guidance in this area.

### Points to Consider

- Learners live in a range of different circumstances. This may include overcrowding, an unsafe environment, little or no privacy, children, or other. If possible, provide them with advance notice of your call via email or text message. Request a suitable time that suits you both, and let them know the purpose of the call is a 'check-in' to say hello. If a learner does not respond that day, it may be best to wait until the following day before ringing them. However, it is still important to call.
- The learners' initial response may not be as you would expect. This does not mean they're not pleased to hear from you and that your call is important. It may be a bad time, they might be surprised to hear from you, or this type of call or communication is unusual for them. They might also be nervous or experiencing anxiety in the current climate.
- The language you use and your approach is key. Be understanding, empathetic and use your active listening skills. You may be the only person or one of very few people they have had contact with outside of their home for a long period of time. If it is a

they are stressed or anxious your kindness and patience will support an open and honest dialogue.

- Manage expectations. Your relationship is extremely important. For both you and the learner it is important to consider how often you will be in touch, the most suitable forms of communication, what will and can be communicated, and appropriate response times. The learner may be unaware of your workload, professional boundaries needed or the length of time assessment or changes in policy are currently taking.

### **Do's and Don'ts**

- **Do** provide phone numbers or referrals to websites such as the HSE, Citizens Information, Mental Health Ireland, Women's Aid.
- **Don't** give information or advice on serious issues that is not your expertise such as medical advice or safety plans. Make a referral. This is also important for protecting yourself within this relationship.
- **Do** seek further professional advice if you think there is an urgent or concerning matter.
- **Don't** overload them with information.
- **Do** remind them that their health and wellbeing is of the utmost importance, and this comes first.

### **Potential Steps and Helpful Phrases**

#### **1. Start with checking-in on the learner and ask them how they are?**

- a. Clarify who you are and the name of the organisation/institution.

“Hi John, it's Maria calling you from St Patrick's Centre. How are you? I just wanted to give you a ring and find out how you are doing? Is this a good time?”

#### **2. Let them know that you are not looking for anything or placing any expectations on them.**

- a. They may be worried that they have forgotten to hand-in an assignment.

“This call is really just to let you know that I'm / we are thinking of you. It's a very difficult situation during Covid-19 and we want to let you to know we're here for you and will try to provide you with the most up to-date information we have. And will continue to support you with your studies.

*If you think the conversation is going well then continue to step 3. However, if there seems to be some difficulty tell them it was nice talking to them and you will be in touch again soon.*

**3. Ask them if they have any questions, concerns, difficulty accessing materials or technology.**

- a. They may not be aware that you have emailed course work or that materials are available online. They might have no laptop, WIFI or cellular data or the digital skills necessary to engage in the course online.
- b. If they do not have the skills or technology needed they may become embarrassed or make an excuse. Normalising this issue will help them to be open and honest. You can use light-hearted humour about technology referring to yourself *“I’m struggling to get a handle on all of these platforms myself. They can be very hard to use.”*
- c. Provide updates on the course work or assessments, if suitable.

*“Do you have any questions or concerns about accessing course work? We have sent out a link to Moodle / an email with information / are currently setting up a system. Some people won’t have laptops at home, WIFI or maybe they’re not used to using this type of software and that is totally fine. Do you have any of these issues? Maybe I can help you?”*

**And..**

*“It’s not urgent, but I just wanted to let you know what the plan is for your assignment / the next steps for this class.”*

**4. Decide the next step and make plans together.**

- a. Manage expectations and let them know your availability, how and when you will contact them again. Tell them how best to contact you.
- b. Your relationship and support is important and may be vital for some learners to stay focussed or engaged in the programme. Some learners will need more frequent contact than others.

*“That’s great, thank you. We are currently still trying to organise this as best we can. I’ll ring you again on Thursday and see how things are going and if you need any help in general or with the course work. Mind yourself and stay safe.”*

**Longer-term engagement**

Tutors, staff and learners are faced with a multitude of new challenges in the current Covid-19 situation. Developing a reengagement strategy focussing on outreach, supporting disadvantaged learners, and resourcing tutors and staff may smooth the transition period for the tertiary sector during and after current restrictions.

- Funding for outreach work as part of a reengagement strategy for disadvantaged groups in the autumn.

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