

Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Group

Educational Equity and Learner Cohorts
- A Discussion Paper

Draft Paper

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Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Groupⁱ Educational Equity and Learner Cohorts

A Discussion Paper

Introduction

This paper sets out to highlight a range of recommendations that will support equality and safeguard the needs of disadvantaged students and learners. The recommendations are based on extensive consultation and discussion with representatives from the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (Incl. Community Education) Working Group and stakeholders across the tertiary education sector. We would ask that such recommendations are considered by the Department of Education and Skills, tertiary education agencies and institutions as they plan and act in response to the current COVID-19 crisis.

The document is divided into three parts: general recommendations which pertain to disadvantaged learners in general; a brief overview of the context and challenges we face; and finally, recommendations and reflections on the needs of specific learner cohorts.

General Recommendations

- An **Outreach and Retention Strategy** for disadvantaged learners should be developed to determine:
 - Vulnerable groups who are not currently engaging in their education course and a strategy for support and the reengagement of these learners
 - Vulnerable groups who are due to complete online assessment but do not have the IT supports
 - Vulnerable groups who are due to undergo online assessment but are currently not engaging with the education institution
 - Seek when and where possible the resumption of face-to-face activities as recommended (UNESCO, 2020)¹ in addition to learner engagement (MED Working Group, 2020)
 - Specifically fund an outreach strategy post the COVID-19 Crisis for community education learners
- Promote Recognition or Prior Learning Processes (RPL) to ensure learning is not lost
- Develop a mental health strategy for across the Tertiary Sector which has a strong focus on the particular needs of disadvantaged learners

¹ IESALC, UNESCO, 2020) COVID-19 and higher education: Today and tomorrow April 9, 2020 1 Impact analysis, policy responses and recommendations (accessed 14th April 2020 <http://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-EN-090420-2.pdf>)

- Research is needed on the medium to long -term of the impact of the crisis which foregrounds the voices of disadvantaged learners to feed into future planning and policy
- Research is needed on different *models of education that include fully online, blended and face-to-face methods* required for disadvantaged students and learners across tertiary education. This would support the 'new normal' as we offer an effective range of teaching and learning approaches. Not all learners can be supported through technology-related pedagogy (people with special needs especially).
- Utilise inclusive frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and ABC Learning as a frameworks for learners and support educators to receive training on how to incorporate this approach into their teaching

The context: Education and equality in the time of a pandemic

Education has a systemic impact beyond learning, it promotes social inclusion; mental health and wellbeing; civic engagement and equality. Due to the complexity of issues that educationally disadvantaged learners face, a diversity of approaches within a supportive learning environment are required to enable retention and meaningful progression. Being learner centred can take time as progression is at the pace of the learner, is not always linear and may be resource intensive.

A number of challenges discussed in this paper are not new. They are social issues that cohorts have had to face prior to this crisis. Learners pre-COVID-19 faced an unequal distribution of privilege in the Irish education system based on numerous factors.² During this pandemic our understanding of educational inequalities must therefore place greater focus on issues of poverty, housing, domestic violence, isolation, mental health, marginalisation and lack of essential supports (finance, childcare, materials). What we are seeing now is an **exacerbation of these issues due to the current restrictions in place**. Many of the supports that were in place to address these issues cannot be provided during the COVID-19 crisis. History, theory, analysis and research both evidence and warrant the claim that this COVID-19 crisis will be differentially negatively experienced by certain cohorts in society versus the mainstream. Educational providers and policymakers must devise solutions to acknowledge and address the specific impact this crisis will have on disadvantaged individuals and communities. To prevent the impact of exacerbated inequalities, differential re-distribution of available national resources over the coming two years are essential. Education providers, in particular, play an important role in supporting individuals pushed to the margins of society. The current crisis, and future provision, will require an **'ecology' of supports** to widen access and support participation.

Within the COVID-19 crisis a number of issues have arisen. **Learning space can either contribute to or diminish their ability to learn**. Vulnerable learners may live with violent and abusive partners, parents, family members or others. In addition, learners may live with

² Lynch & Lodge, 2002.

people suffering addiction, poor mental health or ill health and their needs and behaviour impact on learners within the home environment which now duplicates as a learning space. Educational spaces are critically important in the role they play in providing a safe and positive environment for those who may not otherwise have access to one. Ethical considerations must be made on the inability for learners to continue with their studies during this pandemic whom are living within **dangerous and hostile conditions**. A learner who disengages may not present their reason for leaving a programme. We must understand that this pandemic is experienced differently in society and will further exclude vulnerable people. For this reason, there must be an investment of both time and resources to support these groups as much as possible now and a reengagement plan to bring these groups back into education in the future.

It is important to recognise that for some learners, these changes could have a potentially disheartening effect on their educational achievements prior to the crisis. Learners need to have their education success recognised and celebrated. Moving forward the potential to use the **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)** as a vehicle to capture and validate this learning should be explored. RPL processes as well can be enhanced through the use of digital technologies, particularly through the increased use of e-portfolios.

Poor health has been highlighted as a factor impeding participation in learning for adults which disproportionately impacts vulnerable learners. People need a range of supports to enable access, including health support. 25% of people who left education after primary school (and 16% of people who left school after the Junior or Inter Certificate) cited health and age as a reason they could not participate in lifelong learning. Whereas only 4% of those with third-level qualifications cited health and age as a barrier to participation in lifelong learning.

Education plays a vital role in promoting health and wellbeing. In these trying times, it is important for educational providers to take a role in acknowledging the additional challenges social distancing poses to overall **mental health and wellbeing** for learners and ensuring learners who are facing these challenges are adequately supported. Potential psychological impacts of social distancing and confinement policies on learners with mental health issues will require ongoing support and specific interventions in the medium term. Again, this needs to be contextualised in relation to longstanding challenges. Education plays a role in overcoming loneliness and isolation through increased social connection.

Community education offers mental health support in some centres (counselling). In fact, some community education organisations including several AONTAS members have as their primary pedagogy the recovery education model of education.³ Such approaches should be considered in autumn 2020. Providers should use their social media platforms and engagement structures with learners to share information on tools that promote mental health and wellbeing during this crisis, such as those from the HSE, Silvercloud, My Mind,

³ Central Statistics Office. Adult Education Survey 2017. <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/aes/adulteducationsurvey2017/>. [Accessed on 14th April 2020]

Jigsaw and Mental Health Ireland. **Regular contact with learners should be maintained** through student service phone lines, cloud-based video chats (eg whereby.com), emails and text messages from providers. Providers should also work with counselling and other medical services to develop a COVID-19 plan of supports for learners including a clear referral mapping plan for learners who are identified by educational providers as in need of additional supports during this time. Establish a **National Wellbeing Programme for all learners and students.**

The crisis provides us with an opportunity to tackle issues not only in the context of COVID-19, but with a long-term vision forward. We already know that it is vulnerable learners who have encountered the most significant barriers to participation in the past. It is therefore our responsibility and that of education providers to seek to ensure that the present crisis does not either copper-fasten longstanding inequalities or undo hard won gains in widening participation. No doubt after this crisis the education system as a whole will be collectively judged on how it mitigated disadvantage. There is evidence from Europe that **40% of the population have [low digital skills](#)**. This crisis is showing that this issue is now a major hurdle in people continuing their education online.

The action points within this paper highlight immediate issues and are aimed at mitigation in a time of crisis. Ultimately, given the persistent and deep nature of educational inequality and the delicate ecology of supports required to help individuals and communities overcome barriers we know that we will have to carefully consider how to overcome the ‘shock’ to this ecology of supports that has occurred in the medium-term. However, as the situation evolves and further information on the impact of the crisis on vulnerable learners is understood medium term scenario planning will be considered.

Recommendations and reflections for specific learner cohorts

As we have already outlined ‘vulnerable and disadvantaged groups will be impacted more severely and therefore require particular attention in the policy response’.⁴ Of course this is a very broad, diverse and large section of Irish society. We want to also highlight recommendations for specific groups who have already been identified through research and in social and educational policy as well as ‘emerging’ vulnerable groups⁵. By focusing attention on specific and defined learner cohorts who face a higher risk of further disadvantage this paper wishes to offer guidelines which will help mitigate the effects of the crisis on these groups⁶. The recommendations produced focus both on learning objectives

⁴ OECD (2020b) COVID-19: Protecting people and societies (accessed 14th April 2020, https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=126_126985-nv145m3l96&title=COVID-19-Protecting-people-and-societies).

⁵ That is groups that are newly vulnerable or heretofore have not been very visible in policy.

⁶ Identifying ‘target’ groups and specific measures is a very well-established in policy and policy practice. It is a useful but necessarily limited tool and we are cognisant that target groups are: often highly differentiated; specific ‘categories’ (race, class, disability, ethnicity etc.) used to identify groups overlap and intersect in complex and important ways; and finally sometimes calls for more general social measures which cannot be addressed by treating the defined cohort in isolation (for example persistent social class inequalities in education)

and broader holistic needs of learners. Addressing the needs of these learners will seek to mitigate educational disadvantage and 'build social connections and social capital'.⁷

We focus on the social issues faced by disadvantaged learners, specifically:

1. Learners with disabilities
2. Travellers and Roma
3. Home Carers
4. Women
5. Learners in Direct Provision and Homeless
6. Learners with Literacy, Numeracy and Basic Digital Literacy Needs
7. Adults with Lower-Level Qualifications
8. Individuals in receipt of social welfare
9. First-Time Mature Students

1. Learners with Disabilities

Summary

- Educators should maintain open lines of communication with Disability Support Services and AHEAD to ensure accessibility considerations are being addressed in assessment and course content
- All HEIs and ETBs should be asked to feature a section on accessibility of online teaching materials in any guidance they are providing to their teaching staff on the move to online.
- Educators should communicate accessibility considerations/accommodations through a variety of platforms to learners (e.g. email, phone calls, etc)

** For a full list of 7 recommendations can be found at the end of this passage.

It is important to acknowledge that fears of COVID-19 and its impact are not equal. Learners with underlying health conditions face far greater health fears than others – they are fearing for their lives in the current pandemic. For these learners, the primary concern should be on preserving their health and wellbeing first and foremost. The mental strain placed on students by the global situation, and the huge change to how they have to learn as a result on top of mental health issues which often coexist with other disabilities, could create a situation in which learners simply are not in a space to continue learning. Empathy needs to therefore underline all interactions with learners facing these challenges. Learners need to know they are supported and will not be penalised for whatever choice they make.

Inclusive frameworks for providing supports and designing curriculum have an important role to play in the delivery of education moving forward. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) should be used a framework for developing supports for learners. Educators should also be equipped with the training needed to incorporate this framework into their lesson design, with particular focus on the current emergency remote learning climate. For learners who want to continue their learning, assurances must be given that individual learner

⁷ OECD, 2020b.

accommodations will be considered and addressed to the best possible ability given the current restrictions. Remote learning poses unique challenges for learner accessibility of online tools and formats. While educators should be praised in their efforts to try new and innovative approaches to digital learning, accessibility and accommodations for learners are not always being considered when providers are deploying learning tools. Educause estimates that it takes 6-9 months to design an online module or course and that currently we are not seeing true online learning but Emergency Remote Teaching, which is different. This short-term focus can lead to issues of quality. Can they access the educational content? Is it engaging? Can they learn effectively from it? Additional time, while important, is not the only accommodation learners require to ensure their needs are being met. For example, access to synchronous webinars or online tutorial meetings is challenging for certain cohorts e.g. deaf community, speech and language difficulties (tutorials). In some instances, simple additions can be made to ensure materials are more accessible (eg use word docs over pdfs, select captioned videos from Youtube) in other instances, however, further action will be required. Some recommendations are featured below:

1. **For some learners, it is not feasible to continue their studies without face to face in-house contact.** This is due to a number of complex barriers including their type of disability, their current state of health or their learning needs based on their programme of study.
2. The Higher Education Authority has advised HEIs that even though teaching and learning has moved online, it is still appropriate for students with disabilities to be supported under the **Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD)** once the supports are still in line with what is in the FSD guidelines. HEIs are encouraged to consider how existing services could be reconfigured to meet needs of students with disabilities and provide supports in the current situation while still operating within the FSD guidelines.
3. All HEIs and ETBs should be asked to feature a section on **accessibility of online teaching materials** in any continuous professional development they are providing to their teaching staff on the move to online. In HE, it should be stressed that educators should seek advice from disability/access services when unsure. All educators should be advised to communicate with students their openness to engaging with them to find a solution where lack of accessibility has been identified. AHEAD's tips on teaching online with accessibility in mind. AHEAD has run online teaching and assessment webinars to support this.
4. **Communicate supports available to learners with disabilities** such as the Freephone NALA 1800 202065 for distance tutor over the phone as well as Learn with NALA courses.
5. Education providers should communicate to all educators to ensure that they apply **any reasonable accommodations** recommended for a student by the disability office in their online assessments. This may involve for example having to alter an individual student's settings in the Learning Management System allow extra time with an open book exam.
6. Where a reasonable accommodation cannot be delivered online, the only equitable solution may be to offer the student(s) an **alternative assessment mechanism**.

7. Educators in HE should engage with their Disability Support Services for advice.

AHEAD Tips on **Accessibility in Online Assessment**.

- **Increased flexibility** is required with regard to deadlines and completion, particularly given uncertain nature of the move to online teaching and issues that might arise from it.
- **Alternative times** to complete assessments should be provided. Students with underlying conditions are more likely to be seriously ill than others. There is a need to examine implications of this decision and devise an equitable way to mitigate the unfair disadvantage some students will experience. Once examined, **communication** needs to be made through national media to explain how these inequalities will be dealt with.

2. Travellers and Roma

Summary

- **Collaboration** with national Traveller organisations such as Pavee Point, the National Traveller Women’s Forum, and the Irish Traveller Movement, to ensure mitigations are done with community experts
- **Structures to ensure ongoing dialogue** between HE/FE institutions and national and local Traveller organisations are essential, to ensure informed awareness of the specific difficulties facing Traveller students.
- Increased support and revised plans based on **community engagement** to address Traveller access to higher and further education
- **Priority given to Travellers** in a modified return to classroom setting scenario

Living in poor conditions puts people at greater risk of social inequality.^[1] In some instances, Travellers face overcrowded conditions unsuitable for study. Tutors working with Travellers have expressed concerns for the need of programme extension in the case of those for whom digital learning may not be an option due to lack of home and/or social support for learning, WiFi access, lack of hardware and software. In many instances, learners are not equipped with technology needed to complete their learning. Post is also often not sent to the correct trailer or family member, which can cause further delays or prevent hardcopy documents being delivered. There are also a number of GDPR risks that arise from this fact.

Travellers comprise 0.8% of the secondary school population, with the numbers dropping steeply from initial entry on to Leaving Certificate. The times most vulnerable to drop-out are recognised as those of transition – to second level, to senior cycle, and onwards to higher or further education. Some progress was made up to 2009, but the steady decline from then until 2014 has not been corrected in spite of some improvement since then. Approximately 50% of the national population do not have **basic digital literacy skills**; the proportion rises much higher among marginalised groups including Travellers and Roma.

^[1] IESALC, UNESCO, 2020) COVID-19 and higher education: Today and tomorrow April 9, 2020 1 Impact analysis, policy responses and recommendations (accessed 14th April 2020 <http://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-EN-090420-2.pdf>), p.9.

Students with a long history of educational marginalisation need to engage with the formal education system, all the more so to become the autonomous learners required by current emergency education arrangements. Supports need to include **learning support services** and cultural capital transfer, to which Traveller and Roma communities haven't had sufficient access.

Relationships are important. Resumption of face-to-face activities particularly for vulnerable learners, insofar as is possible, has been recommended by UNESCO.^[2] Many Travellers have had negative experiences in the school system due to discrimination. Returning to education is an important and precarious step for learners from this community, and their current relationships with tutors and institutions will have a ripple effect on families for generations to come. Individual Traveller learners need person-to-person support (especially within their own community organisations and from peer monitoring) and structural supports to underpin the autonomous/ independent learning skills required in formal education, in particular at FE/HE levels. Mobile phone check ins are seen as particularly effective along with designated phone lines for Travellers. There are also some examples for online learning through resources offered by <https://iscoil.ie/>.

All mitigation options must be done in concert with local and national Traveller organisations, whose staffs include members of the Traveller community, and who have close connections to the Traveller community, and expertise within this field. The small increase in access by Travellers to formal and FE/HE education is very recent, and therefore requires substantial support in this emergency. Otherwise this achievement will be reversed or even obliterated. If current engagement in FE/HE (and intent to transition from second level) is eroded, the loss will not be just for this year. **Community-based support** is required to maintain the engagement achieved so far, in this emergency period.

3. Home Carers

Summary

- Educators should do a **home environment check-in** with learners to gain an understanding of home conditions learners are working in to ensure appropriate accommodations are being made to support learning needs
- Education providers to develop **guidelines on setting routines of learning** within the home for particular learning environments in mind (home carers, Direct Provision centres, etc)
- Educators to work with learners who need to **pause their learning** during COVID-19 to develop a return strategy moving forward

Home caring responsibilities have an impact on learning that is taking place in the home. Learners who care for small children or family members with an illness will have the challenge of administering caring responsibilities in the same environment that they are

^[2] OECD, 2020b, p. 9.

completing their learning. This will be a particular challenge for individuals who are lone-carers who will not easily be able to take designated time for uninterrupted learning. Single parent families (especially those headed by women), may also face compounding challenges from a loss of income, difficulties with childcare, and a lack of family support.⁸ Families with frontline workers, may also find that caring responsibilities have shifted onto new family members due to the current societal demands. Taking primary responsibility for this role, may be an added challenge for learners trying to complete their learning.

It is important that learners in these environments, first and foremost, be given **recognition for the additional challenges** they face. This is “not business as usual”. Learners with home caring responsibilities need to know that the added challenges they face in this current context are acknowledged and that they are supported to make decisions about their learning that best meets their needs. Learners caring for those suffering from illness or elderly relatives who fall into a higher risk category for contracting COVID-19 will have an added strain of safeguarding their loved ones in these uncertain times. For some, this may mean **pausing learning** to focus on other responsibilities, while for others, this may mean continuing learning with some **accommodations put into place**. These learners will be best situated to choose the pathway that works best for them and to identify the supports they will need to succeed on their chosen path.

It is recommended that **providers reach out to learners with home caring** responsibilities to ensure they are dealing well with their full-time caring responsibilities, aware of their learning options, and equipped to succeed in their remote learning environments. If learners choose to pause their learning, during this time, providers should develop a plan for these learners to resume their learning in the future. As a measure to support learners who want to continue their learning, providers should consider **eliminating time-bound** assignments and assessments to allow carers who need flexibility in their learning to have it. As much learning as possible should be done with **recordings** and learners shouldn't be penalised for not joining an online class if their assignments are being completed and they are proving their engagement with materials. Live lectures should also be recorded in short segments and interactive activities developed around them and live sessions should be discussion focused, not lectures. It is recommended that providers issue **guidelines to learners** who need support in setting a routine while still administering additional caring responsibilities. Learners should also be met with and explained how they will be expected to interact. It is also encouraged that a plan be developed to slowly re-open labs for a small number of students where social distancing measures can be maintained.

4. Women

Summary

- In collaboration with women's groups and community education centres, **a national strategy to support women's education** to be developed

⁸ OECD, 2020b.

- Target funding for **women’s community education** groups

Women have been highlighted as one of the most at-risk groups during the COVID-19 crisis.⁹ In terms of impact, due to the intersectional nature of discrimination, women from minority groups, who experience poverty will be impacted most. Specific actions to provide educational opportunities to women during and post-crisis are essential. Including funding of women’s local community education groups.¹⁰ Women have a higher burden of care, which correlates to a diminished time capacity to continue learning in our current COVID-19 emergency where caring responsibilities have increased.

Gender-based violence has increased during the COVID-19 crisis.¹¹ Sexual abuse and violence are continually underreported and this issue will be present in the homes of learners (and educators) across the Tertiary sector.¹² Women are at higher-risk of being in unsafe home environments, which are not conducive to learning. While immediate responses should focus on the continued safety of these individuals, medium to longer-term plans will need to be developed to ensure women affected by domestic violence have access as soon as possible to safe educational spaces to resume their learning and that a reengagement plan is put into place to facilitate this return to education. A prioritisation of modified opening of centres supporting domestic violence

5. Learners in Direct Provision and Homeless

Summary

- Ensure all direct provision and temporary accommodation sites are equipped with **IT tools** necessary to continue learning (i.e. WiFi access, laptops, mobile devices, dongles)
- Ensure **safety protocols** are in place for direct provision and temporary accommodation sites to ensure a healthy and safe environment for learners continuing their education

Learners in Direct Provision¹³ and Homeless will face added challenges in continuing their learning. In some Direct Provision Centres learners are confined to their bedrooms, often with children. These confined spaces pose unique challenges for learners who are trying to keep up to date with their learning. Adding to this stress, are the health concerns that arise from living in confined shared spaces. Direct Provision residents want to know that their health and wellbeing is being considered. Education providers can play a role in sharing information on health and wellbeing strategies that are designed to support learners in Direct Provision Centres. Access to digital hardware and the internet are critical for access to learning resources, this includes instructional material and student assignments. Learners

⁹ OECD, 2020.

¹⁰ OECD, 2020a.

¹¹ LWL, Women’s Aid, OECD, 2020a.

¹² Brennan Center, 2018.

¹³

who are Homeless and living in temporary accommodation face similar challenges. They are in confined spaces with limited access to technology.

The Department of Education and Skills should work with the Department of Justice to ensure that Direct Provision Centres and temporary accommodation sites have assigned study spaces where social distancing protocols can be maintained and regular cleaning procedures implemented. These spaces should be equipped with materials learners need to complete learning remotely (eg open access WiFi modems for learner to connect by phone, computers, dongles, software packages required for assignments, etc).

6. Learners with Literacy, Numeracy and Basic Digital Literacy Needs

- The **promotion of services** specialised to support literacy, numeracy and basic digital literacy needs offered by groups like NALA across the Tertiary education sector
- The **use of diverse forms of communication** to learner to promote services available (eg phone call, radio advertisement, local print media, etc)

According to the latest available research, one in four Irish people aged between 16-65 score at the lowest level of numeracy and one in six at the lowest level of literacy. Around 10% of these people are participating in Education and Training Board adult literacy services. Overall participation rates of people with low educational attainment in further education and training is low in comparison to other countries and consistently presents a challenge to policy aspirations to improve Ireland's standing in this area.

It is well established that having low levels of literacy, numeracy and basic digital skills significantly undermines people's life chances. The recent publication from the OECD 'COVID-19 Protecting People and Societies', highlights the dramatic disadvantage to be felt across all age groups of those with low education as a result of COVID-19.¹⁴ They are at the greatest risk of poverty as a result of 3-month loss of income. People with low education lack very basic proficiency in ICT. Amongst the older community those with low education are nearly twice as likely to be living alone.

For more than a decade, NALA has focused its attention on developing solutions with a range of statutory partners to addressing the adult literacy, numeracy and basic digital literacy skills issue in Ireland. Low and high technology solutions include a phone-based distance education service, alongside an eLearning platform which enables independent and centre based learners to pursue a range of QQI accredited modules at level 2 and 3 on the National Framework of Qualifications. The programme facilitates just in time and just enough learning, as well as Recognition of Prior Learning. These quality assured non-face-to-face learning opportunities are highly appropriate solutions during the COVID-19 crisis in which we have seen many learners unable to continue their face to face learning

¹⁴ OECD, 'COVID-19: Protecting People and Societies' at https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=126_126985-nv145m3l96&title=COVID-19-Protecting-people-and-societies

7. Adults with Lower-Level Qualifications

- The expansion of **RPL processes** to support validation of learning targeted at skills from industries where learners are projected to suffer the greatest job losses
- A local level plan to ensure workers from industries projected to suffer the most in the economic down-turn needs are met when accessing support services to return to employment

The economic impact of this Crisis will be long-term and have far-reaching effects on the economy. *'The crisis will hit low-paid, insecure jobs hard'*.¹⁵ Individuals with low-qualifications (specifically for people with less than higher level education) face a higher risk of being impacted by the economic downturn.¹⁶ Those in low paid work are less likely to work from home and maintain their employment.¹⁷ The further education and training sector in particular must ready itself for ensuring learners coming from sectors projected to be hit the hardest by the economic down-turn (food and service industry, tourism and leisure, etc) are accommodated.

The aim of educational providers should be to equip learners as quickly as possible with the skills and educational qualifications needed to re-enter meaningful employment. Further Education and Training providers should begin to map industries and areas that will face the greatest impact (via Regional Skills Forum and other mechanisms). Education and Training Boards and community education providers need to be resourced adequately to support these learners. **ETB staff need to be given support in the areas of IT, pedagogy in this new learning environment, learner supports in remote learning, etc.** Any plans developed to support these learners should explore ways to use Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes to help place learners on a faster track to their qualifications. A focus on particular industries impacted the most by the crisis would help to proactively identify the skill sets learners will have when they enter retraining and help hasten RPL processes needed to support these learners.

8. Individuals in receipt of social welfare

- The development of a **learner-centred referral plan** to be developed by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection in collaboration with HEIs and ETBs to ensure learners educational needs are met when referring learners onto educational courses moving forward
- The development of a **clear map of referral services** for learners who require further support to access social welfare payments and educational courses

¹⁵ OECD, 2020b, p.6.

¹⁶ OECD, 2020b.

¹⁷ Learning and Work Institute (2020) Coronavirus and the Labour Market: impacts and Challenges (accessed 14th April, 2020 <https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Coronavirus-labour-market.pdf>)

The number of individuals in receipt of social welfare has increased drastically as a result of this crisis. The increased entry rate onto the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has undoubtedly created an administrative challenge for the Department. To ensure learners do not suffer as a result of this unavoidable administrative challenge, it is important to develop proactive, learner-centred approaches to **facilitate meaningful referral processes of learners** who want to access educational opportunities while in receipt of social welfare payments.

Tertiary education providers should work collaboratively with the Department of Employment Affairs to develop a learner-centred referral process to educational options – one that considers the learner’s career goals and interests, that supports the learner’s need to succeed in an educational setting, and the amount of time learners will need to reskill for employment. Learners should be provided with clear guidelines that map out their learning options, provide information on referral supports (eg guidance supports, ETB information services, access officers, etc).

9. First-Time Mature Students

- The development of a **long-term plan to recruit learners** from this cohort back into education and assurances provided that educational spaces will be re-opened with their health and safety needs in mind
- The consideration of the **COVID-19 impact on mature learning** access in the current HEA mature student participation study

Mature learners are also at greater risk of falling away from their education in the current context due to lower level of digital skills and a limited capacity to continue learning through an online platform and health concerns. Even as restrictions around social distancing are eased, a number of mature learners may be reticent to re-enter public spaces, including classroom environments without strict protocols in place. Since a number of mature learners also access learning for general physical and social wellbeing, there is a greater risk that social isolation may increase and mental wellbeing may suffer. A long-term plan will need to be developed to recruit learners from this cohort back into education and assurances provided that educational spaces will be re-opened with their health and safety needs in mind.

The HEA is currently undertaking a study on mature student participation in higher education. The study is being carried out by Indecon. As part of the study, a public consultation process is open until 30 April – details at <https://hea.ie/2020/02/27/public-consultation-on-mature-student-participation-in-higher-education/> A survey of learners will also be carried out as part of this consultation. You can find the link to the survey here: <https://www.research.net/r/surveymaturestudents>. The study will also involve direct consultations with relevant stakeholders.

Summary of Reponses

1. Learners with Disabilities

- Educators should maintain open lines of communication with Disability Support Services and AHEAD to ensure accessibility considerations are being addressed in assessment and course content
- All HEIs and ETBs should be asked to feature a section on accessibility of online teaching materials in any guidance they are providing to their teaching staff on the move to online.
- Educators should communicate accessibility considerations/accommodations through a variety of platforms to learners (eg email, phone calls, etc)

** For a full list of 7 recommendations can be found at the end of this passage.

2. Travellers and Roma

- **Collaboration** with national Traveller organisations such as Pavee Point, the National Traveller Women’s Forum, and the Irish Traveller Movement, to ensure mitigations are done with community experts
- **Structures to ensure ongoing dialogue** between HE/FE institutions and national and local Traveller organisations are essential, to ensure informed awareness of the specific difficulties facing Traveller students.
- Increased support and revised plans based on **community engagement** to address Traveller access to higher and further education
- **Priority given to Travellers** in a modified return to classroom setting scenario

3. Home Carers

- Educators should do a **home environment check-in** with learners to gain an understanding of home conditions learners are working in to ensure appropriate accommodations are being made to support learning needs
- Education providers to develop **guidelines on setting routines of learning** within the home for particular learning environments in mind (home carers, Direct Provision centres, etc)
- Educators to work with learners who need to **pause their learning** during COVID-19 to develop a return strategy moving forward

4. Women

- In collaboration with women’s groups and community education centres, a **national strategy to support women’s education** to be developed
- Target funding for **women’s community education** groups

5. Learners in Direct Provision

- Ensure all direct provision sites are equipped with **IT tools** necessary to continue learning (i.e. WiFi access, laptops, mobile devices, dongles)
- Ensure **safety protocols** are in place for direct provision sites to ensure a healthy and safe environment for learners continuing their education

6. Learners with Literacy, Numeracy and Basic Digital Literacy Needs

- The **promotion of services** specialised to support literacy, numeracy and basic digital literacy needs offered by groups like NALA across the Tertiary education sector

- The **use of diverse forms of communication** to learner to promote services available (eg phone call, radio advertisement, local print media, etc)

7. Adults with Lower-Level Qualifications

- The expansion of **RPL processes** to support validation of learning targeted at skills from industries where learners are projected to suffer the greatest job losses
- A local level plan to ensure workers from industries projected to suffer the most in the economic down-turn needs are met when accessing support services to return to employment

8. Individuals in receipt of social welfare

- The development of a **learner-centred referral plan** to be developed by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection in collaboration with HEIs and ETBs to ensure learners educational needs are met when referring learners onto educational courses moving forward
- The development of a **clear map of referral services** for learners who require further support to access social welfare payments and educational courses

9. First-Time Mature Students

- The development of a **long-term plan to recruit learners** from this cohort back into education and assurances provided that educational spaces will be re-opened with their health and safety needs in mind
- The consideration of the **COVID-19 impact on mature learning** access in the current HEA mature student participation study

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**The Voice of
Adult Learning**

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