

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

**Enabling Learner Success in Pathways
and Progression during COVID-19**

- A Discussion Paper

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Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Groupⁱ Enabling Learner Success in Pathways and Progression during COVID-19

A Discussion Paper

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.

This paper specifically focuses on mitigating further disadvantage for learners in the tertiary sector by enabling success in their learning experience and pathways and progression across and within institutions. By learners, we mean all adults engaging in education across the Community Education, Further Education, and Higher education Sectors. This includes non-formal education and the provision of numeracy and literacy. Our priority groups of learners include those identified as educationally disadvantaged including 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 Recommendations

- Reduction of entry requirements for progression or the start of a new course at a higher level on the National Framework of Qualifications
- Provision of free intensive education workshops targeting specific programme needs to ensure learners have support to meet requirements before beginning a new course or entering the next stage of a programme
- Prioritisation and provision of study spaces for people currently living in unsuitable environments, for example people in overcrowded homes or without WIFI
- Creation of a tertiary-wide access model offering financial support, tutoring, outreach, and guidance
- Flexible requirements and timelines for the reopening of courses considering the additional outreach and time needed for engaging new learners on programmes
- All education file or 'passport' with disability and additional needs outlined on file moving with learners from institution to institution
- Mapping of support services and sharing resources across tertiary sector
- Promotion of RPL as a mechanism to ensure people can progress in their learning
- Provide a clear, consistent, support structures for RPL within the new hybrid model of education

Introduction

Progression and pathways are terms traditionally associated with Higher Education. This paper, however, explores these concepts through a tertiary framework. The purpose is to promote the importance of connecting and communicating pathways and enabling student success across all adult learning. Student success, in this context, is understood as a broader framework including student's perspectives and their quality of learning as shown by the National Forum for Teaching and Learning (2019).

Learners, educators, staff and institutions during COVID-19 continue to face complex challenges. This emergency response, reactionary model of education poses barriers that impact on the quality of education provided, the teaching and learning experience, assessment, peer-support, and the completion of programmes. This paper considers the needs and experiences of vulnerable learner cohorts and recommends specific actions for mitigating further educational disadvantage by considering the tertiary system as a whole in an effort to provide a meaningful learning experience.

Tertiary Sector

In Ireland, the tertiary education sector includes Community Education, Further Education and Higher Education (European Commission, 2018/19). Each plays an important role offering learners a wide range of programmes and learning opportunities. Pathways and progression in this sector include entering and progressing both within and between each of these spaces.

Non-formal education including literacy, numeracy, digital skills, and personal development are integral part of this infrastructure. According to European Commission as highlighted in the European Agenda for Adult Learning (2011), adult learning promotes equity, social cohesion, and citizenship. Non-formal education including second-chance education empowers individuals and supports them in their everyday life. Such benefits include the increased capacity to access services and supports; the promotion of environmental awareness; and further ability to engage in democratic systems.

Educationally disadvantaged learners, as detailed in the opening section of this paper, are noted as priority for inclusion across the whole of the education system, including the tertiary sector (Government of Ireland, 1998; 2000). The collaboration of stakeholders involved in the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Group during this pandemic provides evidence of a tertiary-wide response explicitly attempting to address the interests and needs of these learners.

Recognition of Prior Learning

Within the widely diverse and complex space of tertiary education, recognition of prior learning (RPL) has been an oft-cited and accepted as good practice, but infrequently used process. Most institutions identify with the context and need for RPL and many have policies and procedures for implementing the recognition of prior learning, however, significant (albeit reducing) variations occur in recognising uncertified learning - learning for which credits or certification have not been previously awarded.

Broader terms that should be considered in line with RPL include the following:

- *Experiential Learning*: learning which occurs through experience, or through doing, which is normally associated with previous work-related experience
- *Formal Learning*: formal learning refers to learning which has taken place within a systematic way and is supported by structures such as a defined curriculum, a school system with specific academic objectives.
- *Non-formal Learning*: learning that occurs outside of the formal structures of learning and in a non-systematic way. It is usually characterised by the absence of awarding credentials and as such is usually conducted in a more flexible manner. Examples of non-formal education would be learning that occurs in community-based settings
- *Informal learning*: learning that occurs in a non-targeted, structured way, usually through daily experience. It is self-directed learning and examples would include coaching, mentoring, shadowing or knowledge acquired through reading and observation.

Granting Recognition of Prior Learning

Learners are most typically granted Recognition of Prior Learning in a number of ways as set out by awarding bodies and institutions:

- *Exemptions from modules*: learners can be exempted from modules for which they are deemed to have already achieved the learning outcomes for the particular module, through previous study and/or experiential learning. Applications for such exemptions must be evidence based
- *Advanced entry into subsequent stages of programmes*: where learners are deemed to have achieved the learning outcomes of a particular stage of a programme, through previous study and/or experiential learning they may be eligible to proceed directly into the following stage of a programme. Again, applications for such exemptions must be evidence-based.

However, not all programmes are eligible for RPL and the extended practice of making awards on foot of RPL is extremely limited.

RPL can and should be an important part of offering pathways and progression, building on student experience, with potential impact across the whole tertiary sector. It offers the proven potential of crossing the boundaries between different sectors and provides opportunities for recognition of skills, knowledge and competence to enable access and progression both to further learning and to employment (eg validation of competences/transversal skills). Its correct application enables learners to exercise their own agency in the accumulation of credits and recognition of learning over a period of time. It has and can prove hugely beneficial for employers in continually facilitating engagement with and recognition for work-based learning.

In the short term, RPL may prove useful in resolving issues around lack of engagement during and after the time of the COVID-19 emergency and/or address difficulties in learning online at this time. RPL could be used to give credit and aid providers in ensuring that credit is given

to allow learners disadvantaged by events to return and pick up where they left off when ready.

Recommendations:

- Further promote RPL as a mechanism to be understood by departments and agencies within the broader public sector to ensure people can progress their learning using this form of learning.
- Provide a clear, consistent, support structure for RPL within the new hybrid model of education. This will include:
 - Review and communication of clear guidelines and frameworks for the application of RPL across tertiary education
 - Use of digital technologies to enable ease of engagement with RPL
 - Further development and provision of training in the use of RPL across the tertiary education sector including adult, community, further and higher education
 - Reinforce the communities of practice with RPL as epitomised by the RPL Practitioners' Network

Guidance

Guidance services can play an important role supporting RPL and in the delivery of a new hybrid model of education going forward in 2020. Guidance is a neutral actor that uniquely connects each of the spaces within tertiary education. Its core focus is the learner; their learning experience, and the fulfilment of their potential. Encouraging students academic, social, personal and professional development. This relationship is unique due to its neutral role and separation from meeting institutional requirements. Utilising Guidance's cross-sector knowledge may support the development of shared resources and materials and improve communication between all stakeholders.

Tertiary-Wide Access Model

Equity of access is needed across the education sector. At present, the term Access is associated with accessing Higher Education institutions. Huge progress has been made in this area and "embedding 'student success' has become a system priority" with institutions required to take a 'whole-of-institution' approach (HEA, 2021). If specific cohorts of learners accessing Community Education, Further Education and Higher Education were identified and provided with support structures particularly during COVID-19 that reached across and connected institutions, it would benefit the quality of the student experience. This could include:

- Outreach services and transition support between programmes and institutions
 - Often learners with places in a new programme do not accept their offer. This may in-part be due to their fear of the unknown, lack of institutional knowledge with no basis for what to expect going forward

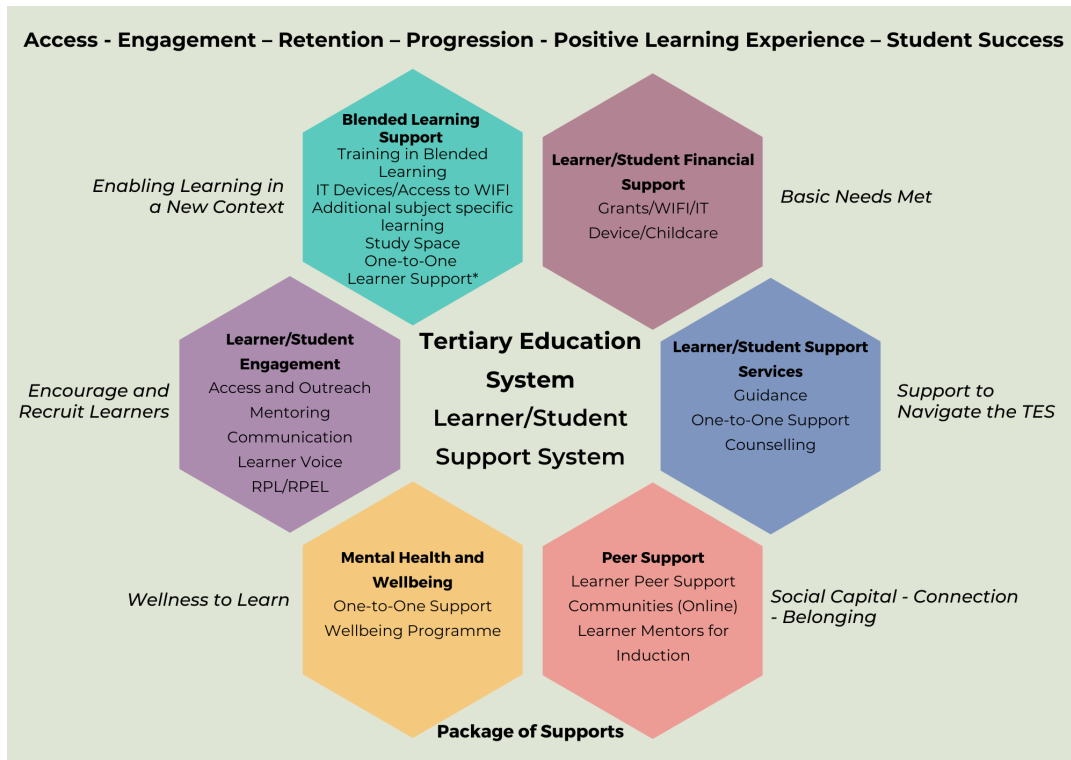
- Learner financial support outside of the broader grant system that can ‘top-up’ and alleviate emergency or unique learner situations
- Tutoring and workshops dedicated to helping learners meet their programme requirements
 - Learners accessing programmes such as apprenticeships or returning to education may need literacy based and non-formal education programmes in addition to their course
- Guidance and support from dedicated professionals that build personal relationships with learners who can reach out as an individual needs help or becomes disengaged

Student Success

Enabling learner success is a priority for all stakeholders in tertiary education and in the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Group. The success of a person in education should not be defined solely by their results achieved and progression into a higher level on the National Framework of Qualifications (National Forum 2019). Learning is a personal and life-changing experience for many people and this means that undertaking a programme should involve empowering, enjoyable and passionate fuelled experiences. The quality of programmes, teaching approaches, inclusion, and accessibility are fundamental for enabling success. In addition, and most notably for educationally disadvantaged learners a framework of consistent and holistic supports should be in place that drive equity provision in all institutions and at all levels within tertiary education.

Recommendation:

- Provision of a tertiary education package of learner supports
 - The image overleaf provides an outline of a suggested structure for the implementation of this model



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