Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Group Barriers in the Return to Remote Learning

- *A Discussion Paper*

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AONTAS

The Voice of
Adult Learning

Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education issues) Working Group[i]
Barriers in the Return to Remote Learning

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. This paper seeks to act as a resource guiding decision making during COVID-19 and is based on the shared experience and expertise from stakeholders across the tertiary education sector. We would ask that such recommendations are considered when actions by the education institution are made in relation to the theme of the paper.

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 Training, 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

1. Specific focus needed to address the drop in accreditation levels at NFQ level 2, 3, and 4 and participation levels are also down by 25% for FET learners.
2. There is a demand for community education courses, but due to restrictions, not all learners can be accommodated on-site in centres or learners do not have the IT devices necessary to engage in learning remotely.
3. Peer-based teaching and learning methodologies developed, shared and implemented to support peer relationships for learners engaging online.
4. Assessment of learners' capacity to use and engage with online platforms at regular intervals in order to prevent disengagement from those 'left-behind'.
5. Development and implementation of a mental health and wellbeing campaign and connected activities, including the provision of online counselling.
6. Resourcing and protection of the mental health and wellbeing of tutors and other practitioners to prevent 'burn-out' due to the high volume of work and pressures faced during the pandemic

Identified Barriers

Specific focus needed to address the drop in accreditation levels at NFQ level 2, 3, and 4 and participation rate for FET learners have seen at drop of 25% on 2019 levels.

There has been a significant reduction in disadvantaged adults participating in education, particularly accredited programmes at the early levels of the National Framework of Qualifications. Compared to 2019, in 2020 there was an average reduction of 50% in QQI Major Awards attainment at NFQ level 1-4. 1 This compares to an average decrease of 17% for QQI levels 5 and 6. Similarly, compared to 2019, in 2020 there has been a decrease in QQI Minor Awards at Level 4, and Level 5 of 51%, and 28%, respectively. Data is also emerging that there has been a 25% reduction in participation rates of marginalised FET learners in 2020 compared to 2019. Specific efforts to engage learners needed.

Remote learning poses significant challenges to meaningful learner engagement

While learners are becoming more comfortable navigating online learning tools, meaningful engagement remains a concern, especially for marginalised learners. Educational institutions can measure the number of learners who sign on to online platforms for class in remote learning lessons, but it has become more challenging to assess the level of intellectual engagement experienced by the learners/students. Evidence suggesting that learner motivation and connection to the learning process has decreased during this unprecedented prolonged period of online learning, has led to studies exploring necessary remedies to this potential challenge. A study by the OECD, for example, found that a success aspect of online teaching required learners being supported in developing strong learning attitudes to address the challenges posed by online learning.[1] As we remain in a remote learning climate, this is an area that will need to be explored more moving forward.

In some instances, the online systems in place are posing a challenge to learners. Some find these systems difficult to relate to, struggling with technology or finding it difficult to maintain a sense of connectedness with their tutor. Others are more comfortable with alternative online systems that are not used by the institution. It was suggested that every effort be made to ensure the systems that are in place meet the needs of the learners accessing them rather than fit the needs of the institutions using them first. Systems put in place could follow the Universal Design model of learning, and facilitate the provision of an inclusive learning environment.

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[1] OECD, (2020). "Strengthening online learning when schools are closed: The role of families and teachers in supporting students during the COVID-19 crisis" available at: http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/strengthening-online-learning-when-schools-are-closed-the-role-of-families-and-teachers-in-supporting-students-during-the-covid-19-crisis-c4ecba6c/

Student experience is being lost in remote learning

Peer interaction in a remote context remains a challenge, and learners are feeling less connected to their learning community. Many learners will not have formed relationships with their peers in the current learning situation. The lack of social interaction has eliminated an important part of the overall student experience. While the focus for much of the discourse in this area has remined on first-year students, it is also important to consider the impact on final year learners, who are not able to celebrate their final achievements in the same manner as before and who have potentially lost their peer support networks at an important transitional time in the educational experience.

Within a community education context, practitioners report the loss of 'drop-in' facilities, with the possibility of connecting with learners in a relaxed, informal setting 'over a cup of tea' being an impossibility in the current climate. The loss of face-to-face interaction has stymied the capacity of groups to build meaningful relationships with their learners, and for those learners to learn informally together. Meet-ups and social activities run by community education centres are also being lost and this negatively impacts on the local community Isolation has been reported as a serious concern.

There should be more proactive thinking in this area. The potential for building smaller social bubbles with learning communities could be explored as a way to ensure social interactions can continue in a limited and safe way. In addition, centres could be supported to offer online activities for learners and the wider community with partnerships from local businesses or councils. An innovative example of this, is Ability2Cook in Cork who are providing live cooking classes with a chef from a local hotel and this is aimed at learners but open to everyone.

Students in living in rented or student accommodation face uncertainty

For learners in both private rented and student accommodation, a lack of clarity around their entitlements to refunds for deposits or rent already paid, has created some frustration. Learners would like a clear public message that ensures they are entitled to a return of fees from any accommodation unused as a result of the crisis.

For learners who have been forced to remain in accommodation, further support measures need to be put into place to ensure they have full access to materials needed to continue living safely and comfortably in their shared accommodation space. For instance, in some cases, campuses have closed on-site food facilities, resulting in limited meal options for on-campus students. Additional restrictions on shared microwaves in cooking facilities have added to this challenge. Learners who are living rented or student accommodation should be entitled to the same access to cooking supplies as are currently required in all rented accommodation. This should include access to microwave and oven facilities. Furthermore, with limited access to public transport due to restrictions and the 5km radius enforced, some learners may struggle to access other food facilities, especially at a reasonable cost in rural areas.

Concern around mental health and wellbeing is rising

Uncertainty about the future, increased isolation, fear of health risks, pressures in home environment, and limited social interactions are some of the many contributing factors to the current rising mental health concerns. Learners, particularly vulnerable learners, are feeling these pressures. Without proper supports in place, learners risk not being able to effectively engage in their learning. As noted by the Psychological Society of Ireland, research has "identified a number of pedagogical, technological and psychological challenges for students, with psychological factors including motivation, procrastination, and increased isolation."[2]

As has been acknowledged in various studies women have been among the groups most impacted by the pandemic and as the crisis continues, resulting challenges, particularly those relating to care, may act as a continuing barrier to engagement in learning.[3] In addition, prior to the pandemic education institutions and other services provided a 'safe space' for women (and men) in dangerous living conditions where they could stay out of their home for extended time periods and access phone and front-line services. During restrictions, there has been a 'horrifying global surge in domestic violence'[4] as homes continue to act as the learning environment, we must consider and address the implications of this for vulnerable learners.

There have been some examples of innovation in this area. For instance, some community training centres have begun running jewellery making courses and cooking courses for learners seeking new projects to support mental health and wellbeing during lockdown. A number of educational providers have also administered on-to-one check-ins or large-scale surveys to learners to identify ways to better support mental health and wellbeing during lockdown. These innovations are just some examples of the positive measures that have been put into place. Nevertheless, more recognition and action in the area of learner mental health and wellbeing will need to be taken the longer the lockdown continues.

Lack of clarity around restrictions is having an impact on the sector

There are a number of centres that have been able to remain open during restrictions due to their support for vulnerable learner groups. This is very much a welcome development and appreciated greatly by the learners who are able to access these supports. There is concern, however, that not all learners who might avail of the services offered at these centres are aware these facilitates are open and available.

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[2] The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) (2020). *Psychological and Mental Health Needs Arising from COVID-19*. Available from: https://www.psychologicalsociety.ie/source/PSIs%20Psychological%20and%20Mental%20Health%20Needs%20Arising%20from%20COVID-19_1.pdf p. 3.

[3] United Nations, (2020). *UN Policy Brief: The Impact of Covid-19 on Women*. Available from: https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406 and Burki, Talha (2020). The indirect impact of COVID-19 on women. *The Lancet: Infectious Diseases*, 20(8), p. 904-905, AUGUST 01. Available from: 2020https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(20)30568-5/fulltext

This is very important for community centres, where in addition to educational courses, a number of essential services are also provided (e.g. domestic abuse support services). Messages need to clearly state, not only that these services are deemed essential and are therefore, still open, but that learners can travel beyond the 5-kilometre limit to access these services. Centres would welcome a promotional campaign from educational providers and national bodies, such as ETBI, that clearly identify what services and providers are open so that learners can travel to avail of these services as needed.

Part-time learner enrolment in FET and Community Education continues to drop

There is increased anxiety around taking a face-to-face course, where on-site learning is in place. In FET and Community Education courses, providers are seeing greater learner drop off of non-formal and part-time courses, out of fear of taking part or a lack of desire to engage in online learning options. For some vulnerable groups in particular, this is a notable problem. Older learners, for instance, who would have been taking part in activities such as for example, a social choir, can no longer meet. For these learners, their course played an important part in their social life and contributed to their overall wellbeing. More long-term planning will need to be developed to address this decrease in enrolment.

There is a demand for community education courses, but due to restrictions, not all learners can be accommodated on-site in centres or learners do not have the IT devices necessary to engage in learning remotely. This is particularly a challenge for non-accredited programmes. Since non-accredited learning options are often the first stepping stones to further lifelong learning and accredited learning options among disadvantaged learner groups, this means the most marginalised people in society now face continued and further exclusion. Processes to engage and maintain communication with learners is essential.

Practitioner burnout remains a concern

Practitioners are navigating new online learning spaces. For some this is a new challenge that comes with significant additional investment in understanding how to use remote teaching tools effectively. In addition to the increased pressure to move work quickly online, practitioners are also facing the added challenge of having to keep learners actively engaged in a remote learning context. For learners struggling to adapt to online learning, this may result in tutors developing remote teaching materials that can be posted home to learners, in addition to the creation of online learning materials. Practitioners have also invested significant resources in making phone calls to learners to ensure they are on track and staying involved in their learning. These phone calls, while an effective lifeline for many learners, are very resource intensive and require significant additional time from practitioners who are already going above and beyond. Methods to avoid practitioner burnout, therefore, need to researched and developed to ensure learning remains a positive experience for both learners and staff.

Online learning has posed new challenges to keeping a safe learning environment

There have been a few concerning incidents that have occurred in an online learning context. In this new domain, learner safety and keeping a safe learning environment for all learners poses new challenges. To ensure staff are equipped with the skills needed to handle unsafe or unhealthy remote learning situations quickly and appropriately, further training should be considered. Educational providers should also consider proactively developing a plan on how to handle and address these situations if they were to arise. Learners should be included in these plans to ensure their voices are heard and that they remain an active part in building healthy remote spaces where people feel safe and welcome.

IT challenges may result in vulnerable learners not pursuing a course

The reality of IT challenges cannot be ignored (i.e. internet cuts out, programmes do not work, etc.). Given that these issues cannot always be addressed, it is important to explore the potential impact of incidents when they do occur. This is particularly important for vulnerable learners, who for the first time may decide to reach out for support. While these challenges may be unavoidable, they can still have a potentially alienating impact on a learner who has taken a big step in reaching out.

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