

COVID-19 'Targets' the National Access Plan

Authors

Michèle Kehoe: Lecturer, School of Business, National College of Ireland & DEd candidate Trinity College Dublin
Linda Cardiff: DEd candidate Trinity College Dublin

Aims

This reflective piece examined the articulation of the vision presented in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (NAP) in the context of the educational challenges faced by the target groups arising from the Covid-19 emergency.

The aim was to identify those who are outside the current NAP and make recommendations to address issues identified. For many of those identified as part of the plan, their educational experience changed overnight and brought with it both challenges and opportunities.

As the pandemic impacted the lives of all it became apparent that others who were outside the NAP should be given a chance for their voices to be heard. The next plan needs to reflect the immediate and longer-term impact of the changes that have been experienced in education and give voice to a wider target group.

Findings

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

Target groups were identified which were under-represented in higher education and a commitment made to increasing participation rates. They were defined as 'entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education, first-time mature student entrants, students with disabilities, part-time/flexible learners, further education award holders, and Irish Travellers (HEA, 2015, p.34).

A Progress Review of the NAP in 2018, recommended an extension to 2021 and a review of the National Target Groups was recommended.

- As the pandemic was experienced, the impact on those across the target groups was wide ranging not just in terms of their educational opportunities, but also socially and economically.
- The overarching economic consequences of Covid-19 led to many difficulties for those targeted by the NAP such as those in the Travelling Community and those disadvantaged by socio-economic barriers.
- The challenges faced by those targeted by the NAP were considerable, however Covid-19 revealed access issues for vulnerable groups beyond the target groups, therefore, the identification of new target groups is required.
- The redefinition of existing target groups should reflect the needs of society today including those in direct provision and recognise outstanding gender issues.
- Serious consideration should also be given to the commitment to support students in other categories of disability and to the revaluation of those who should be included in the target group defined by socio-economic barriers.

Impact

- The key objective of the plan involved 'building positive social change and tackling inequality in our society' (HEA, 2015, p. 1).
- It is now time for all stakeholders to evaluate the performance of the NAP against the identified goals. Covid-19 has caused changes to be rapidly adopted in educational policies and practice and has accelerated the importance of widening the definition of the existing target groups and to include additional target groups.
- An updated plan for equity of access to higher education could be developed using a new model based on the EquiFrame. This model presents an analytical framework for evaluating the extent to which social inclusion and human rights form part of policy and policy-related documents. This systematic approach allows for the analysis and facilitation of the inclusion of human rights and vulnerable groups in health policies (Mannen et al., 2011). This framework could provide a means of widening participation in an equitable manner.
- The experience of COVID-19 has created a valuable insight into the role and responsibilities of the NAP in the provision of equity of access to higher education. Instead of being viewed as a pragmatic, utilitarian, instrumental, and human capitalist approach, a revised NAP can be a catalyst to provide change.
- A new vision for the NAP that reflects the issues highlighted by the pandemic would put a fresh lens on diversity, equality and inclusion. The opportunity now exists to provide a framework for an educational system that meets the needs of all in society.



NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN 2022 – 2026

Consultation Paper April 2021

Additional Content

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URL: <https://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/issue/view/45>

Submitted to the National Access Plan Public Consultation paper April 2021 for the development of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2022 – 2026) publication.
URL: <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/Consultation-Paper-Towards-The-Development-of-a-New-National-Plan-for-Equity-of-Access-to-Higher-Education.pdf>

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