Equity of Access to Higher Education
Submission to the National Access Plan 2022-2026

The Communiversity Network:

Access All Areas.

'…there is room for a new sort of university that is not a ghetto for the young, but a place where all generations can exchange experience, culture and hope'.

Theodore Zeldin

An Intimate History of Humanity

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Introduction:

The Communiversity Network (CN) is a loose affiliation of community based adult guidance counsellors, adult and community education co-ordinators; lifelong learning officers and local employment staff who work for LEADER Partnership Companies, Local Development Companies and Local Employment Offices across Ireland. All of the members are committed to social inclusion, some working directly in the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP), while others seek to move individuals into education, training or employment of as part of an individualised learning/care plan. They work with the same target groups that the National Access Plan identify. The CN grew out of a Maynooth University educational initiative called the Communiversity (See Appendix A) which has been running in different Partnership areas in both Dublin and rural communities since 2012. A full account of the initiative can be found in the Barter and Hyland 2020 Communiversity Report. The network came together for its first 'Think In' in 2019 and have had three face to face and two Zoom 'Think Ins' since, sharing information about education, employability and social services for their client or participant base. The members of the Network engage with those people deemed *hard to reach and underserved* and so their contributions in the submission below are from the frontline. In some cases the organisations that they work for have sections that provide full wrap around and life span services from early years education to school going years up to adult education and older learners therefore they have a unique perspective on access that goes beyond the mere widening participation in HE that Access is usually associated with. Widening Participation narrowly defined could be construed as one dimensional, in this submission deepening and lengthening the role of access in an individual's life adds to the conversation. Access in this sense means access to life chances and opportunities that individuals and whole sections of people living in Ireland are denied.

The Communiversity (a brief note):

First and foremost, the Communiversity is about connecting people in a learning environment where social, economic and political phenomena that effect their lives can, with the help adult education facilitators and academics, be debated and discussed in a meaningful way. It could be considered as an Access gateway or pre-access programme for people to enter Further and Higher Education if they wish. For many participants it can be the first point of contact with HE. For these people university would not be thought of as a welcoming place as one recent participant in the Crumlin Zoom programme said 'university has been tamed in a way' (Asia Rutkowska, Lifelong Learning Team Dublin South City Partnership). If university appears to an individual as something that needs to be tamed (and this sentiment of fear is not unusual in Communiversity participants see Communiversity Report pp 33-40) it would suggest that the internal psychological and emotional barriers to access present the first and perhaps most intransigent stumbling block that needs to be overcome.

Method and structure:

The bulk of the information in the rest of this document is made up of contributions from members of the Communiversity Network made in response to the questions posed by the NAP 2022-2026 Consultation Paper. Not all contributors answered every question and in some instances there is overlap and repetition. However, each vary in emphasis and so the contributions are reproduced verbatim. The document is aspirational presenting the case from those closest to the target groups who recognise gaps in the system and improvements that could be made. Each section is followed by a short commentary and a number of recommendations.

1) What should our overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022-2026?

To ensure that the principle of accessibility to HE based on ability not on means and is supported by ongoing review, guidance, and remedial redress of the factors that negatively influence ability and aspiration/interest in further/higher education.

Building on existing HE access routes, to ensure requisite financial, childcare, guidance and educational deficits supports are easily available so that equity of access is possible in practice and not just in theory. (Aoife Kerrigan, Career Guidance Advisor Eastside and Docklands Local Employment Service, henceforth AK)

The overall vision for equity of access should be based on ensuring that entry is based on a true assessment of merit rather than the school you attend; the area you live in or your parents' own educational background or income. To achieve this, more resources need to be provided at a younger age specifically to members of marginalised communities so that they have greater parity throughout their time in the education system. This also calls for a more holistic approach to child and youth development that includes supports for the family unit within which they live so that barriers within this environment that might prevent a young person from fulfilling their potential are addressed at an early point in time. Equity of access is also hampered by the increasingly onerous financial burdens associated with higher education such as student levies, course fees and accommodation costs. This needs to be addressed by ensuring that higher education in Ireland is adequately resourced. (Freeda Garman Lifelong Learning Officer, SICAP and Anne Cassidy Rural Resource Officer Galway Rural Development, henceforth FG & AC)

Comment: The interpretive gap between Access Policy and the lived experience of service users and service providers is evidenced in the responses to this question.

Recommendation:

- Environmental and socio-economic factors beyond access narrowly defined should be taken into account, to add context to policy development.

2) Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan? How do we ensure that vulnerable members of our society are included (e.g. learners currently in care or who have experience of being in care).

Carers/People in caring roles in the home (over 350,000). A diverse group of people but many commonly report on being isolated, on life passing them by or being put on hold while they are in the role of carer, and of needing education or training for employment when/if the caring role comes to an end. In recognition of the needs of this group and the excess time they often have on their hands, albeit they are curtailed, those on carer's allowance are permitted to work/study for up to eighteen and a half hours pw.

People in early (earliest) recovery from addiction or other debilitating life experiences. Educational assessment, career guidance and deficit learning programmes should be integral to the addiction recovery process from the earliest point. 'Recovery' is typically a time of self-reinvention. (AK)

Target groups should include Travellers, people in the direct provision system, young people within the child protection and welfare system, people with disabilities and people from low- income communities with low rates of participation in higher education. Vulnerable members of society can be included more through the provision of resources to enable early, holistically focused interventions to be put in place for children and young people in need of additional supports arising from, for instance, mental health issues and ASD. This should also include greater resourcing of Family Support services and the Meitheal model so that families' capacities to support children and young people through the education system are enhanced. Resources should also be provided to young people through the school system such as access to grinds etc., where needed to allow them to improve their performance. However, care needs to be taken about the balance within the Plan so that too much emphasis is not placed on university courses at the expense of other pathways such as apprenticeships, PLCs etc (FG & AC)

Mature Students (especially lone parents) should remain a target group for the next National Access Plan. College finance is usually the greatest concern for this cohort. Additional funding for Level 5, Level 6 and part-time Level 7 - 9 courses would guarantee greater participation. Blended learning/online courses which allow for remote learning would reduce commute time. Clear childcare provision is also essential; the current NCS system can be difficult to navigate and makes planning for college as a parent difficult. Greater networking opportunities for mature students would also serve to address social isolation. 2. Members of the Irish Travelling Community: Linking in with students at an earlier age to provide a clear message that further and higher education is a realistic option. 3. Students with Disabilities: Continued supports 4. Students coming from asylum/refugee situations: We find we have an increasing number of students from this cohort seeking advice in terms of accessing further and higher education. With the expected closure of Direct Provision centres in 2024 and a move towards community integration, we would anticipate a larger number of students in need of additional supports 5. Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Communities: Interventions under (Path 1) 'Access to Teacher Education' have had a positive impact on our local area. Similar initiatives in high point fields such as medicine could perform the same function. Initiatives which address an imbalance in terms of social capital would also be of benefit; we find many local students follow similar routes and stick to the same subject areas (Arts and Humanities, Community Development, Healthcare). STEM subjects for example are often not viewed as an option. (Antionette Patton Ballyfermot Chapelizod Partnership/ Education Officer, henceforth AP)

Existing Access target groups – people in disadvantaged areas, people who are under- represented in higher eduaction, people with disabilities, Travellers, non-nationals, long- term unemployed, mature people. Also people with disadvantaged background, living in poverty who do not necessarily live in disadvantaged areas (although they could still avail of Access supports if pass the means test, they actually may not be aware of the programme and not encouraged to apply in the first place). Other 'Under- represented' categories – refugees, low-paid workers. (Dublin South City Partnership, Life-long Learning Team, henceforth DSCP)

Comment: On the whole the CN commends the direction of the NAP up to now and recommends that the Target Groups which are very similar to the SICAP target groups remain the same. However, the people that members of the CN engage with everyday give a more nuanced perspective e.g. the inclusion of care givers as well as those in care; the new poor, the older poor.

Looking to the future, it would appear that migrant communities will need attention. Given the push factor of migration due to environmental and political upheaval in the developing world and necessity of the EU to develop a coherent migrant policy we can expect to see more migration into Ireland. These people have requirements in terms of identity, religion, language, and cultural expression that will put pressure on Irish society unless this is handled sensitively. Ireland can benefit from these new arrivals and their input into Irish society should be valued. Access in this sense means access into wider Irish Society. Access and Integration should be complimentary.

Recommendations:

- Family support work to be recognised and supported in the new NAP.
- Fund modularised credit accumulation programmes for care givers.
- Capacity building community based initiatives to be supported.
- Promote STEM in the Community.
- Recovery Education programmes links to FE/HE to build on the momentum of people primed for re-engagement with education.
- Support the University of Sanctuary movement for new arrivals.
- Develop a Recognition of Prior Learning system to process the qualifications of members of the migrant communities.
- Develop a Cultural stream of Access for the migrant population.

3) How can pre-entry and post-entry activities be developed?

Intervention at an early age is key. Further and Higher Education should be introduced as a viable option from primary school onwards. Academic supports while undertaking courses are also of great benefit. Academic writing classes and study skills workshops help to fill skill gaps that may not have been addressed at second level. (AP)

The new access plan should continue to strategise in depth consultation with those groups/people the principle of inclusivity and equity of access was established for, about personal, social and cultural barriers and impediments to accessing or even aspiring to access further education. In particular, consultation should be undertaken on perceptions of the purpose and relevance to their lives of 'higher' education with those groups who do not typically aspire to or seek to access it. (AK)

Activities need to be developed so that people are aware of the opportunities that are available to them within the HEI. This should also include non-traditional approaches such as using PLC courses, DARE and Access programmes to gain entry to preferred courses where, for example, someone might not have received the points required through the traditional CAO system. Supports should also be made available to people to reduce barriers to accessing education through campus tours etc. These should be introduced at a younger age (i.e.: primary school tours) than they are currently as by the time a student attends university open days, this is often about what choice of HEA they attend rather than whether they attend one at all. Furthermore, where individuals from marginalised communities enrol in a course they need to have access to ongoing pastoral supports in order to navigate their way through the culture and system of the institution. (FG & AC)

Pre-entry activities: Free access (waive fees) Community organisations outreach - work with Community Development Groups, Homeless services, addiction services, mental health services, migrant council, direct provision. School talks. Ensuring full information is given a bout all Access

programmes available in all participating higher education institutions (addressing geographical divide of areas 'covered' by individual higher education institutions and unfamiliar with supports available from others). Perhaps Zoom seminars with representatives from all higher education Access offices. Open days, debates, campus tours, and events expanded beyond the transition year students – starting with primary school students; interactive events like college speed dating – students of different courses answering questions about wide variety of courses. Make University campuses less forbidding and more accessible and welcoming to local communities – developing an integrated approach to link with the local community - providing free lectures, free facilities such as film, theatre, music, sport, lectures, broadband; developing projects like bee- keeping, sustainable gardening that engage local schools and local community. Design collaborative projects in which primary school students, secondary school, communities participate – specifically as part of Corporate Social Responsibility policy. Students / college gets credits for volunteering within the community. Design collaborative projects with social prescribing agents. Broadening the invite to visit the campus beyond STEM and science labs, and change of language e.g. STEM does not sound as appealing (or real) as bee-keeping etc. Post-entry activities: Address literacy barrier and develop a non- literacy approach to course work and assessment (Universal Design for Learning) Provide recordings of all lectures to cater for those who are unable to attend in person or need to hear it more than once to absorb the knowledge. Allow flexibility with course design, structure and progression (time) – option to select full / part time modules and amount of modules to be studied each year Flexibility in direction (content) – allowing to study additional modules from other courses Develop a survey or other tool so students could themselves indicate their needs and areas they need support. (DSCP)

Comment: The concerns of HEIs are the concerns of the society within which they exist. The responses above really address the barriers imagined and real that members of the general public who do not access HE perceive. The next NAP should address this by finding common cause between the HEIs and the communities they serve under macroscopic themes such as environment and climate, health, science, culture, sport, the media etc., and pursue civic engagement activities to forge relationships.

Recommendations:

- Primary education is where Access to HE should be first encountered and facilitated with Campus visits.
- Reconfigure the Second Level system to take account of Alternative pathways to apprenticeships, FE and HE and delayed entry to post-compulsory Further and Higher Education.
- Alternatives to LC/CAO route. Extend Transition Year into Transition Years as a viable alternative to the Leaving Cert. Include work experience, volunteering, community based service learning; Life Skills classes, self-directed learning projects; exit routes into employment; progression onto FE programmes; progression to HE programmes.
- Under Transition Years recognition of volunteering, community engaged learning as part of a system of credit accumulation for both experiential and academic learning continuously assessed.
- Engage Adults as part of a consultation process around curriculum development (see MU Dept. of Adult and Community Education submission on Equity of Access 2022-2026 pp 6-7.)

4) How can current funding programmes be better utilised to further the objectives if the National Access Plan?

1916 Bursary: A great support for students but the opening and closing dates for application need to be clear for students. (AP Ballyfermot)

Funding avenues should not create competition between applicants as this can serve to reinforce negative fears around ability and access.

A review of funding strategy could include an exploration of the incentivising funding model employed as part of the Clerical Abuse Redress Scheme, whereby an amount of funding towards the cost of education and training for survivors of abuse, their children and grandchildren was agreed in advance. Those typically socially disadvantaged people entitled to this funding source tended to seek out opportunities to use it that they may not have sought otherwise. This motivated them to engage with guidance services and from there to develop a further educational progression plan.

Another funding model for comparison is the 1000 Technical Employment Support Grant available per calendar year to job seekers on a Dept. Employment Affairs and Social Protection payment to purchase training or short term education interventions in line with a Personal Progression Plan. The availability of the grant again incentivises motivation to utilise it.

SUSI rules around young adults under the age of 24 can be problematic for many young people with irregular family backgrounds/circumstances. (AK)

Comment: The current National Access Plan would seem to be successful in increasing participation across most of the target groups. The main area of weakness is in attracting mature students into FE/HE programmes. There are ostensibly two reasons for this. 1) Reluctance on the part of adults to engage in HE which is seen as the preserve of Leaving Cert. students and reinforces the recurring theme of impostor syndrome among mature students. 2) The lack of financial support that would allow mature students to study in a way that is commensurate with their needs, i.e. part-time, taking modules over a longer term.

Recommendations:

- Develop Communiversities across the country utilising the Communiversity Network to engage adult learners.
- Begin consultation and adult learners needs analysis while participating on the Communiversity.
- Recognise Part-Time modularised credit accumulation programmes towards major awards as a realistic option for adult students.
- Extend the SUSI grant scheme to Part-time education programmes based on a credit accumulation model. See Dept of Adult and Community Education MU Submission to the independent review of the Student Grant Scheme by The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science 2021.

5)How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded within HEIs?

A whole institution approach is essential. Often students will meet with administrative staff first, especially if their fees are paid by a third party organisation like our Partnership or a non-governmental charity. It is important that this process is dignified and sensitive situations are treated as such. (AP)

Mainstreaming can only be further embedded within HEIs through investing in early intervention and intensive supports among younger age groups. If the focus is primarily on mainstreaming within HEIs, in and of itself, many individuals who would benefit from this approach will have already been lost to the system as they will not have received the support they require at an early age to avail of these opportunities. Resources should also be provided to ensure that students have access to tutors/mentors and other learning supports required to enable their participation in education. (FG & AC)

Comment: Access should be regarded as these key personnel in developmental educational work see it within the Lifelong Learning framework to do so would normalise access as merely an alternative entry route to FE/HE.

Recommendations:

- Primary education is where Access to HE should be first encountered.
- Promote Access and deferred entry with teaching staff, school guidance counsellors, school and HEI administrative staff as a 'normal' alternative pathway to FE/HE.
- Communication and advertising campaign to make the general public award of 'alternative entry routes' and funding supports.

6) How can a whole-of-education approach to widening participation in higher education be achieved?

Collaborative projects with schools and other bodies providing all forms of education, creating networks and linking in with alternative education providers, broadening the concept of education, e.g. allowing the services / practitioners to co-shape the curriculum and grade the assignments.(DSCP)

Widening participation is also about access to higher education and that is primarily through our leaving certificate results in Ireland. As we have introduced an effective reform to the Junior Certificate with classroom based assessments, this reform should be introduced to our leaving certificate programme as rote learning is not a skill for today. We need to equip our young people and citizens with transferrable skills for our future economy which may be very different to our current economy especially post Covid. Widening participation requires widening accessibility and the Leaving certificate should not be the only route into HE, recognised prior learning (RPL) allows one to gain admission or to gain credits on some courses, however, this is not promoted, HE is often seen as only for those who have the academic qualifications and or those who can afford it, this message needs to change and HE should be accessible for all if we really want to widen participation. (FG & AC)

An integrated approach is essential. Campus visits and on-site workshops for Primary and Secondary school students help create a sense of possibility. Subjects considered 'third level' such as philosophy and anthropology could be introduced at an earlier stage by guest speakers at a relatively low cost. Students should be able to comfortably picture themselves in a third level environment. (AP).

Comment: Similar to the recommendations in the above mainstreaming section a Lifelong Learning alternative to the Leaving Cert. approach should be adopted in the next NAP.

Recommendations:

- Develop opportunities for on site visits between HE and primary school/community education programmes.
- Reorient secondary education from Leaving Cert. to an expanded continuous assessment curriculum.
- Expand the Communiversity into TY and give modules in academic subjects not available on the LC curriculum such as Anthropology, Law, Criminology, Philosophy, Psychology etc.
- Provide Critical Skills/Study Skills classes as part of TY Communiversity.

7) How can pathways between further education and training and higher education be better developed?

Including Level 5 and Level 6 courses on the CAO Fee supports from SUSI for Level 5 and Level 6 courses More accelerated entry routes from Level 6 Courses to Degree Courses where appropriate (AP)

Many 'special status' CE schemes are functioning day programmes for people recovering from addiction or ex offenders. Many of these people are highly motivated to learn and progress educationally. Some but not all are engaged in some sort of career guidance. There are already some successful models of HE in these community based setting. (Turas for example). These could be further developed. (AK)

Pathways between further education and training and higher education need to be more streamlined and accessible to the learners. Those who have successfully completed a FET programme should have a conditional offer by the time they finish their course and prior to the CAO being offered. In addition, learners in FET should have the support of a one to one guidance counsellor on a regular basis order to sift through the myriad of choices that are available to them, guidance should be included in the curriculum in FET not just a once off at the end of the course. Moreover, additional financial support should be made available to those who progress from FET to HEI for e.g. the Millennium Partnership Fund previously funded under the Dormant account. (FG & AC)

Comment: Qualifying through FET should be regarded as an educational destination of it's own without further need of progression to HE on the part of the student. This would afford it credibility and value to FET in its own right. However, for students who do want to progress there should be an adequate adult guidance system in place for the student to engage with.

Recommendations:

- Promote FET as a valued exit point from formal education.

- Develop a system of easily accessible and well publicised Adult Guidance Counsellors along the line of MABS.
- Promote Lifelong Learning as a possibility for multiple re-engagements in formal education on the decision of the student.

8) How can other social inclusion initiatives outside of the higher education sector be harnessed to support equity of access?

Unifying the support programmes provided by various institutions. Training the members of local community (e.g. parents) around particular education-related issues (e.g. accessing grants) to deliver information sessions to wider public. (DSCP)

Life Long learning opportunities like Maynooth University's Communiversity foster a culture of learning which has far reaching benefits for the wider community. Subjects usually associated exclusively with third level institutions, such as psychology, philosophy and economics, are explored in a more informal environment such as the local library. Such initiatives help to demystify third level education and help to break down the barriers of esoteric terminology and formalised assessment. The programme usually has far reaching implications; concepts conventionally associated with higher learning are discussed and shared and with family and friends. Similar initiatives for younger demographics (e.g. secondary schools and youth services) would help to further demystify third level education. We find there is great community interest but a lack of funding for such initiatives. (AP)

One of the national social inclusion initiatives outside of the higher education sector is the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme delivered by local development companies which aims to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion and equality. There is a lot early intervention educational initiatives offered in SICAP (specifically in Galway Rural Development) including homework clubs and after school clubs in primary school. Children assessing these clubs should be offered continued support throughout their educational journey as many homework clubs are not offered in secondary education as the priority in the programme is early intervention. Therefore, there needs to be more flexibility within the programme to offer progression clubs/ support (grinds) to young people in secondary school and this could be continued into HE. Furthermore, the budgets are restrictive with a cap of 7% in the overall budget being allocated to grant aid therefore this does not allow for continued planned support throughout one's educational journey. (FG & AC)

Comment: Community actors such as LEADER Partnership companies, Local Employment services Local Development companies embedded as they are in local communities have built up a track record for delivering services to those most in need. The good will generated by these actors could be leveraged and built on for the purposes of Access.

Recommendation:

- Democratise HE by bringing the work and interests of academics out to the people in the communities in which they live through initiatives such as the Communiversity; UCC Learning Neighbourhoods or the UNESCO Learning Cities initiative.
- Identify convergence of policy and develop partnerships between the public sector for instance the Universities and the Public Library Service and civil society organisations (See the Communiversity Report pp 17-21)
- Expand the Communiversity to Transition Years students.

9) What challenges has Covid-19 presented in relation to an inclusive higher education system and how can they be addressed?

The digital divide has become more apparent as a result of COVID. The laptop loan scheme was a welcome intervention and of great benefit to our local students. The loss of public study spaces such as the local library and inexpensive coffee shops had a major impact on students who have no access to a quiet study space at home. (AP)

Opportunity to increase inclusivity e.g. lectures can be attended remotely, asynchronously – removing many barriers such as child care timing, travel costs, accommodation cost, work- related commitments. Challenge relating to IT resources and support could be addressed by developing 'learning hubs' in local libraries, schools, community centres, partnerships, etc. Challenge re missing social aspect of education – perhaps creating local learning 'pods'. (DSCP)

One of the main challenges presented by COVID-19 is that of access to digital tools to enable people without access to the necessary resources to access their education in an appropriate manner. This can range from not having a device/sharing a device with other users to broadband issues. This is a problem for students in secondary school trying to enter higher education and those already in the system. In addition, people can face challenges relating to the lack of quiet or safe spaces within which they can actually carry out their work. They can be addressed by ensuring adequate measures are taken to support the return to face-to-face learning for students not just at primary and secondary level but third level as well. In addition, further supports need to be made available to enable students to have access to the tools they need to ensure they can avail of online learning opportunities such as equipment, broadband and digital skills training. (FG & AC)

Comment: As to be expected there have been pros and cons that have emerged from the forced remote study regime that Covid 19 has imposed. People with the technology have become more familiar with the software for meetings and engaging in learning on line however this has further excluded people who were already on the margins of education and having to move the Communiversity on to Zoom means that we cannot engage those most marginalised.

Recommendations:

- It is vital that we can return to face to face interactions for first time students as soon as possible especially for access students who rely on initial relationships to build confidence.
- For the best results for Remote Learning can be useful for content delivery to students who are at an advanced stage of their studies.

10) Any other thoughts?

Consideration could be given to a change of approach – rather than addressing the barriers, removing them. Perhaps the idea of providing free education – with lectures open to public and also available online, using existing technologies to lower costs of delivering education and allow anyone to sit the exam – to bring those who may otherwise never have a chance, courage or ability to give up an income to commit to higher education. There may be a natural uptake in higher education now that so many people lost their jobs. (DSCP)

Comment: This is a radical proposition suggesting tackling inequality within the education system by dismantling the structures that lead to points races and exclusion. It may seem idealistic but when viewed within the Lifelong Learning framework it has merit and possibility.

Recommendation:

- De-emphasise the Leaving Cert. as the only route to HE.
- Emphasise Lifelong Learning as an egalitarian approach to education available to all citizens at any time of their life for personal, social and professional purposes.
- Reflect on the mission of education for the 21st Century from primary to PhD and beyond.

Conclusion:

Access itself is not an unproblematic idea. Access means different things to different people at different times of their life. For instance, Access in relation to school children assumes that access is about getting children from so called 'disadvantaged' backgrounds into Higher Education. Access for people upon a whole continuum of disabilities means an educational psychological or medical diagnosis is referenced against some notional norm whereby 'less than' is taken into account. Access for Mature students means the ability to engage with learning that is appropriate with their needs and commensurate with their life world, this can include work, family, social welfare entitlements in many cases to make up for something they missed out on first time around. As indicated above Access within the migrant community especially those who are caught up in the asylum process means something akin to meeting one's basic needs. In all cases though Access is associated with 'difference'. This assumption is loaded with negative connotations indicating 'deficiency' of some sort in either the individual or the community they come from. This is an enormous barrier to the very people the NAP seeks to target and in that sense, Access is an inside job. Perhaps the language of access needs to be looked at and the lexicon of Lifelong Learning be adopted and promoted.

Recommendations:

- Use resources that are already at hand for widening participation and community engagement.
- Support Communiversities across the country utilising the Communiversity Network for horizontal engagement into communities and the Higher Education Lifelong Learning in Ireland Network (HELLIN) for vertical engagement into each HEI access office/programmes/Campus Engage.
- Fund part-time next step Return to Learning/Critical Skills programmes in local communities to build on the initial engagement as access routes into FE/HE with graduated visits to campuses for social, cultural and learning encounters to foster relationships

Appendix A

The Communiversity: The Communiversity is about people. The participant attends in their local library for 2 to 2.5 hours one morning per week for thirteen or seventeen weeks (while we are under the conditions of the pandemic, we are linking in through Zoom but the format is still the same). Participants take modules such as Local History (which is nearly always the first module as everybody knows something about their own area and its a good module for confidence building and finding your voice), this can be followed then by modules in any number of subjects requested by the community based organiser. In the past we have run modules in Economics, Politics, Sociology, Chinese Studies, Philosophy, Psychology, Geography, Community Development; Youth Work; Criminology etc. The emphasis is on participation so people may be asked to read a short article or listen to a podcast/watch videos etc. between sessions so a good level of discussion can be reached in the session but this is not a requirement. The Communiversity is open to all who can participate i.e. low threshold. The only condition placed on the individual is that they commit to staying for the duration of the course.

One of the most unique features of the Communiversity is that it is a Partnership in the truest sense of the word in that each of the partners share a common purpose. This purpose is to provide the participant with an educational and social opportunity, in their own locality, that they would never have had before. The Partners are: Maynooth University, Local Libraries and Local Community Development or LEADER Partnership companies.

Maynooth University provides the lecturers, facilitators and tutors and co-ordinates the programme. MU also hosts the on campus Celebration of Learning day at the end of June each year, where all of that year's programmes come together to receive their certificate and share their experiences.

Local Libraries: The local libraries provide a network of venues around the country that can be used for delivery of the Communiversity programme. In conjunction with Dublin City Council's Libraries Section, Communiversities have been successfully delivered in areas which have been identified as having low participation rates into Higher Education such as Coolock; Darndale; Crumlin; Dolphin's Barn; and Ballyfermot. And with the support of County Librarians Communiversities have been delivered in Kildare, Louth, Monaghan.

The benefit of having local community partners means that the Communiversity have access to people that universities usually find very hard to reach. Local LEADER Partnership Companies are agents for the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) support services. SICAP targets single parent families, long term unemployed people, migrant communities, people with disabilities, and people in mental health and addiction recovery etc. Supporting projects and programmes that are embedded in what are often termed 'areas of disadvantage' these Partners have been able to promote the Communiversity in their local area with the result that the programmes are normally oversubscribed. Word of mouth from participants who have attended previously is all the promotion needed for the next programme to fill.

The Communiversity is easy to replicate. 25 people in each course, free of charge to the participant (at the moment funding is provided by the Partnership Companies but that leaves it open to funding risks). 13 or 17 week courses can have staggered start dates. The MAP University Access Officers is invited in to talk about progression to HE and local adult education co-ordinators talk about FE or other career opportunities.

The missing link is into the MU ecosystem of part time modular certificates from l 5 to L8 undergraduate programmes based on credit accumulation see DACE NAP submission for further information.