



**Maynooth
University**

National University
of Ireland Maynooth

Submission by Maynooth University to the HEA Research on Mature Student Participation in Higher Education

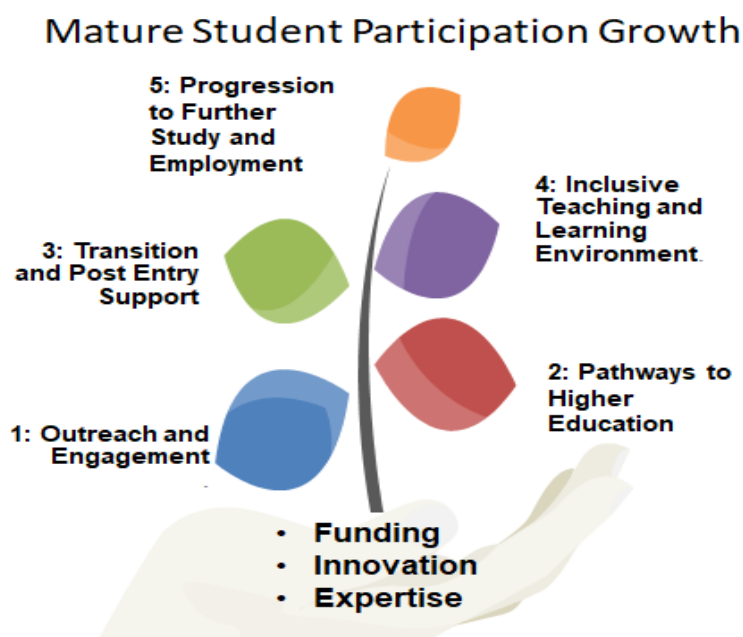
June 2020

Maynooth University: Submission to the HEA Research on Mature Student Participation in Higher Education

Introduction

Maynooth University (MU) welcomes the Higher Education Authority (HEA) call to contribute to an investigation of the issues, barriers and challenges associated with participation in higher education (HE) of current and potential first-time mature students. Moreover, MU is proud to be able to share over forty years of expertise having developed relationships, programmes, events, courses and initiatives to attract adults and mature students into education and to support them through learning.

In developing this submission collaboratively across the university, MU academics and practitioners have identified issues for mature students in participating in HE in the categories outlined in the figure below. These categories loosely follow the continuum of learning embarked on by adults that connect with learning as a mature student in university. In writing this submission, however, we are aware that adult learning, including being a mature student, may not follow a strictly linear path and that these categories are interconnected, and have strong links and overlaps. Using this approach, MU recognizes the longitudinal nature of supports needed to underpin mature student access, involvement and success in higher education. The need for adequate financial supports and funding, guided by expertise in widening participation at personal, institutional and sectoral levels across these categories, to stop the decrease in mature students accessing HE and to increase participation and success for mature students in HE cannot be overstated.



The categories outlined above are addressed as a series of recommendations across 5 building blocks for change using a longitudinal approach that will cover all aspects of the life cycle of a (prospective) mature student. The building blocks are explored in more detail in the report and are summarised below:

Core Recommendations	
1: Outreach and Engagement	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Address the financial barriers for mature students in accessing HE. 2. Resource community-based supports for educational progression to HE including advice and support for applications and funding supports. 3. Enhance and resource targeted communication platforms for mature students providing guidance, advice, support and information, particularly on financial support. 4. Resource HEIs to address low educational expectations in partnership with communities by funding ‘whole of institution’ outreach and engagement on a sustainable and long-term basis in line with an accessible, lifelong learning, longitudinal approach to the inclusion of (potential) mature students, especially those from target groups. An example of this would be to resource HEIs to provide key workers and mature student ambassador programmes which could be especially effective in FET settings to support progression to HE. Resourcing relationship building with community development organisations, in particular those that represent underrepresented communities such as Traveller organisations, would be another example. 5. Identifying communities of prospective mature students, particularly those that are the furthest from education, can be complex and challenging. Developing strategies for outreach and engagement which can offer a partnership-based approach to outreach and develop a more comprehensive understanding of ‘the (prospective) mature student’ and their communities are key. To support an evidence-based approach to outreach and engagement, fund the nationwide expansion of the AIRO pathways to higher education spatial analysis and community engagement digital dashboard programme¹ to inform an evidence-based approach to outreach and engagement. 6. HEIs should be supported to develop radically innovative approaches to outreach, beyond the traditional model of community engagement, open days and information evenings. For example, a staffed live online chat function operating after working hours, streamlined financial support and budgeting proposals that prospective mature students could consider, flexible childcare options, parking subsidies, a mature mentoring programme, live Q&As with mature ambassadors on social media, case study materials, stories of mature student success for handbooks, etc. 	
2: Pathways to Higher Education	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Address the financial barriers for mature students in accessing access/foundation and other pathways into HE. 2. Resource HEIs to provide access/foundation programmes in higher education so that course fees can be eliminated/kept low thereby enabling disadvantaged (mature) students to access them. 3. Resource HEIs to provide expanded offerings/places through access/foundation programmes to provide students with greater progression opportunities, particularly STEM and professional programmes, to build capacity and develop further academic skills and progression opportunities. 4. Create coherent and, where possible, ring-fenced places between Further Education and Training and Higher Education. 	

¹ Drawing on existing national (e.g. the census, Pobal HP Deprivation Index) and institutional (student profiles) datasets, AIRO (the All-Ireland Research Observatory) are developing a detailed spatial analysis of the MEND region to support the College Connect project team to identify untapped higher education ‘cold spots’, track barriers to higher education at local levels and monitor higher education progression and employment outcomes over time.

5. Enhance and resource increased access to adult guidance to create a centralised point of contact for all prospective mature students with advisory support to signpost progression opportunities to FET, foundation programmes and HE.
6. Implement a national programme for the Recognition of Prior Learning.

3: Transition and Post Entry Support

1. Address the financial barriers for mature students in accessing HE:
 - a. Provide parity of financial support for full time and part time mature students with support for fees and student financial support.
 - b. Review SUSI income thresholds and grant aid available to increase the amount of financial support for mature students and make SUSI available to part time students and for repeat years of study.
 - c. Increase BTEA support for mature students to reflect the cost of attending HE and actively support those in receipt of social welfare to access BTEA.
 - d. Provide additional funding through the Student Assistance Fund to all HEIs.
 - e. Provide support to mature students, particularly lone parents, towards the cost of childcare.
 - f. Resource HEIs to provide Student Budgeting Advisors to support individual students/families with financial advice and support.
2. Resource the provision of inclusive orientation programmes to support the transition to HE and to foster engagement and a sense of belonging for mature students in HE with a focus on equality discrimination prevention.
3. Resource HEIs to significantly enhance student advisory support programmes to ensure that mature students who need it receive individualised needs assessment and integrated support (counselling, medical services, career services, placement offices) on an ongoing basis throughout the duration of their studies.
4. Resource the development of targeted mentoring and coaching programmes involving current mature students/graduates.
5. Resource HEIs to provide a targeted contact system for mature students in each academic department.

4: Inclusive Teaching and Learning Environment

1. Support HEIs to develop a wider awareness of the principles of good practice in adult learning and teaching through CPD, inter-institutional and interdisciplinary collaboration and continued research.
2. Support HEIs to continue and widen research and programme development aimed at targeted groups such as Irish Travellers, working class communities suffering multiple disadvantage, Black and Minority Ethnic groups. It is crucial that such research is done with groups in a participatory manner to be fully effective. This could be linked to research clusters and centres in universities concerned with addressing disadvantage.
3. Address current funding models and structures of HE to support part-time or phased completion of degrees. Support HEIs to develop fully flexible programmes in all subject areas that cater fully for students' needs and can accommodate changes in a student's circumstances.
4. Support the further development of student fora and research in support of student voice which is capable of identifying the specific needs of mature students.
5. Support HEIs to develop a whole-of-university approach to facilitating mature students (especially those studying part-time) so that all supports and facilities are available outside of working hours and during Christmas and Easter breaks.
6. Mitigate the negative impacts of moving to virtual and blended learning environments by consulting with learners and their representative groups.

5: Progression to Further Study and Employment

1. Address the financial barriers for mature students in accessing post graduate education and employment. Provide increased financial support for mature students to access internships and study abroad options. Support mature students to access SUSI funding for post graduate study.
2. Provide specific adult guidance counselling as an integral part of degrees for mature students to manage the next transition and build on FE-HE networks to ensure continuity of guidance.
3. Resource HEIs to develop strategic relationships with employers to support internship and employment opportunities for targeted cohorts of students who will struggle with the social, cultural and economic capital needed to access relevant and appropriate employment.
4. Recognise the importance of meaningful paid placements and internships as part of degree programmes in first and second year to help mature students make informed decisions about graduate careers and to help build professional networks.
5. Support target groups in accessing potentially network and experience building learning activities such as ERASMUS student exchanges, internships and other off campus learning experiences which build experience and networks leading to more success in pursuing employment opportunities. Such activities need to be sensitive to the relative lack of geographical mobility for mature students who often have care commitments.
6. Support the development of further work with alumni and professional representative organisations to create social and professional networking opportunities that students with high social capital have access to through their own social networks.
7. Extend availability of career-guidance and other supports to mature student graduates especially those from target groups.
8. Increase pathways to post graduate education using RPL as an entry method.

Maynooth University as an agent of social change:

Maynooth University (MU), since its foundation, has had a deep commitment to equality and inclusion. We are a diverse and collegial community, and a national leader in widening participation in higher education. We have consistently attracted students and staff from a diverse range of backgrounds and offer an environment in which all students can flourish and succeed. We have, through our research, scholarship, teaching, engagement and advocacy, advanced social justice and human rights. MU has the highest proportion of students in receipt of a grant in the University sector (HEA, 2015)². In 2017, 15% of new undergraduate students had a disability, 28% came from social groups under-represented in higher education, and 47% came from families where neither parent had a higher education qualification.

This success is attributable to MU's extensive commitment in and experience of developing responses to support equality and inclusion. The Maynooth University Access Programme (MAP) is responsible for leading on widening participation policy and practice and enabling students from non-traditional backgrounds to succeed in the University. Through MAP, the University provides specific supports for mature students, and students entering through the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Disability Access to Route to Education (DARE). This support includes pre-entry preparation programmes, post entry supports, and additional financial support. With over forty years of experience in designing and developing programmes, events and courses for mature students MU's Department of Adult and Community Education (DACE) is a pioneer in research and scholarship on adult learning nationally and internationally. MU has shown national leadership in Traveller participation in HE, in particular through programmes offered by the Department of Applied Social Studies (DAPPSS). DACE is centrally involved with AONTAS as an adult education advocacy group especially with the [Community Education Network](#) and has developed [the Communiversity](#)³, a partnership with local development companies and libraries. Both DACE and DAPPSS are examples of how MU works beyond the campus with strong links to national advocacy organisations and local community groups maintaining learning from and with target groups identified in the terms of reference for this research. Scope for partnership is not limited to these groups and outreach programmes also exist for people in need of other educational supports, such as people living in direct provision and prisoners.

As with all under-represented population groups identified in national policy, we recognize that the access to participation in HE often begins long before a person takes up their place on a college course. Through funding granted by HEA as part of PATH⁴, MU have designed the [College Connect](#) programme to enhance educational aspirations for acutely under-represented groups in the MEND⁵ region in partnership with other HEI's in the region. This programme aims to provide a participative and sustainable suite of activities

² 49% in comparison to DCU at 36%, UCD at 28% or TCD at 24% for example.

³ The Communiversity is a MU pilot project offering a free university course in local libraries as a gateway for people to enter higher education. Subjects include local history, politics, sociology and philosophy (critical thinking), English, economics, geography, community development, youth work and addiction studies. Maynooth University provide the lecturers, facilitators and tutors and co-ordinate the programme. Local libraries provide a network of venues that are used for delivery of the programme.

⁴ The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) is a dedicated fund, broken into three strands, committed to increasing participation by under-represented groups in higher education. The fund, valued at €16.5 million, was established by the Department of Education and Skills in 2017 as a commitment to support the [National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019](#).

⁵ The MEND region is collective of HEI's across the Midlands, East, and North Dublin corridor that include Dublin City University, Maynooth University, Dundalk Institute of Technology and Athlone Institute of Technology

and resources that illuminate pathways into, through and beyond higher education⁶. This work involves building relationships with external stakeholders such as community development organisations, Traveller advocacy groups, and Local Area Partnership companies. MU have also led on the development of access, transfer and progression through Further Education (FE) by leading on the development of the [FET2HE Network](#) (est. 2015) across the Leinster Pillar 2 Regional Cluster⁷.

Dedicated entry routes including a [Maynooth University mature admissions route](#), a suite of Foundation Certificates, a part-time evening degree option, and an outreach programme of continuing education that principally focuses on certificate and diploma programmes further supports success in widening participation for mature students. This success is also driven by our commitment to a whole of university approach. By way of example the HEA PATH 1 funded [Maynooth University Turn to Teaching Programme](#) is a collaboration between the Maynooth Access Programme (MAP) and three distinct education departments⁸. This flagship foundation certificate offers an entry route into primary and secondary school teaching that is specifically targeted at learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular members of the Traveller Community.

MU research is the largest, most sustained body of work in Ireland on mature students. This has involved mixed-method and qualitative studies in a range of Irish HEIs and comparative work on mature student experience in HEIs across Europe. This research and international scholarship on adult learning and the teaching of adults is very extensive and falls outside the remit of the submission to include it in the bibliography. This work points clearly towards the importance of participatory and democratic approaches to teaching and learning which engages with and respects the experience adults bring to the classroom. This also means developing sophisticated conceptions of feedback and careful attention to student voice.

Repeatedly, research finds under-represented communities can experience a feeling of “not belonging” once on campus. MU works to build continuous relationships throughout their educational journey to support students to feel connected to the university. An inclusive orientation programme for all underrepresented target groups including their families/communities and supporters has been developed. Once students arrive on campus, MU has also developed a suite of academic and personal supports, some of which have been mainstreamed into the business of the university. These include a Mathematics Support Centre and a Student Budgeting Advisory Service. Our whole of university approach to student finance (est. 2018) means that we now reach those most disadvantaged through a collaborative approach.

Many mature students have extensive caring and work responsibilities in relation to their families, which impact on their education participation. This is often gendered, with women taking the majority of the caring responsibilities in Ireland and globally. Hence their access to education, selection of HE institutions, programmes and subjects, as well as their ongoing participation in education must be balanced within family and other life commitments. This is further complicated by the intersection of class, disability and

⁶ MU has led on this programme along with a broad spectrum of external and internal stakeholders including [MU All Ireland Research Observatory AIRO](#), the Department of Adult and Community Education, the Department of Education, Department of Applied Social Studies and the MU [ALL Institute for Assisting Living and Learning](#).

⁷ Leinster Pillar 2 Regional Cluster: is a collective of HEIs across the Midlands, East, and North Dublin corridor. The cluster is engaged in collaborative research projects on many different levels. This Regional Cluster is a collective of HEI's across the Midlands, East, and North Dublin corridor that include Dublin City University, Maynooth University, Dundalk Institute of Technology and Athlone Institute of Technology.

⁸ The Department of Adult and Community Education, the Department of Education and the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

ethnicity where mature students' participation and retention in higher education is mediated by the specific demands and contexts of their backgrounds. While this diversity is to be welcomed, it is usually not recognised by education systems and processes who position and relate to students as autonomous subjects independent of other family, work and social commitments.

The inclusion of first-time mature students in HE not only makes us agents for change, Maynooth University benefits because it is a more diverse and interesting place to study and work. This is enhanced by our paralleling commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion for staff.

Notwithstanding the successes outlined above, MU is concerned at the fall in the numbers of mature students entering HE. MU has traditionally had the highest intake of mature entrants among the universities. Mature new entrants to Level 8 undergraduate degrees as a percentage of the total level 8 new entrants at MU has fallen from 17.9% in 2010 to 5.6% in 2018/19. This is consistent with an overall national decline in the number of mature students applying to college. MU, in the [Maynooth University Mission Based Performance Compact 2018-2021](#), has stated that we do not anticipate major increases in mature new entrants in the short term.

There are issues in terms of barriers to participation for mature students with additional and specific issues and barriers for Irish Travellers, students with a disability, lone parents, and students disadvantaged by socio-economic barriers. There is more to be done to build inclusive admission routes and pathways, support structures, guidance systems and more community structures to address these issues and barriers. Moreover, the financial impact of the current COVID-19 crisis is likely to exacerbate the issues of mature students.

In responding to the HEA's call for submission MU has created this document which seeks to outline and address the needs of the most marginalised mature students using the Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) format of key questions, outline of issues and supporting evidence and recommendations. The report takes a longitudinal approach to the issue covering mature student experiences from pre-access to post graduation options for further study and employment. We present our recommendations across 5 building blocks for change using a longitudinal approach that will cover all aspects of the life cycle of a (prospective) mature student.

Building Block 1: Outreach and Engagement

Outreach and Engagement in MU: The Maynooth University outreach programme of activities is aimed at removing barriers to progression to higher education and creating realistic expectations for educational progression among schools, parents, adult learners and communities who historically do not access higher education. Initiatives are a blend of inreach and outreach and support the University to meet its own, and national, targets for widening participation. The development of the outreach programme has demanded the building of key relationships with education providers and communities as well as with key partners. Many outreach programmes are managed at departmental level and vary in their methods and outcomes as they are lead by individuals with particular expertise in their own subject area and an interest in increasing access. This outreach is critically important in encouraging and supporting adults to raise their educational expectations and explore their options for entering higher education.

Key Question:	As the number of mature students in Higher Education continues to fall, how can the Higher Education sector support mature students, especially those from under-represented target groups, in entering HE?
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Issues:

1. Many potential mature students perceive that HE is unaffordable and this impacts expectations and potential progression.
2. Funding issues are also at the core of shortcomings in outreach and engagement work of HEIs where, what should be long-term investments in communities, are truncated by short-term project funding leading to a '*culture of initiatives*' which harms trust between HEIs and community organisations. This undermines possibilities and perceptions of good partnership where each partner invests financial and other resources to achieve the aims of outreach. There is a particular lack of funding to support effective outreach to develop partnerships between HEIs and community stakeholders (e.g. Traveller and Roma representative organisations).
3. Low educational expectations exist for many adults, especially those from target groups. Developing a culture of expectation within communities that lifelong learning is accessible and achievable is one aim of many outreach programmes. This is resource intensive and relies on developing partnerships with community groups.
4. Information, advice and guidance for prospective mature students can be fragmented and difficult to access in a systemic way. Mature students need significant support to build confidence and to navigate the options which can seem out of reach.
5. Fostering ambitions to participate in higher education for adults is hampered by a fragmented approach to community engagement from HEIs which can disempower communities through a 'top-down' approach. The benefit of partnership between HEIs and community groups focusing on mutual learning in addressing community needs are often missed through a lack of focus on community needs and the learning outcomes for participants that could lead to further engagement in education up to HE level.
6. No comprehensive national database of Adult Education programmes exists nor is there a coherent process in place for HEIs to monitor and aggregate new mature students from the specific target groups.
7. There is a lack of choice and flexibility in course provision especially for part-time learners which are particularly suitable to mature students e.g. greater evening and weekend options, block study, blended learning. Most level 8 courses in universities are delivered full time and despite longstanding commitment to developing a greater range of supports for flexible and part-time learning this remains very much at the margins of learning in higher education.
8. The Covid 19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the absence of broadband, IT equipment and

computer training to enable blended learning. Such deficiencies will have an impact on the ability of HEIs to adequately partner with community groups to achieve learning outcomes

Evidence:

1. Report by Barter and Hyland (2020) evidence barriers in terms of lack of funding for community engagement which is not available for HEIs leading to community groups to take on the burden of funding such initiatives from meagre funds.
2. Research undertaken in defining goals for the MEND collaborative College Connect programme - 'Pathways report'⁹ (2019) assesses the situation for mature students and shows the various pathways that exist for mature students. Navigating these often fragmented and complex pathways requires support for mature students to access HE.
3. Examples such as [Campus Engage](#) and TU Dublin Students Learning with Communities initiative are good examples of how the higher education sector can engage with local communities.

Recommendations:

1. Address the financial barriers for mature students in accessing HE.
2. Resource community-based supports for educational progression to HE including advice and support for applications and funding supports.
3. Enhance and resource targeted communication platforms for mature students providing guidance, advice, support and information, particularly on financial support.
4. Resource HEIs to address low educational expectations in partnership with communities by funding 'whole of institution' outreach and engagement on a sustainable and long-term basis in line with an accessible, lifelong learning, longitudinal approach to the inclusion of (potential) mature students, especially those from target groups. An example of this would be to resource HEIs to provide key workers and mature student ambassador programmes which could be especially effective in FET settings to support progression to HE. Resourcing relationship building with community development organisations, in particular those that represent underrepresented communities such as Traveller organisations, would be another example.
5. Identifying communities of prospective mature students, particularly those that are the furthest from education, can be complex and challenging. Developing strategies for outreach and engagement which can offer a partnership-based approach to outreach and develop a more comprehensive understanding of 'the (prospective) mature student' and their communities are key. To support an evidence-based approach to outreach and engagement, fund the nationwide expansion of the AIRO pathways to higher education spatial analysis and community engagement digital dashboard programme¹⁰ to inform an evidence-based approach to outreach and engagement.
6. HEIs should be supported to develop radically innovative approaches to outreach, beyond the traditional model of community engagement, open days and information evenings. For example, a staffed live online chat function operating after working hours, streamlined financial support and budgeting proposals that prospective mature students could consider, flexible childcare options, parking subsidies, a mature mentoring programme, live Q&A's with mature ambassadors on social media, case study materials, stories of mature student success for handbooks, etc.

⁹ This is an internal working document for College Connect to identify achievable goals that will increase access and participation of target cohorts. The purpose of the report was to map what pathways exist in MEND and how well they serve the communities.

¹⁰ Drawing on existing national (e.g. the census, Pobal HP Deprivation Index) and institutional (student profiles) datasets, AIRO (the All-Ireland Research Observatory) are developing a detailed spatial analysis of the MEND region to support the College Connect project team to identify untapped higher education 'cold spots', track barriers to higher education at local levels and monitor higher education progression and employment outcomes over time.



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Linking Traveller Organisations in with the College Connect project will be hugely important. Travellers need accessible information in Plain English about the process of getting into college, the skills needed, building up credits to get into Maynooth University. It is daunting till you see you have done the credits in the past or are on your way to having them.

Final year Mature Student, Traveller and 1916 Bursary recipient

It exposed (*Communiversi-ty* programme of study) you to something that you ordinarily wouldn't be exposed to – so from that point of view you could make up your mind if you wanted to pursue itit opened your mind to something that you might automatically think – oh no it's not for me and suddenly you think (differently)...

Communiversi-ty Participant

Building Block 2: Pathways to Higher Education

Pathways: A key area for Maynooth University concerns the creation and development of flexible pathways to third level education for our target groups. MU has contributed significantly to the development of national pathways for school leavers and students with disabilities through HEAR and DARE and to the development of the Maynooth University mature student entry route. The Department of Adult and Community Education have also developed a stepping-stone for those who wish to return to study but have not studied in any formal way for a number of years. Participants on the [Maynooth University Certificate in Return to Learning](#) are given an opportunity to sample a number of academic subjects so that they can make a more informed choice when selecting subjects later. A specific pathway for disadvantaged mature students through the [Maynooth University Certificate in Science](#) has also been developed. In 2017 MAP, the Department of Adult and Community Education, the Department of Education and the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education developed the [Maynooth University Turn to Teaching Programme](#), a foundation route pathway to access Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Successful completion guarantees progression to a number of our degree programmes.

Key Question: How can the Higher Education sector support mature students to navigate the various pathways that exist for entry to HE?

Issues:

1. Access/Foundation Programmes provide an important route into higher education for mature students, particularly students that are the furthest away from education. The courses that are provided within HEIs are not funded by the HEA which advocates that delivery of such courses should be located within the FE sector. As a result, the course cost must be borne by the student or the HEI. Students on these courses are also not 'counted' as mature students.
2. Many mature students participate in FET or foundation programmes first but there are few coherent, structured pathways between Further Education and Training (FET) and Higher Education (HE) rather existing pathways are ad hoc. Therefore, students on FET courses are not always sure or feel that they have guaranteed progression options.
3. [The Adult Education Guidance Initiative \(AEGI\)](#) and the guidance services provided in FET settings are excellent, but these services are not necessarily accessible to all prospective mature students unless they are linked with their local AEGI through community initiatives or through a formal programme of study in a FET College.
4. Recognition for Prior Learning (RPL) practice in Ireland continues to be very uneven. While practice has been developed and advanced in some institutions this is not universal.

Evidence:

1. MU 'Pathways report'¹¹ (2019) found existing pathways into HE in the MEND region are uneven, complex and unclear with inconsistencies in entry requirements. [The FET2HE scoping document](#) documents the issues with HE admission processes using accreditation accumulated in FET settings.
2. Research into Foundation Certificates (Fitzsimons and O'Neill 2015; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017) evidence their success in preparing students for undergraduate studies but identify inequalities in

¹¹ This is an internal working document for College Connect to identify achievable goals that will increase access and participation of target cohorts. The purpose of the report was to map what pathways exist in MEND and how well they serve the communities. There is a lack of supports, including pathways, across the MEND colleges that are culturally appropriate and specific to the needs of the Traveller community (though MU have since developed a part-time Return to Learning Foundation Course for Travellers wishing to progress to the B.Soc.Sc. degree in Community and Youth Work).



access to these programmes because of course fees.

3. Report by Barter and Hyland (2020) shows the benefits education in local community settings in terms of generating interest in HE engagement. As students on this outreach programme are outside of the ETB system options to progress are limited for past-participants.
4. Finn (2019) studied recognition of prior learning and found that different approaches to RPL in HE offers different outcomes and were built on vague conceptualizations of RPL.

Recommendations:

1. Address the financial barriers for mature students in accessing access/foundation and other pathways into HE.
2. Resource HEIs to provide access/foundation programmes in higher education so that course fees can be eliminated/kept low thereby enabling disadvantaged (mature) students to access them.
3. Resource HEIs to provide expanded offerings/places through access/foundation programmes to provide students with greater progression opportunities, particularly STEM and professional programmes, to build capacity and develop further academic skills and progression opportunities.
4. Create coherent and, where possible, ring-fenced places between Further Education and Training and Higher Education.
5. Enhance and resource increased access to adult guidance to create a centralised point of contact for all prospective mature students with advisory support to signpost progression opportunities to FET, foundation programmes and HE.
6. Implement a national programme for the Recognition of Prior Learning.

She went on to the MU website and found information on the Return to Learning foundation course for which she successfully applied. She received no guidance in finding out the various options that were available to her. At the time she received a 'Jobseeker's transitional payment' which allowed her to study and work part-time to a certain earning limit – without that payment it would have been impossible for her to return to education.

Mature Student going into 3rd year, lone parent – record of conversation

SUSI was very challenging for me. They were looking for documents that were not possible to get. I'm living on a halting site and for example, I'm not a named tenant, I live in a mobile home so some documentation requested was hard to get. Pavee Point helped me to overcome that with SUSI. So I got SUSI in the end but it was very drawn out and stressful process and I would have not applied only for Pavee Point supports.

Final year Mature Student, Traveller and 1916 Bursary recipient

Please describe the route you took –

The Return to Learning at Maynooth and support in the Ballyfermot community through (CDET) and Matt Talbot Community Trust and the support of the Ballyfermot Chapelizod Partnership.

Mature Student going into 2nd year, 1916 Bursary recipient, lone parent

Building Block 3: Transition and Post Entry Support

Transition to third level: Maynooth University has developed a series of initiatives, including the LaunchPad Orientation Programme¹², which enable students to make a successful transition to third level study. These early engagement initiatives, in which potential students are gradually introduced to the University and afforded the opportunity to learn vital academic skills, are designed to empower students to surmount transitional difficulties and therefore participate fully as students of Maynooth University.

Post-entry Support: Post-entry supports developed by MU are aimed at achieving equity of participation while supporting students to develop as independent learners. Access, progression and retention is underpinned by a suite of post entry supports aimed at enhancing academic achievement and fostering engagement. A number of supports initially developed for widening participation target groups have been mainstreamed e.g. Mathematics Support Centre, Student+ and the Student Budgeting Advisory Service, in order to improve the student experience and learning outcomes for all students. Pioneering specialised supports (e.g. Student Central) have been developed for the smaller percentage of students whose more complex needs cannot always be met through mainstream provision. Furthermore, initiatives which provide a more cohesive and inclusive approach to supporting students, e.g. the unique MAP Academic Advisors model and the Launchpad Orientation Programme, have been successful in meeting student needs for all students in a more efficient and comprehensive way.

Key Question: How can the Higher Education sector support mature students in higher education?

Issues:

1. Diverse students require personal, financial and academic supports. Many mature students struggle to participate in full-time undergraduate programmes because of competing work, care-based and financial responsibilities¹³.
2. SUSI funding requirements stipulate that a student undertake 60 credits each academic year which is unachievable for many mature students. This is a significant barrier to the participation of mature students in HE part-time courses.
3. Many mature students, in addition to receiving SUSI, also rely on individualised funding through the Student Assistance Fund (SAF). Funding through the SAF to HEIs is limited and so students only receive small amounts of funding.
4. Mature students who are in receipt of social welfare describe how these welfare supports can be uncertain or change as policy changes. This uncertainty, particularly where there are such small margins, make the 'risk' of returning to education too high.
5. Mature students, unsurprisingly, may take longer to complete their degree. However, if they are in receipt of SUSI they could lose that support if they need to repeat a year of study. They can also be liable for additional fees and costs. Again, these additional financial costs can make completing programmes of study seem out of reach.
6. Mature students can lack confidence in their ability to complete their studies due to previous negative educational experiences and/or time-periods away from education.

¹² Launchpad is a 3-day orientation for incoming MAP students to get to know one another and the University before starting Maynooth University. Students stay on campus in student accommodation for the duration of the programme, supervised by existing HEAR and DARE and mature students who act as role models and mentors.

¹³ Small expenses can make the difference between staying in HE or leaving. For example, the additional cost of lab coats, attending the Gaeltacht, 'teachers clothes' required for school placement, photocopying and printing, expensive books.

7. Mature students can struggle to fit in socially to classes which are primarily made up of younger-age students.

Evidence:

1. The *Study on the Costs of Participation in Higher Education* (HEA, 2009)¹⁴ shows students experience financial strain and often rely on other sources of funding to supplement college going.
2. *Progression in Irish Higher Education* (HEA, 2016) identified in relation to socio-economic groups, that the differences between socio-economic group and non-progression are statistically significant and that for many under represented communities the financial hardships of attending higher education are affecting their ability to get into and to stay in college.
3. Maynooth University has paid €100,000 of expedited SAF payments to 173 students since 13 March 2020. There are more than 200 further SAF applications currently being processed. We are now paying SAF weekly to meet urgent demand. Many of these are mature students who traditionally have been the biggest group accessing these funds.
4. The 1916 Bursaries have had a significant impact on the affordability of HE for many mature students experiencing complex disadvantage. At Maynooth University, entry 2017, 5 out of 10 bursary recipients were mature students, entry 2018, 4 out of 10 were mature students, and in 2019, 8 out of 10 bursary recipients were mature students. All of these students have been retained in HE with personal and academic and financial support. Providing significant additional guaranteed funding that addresses financial need to mature students sustains success at higher education level.
5. Engagement and discussion with students from marginalized and under-represented communities and in particular students who have successfully navigated the system, highlights ongoing financial struggles further compounded by piecemeal funding opportunities that create insecurity and anxiety in the learner. The need to make frequent funding applications also increases stigma.
6. Student supports exist in MU and are well used to the point of being under pressure at stressful points during the year. These supports help mature students deal with issues such as a lack of confidence academically or dealing with financial pinch points which can have an impact on mature student retention.

Recommendations:

1. Address the financial barriers for mature students in accessing HE.
 - a. Provide parity of financial support for full time and part time mature students with support for fees and student financial support.
 - b. Review SUSI income thresholds and grant aid available to increase the amount of financial support for mature students and make SUSI available to part time students and for repeat years of study.
 - c. Increase BTEA support for mature students to reflect the cost of attending HE and actively support those in receipt of social welfare to access BTEA.
 - d. Provide additional funding through the Student Assistance Fund to all HEIs.
 - e. Provide support to mature students, particularly lone parents, towards the cost of childcare.
 - f. Resource HEIs to provide Student Budgeting Advisors to support individual students/families with financial advice and support.

¹⁴This report outlined how “*The level of State funding for students and the nature of that funding have led to a situation where some groups of students are experiencing financial strain and the ongoing pressure of having to secure income from other sources. The experience of subjective financial strain may impact negatively on a student’s performance and retention in HE*”



2. Resource the provision of inclusive orientation programmes to support the transition to HE and to foster engagement and a sense of belonging for mature students in HE with a focus on equality discrimination prevention.
3. Resource HEIs to significantly enhance student advisory support programmes to ensure that mature students who need it receive individualised needs assessment and integrated support (counselling, medical services, career services, placement offices) on an ongoing basis throughout the duration of their studies.
4. Resource the development of targeted mentoring and coaching programmes involving current mature students/graduates.
5. Resource HEIs to provide a targeted contact system for mature students in each academic department.

I asked him why he was leaving. He explained to me that the final sacrifices were huge. That morning his daughter had asked him going out to school if she could have 2 euros for a no-uniform day and he did not have it to give to her. He decided that he could not do this to his family, particularly his children any longer and he left the course.

John – ex Mature Student in conversation

When I started in Maynooth I was worried about fitting in. I was the only Traveller in my class. I was worried based on previous experiences in formal education. I actually settled in very well, everyone was very friendly and I was linked with MAP for support. I settled into the Department of Applied Social Studies better than I expected.

Final year Mature Student, Traveller and 1916 Bursary recipient

Childcare and financial issues were barriers in getting to higher education. I was also worried having a chronic condition/disability would impact my ability to do well and participate. My experience in HE is very positive. I struggled quite a bit throughout the year with a chronic condition, and the MAP office were extremely helpful and accommodating.

Mature Student going into 2nd year, 1916 Bursary recipient, lone parent and student with a disability

Building Block 4: Inclusive Teaching and Learning Environment	
<p>The Department of Adult and Community Education in MU has built the biggest knowledge base on adult learning in Ireland (examples of which are available here). Our philosophy is that education should be participatory, dialogic and designed in collaboration with learners. To increase the numbers of mature students, it is necessary for HEIs to adapt to learners needs and not vice-versa. This means being innovative and creative in our pedagogies appreciating that all learners bring extensive knowledge into the university.</p>	
Key Question:	How can the teaching and learning environment be made more inclusive the needs of mature students with diverse needs?
Issues:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Research indicates that the opportunity to access education is very highly valued by most mature students and these students contribute greatly to the university. However, there is uneven awareness across Irish higher education of the pedagogies and practices that best support mature students which leads to an inappropriate and ineffective approach to the teaching and learning of adults. 2. There is a relative lack of culturally responsive pedagogy and curricula aimed at specific disadvantaged groups. Many programmes continue to rely on curricula that are west-centric and that silence many population groups such as those from disadvantaged communities, Travellers, Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME) students, people with disabilities and all those with diverse learning needs. 3. There is a need to create more opportunities for mature students voices to be heard with HEIs. 4. The current funding model and structures of HE does not adequately support part time or phased completion of degrees (building credits and credentialising prior learning/work experience). The rigidity of the system has an impact on participation of mature students. There is a lack of choice and flexibility in course provision especially for part-time learners which are particularly suitable to mature students e.g. greater evening and weekend options, block study, blended learning. Most level 8 courses in universities are delivered full time and despite longstanding commitment to developing a greater range of supports for flexible and part-time learning this remains very much at the margins of learning in higher education. 5. Developing appropriate pedagogical and institutional to support mature students especially disadvantaged mature students using talking and blended learning. 	
Evidence:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Access and Participation in Irish Higher Education</i> (Fleming, Finnegan and Loxley, 2017) comprehensively examines the concept of access to HE from various points of view including specific chapters for target groups. 2. International scholarship on best practice in adult teaching and learning. 3. Institutional and practitioner experience in running courses, events and initiatives. 	
Recommendations:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Support HEIs to develop a wider awareness of the principles of good practice in adult learning and teaching through CPD, inter-institutional and interdisciplinary collaboration and continued research. 2. Support HEIs to continue and widen research and programme development aimed at targeted groups such as Irish Travellers, working class communities suffering multiple disadvantage, Black and Minority Ethnic groups. It is crucial that such research is done with groups in a participatory manner to be fully effective. This could be linked to research clusters and centres in universities concerned with addressing disadvantage. 	



3. Address current funding models and structures of HE to support part time or phased completion of degrees. Support HEIs to develop fully flexible programmes in all subject areas that cater fully for students' needs and can accommodate changes in a student's circumstances.
4. Support the further development of student fora and research in support of student voice which is capable of identifying the specific needs of mature students.
5. Support HEIs to develop a whole-of-university approach to facilitating mature students (especially those studying part-time) so that all supports and facilities are available outside of working hours and during Christmas and Easter breaks.
6. Mitigate the negative impacts of moving to virtual and blended learning environments by consulting with learners and their representative groups.

I found that there was no class difference (in the Communiversity)– when I was at school the teacher was up there and we were down there – and even when my kids went to school the teacher was up there but in this there was no class difference.

Communiversity Participant

I was a bit anxious at the start of my degree but now my confidence has grown. I have some amazing lecturers who just go out of their way to help. I also had anxiety about how I would be treated because of my disability but I can honestly say I have never felt as included before in my life. The staff and students here are just amazing.

Mature Student in Final Year with a disability

Building Block 5: Progression to Further Study and Employment	
<p>MU was involved in the Erasmus funded EMPLOY project¹⁵. This project explored in-depth the transitions for non-traditional students, (from low income families, first generation into HE, students with a disability and from underrepresented ethnic and minority groups) in six European countries from graduation to employment. By developing tools (employer and student handbooks, workshops, social media interaction) to assist and support non-traditional students into employment and the chances of these students/graduates to obtain employment that was below degree level was significantly increased.</p>	
Key Question:	How do we ensure that mature students, especially those from target groups, can access further learning and other qualifications and access relevant, secure and sustainable employment?
Issues:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Many mature students see their university education as a more longitudinal re-directing of an occupational life into more meaningful and better-paid work. The outcomes for mature students do not always lead to better jobs and without adequate support, guidance and opportunities some will return to the low-paid, low-status work that they had hoped a university education would release them from. 2. Mature students are concentrated in less specialised disciplines (Arts and Humanities) that require further specialisation before being able to participate in a job market – therefore the provision of post graduate courses is now more central to progress from study to employment. 3. Recognition of Prior Learning is not commonly used as an entry method for post-graduate programmes this can exclude mature students with significant experience and learning outside of the formal and/or Irish education system. Migrants (returning) to Ireland with significant experience are particularly prone to exclusion from using qualifications for employment or access to post-graduate education. 4. Mature students from target groups are disadvantaged in getting relevant employment because of a lack of social cultural and economic capital. Accessing relevant employment, the development of (professional) networks, paid internships and study abroad options, can be challenging for mature students. 5. Mature students often experience more complex and difficult transitions to employment/postgraduate life – a transition that starts in the latter part of their degrees as they start to imagine the ‘what next?’. There can be significant personal, familial and social expectations to negotiate in this transition which is often undertaken without adequate or appropriate guidance. 6. Discrimination is a real lived experience for many target groups and persists after graduation leading to limited opportunities to gain suitable employment. This acts as a significant disincentive to make the sacrifices needed to access HE. 	
Evidence:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. EMPLOY project described above. 2. HEA Graduate Outcomes Survey: Class of 2018 report identifies that graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds earn less after graduation than others. 3. Importance of joined-up adult guidance which follows the student pre, during and post-university. 4. Finn (2019) studied recognition of prior learning and found that different approaches to RPL in HE offers different outcomes and were built on vague conceptualizations of RPL. 	
Recommendations:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Address the financial barriers for mature students in accessing post graduate education and employment. Provide increased financial support for mature students to access internships and 	

¹⁵ employ.dsw.edu.pl



- study abroad options. Support mature students to access SUSI funding for post graduate study.
2. Provide specific adult guidance counselling as an integral part of degrees for mature students to manage the next transition and build on FET-HE networks to ensure continuity of guidance.
 3. Resource HEIs to develop strategic relationships with employers to support internship and employment opportunities for targeted cohorts of students who will struggle with the social, cultural and economic capital needed to access relevant and appropriate employment.
 4. Recognise the importance of meaningful paid placements and internships as part of degree programmes in first and second year to help mature students make informed decisions about graduate careers and to help build professional networks.
 5. Support target groups in accessing potentially network and experience building learning activities such as ERASMUS student exchanges, internships and other off campus learning experiences which build experience and networks leading to more success in pursuing employment opportunities. Such activities need to be sensitive to the relative lack of geographical mobility for mature students who often have care commitments.
 6. Support the development of further work with alumni and professional representative organisations to create social and professional networking opportunities that students with high social capital have access to through their own social networks.
 7. Extend availability of career-guidance and other supports to mature student graduates especially those from target groups.
 8. Increase pathways to post graduate education using RPL as an entry method.

James graduated with his degree and I met him some years later and asked him about his career. He found when he graduated with his degree that he could not get a job because as he says *'who wants to employ someone in a business who just has twenty years' experience painting and decorating on their CV'*. He was most disillusioned with higher education and felt that the sacrifices that he and his family had made had been for nothing. He did feel that his children benefitted socially from his experience because they valued education However overall, he felt that his experiences had been one of constant struggle and with a sense of always battling for support.

James - In conversation

This is an opportunity and experience I never thought I'd get. I'm loving the practical side of fieldwork placements and experiencing different organisations where I can develop new skills and use my existing skills in a different setting and meeting new people. I'm hoping it'll break barriers and open new doors for me. My main goal is to go back into my own community, fighting for human rights.

Mature Student in final year, Traveller and 1916 Bursary recipient

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Appendix 1 - Maynooth University Entry Routes:

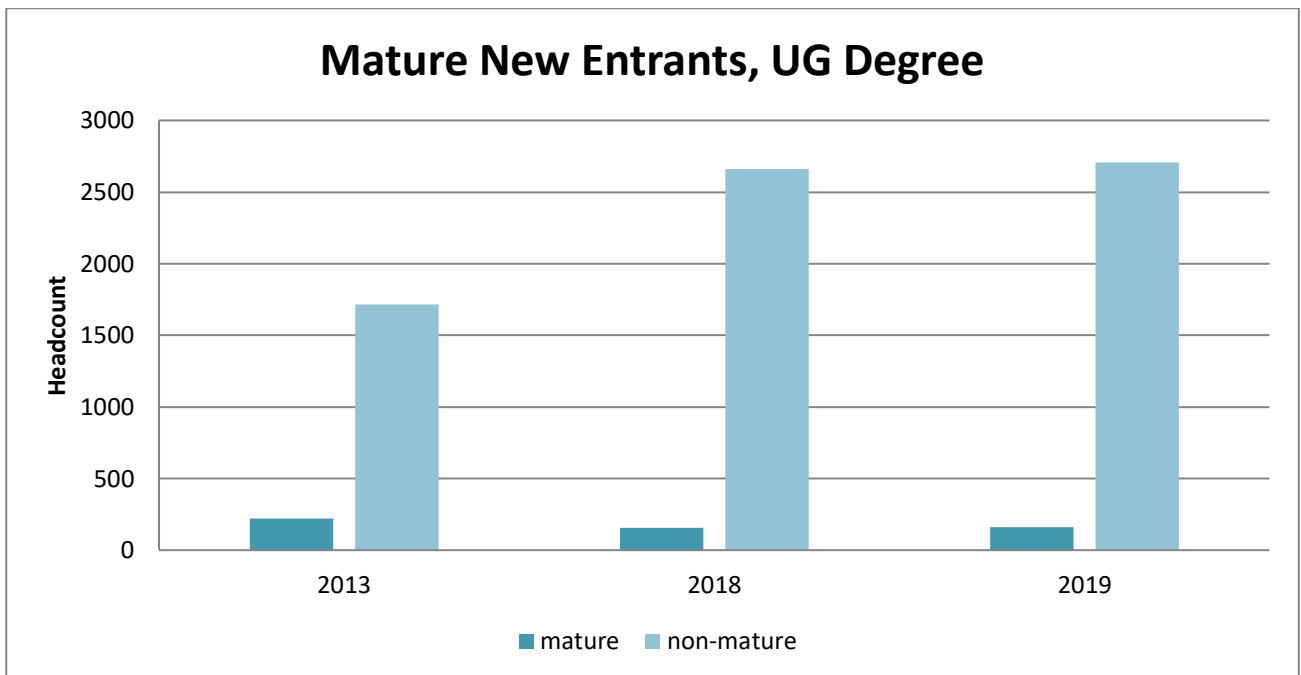
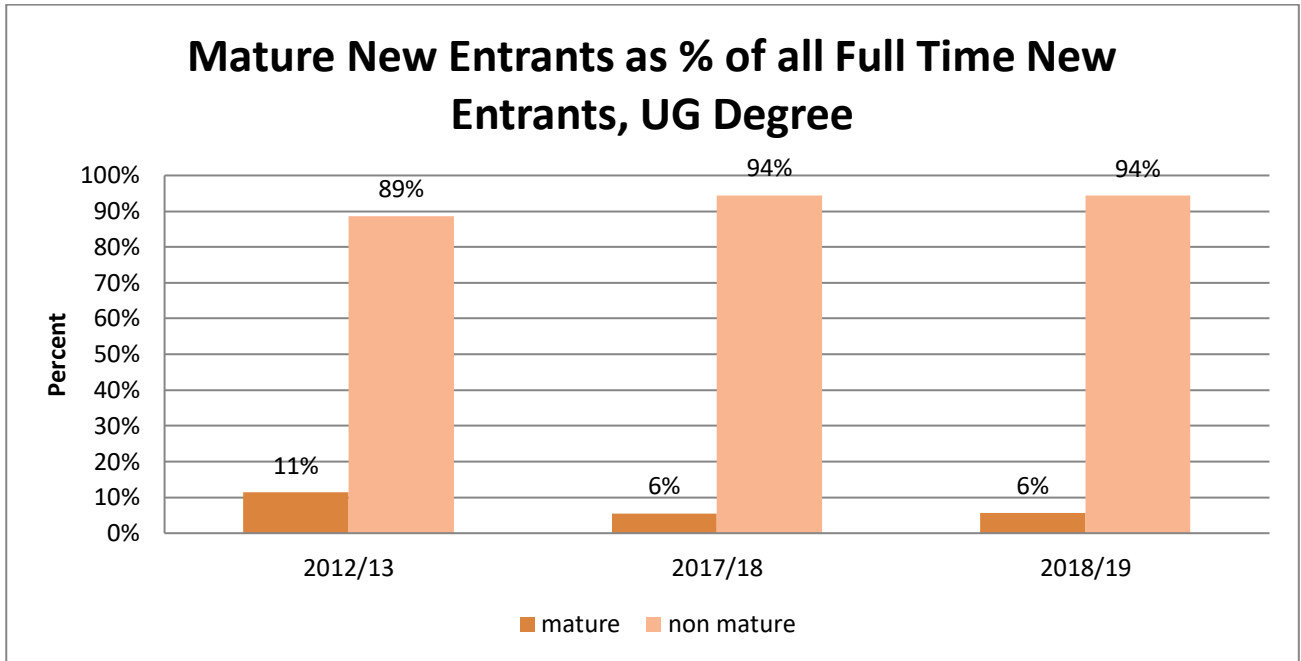
There are a broad range of entry routes available to prospective mature students at Maynooth University. Maynooth University offers a range of pre-university foundation courses for students to provide the opportunity to prepare academically for study in different subject areas. The [Certificate in Science](#) prepares mature learners (21+) for study in Science and Engineering. The MU [Certificate in Return to Learning](#) provides students with the opportunity to sample a number of academic subjects in the Arts/Humanities/Social Sciences so that they can make a more informed choice when selecting subjects later. Completion of the Return to Learning course also makes students eligible for Recognition of Accredited Prior Learning for the Part-Time Degree for Adults the BA Local Studies & BA Community Studies [MH803](#). A foundation route pathway to access Initial Teacher Education (ITE) has also been developed by the University through the [Turn to Teaching Programme](#) with the first intake having started in September 2018. Each of these courses provides guarantee of entry to a number of relevant degree courses on successful completion. MU is planning to incorporate our range of successful Mature Student Access Programmes in Humanities, Turn to Teaching (Education) and Science & Engineering in to an overall structure to serve the needs of the target groups. We wish to enhance the provision to include an access programme for matures to Business and Law, two discipline areas which marginalised matures are underrepresented in, which this proposed programme would address.

MU provides a specific [Maynooth University mature admissions route](#) for mature students who are aged 23 or over who may not have achieved their full potential in previous education or who have been out of education for some time. Applicants apply through the CAO. All Maynooth University courses are open to mature applicants. There are a range of approaches in assessing mature applicants, which involve both the wider academic community and administration and support staff with extensive experience in supporting mature learners. Mature entry to many of our degrees is granted on the basis of an interview, which explores the applicant's suitability for the degree based on education attainment, and/or life/work experience. For more specialised degrees, selection of mature students may be on the basis of a written assessment, after which a shortlist for interview is compiled. Many of our mature applicants are referred to Academic Writing or Mathematics courses as part of their preparation for third level study. Our interviews contain a strong advisory and developmental focus which enables the University to not just assess suitability for a course, but also to offer advice on subject choice, what to expect in college and on the more practical aspects of returning to study, such as funding options.

For applicants requiring further preparatory study, the University offers comprehensive and tailored advice during the interview, offering guidance on the most suitable preparatory course such as our own Foundation/Access courses or within the network of Colleges of Further Education that the university has relationships with. The suite of Level 7 Part-Time courses provided by the Continuing Education section of the Dept. Of Adult and Community Education also act as alternative routes into the university for adult students. A number of these programmes are offered in Outreach venues embedded in local communities and in partnership with community based or statutory organisations such as Local Drug and Alcohol Task Forces, Community Development Companies and Community Employment schemes. These Open Access courses carry 20 credits on the ECTS and are available to students aged 21 years on 1 January in the year of commencement.



Appendix 2 MU Mature Student Data



Appendix 3 – Maynooth University Submission - development process and list of contributors

Process

After an initial consultation with Ronnie O’Toole from Indecon Economic Consultants Dr Rose Ryan, Director of Access, invited academics and practitioners at Maynooth University to contribute to the study on mature student participation.

Indecon facilitated a focus group with MU staff only (academic, practitioners and policy makers) on Friday 15th May. A number of staff also contributed perspectives directly to Indecon.

A broad range of experts in the area of adult education at Maynooth University developed this submission in May and June 2020. The focus of this submission was to consider how as a university, recognising the depth of our expertise in this area, we could share our knowledge to better understand why there has been such low and reducing participation by mature students in HE, what the key barriers and issues are and how we might, from a policy perspective, address these issues. The team also consulted with community and voluntary groups, key stakeholders, and mature students to ensure that their voices and experiences were reflected in the submission. The team identified five major barriers for mature students in accessing and participating in HE. The team created a template of issues, collated supporting evidence and considered appropriate recommendations. Using MS Teams contributors added content to the submission where the final report formatted and agreed. The report was edited by Sinead Hyland, Dr Camilla Fitzsimons and Dr Rose Ryan.

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