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Access Policy and Practice Insights Critical Factors Enabling PATH 3 Inter-Institutional Partnership

A Case Study

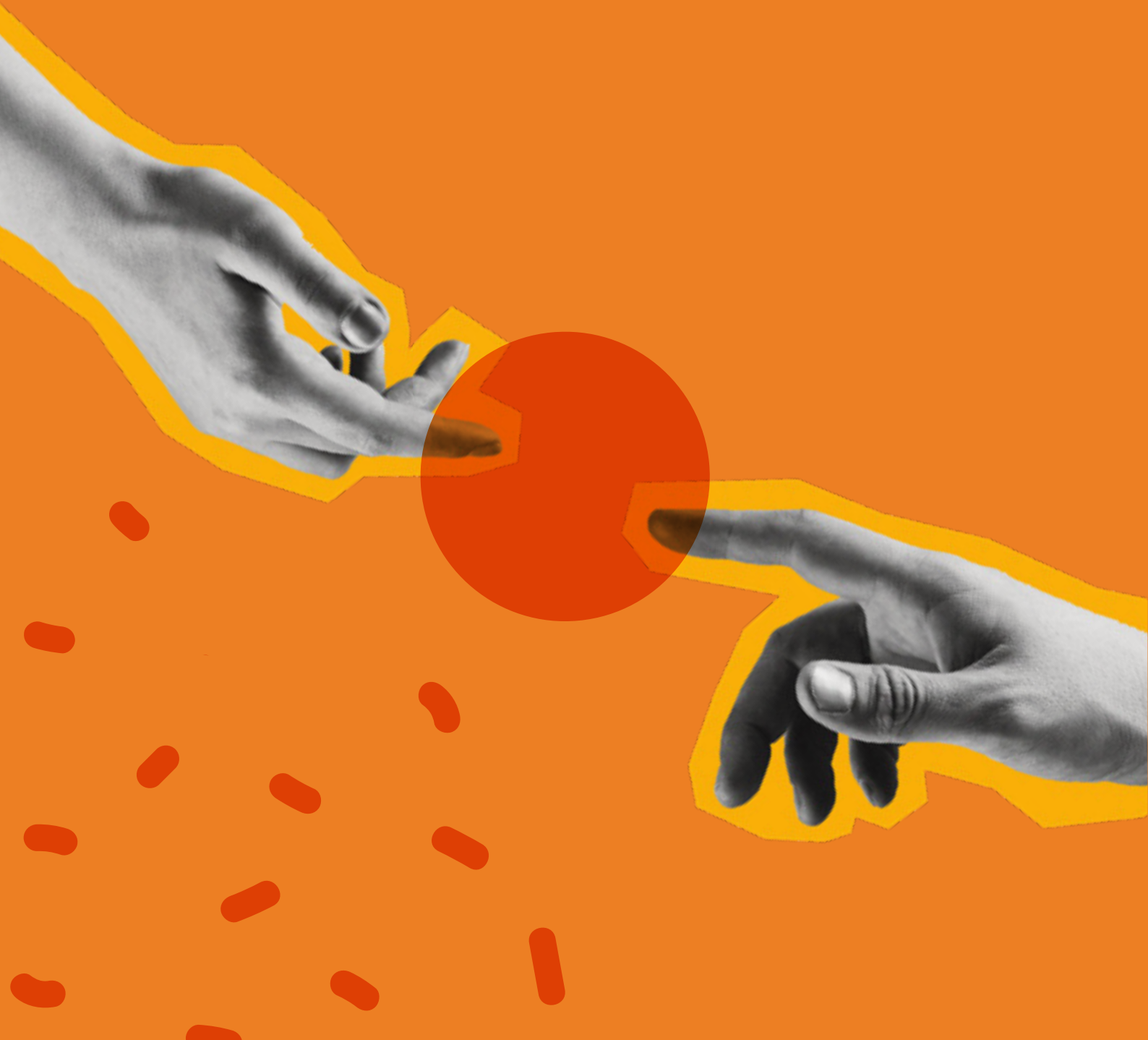


Liz Folan O'Connor, Máire Leane, Sheila McGovern, Fiachra Ó Súilleabháin



ACCESS POLICY AND PRACTICE INSIGHTS

The Access Policy and Practice Insights was developed to surface and disseminate policy and practice insights derived from the shared reflective learning occurring on the PATH 3 Programme, South Cluster. This case study 'Access Policy and Practice Insights Critical Factors Enabling PATH 3 Inter-Institutional Partnership – A Case Study' identifies critical factors that support inter-institutional partnerships around access. It is informed by the insights of Access Practitioners and Registrars involved in the South Cluster.



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Broadening participation in higher education is an aspiration widely adopted by HEIs in most OECD countries.⁽¹⁾ Policy initiatives to increase access to higher education for all have resulted in a dramatic increase in the numbers attending higher education in Ireland, but challenges remain in reaching under-represented communities.⁽²⁾

The comparatively low levels of students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds in higher education (HEA 2018) has led to a push for more targeted and coordinated policy initiatives. Signaling an intention to promote more co-operative engagement, the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030⁽³⁾ called on higher education institutions to develop a 'regional cluster model' to facilitate system-wide collaboration between diverse institutions in order to:

- (i) Improve responsiveness to local economic and social needs;
- (ii) Encourage progression pathways for students; and
- (iii) Facilitate academic interchange and exchange of ideas.

Recognising that each HEI is situated in a local community, each with its own 'spectrum of opportunities to meet different student needs and interests'⁽⁴⁾, it was envisaged that incentivising broader and deeper partnerships between regional HEIs would facilitate a richer exchange of ideas, methods and strategies for increasing access

to higher education and broadening participation. Commitment to this policy was articulated further in The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2021 (HEA 2015). Funds provided under the Programme for Access to Higher Education Fund (PATH 3) enabled these partnerships. Originally, a three-year funding programme from 2018 to 2021, PATH 3 was extended for an additional three-year period from 2021 to 2024.

PATH 3 was the first Access funding programme in Ireland to make regional partnership compulsory. It required HEIs in the same geographic location to work in partnership to design, develop and implement strategies for increasing access to higher education to disadvantaged groups. This case study is based on one of these regional clusters, the South Cluster SOAR Project partnership located in the south/southeast of Ireland. Although there were multiple layers of partnership within the SOAR Project, this case study is focused on the inter-institutional partnership relationship as understood by the Registrars and Access Practitioners from each HEI.

1.1 The SOAR Project

The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on access to higher education established to promote access for socio-economic groups which have been traditionally under-represented in higher education. Positioned within the Access Services of the cluster HEIs, the SOAR Project was overseen by a Steering Group consisting of Registrars and Access Practitioners and an Advisory Group consisting of Access Practitioners and Community Partners (see Figure 1 below). SOAR was comprised of five distinct work streams:

- (i) Travellers in Education;
- (ii) Enabling Transitions;
- (iii) Connecting Communities, Connecting Curriculum;
- (iv) the 1916 Bursary Fund;
- (v) Partnership for Access.

This case study reflects on the fifth work stream, Partnership for Access (see Figure 1 for the South Cluster Governance Structure, for additional details see Appendix 1). The Project had a designated Lead Institution which acted as the HEA contact liaison, and a Project Coordinator was based in this institution and undertook specific responsibilities around project reporting.

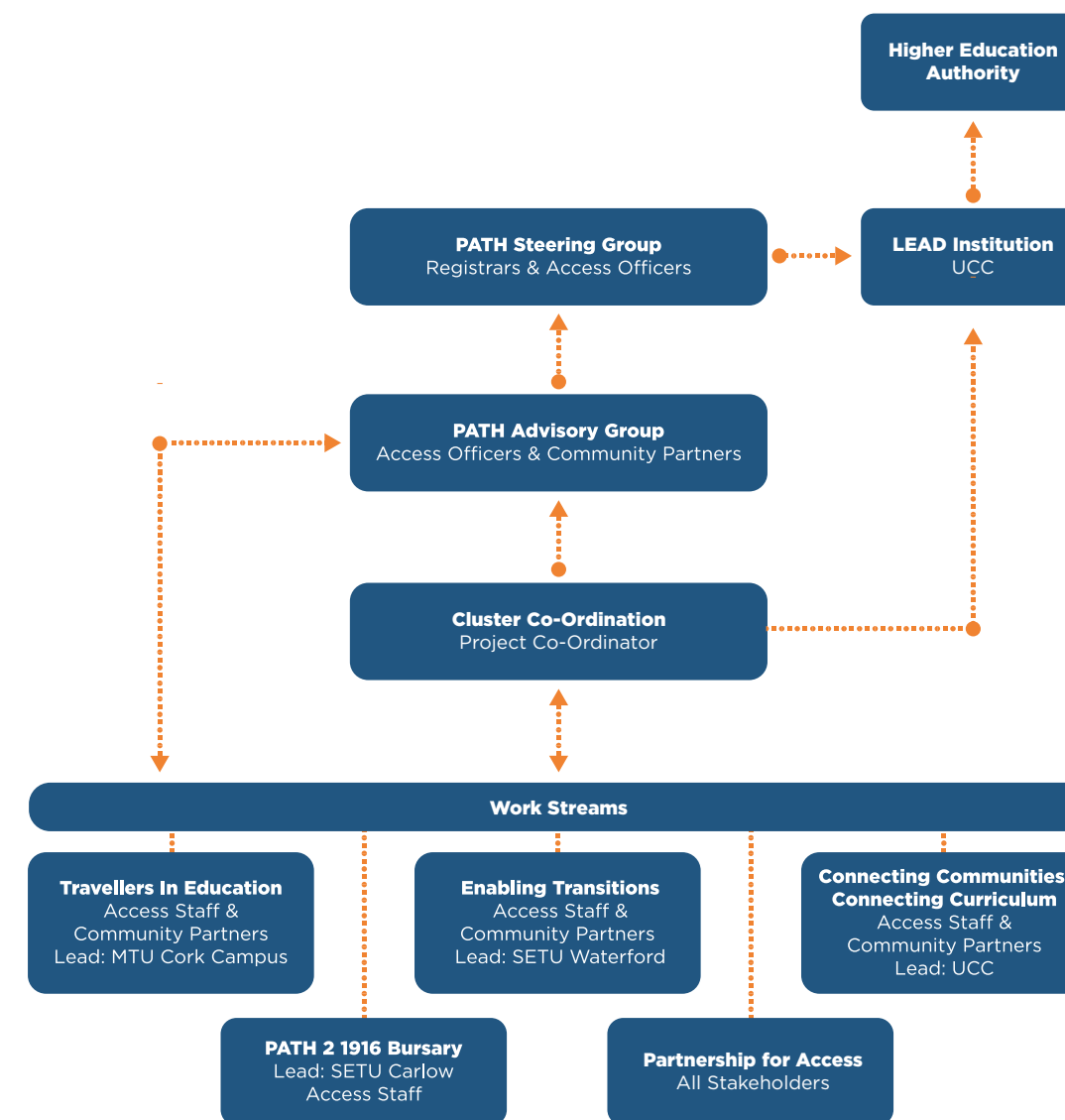


Figure 1. South Cluster Project Governance Structure

⁽¹⁾ Rainford, J. 2020. Working with/in institutions: how policy enactment in widening participation is shaped through practitioners' experience. British Journal of Sociology of Education, vol. 42(2): 287-303.

Rainford, J. 2017. Targeting of widening participation measures by elite institutions: widening access or simply aiding recruitment? Perspectives (Association of University Administrators (U.K.)), vol. 21(2-3): 45-50.

⁽²⁾ Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2018. Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021. Dublin, Ireland: Higher Education Authority.(3) Webber Research, 2023 ESG Scorecard

⁽³⁾ DES (Department of Education and Skills), 2011. National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. Dublin: Government Publications. Available at: <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Strategy-for-Higher-Education-2030.pdf> [accessed 26 October 2022].

⁽⁴⁾ Ibid:98



1.2 The Case Study

This case study is a qualitative exploration of the inter-institutional partnership underpinning the SOAR Project. The Project included multiple layers of partnership between participating HEIs (as detailed in Figure 1) in the South Cluster.⁽⁵⁾ Little attention has been paid to the partnerships which underpin access initiatives, and the contribution which these partnership approaches make to the success of the initiatives.⁽⁶⁾ This case study considers the partnership approach itself as understood from the perspective of key stakeholders, namely the Registrars (N=5) and Access

Practitioners (N=5) from partner institutions involved in the SOAR Project. It explored relationships, processes and practices with a view to identifying the critical factors that enabled successful partnership. The Registrars were the HEI officers responsible for endorsement, institutional support, strategic development and programme oversight. The Access Practitioners, consisting of Access Officers in four HEIs and the Head of Student Life and Learning in a fifth institution, were involved in the design and delivery of Access Service initiatives in their respective HEIs. Case study data was collected through individual and focus group interviews.⁽⁷⁾

⁽⁵⁾ Another aspect of the PATH 3 funding call was to provide evidence on how individual HEIs within the cluster partnership engage with local DEIS schools, further education providers, community and volunteer groups, existing local initiatives to tackle educational disadvantage, Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) and other relevant stakeholders. This aspect of the SOAR Project partnership will be the focus of research in a separate research piece.

⁽⁶⁾ Burgess, A.P., Horton, M.S. and Moores, E. 2021. Optimising the impact of a multi-intervention outreach programme on progression to higher education: recommendations for future practice and research. *Heliyon*, vol. 7(7): 1-10.

⁽⁷⁾ Data collection took place between December 2021 and January 2022. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from UCC's Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC). To ensure confidentiality, data shared in this report is attributed generically to either Registrars or Access Practitioners.

2.0 CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS ENABLING INTER-INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIP IN ACCESS

2.1 Introduction

The three critical factors which enabled the success of the SOAR Project inter-institutional partnership as perceived by the Registrars and Access Practitioners are:

- (i) Trust, professional collaboration and shared goals;
- (ii) Robust governance, institutional ownership and designated responsibility; and
- (iii) Shared learning and consolidation of communities of practice.

2.2 Trust, Professional Collaboration and Shared Goals

For both Registrars and Access Practitioners, the greatest facilitator of the SOAR Project partnership was the collaborative working practices and openness to shared learning and peer support that emerged.

Registrars identified pre-existing connections and relationships of trust among the Access Practitioners as a key enabling factor for the success of the partnership. One Registrar noted, the 'synergy' of 'long-established collaborations' among Access Practitioners which meant that the partnership was not starting 'from scratch' but rather building on previous professional collaboration between 'very collegiate' partners who 'already knew each other from prior work'. Registrars identified the 'adaptability', 'flexibility' and 'willingness' of the project partners to 'work together to get to a common ground' as another critical success factor. In particular, the shared goals and commitment to inclusion shared by Access Practitioners was identified

by Registrars as a key cohesive factor, with one observing that the success of partnership depended on:

'... key individuals across the sites who believe, are truly advocates, for the access and participation of all individuals in education...'

2.3 Robust Governance, Institutional Ownership and Designated Responsibility

A robust governance framework (see Appendix 1), strong institutional ownership as demonstrated by involvement of senior leaders, and designated roles of responsibility including a Lead Institution and Project Coordinator, were identified by both cohorts as crucial to the success of the SOAR partnership.

The Registrars identified the robust governance and operational frameworks, the designation of a Lead Institution with a funded Project Coordinator, and the committed engagement of senior-level institutional leaders as key enablers of the SOAR Project partnership. As one Registrar noted:

'I think probably one of the biggest learnings is that need for that kind of leadership and direction on these projects because you have so many disparate groups involved in them.'

Jointly developed governance frameworks identifying responsibilities and shared operational procedures were also considered crucial to the cohesion of the partnership. It was acknowledged by Registrars that a partnership model should not 'make any assumptions that people operate in a certain way' and that success depended on partners being:

'... prepared to adapt our own systems and our own way of doing things in order to work together to get to a common ground'.

The need for partner institutions to be willing to make 'significant commitment' was identified by Registrars who noted:

'... there are a number of engagements a year, for example, that we would expect the senior person in the organisation to attend...'

The collaborative leadership demonstrated by 'the people who have led the project' was acknowledged, and the Lead Institution role was acknowledged as a critical success factor which gave:

'... a focus, and there is nothing like having a person there to drive an initiative'.

The Project Coordinator role in overseeing the work streams and reporting to the HEA was considered another critical factor in the success of the partnership:

'[the partnership] ... worked really, really well because of that day-to-day person ... I think you need to factor in that resource...'

Like the Registrars, Access Practitioners recognised the development of a strong governance and operational structure and the designation of a lead institution as key to the success of the partnership. As one Access Practitioner noted, 'having an overall coordinator' who helped 'pull it all together' and 'share best practice' was a 'godsend'. The efficacy of the Lead Institution and the success of their leadership was also widely acknowledged by the Access Practitioners. However, a need for greater clarity in relation to the responsibilities attributed to the Lead Institution was identified by one Access Practitioner who believed that the role of the Lead Institution was not as clearly defined as it might be:

'I think there were unrealistic expectations from the HEA in terms of what a Lead Institution could do or should do.'



2.4 Shared Learning and Consolidation of Communities of Practice



For both cohorts, the shared, cross-institutional learning which occurred was a critical factor in the success of the partnership. Registrars recognised that the surfacing and sharing of knowledge about access initiatives created a community of practice and had a cohesive impact on the partnership:

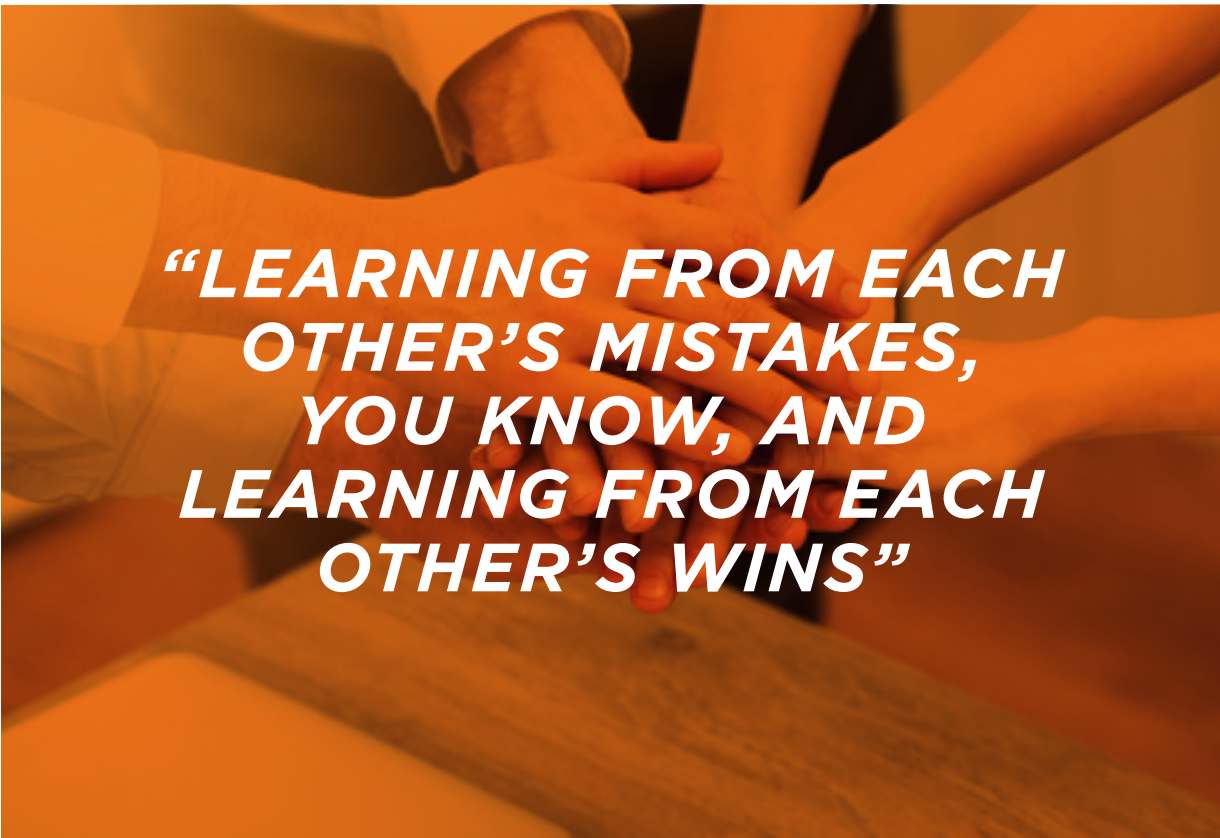
'... the fact that there are multiple partners coming together, that there is a sharing of practice and a framework for consistency of effort across the various communities that are involved... I think that is a real strength'.

The sharing of practice insights for working with specific access cohorts was identified by the Registrars as a critical enabler of partnership success which made it possible for partners to learn from each other and 'move ahead' with projects. As one Registrar observed:

'... that truly collaborative sharing [of] information and collaborative working together... to me is really the key aspect of it and the key strength and it is working for the inclusivity of students in education'.

Access Practitioners also highlighted the opportunity for professional engagement, knowledge exchange and dynamic practice development as a key enabler of partnership success. All Access Practitioners agreed that the collaborative working relations established between partner institutions brought strength to the partnership:

'... it saved us a lot of time in terms of, you know, not starting from scratch and maybe making some of the mistakes or going down the avenues that you might go down if you didn't have this collective expertise from within your own institution but a much greater expertise from outside of the institutions and also from our community partners'.

“LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER’S MISTAKES, YOU KNOW, AND LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER’S WINS”

Sharing of knowledge and practice expertise was described by an Access Practitioner as:

‘... that sort of signposting, guiding each other, learning from each other’s mistakes, you know, and learning from each other’s wins as well, which I think is huge’.

The creation of a community of practice between partners was seen as a critical success factor by Access Practitioners:

‘... a place that you could actually bounce ideas off, you could get feedback from colleagues on what they thought, why things worked, why they didn’t work – which was sometimes more important – and, I suppose, for me personally, there has been huge learning and advantages in having that group to be able to come to, to bring things to; so that to me was a huge advantage’.

The consolidation of practice learning resulted in the development of cohesive inter-institutional practices across the partnership including the centralisation and streamlining of 1916 Bursary applications.⁽⁸⁾ As one Access Practitioner stated:

‘The fact that we had one application process you know and again just to kind of thank [the Lead Institution] for taking the lead and the real heavy lifting with regard to the application process on that because it meant less work for the rest of the institutions, which was great, but that kind of collective approach... made great sense.’

The ‘dynamism in working together’ in partnership was also flagged by Access Practitioners as particularly beneficial because of the absence of a coherent, national professional network for all Access Practitioners.

3 CHALLENGES TO WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP



The key challenge to working in partnership on the SOAR Project related to pre-existing variances in Access Service infrastructure in different higher education institutions. Institutions with a less developed pre-existing Access infrastructure found it challenging to expand at a pace that was consistent with the timeline of project

deliverables. The time required to build capacity through recruitment of new staff hampered optimum project engagement for some partners. Lack of clarity about whether funding would continue into the future was also a concern as it was unclear whether Access initiatives developed would be sustainable.



⁽⁸⁾ In 2019 the South Cluster developed a central unit managed by the SOAR Project Coordinator to deliver a streamlined approach to the PATH 2 1916 Bursary. All information, applications, queries and assessment were managed centrally, enabling Access Practitioners to concentrate efforts on promotion of the bursary and providing applicant support.



4 CONCLUSION: WORKING WELL IN INTER-INSTITUTIONAL ACCESS PARTNERSHIPS

This case study, based on insights from Registrars and Access Practitioners, surfaces and explores critical factors which enabled successful inter-institutional partnership in the SOAR Project. The following suggestions may help inform practice development in similar inter-institutional partnership models oriented towards increasing access in higher education.

Guidelines for Successful Inter-institutional Access Partnerships

1. Articulate Shared Values and Principles of Working

The principles of openness, collaboration and co-operation are vital to inter-institutional partnership success. Articulating the shared value base of project partners and outlining a set of principles for working can help to consolidate the partnership. The SOAR Project partners had a shared commitment to inclusion and access and developed a working style characterised by co-operation, flexibility and openness to sharing.

2. Clarify Governance and Operational Protocols

Partnership success is facilitated by strong governance structures with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for each partner organisation. The establishment of a Steering Group with representation from all partners facilitated a sharing of responsibility and accountability within the partnership and also facilitated co-operation. Regular meetings, clear agendas and the involvement of high-level institutional officers were key to success.

3. Scope and Resource Anchor Posts

The appointment of a designated and resourced Lead Institution and Project Coordinator was core to the success of the SOAR partnership. Consideration of what key posts are required to anchor a partnership is vital. Clearly defining the responsibilities associated with identified anchor posts is also critical to successful project management and partnership engagement.

4. Facilitate Partner Engagement

Full engagement of all partners leads to a more robust and dynamic partnership. The SOAR Project acknowledged variances in the opportunity-readiness of partners due to pre-existing infrastructures. The integration of a scheduled pre-development phase in project design would facilitate time to build the necessary capacity through the recruitment staff and enable the maximum engagement of all partners.

5. Build-in Opportunities for Shared Learning

Partnership is strengthened and enriched by shared learning between partners. The knowledge exchange which occurred on the SOAR Project played a key role in strengthening partnership. To facilitate reciprocal learning, opportunities for professional development and networking should be built into project planning. Learning exchange opportunities might include workshops, project visits and compilation of case studies or case stories of projects. Opportunities for stakeholder engagement that supports co-learning and foster institutional and community alliances and networks should also be built-in to project planning.

To surface and share good practice in Access work, an evaluation and dissemination dimension should be built-in to project design. Surfacing and sharing Access practice will support the continued development of the knowledge base of Access practice.



APPENDIX 1 | SOUTH CLUSTER SOAR PROJECT GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

PATH Steering Group

Terms of Reference of Regional Cluster South PATH Steering Group

Topic	Description
Purpose	The Regional Cluster South PATH Steering Group will oversee the development of cluster structures which will enable the strategic development of innovative and capacity-building approaches to widening access across the cluster. The group will also oversee and monitor the progress and delivery milestones for the PATH 2 and PATH 3 projects. The Steering Group will work on the principles of consensus, collaboration and co-operation.
Parent to	Regional Cluster South PATH Advisory Group
Key Functions	<p>The Steering Group will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Agree the deliverables and timescales for the overall plan for the PATH 2 and PATH 3 projects.• Provide budget oversight at project and institutional level to ensure compliance with the terms, conditions and deliverables of the HEA funding.• Ensure appropriate procedures are in place to identify, assess and manage risk from a strategic and operational perspective.• Review and approve annual reports from the PATH Advisory Group and at the end of the programme approve a project completion report.• Nominate institutional representatives for the PATH Advisory Group• Agree a Memorandum of Understanding for operation of the cluster.• Attend and present at an annual forum to disseminate project outcomes.

Membership

- Deputy President and Registrar, University College Cork
- Registrar & Vice President for Academic Affairs, Munster Technological University - Cork Campus
- Vice-President, Academic Affairs, Munster Technological University - Kerry Campus
- Vice President for Academic Affairs and Registrar, South East Technological University Carlow
- Vice President for Academic Affairs and Registrar, South East Technological University Waterford
- Access Officer, Munster Technological University - Cork Campus
- Access Officer, Munster Technological University - Kerry Campus
- Access Officer, South East Technological University Carlow
- Head of Access, University College Cork
- Head of Student Life and Learning, South East Technological University Waterford
- SOAR Project Co-Ordinator

PATH Advisory Group

Terms of Reference of Regional Cluster South PATH Advisory Group



Topic	Description
Purpose	The Regional Cluster South PATH Advisory Group will ensure a collaborative, partnership approach between key community organisations and the cluster HEIs. Through the establishment of Work Streams the Advisory Group will plan and oversee the implementation of the deliverables of the four initiatives, i.e. Travellers in Education, Enabling Transitions, Connecting Communities Connecting Curriculum and the 1916 Bursaries. The Advisory Group will be responsible for meeting the reporting requirements of the HEA.
Reporting to	Regional Cluster South PATH Steering Group
Parent to	Regional Cluster South PATH Work Streams
Parent to	<p>The Regional Cluster South PATH Advisory Group will provide oversight for the five keys stages of the initiatives, namely:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">(1) networking and consultation(2) project design(3) resource development and training plan(4) project implementation(5) evaluation and knowledge sharing <p>as relevant to PATH 2 and PATH 3 and will be responsible for the preparation of an annual report for submission to the Steering Group. The Advisory Group will establish a work stream for each of the four initiatives listed above.</p>

Membership

- Access Officer, Munster Technological University – Cork Campus
- Access Officer, Munster Technological University – Kerry Campus
- Access Officer, South East Technological University Carlow
- Head of Access, University College Cork
- Head of Student Life and Learning, South East Technological University Waterford
- Schools and Community Partner Representative
- Traveller Community and Projects Representative
- SOAR Project Co-Ordinator





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