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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

ACCESS PRACTITIONERS:

OUR ROLE
OUR IDENTITY
OUR VISION

The first National Study of Higher Education Access Practice and Delivery

Rebekah Brennan, Sheila McGovern, Máire Leane, Fiachra Ó'Súilleabháin.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on Access. It brings together the South Cluster of higher education institutions (HEIs), i.e., Munster Technological University (MTU), South East Technological University and University College Cork (UCC). In collaboration with community partners, the project devises and implements strategies to increase access to higher education for under-represented groups. The SOAR Project is funded by the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 3 and is operationalised through five work streams: Travellers in Education; Enabling Transitions; Connecting Communities: Connecting Curriculum; 1916 Bursary Fund; and Partnership for Access.

This report is the first of it's kind. It provides an insight into the evolving roles of Access practitioners and their vision for the future of Access practice in Ireland.

We wish to extend heartfelt gratitude to the Access professionals who took part in this research.

ACCESS PRACTITIONERS: **OUR ROLE; OUR IDENTITY; OUR VISION**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Access Practitioners[1] are responsible for building relationships with students and collaborating with other stakeholders, in designing and creating effective Access initiatives (Rainford, 2023; Folan O'Connor, 2024). The National Access Plan (NAP), A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education, 2022 to 2028 states that Access is "*a shared responsibility of government, the higher education system, the education sector and the community* (p.20)" Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) have responsibility to implement the aims of the NAP and this work is primarily done by Access Practitioners. Broadly, their work is to ensure that students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged[2], students with disabilities, or members of the Traveller community or Roma community are supported to succeed in Higher Education (HE), whatever that success looks like for them. The work of Access Practitioners enhances social mobility, enriches campus diversity, fosters a more inclusive learning environment (Harvey, 2015) and includes, pre-entry outreach work, student support, interventions, administrative duties, event planning and research (Rainford, 2012). While the literature on Access Delivery or widening participation is substantive, there is little documented on the role of the Access Practitioner. Rainford (2019; 2021) has included these professionals as research participants in the UK but the Irish literature is largely silent in providing a space for the voice of the Access Practitioner to be heard and their work remains undocumented and unresearched. The increasing diversity of Irish society (Rooney and Swan, 2021) means that Access Practitioners are continuously adapting and developing practice and service delivery initiatives tailored to an increasingly diverse cohort of students with complex needs. Fluctuations and shortfalls in funding allocated to Access programmes and support services, create further challenges for Access Practitioners in carrying out their role (Solomonides *et al.* 2019). This report spotlights the perspectives of Access Practitioners currently working in the Irish Higher Education Sector, providing critical insights into how their roles have evolved, the challenges they experience in delivering the objectives of the NAP (2022), the resources they need to enable their work, and their vision for the future of Access Delivery and for Access Practitioners in the context of an increasingly diverse society.

1 This report uses the term "Access Practitioner" to refer to individuals working in Access Delivery

2 Includes: Low income or social welfare, Survivors of domestic violence, From disadvantaged area, Experience of criminal justice system, Mature first time, Mature second time, Migrants, refugees, from ethnic minorities, Experience of homelessness, Experience of care system, Carers, Lone or teen parents.

METHODOLOGY

Data was gathered through a national survey of Access Practitioners (*n*=121) and a series of World Cafés held in three counties across Ireland with a diverse group of Access Practitioners (*n*= 54).

THE FOLLOWING RESEARCH QUESTIONS GUIDED THE WORK:

1. What is the role of Access Practitioners currently?
2. Has the role of Access Practitioners changed over time and if so, what are the nature of these changes?
3. What do Access Practitioners need from HEIs and other decision-making bodies or organisations in order to perform their role in line with best practice and in a manner that supports them?
4. What are the challenges that Access Practitioners navigate while performing their role?
5. What do Access Practitioners nationally envision as the future of Access as a sector and as a role?

The research received ethical approval from the Social Research Ethics Committee at UCC.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

NATIONAL SURVEY

The inclusion criteria for participation was that the research participant must hold a role in Access. The survey had twenty-two questions including both quantitative and qualitative items. A copy of the survey is appended to this report (see Appendix 1). The survey was closed on the 31st of May 2023 having received one hundred and twenty-one responses.[3]

[3]Calculating a response rate to the survey is not possible as there are no official published statistics about the number of Access Practitioners employed in higher education institutions in Ireland. Information on Access teams derived from the websites of twelve of the eighteen HEIs listed on the Higher Education Authority website indicated a total staff cohort of 193.

WORLD CAFES

The inclusion criteria for participation in the World Cafes[4] was that the participant must hold a role in Access. Fifty-four participants from fourteen HEIs subsequently attended the World Cafés which took place in Cork on the 25th April 2023, Dublin on the 4th of May and Limerick on the 10th May 2023.

The following four questions informed by preliminary analysis of the survey data guided the World Café discussions:

1. What is Access?
2. What is the role of an Access Practitioner and how is it becoming more complex?
3. What are the challenges?
4. What is your vision for an ideal future of Access?

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data gathered through the survey instrument was analysed using Excel. The qualitative responses were uploaded to software programme NVivo for coding and indepth analysis. Codes were identified using the research questions initially and then emergent themes were identified using thematic analysis.

LIMITATIONS

Calculation of a response rate to the survey is precluded by the absence of published statistics about how many Access Practitioners there are in Ireland. The majority of survey respondents identified as White, Irish, females who were not members of an ethnic minority. The experiences of other genders and ethnic groups is thus underrepresented in the dataset. No demographic data was collected from World Café attendees. A small amount of handwritten World Café data may have been lost due to illegibility or incomprehensibility. Due to diversity of practice across HEIs, results may not be generalisable to the experiences of all Access Practitioners, however a wide range of HEIs (fourteen) are represented in the dataset. Survey and World Café data is subject to the limitations of self-report measures.

[4]The World Café methodology is a simple, effective, and flexible format for hosting large group dialogue. The following five components comprise the basic model: 1) Setting: Create a "special" environment, most often modelled after a café, i.e., small round tables, paper, coloured pens, coffees, teas. There should be four/five chairs at each table. 2) Welcome and Introduction: The host begins with a warm welcome and an introduction to the World Café process, setting the context, sharing the Cafe Etiquette, and putting participants at ease. 3) Small-Group Rounds: The process begins with the first of three or more fifteen minute rounds of conversation for small groups of 6-7 people seated around a table. At the end of the fifteen minutes, each member of the group moves to a different new table. 4) Questions: each round was prefaced with a question around Access - the purpose of the World Café. Each table "hosted" a specific question. Participants hand wrote their responses onto large pieces of paper. Each sheet of paper was graphically designed to represent the nature of the question For more information (see Löhr, Weinhardt & Sieber, 2020).

KEY FINDINGS

Most Access Practitioners surveyed were female, aged forty and older and from a White Irish background. Educational attainment was to a high standard in survey respondents and a range of disciplinary backgrounds were evidenced. The majority of research participants worked in a university (as opposed to e.g. a Technological University or an Institute of Technology) and worked full time hours. 56.2% of respondents were in permanent positions and 30% were on fixed term contracts. Most survey respondents were motivated to join Access by a sense of altruism and service and/or a lived experience with social disadvantage or use of Access Services themselves. As such, Access Delivery was termed by research participants as "*a passion and a vocation".* Research participants coined forty nine terms to describe the various roles an Access Practitioner is responsible for. This speaks to the volume and intensity of this work. The majority of survey respondents chose "student support" as the title which best describes their role, with "socioeconomic disadvantage" being the main area within which they work. Many survey respondents could comment on their personal experiences of the evolution of the role of Access Practitioner over time, as 60.3% of survey respondents had worked in Access for over six years, with 30.6% of those working in Access over fifteen years. There were many changes documented by World Café participants in relation to their role over time, which was described as *"significantly different to ten or twenty years ago"*. Larger and more complex workloads were seen to be leading to burnout, with participants describing lack of time to put the student at the centre of their work, increasingly onerous administrative and reporting duties and colleagues leaving for more secure positions Access Practitioners identified a wide range of training needs, demonstrating a connection to and an awareness of how they need to be supported to grow within their roles and respond to student need in the context of a changing social and political landscape.

Despite these challenges, a majority of survey respondents (78.5%) report feeling satisfied in their role. The data highlighted that Access Practitioners stay for the students and for their teams, and that they derive great satisfaction from both. In their idealisation of the future of Access, some research participants stated that they would rather their role be made obsolete, with the entire HEI taking responsibility for equitable HE for all those underrepresented. Although data varied regionally and across HEIs, the "whole of university approach" underscored in the National Access Plan (NAP) (HEA, 2022) was largely not felt by Access Practitioners in this research, who reported strongly that they need a seat at the table of decision making in their HEI and to be granted more recognition for their work and contribution. Access Practitioners want their work to be valued through action: sustainable funding; job security; talent management and adequate time to focus on student relationships and meeting student need. A clear definition of the role of Access Practitioner is required. This research recommends that consideration be given to having a debate about professionalisation of the role of Access Practitioner in higher education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon the research findings this report sets out recommendations centred on policy, practice and practitioners, that also speak to NAP 2022-2028 goals of inclusivity, flexibility, clarity, coherence, sustainability and evidence-driven approach.

POLICY

1. That sustainable governmental strategies and funding mechanisms be put in place for Access Delivery.
2. That administrative and reporting requirements be adequately resourced to ensure relational student contact is upheld and safeguarded as the primary focus of Access Practitioners.
3. That a clearer, less complex student grant system be designed and implemented, including a SUSI grant for part time students and scaling system for students who fall between funding criteria.

PRACTICE

4. That Access Practice be represented in HEI Senior Management decision-making fora to support embedding, visibility, impact, and a whole of institution approach.
5. That a distinct physical space be mindfully and purposefully designated to Access Delivery services in all HEIs.
6. That research and evaluation of Access initiatives be resourced and staffed adequately to cultivate an evidence driven approach.
7. That an annual, national Access conference be established to support sharing of practice, learning and reflection on development of Access policy and the Access profession.

PRACTITIONERS

8. That a professional body of Access Practitioners be set up to foster awareness and understanding of Access Practice and advocate for resource continuity to support sustainability of Access initiatives.
9. That consideration be given to the expansion and development of a community of practice for Access Practitioners with opportunities for Access Practitioners to collaborate through the creation of an Access Practitioner network exist.
10. That consideration be given to developing an accredited training/education qualification, to be made available to those currently working in or those wishing to work in the sector
11. That regular in-role supervision be made available to Access Practitioners, given the emotional labour associated with their work.

1.0

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

While there is a large body of literature on Access, also known as widening participation to Higher Education (HE), there are relatively few published studies focusing on Access staff. The scarcity of studies on such an important topic provides the rationale for this research. This chapter provides an overview of the existing research on Access Practitioners and tracks the changing landscape of access work in the Irish context with reference to developments in access policy and increasing diversity in Irish society.

1.1. ACCESS

ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Access to HE for all is a global issue (Atherton et al., 2016) and it is acknowledged as a critical factor in ensuring an equitable society (Hazelkorn, 2015). Increasingly, national governments, under the influence of supranational agencies, have recognized education systems as pivotal instruments for realizing social justice goals (OECD, 2008; UNESCO, 1998). The 1998 World Conference on Higher Education, organized by UNESCO, reaffirmed the principles set forth in Article 26 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, asserting that *"Every individual has the entitlement to education, and higher education should be equally accessible to all based on merit*." A human rights approach to education places human rights principles and standards at the core of educational policies and practices. This approach emphasizes equal access, inclusivity, non-discrimination, and the development of critical thinking skills. The pursuit of equitable access was a central theme in the OECD's examination of tertiary education (OECD, 2008) and represents a key objective within the Bologna process[5], which is propelling changes in European higher education. One of the core objectives within this process, termed the 'social dimension,' aims to ensure that "*the composition of students entering, participating in, and successfully completing HE at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations*," while underscoring the "*significance of students being able to complete their studies without hindrances related to their social and economic backgrounds*" (London Communiqué 2007, p. 5). Additionally, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of seventeen global goals established by the United Nations in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, includes an objective of ensuring quality education.

[5]The Bologna Process is a European initiative aimed at creating a harmonized and standardized higher education system across participating countries to facilitate student mobility and improve the quality and competitiveness of European higher education (Voegtle, 2019)

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ACCESS IN IRELAND

'Access' in this report is understood as the involvement of underrepresented students in HE which extends beyond initial entry pathways and encompasses inclusion within a learning environment that caters to the diverse needs of students through student services and operational structures (Burke, 2012). Typically, underrepresented students include individuals with disabilities, those from communities or groups with limited progression opportunities/ socioeconomic disadvantage and members of the Traveller community (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2015). Ireland has a comprehensive policy framework regarding access (HEA, 2004, 2008, 2015). Access to HE in Ireland has evolved significantly with a participation rate of 53% [6] noted in 2022 (Central Statistics Office, (CSO) 2022). 46% of the overall adult population have obtained a degree, which is above the OECD average of 38% (OECD, 2018). Although the higher education sector is no longer perceived as exclusively belonging to an elite minority (Walsh, 2014) disparities rooted in social class have exhibited a notable degree of stability over the past few decades ((HEA), 2018) and persistent social inequality in access and entry to higher education in Ireland is noted by several authors (Karmaeva and Kosyakova, 2022; McNally et al, 2022; Cahill and O'Sullivan, 2022; Jeffers and Lillis, 2021; McCoy and Byrne, 2011).

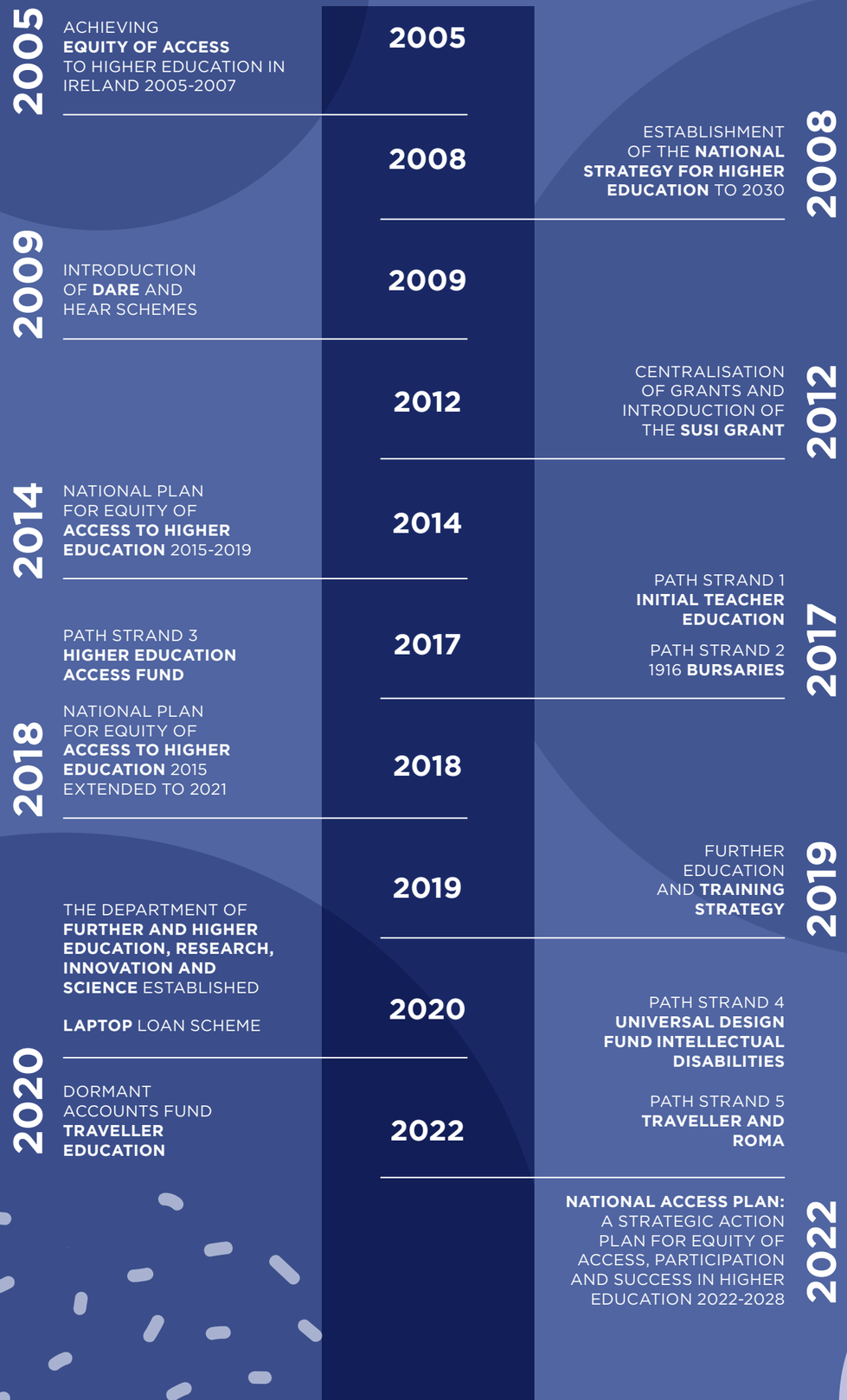
1.2. ACCESS PRACTITIONERS

Access Practitioners are depicted as responsible for building relationships with students and collaborating with other stakeholders, in designing and creating effective Access initiatives (Rainford, 2023; Folan O'Connor et al., 2024). The National Access Plan (NAP) 2022-2028, states that Access is "*a shared responsibility of government, the higher education system, the education sector and the community*" (p. 20). Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) have responsibility to implement the aims of the NAP and this work is primarily done by Access Practitioners. Broadly, their work is to ensure that students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged; students with disabilities and members of the Traveller community and members of the Roma community are supported to succeed in Higher Education (HE), whatever that success looks like for them. The work of Access Practitioners enhances social mobility, enriches campus diversity, fosters a more inclusive learning environment and includes, pre-entry outreach work, interventions, administrative duties, event planning and research (Rainford, 2012).

[6]This figure represents the percentage of individuals within a specific population or age group who have the opportunity to pursue and attend higher education institutions (Central Statistics Office, (CSO) 2022).

1.3. EVOLUTION OF ACCESS DELIVERY

Below is a timeline highlighting some of the key developments related to Access Delivery in Ireland from 2005 to present day.



The Access to HE landscape is constantly evolving (Quinn, 2020) including additions and enhancements to grant schemes, access routes, government strategies and funding streams.

NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

This strategy outlines a vision for the broader Irish higher education sector, effectively addressing numerous social, economic and cultural challenges.

NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN

There have been three iterations of the National Access Plan since 2005 (HEA 2005; 2014; 2018; 2022), with each iteration continuing and building upon the efforts to enhance access, participation and success for underrepresented groups. The most recent version (2022) broadened criteria of socioeconomic disadvantage and in doing so, introduced new student cohorts along with their distinct needs to policy.

GRANT SCHEMES

The practice of Irish students receiving grants through local authorities or Vocational Education Committees (VECs) began several decades ago. The establishment of the Student Universal Student Support (SUSI) in 2012 (SUSI, 2020) centralised the grants system. Other financial initiatives to assist students in accessing third level included the PATH 2 1916 Bursary Fund.

FUNDING STREAMS

In 2017, the HEA-managed Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH), initially featured three distinct components targeting the diversification of access to teacher education (Strand 1); the establishment of the 1916 Bursary Fund (Strand 2) and the creation of regional collaborative partnerships between HEIs and community organizations (Strand 3). In 2022, a fourth component was added to PATH, further enhancing universally designed learning environments and extending support for students with intellectual disabilities (HEA, 2022). The PATH 5 funding initiative aims to empower HEIs to establish the necessary infrastructure for boosting the involvement of students from the Traveller and Roma communities in Higher Education.

ACCESS ROUTES

The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) (2009) support students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (HEAR) and students with disabilities (DARE) in accessing higher education.

EVOLVING THE LANDSCAPE

The merging of twelve of Irelands institutes of technology (ITs) into five technological universities (Tus) from 2020-2023[7] and the Springboard+[8] (HEA, 2011), Human Capital Initiative (2019)[9] and the development of apprenticeship pathways within HEIs (National Apprenticeship Council, 2018)[10], seek to enhance the potential of the HE sector to meet national skill requirements. Additionally, in 2022, the National Tertiary Office (NTO) was developed to oversee the coordination and facilitation of progression pathways from further to higher education (DFHERIS, 2023 across specific program domains (DFHERIS, 2023). Through these pathways students will initiate their tertiary education in further education and finalize it at a partnered HEI (DFHERIS, 2023), which is likely to increase numbers of underrepresented cohorts.

IMPACT ON ACCESS PRACTITIONERS

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have embraced comprehensive approaches to access and have implemented strategies for student success (Brennan et al., 2023a, 2023b; Brennan et al., 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d; Cummins et al., 2021). All of this has had an impact on the workload and roles of Access Practitioners (Folan O'Connor et al., 2024). The expansion of access policy discussed above, in conjunction with the increasing diversity of Irish society (Herzog-Punzenberger et al. 2023) mean that Access Practitioners are continuously adapting and developing practice and service delivery initiatives tailored to an increasingly diverse cohort of students with complex needs. Fluctuations and shortfalls in funding allocated to Access programmes and support services, present challenges for Access Practitioners in supporting disadvantaged students (Brennan et al. 2022a). Universities navigate a demanding landscape characterized by increasing demand for higher education, a public policy focus on providing access to underrepresented demographics, and considerable limitations in available resources (RTE, 2013b, 2013a). Universities are progressively urging academic staff to facilitate the engagement of non-traditional students. This includes fostering a nurturing atmosphere, adapting teaching and learning strategies and policies and engaging the co-operation of individual staff (Kelly, 2017). There is a requirement for Access Practitioners to be dynamic, with the ability to respond flexibly and authentically to evolving needs in the educational landscape and to devise practice strategies which are cognisant of, and at times challenging of, social and political situations.

[7]See: https://hea.ie/policy/he-reform/the-changing-landscape/mergers/
[8]The Springboard+ scheme in Ireland was introduced in 2011. Springboard+ is an initiative that provides free or heavily subsidized higher education courses to unemployed individuals, those returning to the workforce, and people seeking to upskill or reskill in areas where there are identified skills shortages. The program aims to enhance employability and address the changing needs of the labour market. Springboard+ is managed by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in collaboration with higher education institutions in Ireland.
[9]The Human Capital Initiative (HCI) in Ireland was launched in 2019. The Human Capital Initiative is a government-funded program aimed at increasing investment in higher education to enhance the skills and employability of graduates. It involves funding for additional places on undergraduate and postgraduate programs, as well as initiatives to support innovation and research in higher education institutions.
[10]Ireland has sought to diversify apprenticeships beyond traditional trades and crafts to include areas such as finance, information technology, hospitality, and more. The development of apprenticeships often involves close collaboration between higher education institutions and employers. The National Apprenticeship Council, established in 2018, oversees the development and expansion of apprenticeships in Ireland. The council works to identify new apprenticeship opportunities, engage with stakeholders, and ensure that apprenticeships align with industry needs.

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1.4. CONTRIBUTION OF THIS RESEARCH

This report spotlights the perspectives of Access Practitioners currently working in the Irish Higher Education Sector, providing critical insights into how their roles have evolved, the challenges they experience in delivering the objectives of the National Access Plan (2022), the resources they need to enable their work, and their vision for the future of Access Delivery and for Access Practitioners in the context of an increasingly diverse society.

2.0
METHODOLOGY

2.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter details the methodology employed in the research including discussion of research approach, ethical protocol, data collection methods, study participants and data analysis.

2.2. RESEARCH APPROACH

The aim of this research was to make a substantial contribution to the evidence base on Access practice in Ireland in terms of profiling Access Practitioners, capturing their experiences of working in Access, examining the evolution of their role and eliciting their vision for the future of Access. Data was gathered through a mixed methods approach comprising of a national survey of Access Practitioners (n= 121) and three World Café style enquiries held in different counties with a diverse group of Access Practitioners (*n*=54).

The following research questions guided the work:

1. What is the role of Access Practitioners?
2. Has the role of Access Practitioners changed to over time and if so, what are the nature of this change?
3. What do Access Practitioners need to perform their role in line with best practice and in a manner that supports them?
4. What are the challenges that Access Practitioners navigate while performing their role?
5. What do Access Practitioners envision as the future of Access as a sector and as a field of practice?

2.3. ETHICS

Participants were made aware that the research project had ethical approval from the Social Research Ethics Committee at UCC and was governed by ethical principles including anonymity, confidentiality, the safety of participants, informed consent and freedom to withdraw from the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

2.4. DATA COLLECTION METHODS

An email providing information about the research project, was sent to thirty four Access Directors/senior staff across seventeen HEIs on the 11th of April 2023. It requested their support in dissemination of an online survey to Access staff within their institution and included a link to the survey and an invitation to express interest in the World Café (see Appendix 2).

2.4.1. NATIONAL SURVEY

The inclusion criteria for participation in the survey was that the research participant must hold a role in Access. The survey link circulated to access practitioners contained information about the study. Response to a question indicating informed consent was required to progress to the remainder of the survey questions. The survey had twenty-two questions including both quantitative and qualitative items. A copy of the survey is appended to this report (see Appendix 1). The survey was closed on the 31st of May 2023 having received one hundred and twenty-one responses.[11]

[11]Calculating a response rate to the survey is not possible as there are no official published statistics about the number of Access Practitioners employed in higher education institutions in Ireland. Information on Access teams derived from the websites of twelve of the eighteen HEIs listed on the Higher Education Authority website indicated a total staff cohort of 193.

2.4.2. WORLD CAFES

The inclusion criteria for participation in the World Cafes[12] was that the participant must hold a role in Access. Sixty-six Access Practitioners responded to the invitation to express interest in the World Café. An information sheet and consent form (Appendix 4) was emailed to those who indicated their willingness to attend. Fifty-four participants from fourteen HEIs subsequently attended the World Cafés which took place in Cork on the 25th April 2023, Dublin on the 4th of May and Limerick on the 10th May 2023.

The following four questions informed by preliminary, contemporaneous analysis of the data being gathered in survey data, guided the World Café discussions:

1. What is Access?
2. What is the role of an Access Practitioner and how is it becoming more complex?
3. What are the challenges?
4. What is your vision for an ideal future of Access?

These questions were discussed by groups of approximately 6-7 participants at each Café and handwritten group responses were provided on artistically themed paper[13]. Participants were given opportunity to answer all questions. Once responses had been collected, individuals were invited to share insights or other results from their conversations with the full group in the 'harvest' round. The handwritten responses were displayed on a wall in the room for participants to read and discuss. They were given sticky dots to place against statements that resonated deeply with them (to a maximum of three per participant), to highlight popular responses.

[12]The World Café methodology is a simple, effective, and flexible format for hosting large group dialogue. The following five components comprise the basic model: 1) Setting: Create a "special" environment, most often modelled after a café, i.e., small round tables, paper, coloured pens, coffees, teas. There should be four/five chairs at each table. 2) Welcome and Introduction: The host begins with a warm welcome and an introduction to the World Café process, setting the context, sharing the Cafe Etiquette, and putting participants at ease. 3) Small-Group Rounds: The process begins with the first of three or more fifteen minute rounds of conversation for small groups of 6-7 people seated around a table. At the end of the fifteen minutes, each member of the group moves to a different new table. 4) Questions: each round was prefaced with a question around Access - the purpose of the World Café. Each table "hosted" a specific question. Participants hand wrote their responses onto large pieces of paper. Each sheet of paper was graphically designed to represent the nature of the question For more information (see Löhr, Weinhardt & Sieber, 2020).
[13]Paper designed with green grass symbolised the "grass roots" of Access for question number one. Paper designed with a tree symbolised question two and the many roles that Access Practitioners can embody. Fencing was etched onto paper for responses to question three around challenges in Access. Pieces of paper with blue skies were handed out in order to collect responses to question four, to represent "blue sky thinking" and to inspire a vision for the future for Access in participants.

2.5. DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data gathered through the survey instrument was analysed using Excel. The qualitative responses were uploaded to NVivo for coding and analysis. The handwritten data collected at the World Cafés were transcribed and the handwritten records were destroyed. The transcriptions were uploaded to NVivo for analysis. Codes were identified using the research questions initially and then emergent themes were identified using thematic analysis. Responses that were favoured with sticky dots were foregrounded in analysis.

2.6. LIMITATIONS

Calculation of a response rate to the survey is precluded by the absence of published statistics about how many Access Practitioners there are in Ireland. The majority of survey respondents identified as White, Irish, females, who were not members of an ethnic minority. The experiences of other genders and ethnic groups is thus underrepresented in the dataset. No demographic data was collected from World Café attendees.

A small amount of handwritten World Café data may have been lost due to illegibility or incomprehensibility. Due to diversity of practice across HEIs, results may not be generalisable to the experiences of all Access Practitioners, however a wide range of HEIs are represented in the dataset. Survey and World Café data is subject to the limitations of self-report measures.

ACCESS PRACTITIONERS: **OUR ROLE; OUR IDENTITY; OUR VISION**

3.0 RESULTS

RESULTS

The following section will present the findings of the research thematically organised. The quantitative data was gathered from the surveys while the qualitative data was gathered from both survey data and data from the series of World Cafes.

3.1. ACCESS PRACTITIONERS - A PROFILE

What gender do you identify with?
121 responses

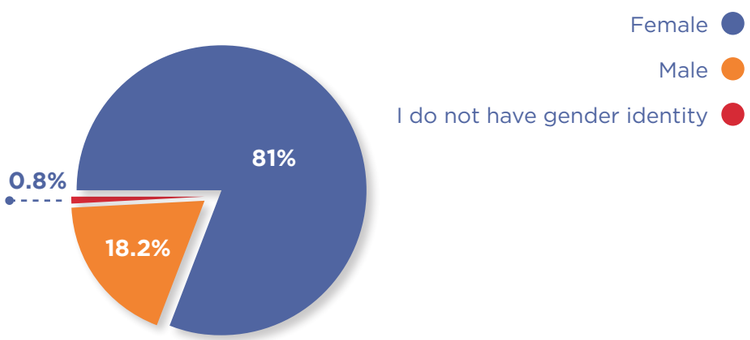


Figure 1 Gender of survey respondents

What age range do you fall within?
121 responses

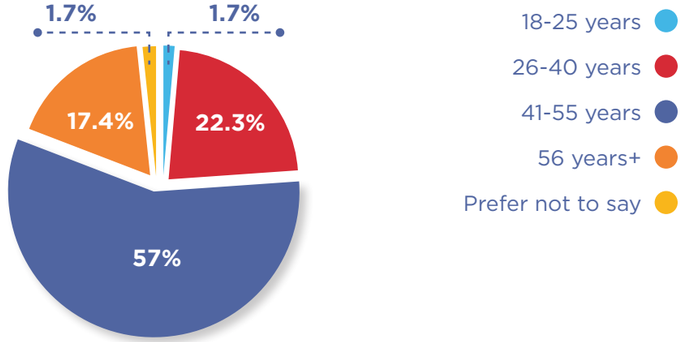


Figure 2 Age range of survey respondents

Do you consider yourself to be from a minority ethnic background?
121 responses

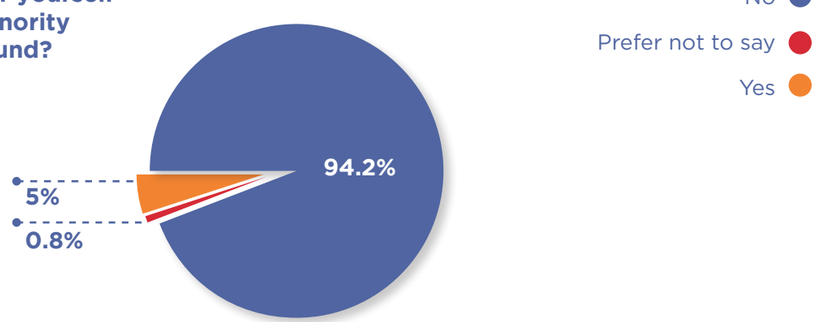


Figure 3 Minority Ethnic Background - Survey Respondents

With which ethnic group do most identify?
121 responses

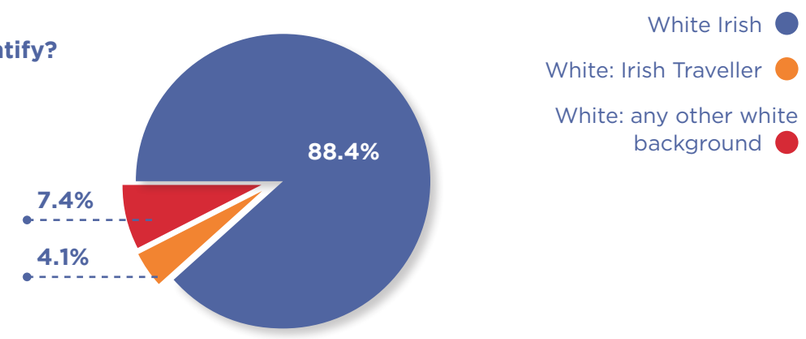


Figure 4 Ethnicity - Survey Respondents

What is your nationality?
121 responses

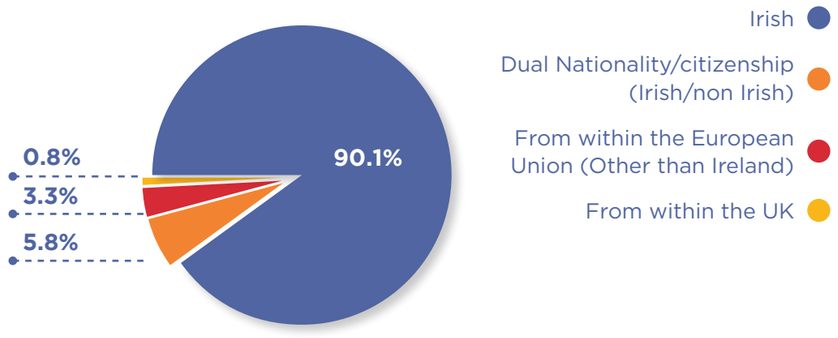


Figure 5 Nationality - Survey Respondents

What is your highest level of education attained?
121 responses

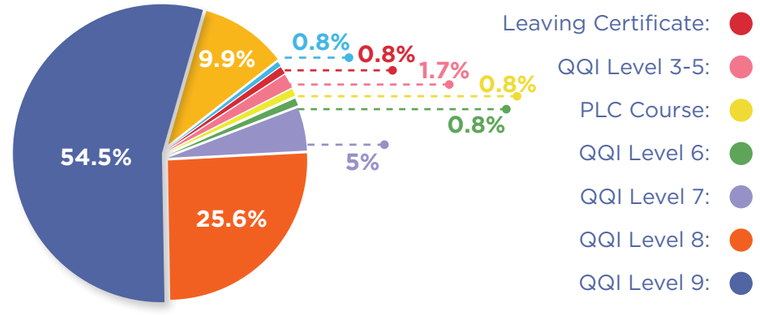


Figure 6 Education - Survey Respondents

What is your disciplinary background?
121 responses

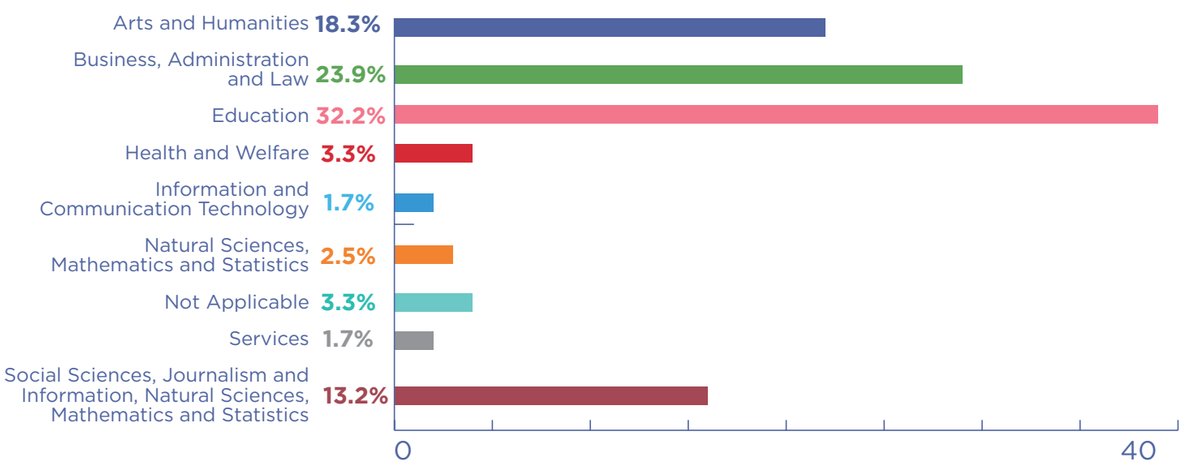


Figure 7 Disciplinary background - Survey Respondents

Do you work in a:
121 responses

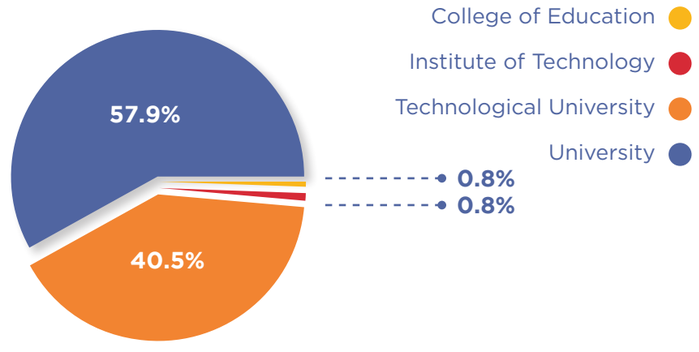


Figure 8 Types of HEIs

Do you work:
121 responses

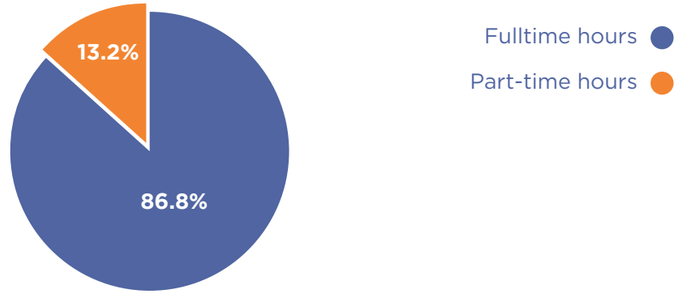


Figure 9 Fulltime or parttime hours - Survey Respondents

What is the nature of your contract?
121 responses

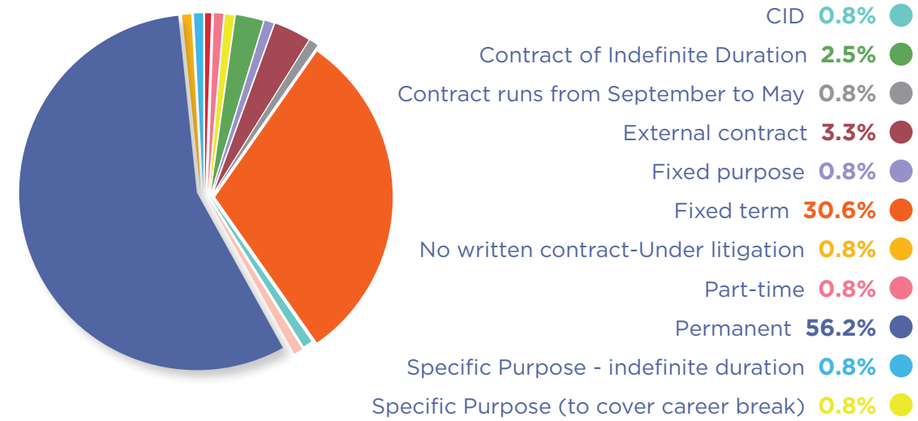


Figure 10 Nature of contract - Survey Respondents

3.2. ACCESS PRINCIPLES

Analysis of the data on what motivates, and guides Access Practitioners indicates a core set of principles which provide a unifying framework for practice. These include an orientation toward rights and justice, and engagement in advocacy and transformative practice.

RIGHTS AND JUSTICE

Some respondents drew on a rights discourse (UNESCO, 2015; Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948) to explain their motivation for engagement in Access work. Research in social psychology underscores the role of empathy, social norms and cultural influences in shaping altruistic behaviors, emphasizing the complex interplay of individual and contextual factors (Batson et al., 2015; Decety and Cowell, 2014). By emphasizing the inherent rights and freedoms of all individuals, irrespective of their status or position within society, human rights theory empowers underrepresented groups to challenge oppressive regimes (Baxi, 2008). World Café participants described Access as "*a passion and vocation*" and an example of social justice (World Café #2). This was reiterated in survey data:

> *"I adore supporting students with their end of term examinations, seeing students' progress through education due to the supports that we can provide is incredible, having dyslexia myself and working through mental health difficulties, I can empathise with how difficult it can be, knowing that I can make a difference is what keeps me going."*
>
> **SURVEY RESPONDENT**

Personal experience of needing support to access HE for themselves or their family members was also common. For individuals who have faced adversity, such as discrimination, hardship, or trauma, roles that enable them to support and uplift others can be a powerful manifestation of resilience and a commitment to social justice (Masten, 2018):

> *"I was an Access student and knowing the gaps that exist for some and the power having an education can be."*

> *"I am from the Traveller Community and I left school when I was 13. I later returned as a mature student and found the whole process very challenging. I know firsthand the value of having supports and supportive people available to help a student throughout their journey."*

> *"I was motivated to join access for personal and professional reasons. I was able to access my third level education by doing a degree as a mature student in the UK that used UDL principles. I found out many years later in my forties that I am dyslexic. But due to the format of my degree I did not need to have any accommodations to manage the course. In addition, I am a parent of a neurodivergent young person and I want to be part of making changes for students like my child."*

> SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Bearing witness to student success, witnessing the impact of their work on each individual life course, a sense of service, and watching students grow in confidence and ambition were all reasons given for engagement in Access work:

> *"What keeps me motivated…is the experiences of our Access students when they come to third level, how motivated they are to succeed, how they do succeed sometimes through real adversary and how they always, always, want to give back, how they volunteer to help other Access students when they enter third level. Also, how they describe their experiences as an Access student when they leave third level."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT

There was an acute awareness in the dataset of how education may be a way out of poverty. Respondents expressed a keen knowledge of there being more than one way to attend university and a desire to break down the idea that aspiration for personal and professional advancement was reserved for a certain section of society:

> *"I felt strongly that education can help people change their lives for the better, give them more opportunities and that this should be available to everyone in our society especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT

Other respondents were motivated by a strong desire to support the progression of individuals with disabilities.

> *"Opportunity to support young adults with disability to transition into and progress in higher education successfully."*

> *"I have a long interest in working with people with disabilities and promoting equality."*

> *"After previously working with a student registered with a visual impairment and another student with a learning difficulty, I found that I enjoyed work and in particular helping students and lifting barriers for them, so I applied for a Grade 3 when my time as a mentor was ending and when asked what department would I like to work in, I immediately knew I wanted to work directly helping students with disabilities."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT

ADVOCACY AND TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

Some World Café participants understood Access as being a "*voice for students and a channel for student voices to be heard* (World Café #3). Others described it as a "*challenge to the establishment*" offering alternative routes, methods and approaches to learning, and valuing prior learning gained through the lived experiences of students. Participants emphasised that Access Practice requires "thinking outside the box" (World Café #2) and being creative in bringing "the non-formal to the formal" and striving to "level the playing field" in HE (World Café #2). The role of Access Practitioners in advocating for and driving inclusion by starting conversations around big topics such as social justice, equality, diversity and representation was also strongly articulated (World Café #3).

3.3. ACCESS PRACTICE

The data highlights that there is consistency across the sector in terms of the cohorts that Access Practitioners work with and the type of work they do with them. However, the absence of any professional role descriptor and the constant evolution and increasing complexity of the work make it difficult to define the role. Survey data as represented in Figure 11 below indicates consistency in relation to the student cohorts with whom Access Practitioners work, with students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, students with disabilities and to a lesser extent mature students, being the main groups engaged with.

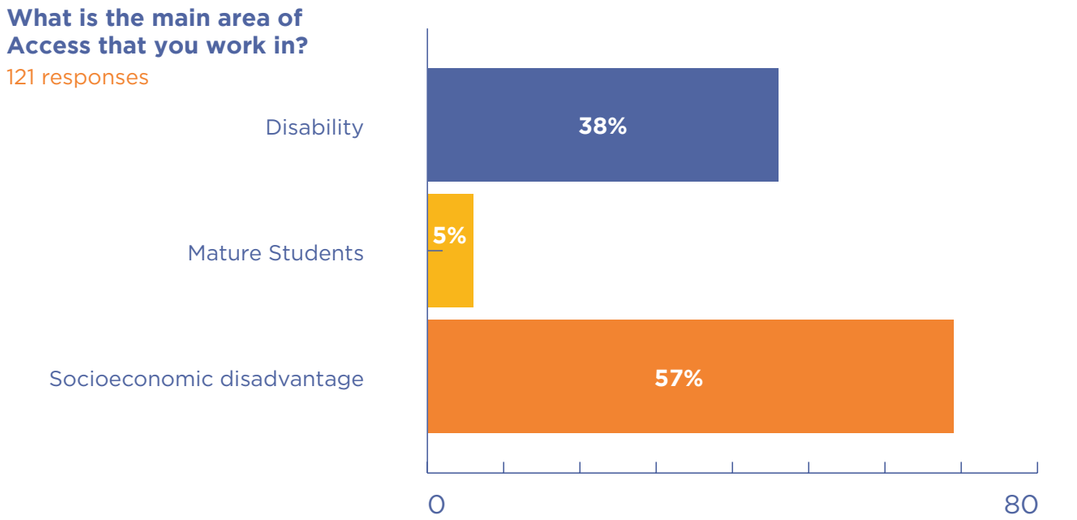


Figure 11 Main Area of Access Practice - Survey Respondents

Student support was the category of work which most survey respondents identified as best describing their role (see Fig. 12 below) with listening to students and liaising with schools, colleagues and communities being seen as core to this work.

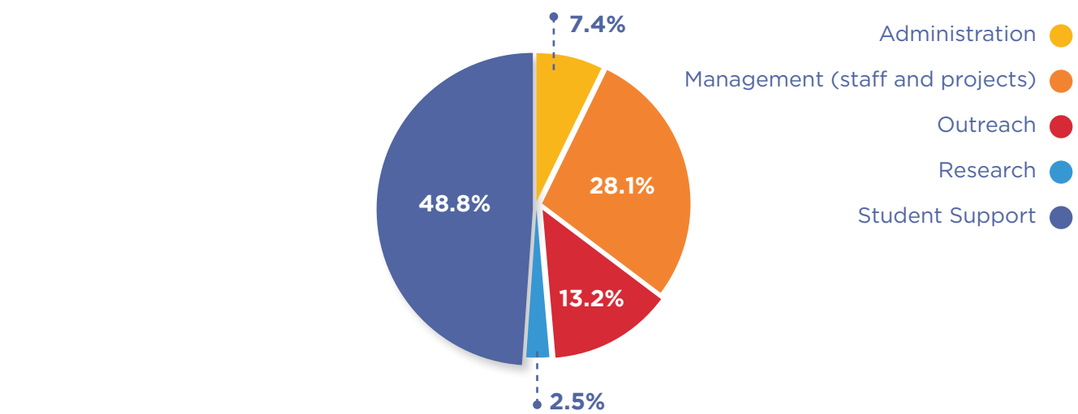


Figure 12 Role of Access Practitioners - Survey Respondents

The scope and volume of activities undertaken by Access Practitioners was clearly evidenced in the data. As one Work Café participant noted:

> *"The role of Access Practitioners is enormous."*
>
> *"We get a microcosm of all university life."*
>
> **WORLD CAFÉ#1**

The diversity and complexity of the tasks involved is succinctly captured in the following quote:

> *"The role of Access Practitioner is a nuanced and wide-ranging role. It requires the person to have a flexible mindset and a calm demeanour in order to engage with the suite of issues, challenges and obstacles that present on a daily basis. It requires the ability to engage with students and help them navigate through issues while also being mindful of boundaries and self care of the practitioner."*
>
> **SURVEY RESPONDENT**

The broad and dynamic nature of the Access Practitioner role is also reflected in the list of terms used by World Café participants when they were asked to describe it (see Table 1 below).

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF AN ACCESS PRACTITIONER?

Empowerment; Facilitation; Advocate for change; Partnerships/Clusters; Strategic involvement; Decision makers; Pastoral: holistic, admin, advocacy, mentoring, planning, organisation, outreach, post-entry, community development; Outreach awareness raising; Sanctuary. Crisis manager; Networking (internal/external); Reporting. Educating HEI colleagues; Shape shifter; Justifying work; Promoting on social media; EDI/UDL; Problem-solver; Sign posting/ referring; Creating new initiatives; Resource allocators; Event planner; Diplomat; Learner; Researcher; Guidance counsellor; Relationship builder; Life coach; Demystifying college; Connecting colleges to communities; To support students; To create a safe space; Decoding the system/ knowledge translator for students; Advocates; Project managers; Fire Fighters; Liaison officers; Data collectors & administrators; To be a community presence

Table 1: The role of an Access Practitioner

In addition to perhaps expected descriptions of the Access Practitioner role; student support; advocates; creating new initiatives etc., other less anticipated descriptors were identified – life coach; shape shifter; crisis manager; data collector; administrator. The diversity of the tasks described indicates the complex nature of the Access Practitioner role.

CONNECTING WITH COMMUNITIES: OUTREACH, SHOWCASING, SUPPORTING

Access was described by World Café participants as the provision of accessible supports for all students by a collective of like-minded people who were creating a path to the community through outreach work. In addition to championing equity and overcoming blocks to participation, showcasing opportunities was said to be a key aspect of Access work and involved showcasing the opportunities to parents, to students themselves and to their communities (World Café #1). Survey respondents also highlighted the need to raise awareness in communities around the opportunities available to them:

> *"Getting information to people in the community about options available for them (was a motivator)"*

> *"I... wanted to get the message out there of the opportunities already existing and actively promote the expansion and range of those opportunities."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENTS

AGILE PRACTICE DELIVERY AND DEVELOPMENT

Access practice was described as difficult to define as it is not articulated in any statutory definition or guideline and is continuously evolving in response to successive iterations of policy and changing political and socioeconomic contexts. (World Café#3). Participants demonstrated consistency in describing Access practice as progressive, person-centred and agile in responding to changing societal and educational contexts:

> *"I feel that the work of Access does have a really important impact on the educational landscape in Ireland."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT

The innovative, resourceful, resilient and adaptable (World Café #3) nature of Access Practice was valued by some participants who felt it contributed to an interesting and rewarding career:

> *"Personally, I am very grateful that I was part of access when it was very small and nascent concept; I enjoyed the collaboration and collegiality as we built some very successful models such as HEDAS (which became HEAR), Take 5 summer schools, etc. The ever-evolving landscape has also motivated me."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The opportunity to be part of a cohesive Access team and to engage with

community stakeholders was important to survey respondents who spoke positively about the collaborative alliances within the teams they worked with:

> *"I love the energy and the buzz."*

> *"The great team that I work with, broad support for our work."*

> *"Speaking with colleagues who are embedding (Universal Design for Learning) UDL and overcoming challenges together."*

> *"Supportive colleagues and an environment that encourages teamwork".*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENTS

SECTORAL CHALLENGES

FUNDING POLICY

Although the everchanging landscape of Access was perceived positively by many participants who welcomed the dynamic and exciting nature of the work, challenges were also identified. The lack of core, sustainable funding to meet student needs was highlighted by World Café participants, some of whom emphasised the "*Stress + powerless feelings of staff when system clashes with need of student*" (World Café #1). Current funding models were described as *"ad hoc", "time limited"* and aligned with *"short termism"* (World Café #2 and #3). A lack of flexibility in using funding for needs that may arise was also discussed (World Café #3). Survey respondents also highlighted negative consequences of funding shortfalls:

> *"Lack of funding and recognition makes it very difficult to be strategic."*

> *"... because of limited resources we first meet students in senior cycle of secondary school and expect them to be able to compete for high points CAO places. We need to have the resources to meet students much earlier to ensure that they know the importance of working towards higher or ordinary level subjects, keeping their third language, etc."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENTS

The need for more support and commitment to Access work by other departments within HEIs was widely identified (World Café #3) as was the need for knowledge sharing and further collaboration.

SECTORAL STANDING AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

To explore the structural and institutional challenges experienced by Access Practitioners, the survey posed four statements requesting participants to indicate level of agreement with each (see Fig. 13 below):

Please indicate your level of agreement to the following statements in relation to your institution:

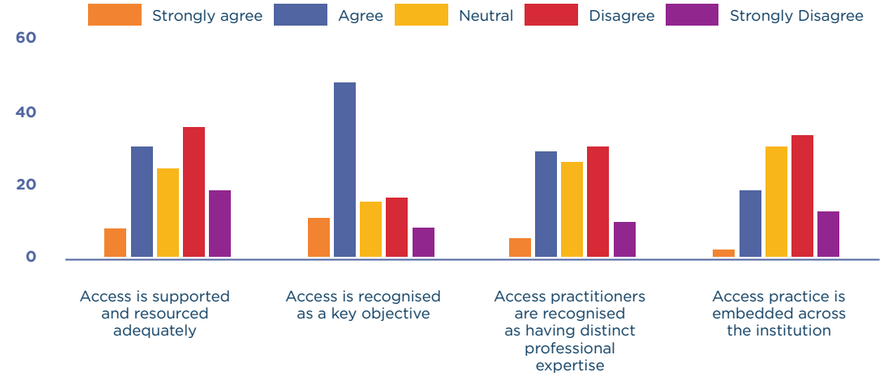


Figure 13 Recognition of Access within HEIs

Although survey respondents felt Access was recognised as a key objective in their institution, they also felt that it was not resourced or supported adequately:

> *"I feel we are not recognised for the work we carry out by all Departments and are not paid accordingly."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT

The survey statement "Access Practice is embedded across the institution" was disagreed with by a small majority of respondents.

> *"While I feel access is recognised as a key objective, I feel it is seen as an objective that is responsible to achieve solely by the access office. I don't think it is seen as an institutional responsibility."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT

> *"I think that whilst access is listed as a key strategic objective, this does not filter down to actions on the ground."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT

There was a significant diversity of opinion about Access practitioners being recognised as having distinct professional expertise. This raises the question that, as a cohort of workers, do Access Practitioners have a shared sense of professional identity? The survey data also provided some interesting insights into how Access Practitioners perceived the standing of Access Practice within their institutions. The indicative quote below provides an excellent description of the challenges Access Practitioners face in terms of recognition and standing within the HEI sector:

> *"Access Practitioners tend to work in that third space, neither recognised as academic or administrative. The skillsets are unique and niche and warrant more recognition, status and reward. As senior leadership in HE is typically by academics, the value of access work can be conflated with administrative work or diminished as being operational. Promotional pathways and status and recognition in HE are skewed in favour of academics. Meanwhile, Access Practitioners have been developing significant competencies and have become highly credentialled. Many practitioners have the same qualifications as their academic peers, they have capacity for scholarship, teach and complete a range of functions that are traditionally associated with academics. What they don't have is autonomy. Consequently, many initiatives must either be sponsored by an academic or be assigned a pilot project status to keep the activity below the radar. The paradox with this is that Access Practitioners are devoted to enhancing equity and promoting EDI, even though they do not enjoy equitable opportunities or status themselves."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

A general lack of job security and career progression for Access Practitioners was demonstrated in the data. World Café participants discussed short term contracts which impacted staff retention due to *"Staff leaving for permanent posts"* (World Café #2). Participants felt strongly that job security needed to be increased for Access Practitioners with long term temporary contracts. The link between contractual instability and policy initiatives which were time limited was emphasised in the survey data and "piecemeal funding" was a term that arose multiple times in discussions around challenges to sustainability of practice. Research participants felt that short term funding prevents continuity of programmes due to short term human resourcing:

> *"Access programmes should have sufficient staff, and contracts suitable to retain staff to properly support students post entry. Piecemeal funding calls with short turnaround times, detailed reporting requirements without inclusion of funding for staff are very challenging for small HEIs keen to facilitate access and support students."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENTS

69% of survey respondents were less than 15 years in post, 31% were over 15 years in post (see Fig 14 below), and 28% were working in the sector for less than three years. The significant number of practitioners who were less than three years in post may reflect funding practices which result in short term contracts. However more comprehensive data collection would be required to fully explain this finding.

How long have you worked in Access?
121 responses

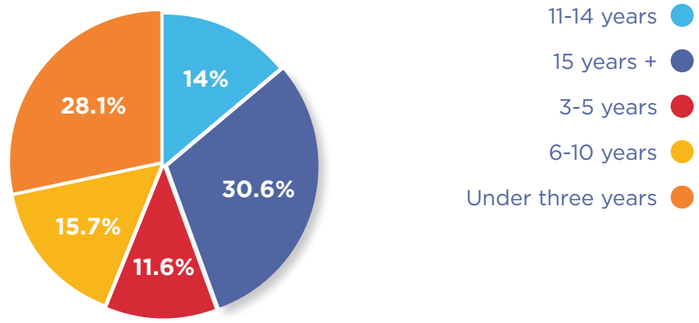


Figure 14 Length of time in Access - Survey Respondents

How long have you performed your current role?
121 responses

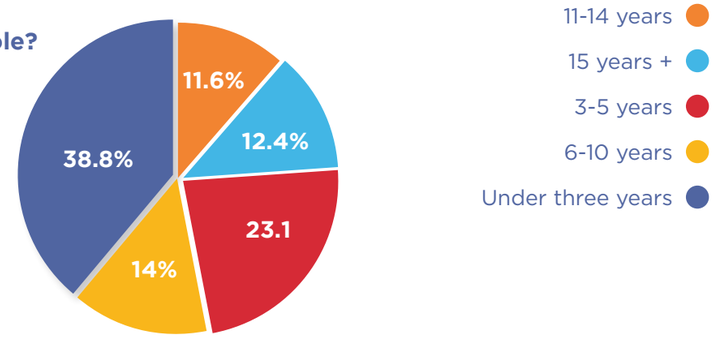


Figure 15 Length of time in current role - Survey Respondents

Most survey respondents reported working in their current role for under three years (see Figure 15 above) indicating that for many, their role had changed over the course of their career. This suggests that Access Delivery is a dynamic career, with frequent opportunities or requirements for changes in role. This again may reflect policy drivers or changes in areas of priority need within Access services. Given the diverse nature of tasks associated with the job, we asked Access Practitioners in our national survey whether they felt adequately qualified to perform their current role (see Fig. 16 below). A large majority (85.1% in total) agreed that they were:

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: I feel adequately qualified to perform all of the duties required in my current role.
121 responses

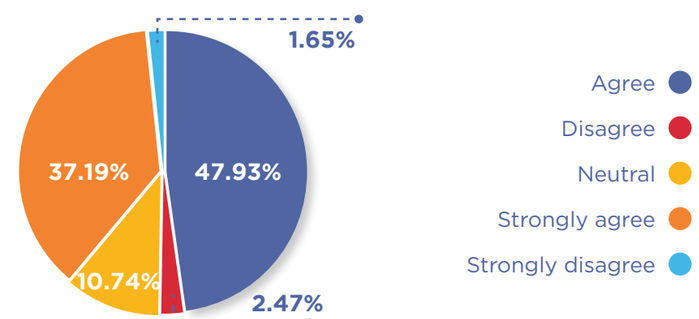


Figure 16 Qualified for current role- Survey Respondents

Despite feeling adequately qualified to perform their roles, there was a distinct recognition of an ongoing CPD need in response to the changing Access environment. The most frequently identified training needs amongst survey respondents related to project management, leadership and communication skills (see Appendix 5 for list of training needs identified).

WORK DEMANDS AND ROLE EXPANSION

As previously described, the landscape of Access Delivery has undergone major changes in recent years. Additional programmes and initiatives, while welcome in supporting students, have translated to extra pressure on Access Practitioners:

> *"The landscape for Access Officers has changed beyond recognition, with increased HEA funding streams, SAF Covid Contingency Fund, Dormant Account, PATH 2, 3 4 and 5. With all of this extra funding comes additional reporting and project management functions which takes time away from core Access duties. Not all Access Depts are resourced the same and the pressure felt by certain staff members is not sustainable and will result in valued experienced staff leaving the service."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT

Increases in the diversity and quantity of tasks associated with the Access Practitioner role were identified in the data. Participants described growing student cohorts and increasingly complex needs. Issued flagged included the diversity of groups requiring a service, the growing scale of mental health issues, emergence of a more litigious environment (World Café #1; World Café #2; World Café #3) and sectoral and student expectation which have "mushroomed" (World Café #2). Difficulties in accessing supporting documentation and consultant reports required to register students with disabilities (World Café #1); and "reaching" students and schools that were not linked to their HEI (World Café #2) were other noted challenges.

There was an overall sense across the World Cafés of Access Practitioners having "less time" as workloads have increased. Participants felt that time restriction impacted most on the relationship building, collaboration and community development aspects of Access work. Competing and shifting priorities driven by policy approaches and reporting requirements, were described as causing administrative burdens, with practitioners describing doing "more paperwork and less people work" and becoming a "KPI collector" - World Café #2). The lack of an Access specific IT System or infrastructure to support monitoring and reporting (World Café #3) which resulted in "...workload becoming more about IT and admin and less meaningful contact with students ."

Unclear boundaries about where their role began and ended, "having to wear many hats" (World Café #2) and "having to be all things to all people" World Café #3) were also flagged as a challenge. So too was a sense that the balance of work was shifting from supporting students to completing bureaucratic requirements resulting in increased administrative rather than advocacy work (World Café No

#3). Although helping students through the lifecycle of higher education was a guiding principle of Access Practice as described by research participants, an emphasis on short term external initiatives (e.g., The 1916 Bursary; the Government Laptop Loan Scheme) and changes in funding mechanisms led some participants to feel this was not as easy to achieve as before. World Café participants spoke about boundary setting and "leaving work at the door" being problematic for them (World Café #1). The high level of emotional labour and vulnerability attached to the work and related mental health challenges for practitioners, was discussed (World Café #2). Participants felt that they were "… expected to do so much" (World Café #2) and were "asked to be involved in everything" with "no downtime in the year" resulting in "an unsustainable workload- being added to all the time" (World Café #3). Participants described a significant workload increase during the COVID 19 pandemic which has not since decreased. They perceived that there was a lack of understanding and recognition of what Access Practitioners do in their institutions - "Do staff know what we do -and what we do not do? (World Café #1) and expressed feelings of being "undervalued" (World Café 3). This was also reflected in the survey data:

> *"There is still more needed to ensure that Access practitioners are valued in their very important role. We are the first point of contact in most instances and we are guiding light for students."*
>
> *"We are undervalued, overworked and our expertise is not utilised when any developments within the organisation are made that impact on us."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENTS

A risk of burnout amongst Access Practitioners was flagged and a *"lack of supervision or mentoring"* was seen as contributing to this risk (World Café 3). Burnout in the workplace is a pervasive phenomenon characterised by compassion fatigue and a reduced sense of accomplishment (Meluch, 2023). It often occurs as a direct outcome of high demand roles, perceived low control, conflict in the workplace and insufficient organisational support (Maslach et al. 2001). A need for supervision and support for Access Practitioners was identified:

> *"We need more professional support in dealing with the issues that we face. We are not clinically qualified but expected to deal with issues without readily available access to professional support that is specific to the issues that we deal with."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT
>
> *"Tasks landing on our doorstep, but don't have experience/ suitable skills."*
>
> WORLD CAFÉ #3

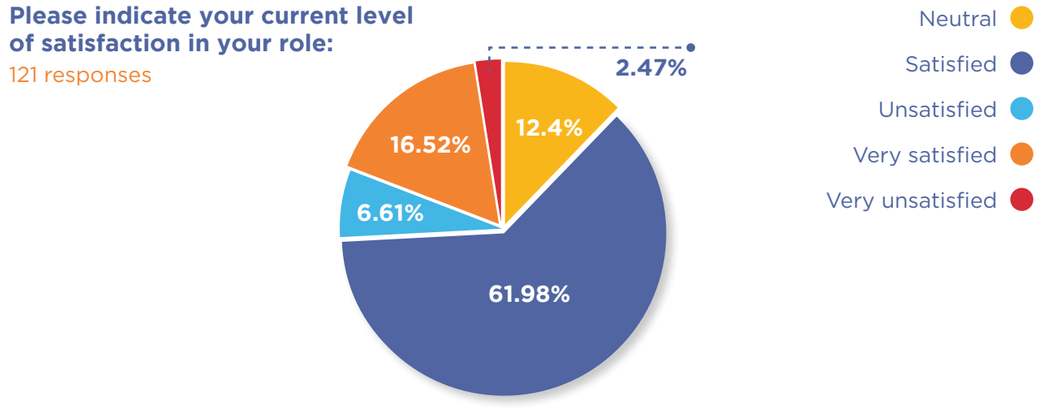


Figure 17 Satisfaction in current role

JOB SATISFACTION

Notwithstanding the many challenges identified for Access Practitioners, survey respondents (78.5%) report feeling satisfied in their role. The meaningful impact of Access Practice has been highlighted in the data as a clear motivator for performing this role and is likely a source of job satisfaction. Research has highlighted the positive impact of altruistic behaviour on task significance (Allan, Duffy and Collisson, 2018) emphasising the intrinsic rewards derived from helping others.

3.3 AN IDEAL FUTURE FOR ACCESS

When asked to identify changes which would shape an ideal future for Access Practice and Practitioners, participants offered suggestions related to institutional, policy and professional issues.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

When envisaging an ideal future for Access, some World Café participants spoke about Access Practice becoming "… obsolete ultimately" (World Café #3). Participants aspired to normalised institutional processes and practices informed by Universal Design for Learning which would result in them "Doing ourselves out of a job with UDL across all education and service for only complex needs" (World Café #1). Increased resources were wished for to allow more time to focus on the core work of Access such as relationship building, outreach and new initiatives. An aspiration for Access to be embedded in the governance structure of HEIs (World Café #3) and for an Access practitioner located in each academic department, embedded in planning for student education and preparation for employment, was expressed.

WHOLE OF INSTITUTION APPROACH

While Irish Universities are slowly evolving into inclusive institutions, gaps remain in relation to the full implementation of inclusion measures (Kelly 2017) and the policy aspiration (HEA, 2015) of promoting a whole of *institution* approach to Access is not fully realised. The ethos of Access should be the norm across the whole university (World Café #1) and "requires a whole institution to support it" (World Café #2). A "Whole of institution approach" refers to the embedding of Access practice within every department across an entire university (HEA, 2015). A desire for greater visibility on campus and involvement in high level management was also flagged in the survey data, in order to embed Access across the institution and increase the impact and importance of the work:

> *"Practitioners should sit on high level boards and feed into campus-wide decision making, not just senior management who have different perspectives and priorities."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT

Other ideas for institutional scaffolding of Access work included a financial officer in each Access office, a research and evaluation resource that doesn't involve KPIs or quantitative data, but rather measures impact more meaningfully (*"A researcher for each access team*" World Café #3) and planned Access spaces on campuses which are not *"an afterthought for campus design"* (World Café #3).

POLICY CONTEXT

A comprehensive grant system aligned with the cost of living and available to part time students, increased availability of part time courses, and childcare supports for students were identified as policy aspirations (World Cafe #2). Facilitated consultation and networking of Access Practitioners across national and European HEIs to share best practice and feed into policymaking was also desired.

PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

Participants wished for greater acknowledgement of the contribution made by Access Practitioners and recognition of their comprehensive range of professional skills. Development of national guidelines clarifying the supports Access Practitioners provide (World Café #1) and consideration of professionalisation of the role through development of a qualification specific to Access Practice (World Café #2) was suggested. Development of an Access Practitioners Professional Body to support professional and career development including creation of recommended salary scale for Access Practitioners and provision of funded Continuous Professional Development (CPD) training opportunities was also suggested. Survey respondents made similar suggestions around the need for professional recognition:

> *"I feel that Access Practitioners are not recognised as having a distinct professional expertise but would very much welcome a group approach showcasing ideas on how we could change this. Would be happy to be get involved in further learning opportunities or perhaps a further funded qualification opportunity."*
>
> *"It would be great to become professionally recognised as a group of workers within higher education, most people in my institute have no idea what I do and would just see our work as student support services."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Time to reflect, connect, collaborate and build best practice as a sectoral cohort, an annual Conference on Access (World Café #1; World Café #2) and *"less competition and more connections"* between Access services (World Café #1; World Café #2) were aspired to. This was echoed in the survey data:

> *"There is great value to be achieved in coming together as Access Practitioners to share insights and lobby for better supports. Much like the Admissions Officers Association who collectively share crucial time bound CAO workload and together seek ways to enhance prospective students' journeys."*
>
> *"Opportunities to exchange knowledge with across the sector is always motivating, it's getting the time to do that can be difficult."*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENTS

A system of professional support which would guard against burnout was desired. Regular supervision and adequate staffing (World Café #1), administrative support to facilitate "*Less paperwork, reporting etc and more professional development/ collaborative working together" –* (World Café #2) and a *"focus on the relational nature of the work"* (World Café #2) were suggested.

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report presents findings from the first national study of Access Practitioners in Ireland. A mixed methods approach collected quantitative and qualitative data from one hundred and twenty one survey respondents and qualitative data from fifty four World Café participants. The report provides unique insights into the work practices of Access Practitioners, their understandings of Access work and their work conditions and career trajectories. It also provides a snapshot profile of who Access Practitioners are, in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, education and employment status.

The data indicates that most Access Practitioners are female, aged forty or older, from a White Irish background, educated to Masters standard in a range of disciplinary areas, with education graduates constituting a small majority. The majority work full time on permanent or fixed term contracts but some precarious contract arrangements exist. Most respondents (69%) have worked in Access for under 15 years with 31% being over 15 years in post. They undertake a multiplicity of tasks primarily with students from socioeconomic disadvantaged backgrounds or with disabilities.

Results reveal that in the main Access Practitioners love their job, are motivated by a sense of service to students, the cohesive and supportive teams they work in and the dynamic nature of their work. Access Practitioners share a commitment to social justice, equality and inclusion and a rights-based approach to education. However, the data shows that the role of Access Practitioners has become more expansive, diverse and complex. Lack of continuity in funding, onerous administrative and reporting requirements and limited access to supervision or debriefing support around challenging situations makes the role difficult.

The data demonstrates a shared perception that Access is not systematically valued at the highest levels of institutional decision making and that the "whole of university approach" proposed in the National Access Plan (NAP) (HEA, 2022), is not being fully realised. A need for greater awareness and recognition of what Access Practitioners do and for Access work to be integrated throughout the foundational structures of each institution is articulated. A need for sectoral consistency around professional identities and coherence around what constitutes the role of Access Practitioner is identified. So too is the need for a comprehensive framework for career development in terms of salary structure, ongoing training, professional practice development and networking opportunities.

Access Practitioners play a pivotal and multifaceted role that is central to promoting equity, inclusivity, and diversity within HEIs and within Irish society.

ACCESS PRACTITIONERS: **OUR ROLE; OUR IDENTITY; OUR VISION**

Consideration should be given to the benefits of professionalising this role. Professionalisation (Parson, 1951; Marshall, 1950) is grounded in the principle that certain types of work hold significant societal or state importance and value (Freidson, 2001, p. 214). Practitioners in such fields are recognised as possessing specialised expertise and competencies. According to Freidson "*the ideal typical position of professionalism is founded on the official belief that the knowledge and skill of a particular specialisation requires a foundation in abstract concepts and formal learning*" (Freidson 2001, pp 34–5). The professionalisation of a role elevates it beyond a job, imbuing it with a higher degree of specialisation, ethical standards and recognition, resulting in numerous benefits for practitioners and the broader community. This research indicates a need for discussion about the professionalisation of the role of Access Practitioner in higher education.

Despite the challenges discussed above, most survey respondents reported feeling satisfied in their role and deeply committed to the students and communities they work with. This report makes the following recommendations to support Access Practitioners in the continuation of their valuable work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon the research findings this report sets out recommendations centred on policy, practice and practitioners, that also speak to NAP 2022-2028 goals of inclusivity, flexibility, clarity, coherence, sustainability and evidence-driven approach.

POLICY

1. That sustainable governmental strategies and funding mechanisms be put in place for Access Delivery.
2. That administrative and reporting requirements be adequately resourced to ensure relational student contact is upheld and safeguarded as the primary focus of Access Practitioners.
3. That a clearer, less complex student grant system be designed and implemented, including a SUSI grant for part time students and scaling system for students who fall between funding criteria.

PRACTICE

4. That Access Practice be represented in HEI Senior Management decision-making fora to support embedding, visibility, impact, and a whole of institution approach.
5. That a distinct physical space be mindfully and purposefully designated to Access Delivery services in all HEIs.
6. That research and evaluation of Access initiatives be resourced and staffed adequately to cultivate an evidence driven approach.
7. That an annual, national Access conference be established to support sharing of practice, learning and reflection on development of Access policy and the Access profession.

PRACTITIONERS

8. That a professional body of Access Practitioners be set up to foster awareness and understanding of Access Practice and advocate for resource continuity to support sustainability of Access initiatives.
9. That consideration be given to the expansion and development of a community of practice for Access Practitioners with opportunities for Access Practitioners to collaborate through the creation of an Access Practitioner network exist.
10. That consideration be given to developing an accredited training/education qualification, to be made available to those currently working in or those wishing to work in the sector
11. That regular in-role supervision be made available to Access Practitioners, given the emotional labour associated with their work.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Access Practitioners: Our Role, Our Identity, Our Vision

The first National Study of Higher Education Access Practice and Delivery

What is this survey about?

This is the first survey conducted with Access Practitioners in Ireland about their professional roles, identities and vision. It aims to map the landscape of Access Practitioners in higher education in line with your needs and expertise. This survey contains 21 questions and should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Participation in the survey is voluntary. All information you provide in this survey will be treated confidentially. Anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising any identifying information. Disguised extracts from the research may be quoted in progress reports, academic journals and/or The SOAR Project website. Should you have any further questions around the research please contact rebekah.brennan@ucc.ie. If you have any concerns or complaints around the survey, please contact PI Professor Máire Leane at m.leane@ucc.ie.

Consent

1. Do you consent to taking part in this survey? If you do not consent, you cannot proceed with answering the rest of the survey questions. *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Demographics

2. What gender do you identify with? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Female
- ◯ Male
- ◯ Transgender
- ◯ Non-binary
- ◯ Androgynous
- ◯ Gender fluid
- ◯ Bigender
- ◯ Prefer not to say
- ◯ Other: _____

3. What age range do you fall within? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ 18-25 years
- ◯ 26-40 years
- ◯ 41-55 years
- ◯ 56 years +
- ◯ Prefer not to say

4. Do you consider yourself to be from a minority ethnic background? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Prefer not to say

5. With which ethnic group do you most identify? Options are listed alphabetically.

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Asian or Asian Irish: Chinese
- ◯ Asian or Asian Irish: Indian/Pakastani/Bangladeshi
- ◯ Asian or Asian Irish: any other Asian background
- ◯ Black or Black Irish: African
- ◯ Black or Black Irish: any other black background
- ◯ Other including mixed group background: Arabic
- ◯ Other including mixed group background: Other
- ◯ White: Irish
- ◯ White: Irish Traveller
- ◯ White: Roma
- ◯ White: any other white background
- ◯ Prefer not to say

6. What is your nationality? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Irish
- ◯ Dual nationality/citizenship (Irish/Non Irish)
- ◯ From within the European Union (other than Ireland)
- ◯ From within the United Kingdom
- ◯ Prefer not to say

7. What is your highest level of education attained? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Junior Certificate
- ◯ Leaving Certificate
- ◯ PLC Course
- ◯ QQI Level 3-5
- ◯ QQI Level 6
- ◯ QQI Level 7
- ◯ QQI Level 8
- ◯ QQI Level 9
- ◯ QQI Level 10
- ◯ Prefer not to say

8. What is your disciplinary background? *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Business, Administration and Law
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Arts and Humanities
- ☐ Social Sciences, Journalism and Information
- ☐ Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction
- ☐ Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary
- ☐ Health and Welfare
- ☐ Information and Communication Technology
- ☐ Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics
- ☐ Services
- ☐ Not Applicable

Your current role in Access Delivery

9. Do you work in a: *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Technological University
- ◯ University
- ◯ College of Education
- ◯ Institute of Technology

10. What is the nature of your contract: *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Permanent
- ◯ Fixed term
- ◯ External contract
- ◯ Other: _____

11. Do you work: *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Parttime hours
- ◯ Fulltime hours

12. What is the **main** area of Access that you work in? Tick all that apply *

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Socioeconomic disadvantage
- ☐ Disability
- ☐ Mature Students

13. What **best** describes your role? *

Mark only one oval.

- Management (staff and projects)
- Student Support
- Outreach
- Administration
- Research

14. How long have you worked in Access? *

Mark only one oval.

- Under three years
- 3-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-14 years
- 15 years +

15. How long have you performed your **current** role? *

Mark only one oval.

- Under three years
- 3-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-14 years
- 15 years +

16. What motivated you to **join** Access? *

17. What has kept you motivated to **stay** working in Access? *

18. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: I feel adequately qualified to perform all of the duties required in my current role. *

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

19. Please name your top three training and professional development priorities for your current role. *
Please number in order of importance (i.e. 1, 2, 3)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

20. Please indicate your **current** level of satisfaction in your role: *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Very satisfied
- ◯ Satisfied
- ◯ Neutral
- ◯ Unsatisfied
- ◯ Very unsatisfied

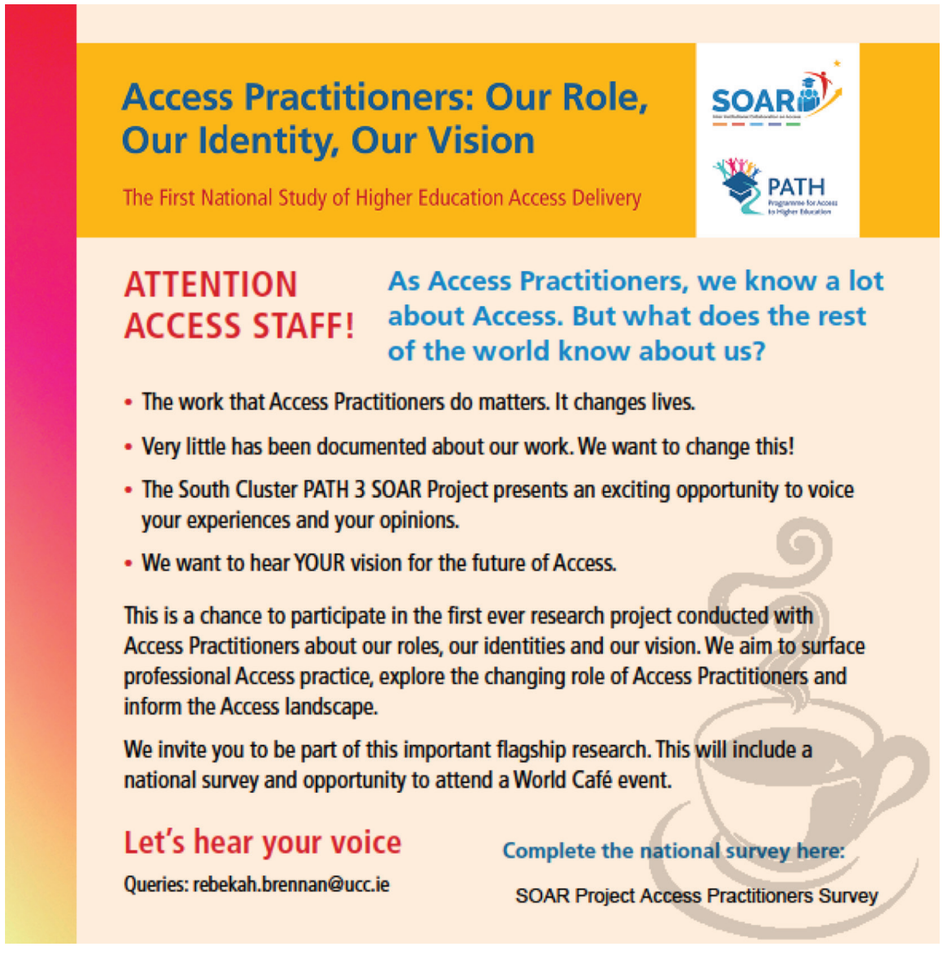
21. Please indicate your level of agreement to the following statements **in relation to your institution**: *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Access is supported and resourced adequately	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Access is recognised as a key objective	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Access practitioners are recognised as having distinct professional expertise	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Access practice is embedded across the institution	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

22. Please feel free to comment here, if you have any additional comments, about the role of Access Practitioners in higher education in Ireland:

APPENDIX 2



Access Practitioners: Our Role, Our Identity, Our Vision

The First National Study of Higher Education Access Delivery

SOAR

PATH

ATTENTION ACCESS STAFF!

As Access Practitioners, we know a lot about Access. But what does the rest of the world know about us?

- The work that Access Practitioners do matters. It changes lives.
- Very little has been documented about our work. We want to change this!
- The South Cluster PATH 3 SOAR Project presents an exciting opportunity to voice your experiences and your opinions.
- We want to hear YOUR vision for the future of Access.

This is a chance to participate in the first ever research project conducted with Access Practitioners about our roles, our identities and our vision. We aim to surface professional Access practice, explore the changing role of Access Practitioners and inform the Access landscape.

We invite you to be part of this important flagship research. This will include a national survey and opportunity to attend a World Café event.

Let's hear your voice

Queries: rebekah.brennan@ucc.ie

Complete the national survey here:

SOAR Project Access Practitioners Survey

APPENDIX 3

Access Practitioners: Our Role, Our Identity, Our Vision

The First National Study of Higher Education Access Delivery

SOAR

PATH

Indication of Interest in attending World Café

As part of this research, we are hosting a World Café to collect your thoughts on and visions for Access.

What is a World Café?
The World Café methodology is a simple, effective, and flexible format for hosting large group dialogue. We will create a "special" environment, modelled after a café. The process begins with the first of four fifteen minute rounds of conversation for groups of 6-7. At the end of the fifteen minutes, each member of the group moves to a different table. Each round is prefaced with a question around Access - the purpose of the World Café. Participants will get the chance to answer all of the questions.
After the small groups, individuals are invited to share insights or other results from their conversations with the rest of the large group. These results are reflected visually as a piece of art in the room. We are hoping for a diverse cross section of Access staff to attend.
Lunch will be provided and an opportunity to network! Please let us know of any special dietary requirements or access requirements so that we can best accommodate you.

Email* _____

What is your role in Access (title)? _____

Have you any special dietary requirements? _____

Have you any access requirements? _____

Which Word Café are you able to attend? _____

Many thanks and appreciations

Completion of this survey is an indication of interest in participation in a World Café. We need to ensure that a cross section of Access roles participate. Participants will be randomly selected and you will receive an invite to attend if you are selected. Acceptance of an invitation denotes consent to participate in the World Café research. Completion of this survey does not impact your anonymity or confidentiality in any way or guarantee participation in a World Café.

APPENDIX 4 INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

"ACCESS PRACTITIONERS: OUR ROLE, OUR IDENTITY, OUR VISION: THE FIRST NATIONAL STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS DELIVERY" RESEARCH STUDY

Thank you for accepting our invitation to take part in a World Café for the "Access Practitioners: Our Role, Our Identity, Our Vision, The First National Study of Higher Education Access Delivery" research study. The purpose of this document is to explain to you what the research is about and to give you all the information. The purpose of this World Café is to talk to Access Practitioners about your role, how your role may have changed, the challenges and needs of Access Practitioners and your vision for Access in the future. You will attend a World Café at the Glucksman, UCC with Rebekah Brennan and Sheila McGovern from The SOAR Project.

The World Café will NOT be video or audio recorded.

Your responses to questions will be handwritten by yourselves **anonymously** on paper and typed up at a later stage.

Reminder: What is a World Café? The World Café methodology is a simple, effective, and flexible format for hosting large group dialogue. The following five components comprise the basic model: 1) Setting: Create a "special" environment, most often modelled after a café, i.e., small round tables, paper, coloured pens, coffees, teas. There should be four/five chairs at each table. 2) Welcome and Introduction: The host begins with a warm welcome and an introduction to the World Café process, setting the context, sharing the Cafe Etiquette, and putting participants at ease. 3) Small-Group Rounds: The process begins with the first of three or more fifteen minute rounds of conversation for small groups seated around a table. At the end of the fifteen minutes, each member of the group moves to a different new table. 4) Questions: each round is prefaced with a question around Access - the purpose of the World Café. Each table "hosts" a specific question. Participants will get the chance to answer all of the questions. 5) Harvest: After the small groups, individuals are invited to share insights or other results from their conversations with the rest of the large group. These results are reflected visually in a variety of ways in the room.

If you have any queries about this research, you can ask Rebekah, the researcher for the SOAR Project at **Rebekah.brennan@ucc.ie.**

If you would like to discuss this research with a person outside of the research team, for example if you have a complaint, you can contact Professor Maire Leane, Head of School, School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, Western Road, Cork at **maire.leane@ucc.ie.**

CONSENT

I_____agree to participate in the Access Practitioners: Our Role, Our Identity, Our Vision The First National Study of Higher Education Access Delivery" Research Study. The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing. I am participating voluntarily. I understand that I can withdraw from the World Cafe, without consequences, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating. I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity. I understand that disguised extracts from my responses may be quoted in publications, presentations and reports.

Signature (Access Practitioner) _____

Researcher's name: __Rebekah Brennan _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX 5 TRAINING NEEDS

Training needs identified included: People management; managing conflict; public speaking; mentoring staff; expanding education especially around new student needs; Universal Design for Learning (UDL); organisational skills; personal development; networking; building a community; research and evaluation; measuring impact ; cultural awareness; supporting students with complex needs ; ESF Funding; completing a PhD; data management; disability awareness training; upskilling to work with new groups; managing caseload; social media training; financial management; Motivational Interviewing (MI) skills; administration training; building resilience in staff; reading non-verbal cues; reflective practice training; report writing; trauma-informed practice; mental health support for young people; SLD strategies to support learning; training in legislation; IT Training; mainstreaming/designing out accommodations; training in dyslexia; training in ADHD coaching skills; advocacy; strategic planning; psychology; access rights for migrants and refugees; access best practices; web editing skills; training in improving systems and processes; sensory integration; DARE screening; DEI training; community development; creative means of engagement; budgeting training; partnership working; EDI training (Equality, Diversity, Inclusion); digital teaching and learning; assistive technology training; crisis management; change management; new building regulations; support for students on work placement and RCAT training.

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OUR ROLE
OUR IDENTITY
OUR VISION

The first National Study of Higher Education Access Practice and Delivery

Rebekah Brennan, Sheila McGovern, Máire Leane, Fiachra Ó'Súilleabháin

HEA | HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY
AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS