



# Submission to the consultation on the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education

**June 2021**



St Patrick's Mental Health Services (SPMHS) is Ireland's largest independent, not-for-profit mental health service provider. St Patrick's Mental Health Services' vision is a society where all citizens are empowered to live mentally healthy lives. SPMHS works to provide the highest quality mental healthcare, to promote mental wellbeing and mental health awareness, and to advocate for the rights of those experiencing mental health difficulties. SPMHS achieves this through a human rights-based approach, through the enhancement of evidence-based knowledge, and by striving to be at the cutting edge of new initiatives and advances in the field. SPMHS is committed to furthering the development of the competencies of those choosing to work in mental health and of the organisations providing mental health care services, and to enhancing partnership with service users. Our strategic plan for 2018-2022 – [‘Changing Minds. Changing Lives’](#), is firmly rooted in these principles and commitments.

SPMHS welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation on the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (‘National Access Plan’). This brief submission will focus on the significance of mental health needs of students and prospective students.

### **Significance of mental health**

SPMHS supports the vision of the National Access Plan - “to ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population”, and the progress made to date as outlined in the consultation document.<sup>1,2</sup> Mental health is noted within the plan in the context of disability, and while specific targets are not included, it is stated that “the HEA and the DES are committed to continuing to support students in other categories of disability (for example, students with a learning disability, with mental health conditions or with neurological conditions) and to ensure that all students with disabilities can access and participate in higher education on an equal basis”.<sup>3</sup>

The emergent impacts on collective wellbeing and societal mental health over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the interlinked potential for a deepening of inequalities and a frustration of progress towards greater enjoyment of human rights within society continues to be evidenced.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Data from the Central Statistics Office from February 2021, indicates almost six in ten respondents reported their mental health has been negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, with young people (aged 18-34) highlighted as amongst those reporting the greatest negative impacts.<sup>7</sup> While only a minority of these impacts will likely lead to psychosocial disability, as defined under the



provisions of the UNCRPD, there may nonetheless be an increase in incidence of psychosocial disability emergent over the coming months and years.

Within the consultation document, the disproportionate impact Covid-19 has had on students from disadvantaged communities is highlighted as a key challenge for the new National Access Plan. Of relevance here is a recent report by the Irish Youth Foundation wherein 86% of youth workers “cited long-term mental health challenges as a key issue for the young people they support”, and 62% felt that “hidden trauma / stress from the past year will become an issue for the young people they support, in the near future”.<sup>8</sup>

SPMHS would thus assert that in light of the impacts of Covid-19, and especially in recognition of impacts on the mental health of young people and those living in disadvantaged circumstances, that greater attention is directed to access needs of prospective students who may have mental health difficulties.

### **Significance of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)**

Since the National Plan for Access 2015-2019 was first drafted, Ireland has ratified the UNCRPD. SPMHS would recommend that the principles of the UNCRPD, most significantly under Article 24 – Education, are applied and used as a key guiding influence in the drafting of the new plan.<sup>9</sup> SPMHS would further point to the importance of reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities, highlighted within Article 24, and suggest that it may be of benefit to consider efforts to foster greater awareness and understanding of reasonable accommodations as they relate to mental health difficulties, in relation to prospective students, guidance counsellors and others working to support people to access higher education, and higher level education providers. The valuable work of organisations such as AHEAD is noted in this regard.

Further in line with the General Obligations of the UNCRPD, ‘close consultation with and active involvement of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations’ should be a formative influence on the new National Plan for Access as regards access and disability issues.<sup>10</sup> This is especially pertinent given the findings of the recent *Mind the Gap* report of the Office of the Children’s Ombudsman, which points to a failure to effectively include children and young people with disabilities in consultations and research to date.<sup>11</sup> Of further note, the *Mind the Gap* report points to the progress made under the current National Access Plan for young people with disabilities, but highlights areas for further attention including tackling low expectations where they exist amongst parents and teachers of



children with disabilities, transition planning and retention, and under-representation of students with disabilities in academic fields beyond humanities and arts subjects.<sup>12</sup>

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**Submission Ends**

**Name:** Louise O'Leary  
**Position:** Advocacy Manager



## References

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- <sup>2</sup> Higher Education Authority (2021) *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2022-2026 Consultation Paper*. Available at: [https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/04/National-Access-Plan-2022-2026\\_Consultation-Paper-1.pdf](https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/04/National-Access-Plan-2022-2026_Consultation-Paper-1.pdf) . [Accessed 11/6/2021]
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- <sup>4</sup> Mental Health Reform and the Covid-19 Psychological Research Consortium (2020) *Responding to the Mental Health Impact of Covid-19: Public views on the Government's response and insights from lived experience*. Available at: <https://www.mentalhealthreform.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Responding-to-the-Mental-Health-Impact-of-COVID-19-Report-July-2020.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> United Nations (2020), Policy Brief: Covid-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health. 13 May, 2020. Available at: <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/policy-brief-covid-19-and-need-action-mental-health>
- <sup>6</sup> UN Economic and Social Council, Statement on the Coronavirus (Covid-19) disease pandemic and economic, social and cultural rights, 17 April 2020, E/ C.12/ 2020/1. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/E/C.12/2020/1>
- <sup>7</sup> Central Statistics Office (2021) Social Impact of Covid-19 Survey February 2021: Wellbeing. Available at: <https://cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-sic19wbg/socialimpactofcovid-19surveyfebruary2021well-being/resultsandanalysis/>
- <sup>8</sup> Irish Youth Foundation (2021, p.26) *Generation Pandemic*. Available at: <https://iyf.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/GenerationPandemicJune2021Report.pdf> [Accessed 11/6/21]
- <sup>9</sup> UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 24 January 2007, p. 8, A/RES/61/106. <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf> [Accessed 11/6/21]
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid
- <sup>11</sup> Moloney et al. (2021) *Mind the Gap - Barriers to the realisation of the rights of children with disabilities in Ireland*. Available at: [https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2021/03/MindTheGap\\_OCO\\_NUIG\\_Disability\\_Report.pdf](https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2021/03/MindTheGap_OCO_NUIG_Disability_Report.pdf) [Accessed 11/6/21]
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid