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Access Office Progress Report Providing Equity of Access in the times of Covid-19

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Access Office Progress Report

Providing Equity of Access in the times of Covid-19



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ACCESS OFFICE STAFF



Deirdre O'Connor
Access Officer



Caitriona Moore
Access Office
Senior Administrator



Sorcha Prendergast
Second level
Access Coordinator



Edel O'Donnell
Destination College
Assistant Coordinator



Nora Moloney
Access Office
Administrator



Tess Phillips
Academy for Children
Administrator



Clodagh De Klein
Access Office
Administrator

INTRODUCTION

The Access Office in UL was established in 1999. With its vision to widen access and participation in Higher Education, the key objective of the Access Office is to challenge educational, social, cultural and economic barriers endured by children and young adults affected by inequality and social exclusion. Since its inception, the Access Office has built sustainable routes to Higher Education, enabling equal access and completion of third-level education by marginalised communities. Among other important national and international best practice access and widening-participation policies, over the last few years, the work of the Access Office has been guided by the UL's Equality and Human Rights Strategy 2019-2022 (in particular, Goal 4 - Educational Experience) and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (in particular, Goal 4 - Quality Education and Goal 10 - Reduced Inequalities).

The Access Office works to promote and support the access and participation of students from groups that have been traditionally under-represented in third-level and the University sector. The Access Office engages with students and their parents and guardians at all stages in the educational lifecycle: primary, secondary and tertiary. Through a range of pre-entry school and community initiatives and programmes and post-entry student success supports, the office assists young people under the age of twenty-three, to prepare for and ultimately enter the University through one of two Access routes: Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Access to University Course (AUC).

To inform its policies and everyday practices, the Access Office uses the concept of the Engagement Cycle. Accordingly, the core activities of the Access Office can be viewed through each phase of the cycle:

- ⇒ Aspiration: Raising awareness of the possibilities of third-level education and reducing barriers to entry.
- ⇒ Transitions: Providing clear pathways and flexible entry routes for students to enrol in higher education.
- ⇒ Retention: Ensuring a range of supports are available throughout students' degree programmes to increase the likelihood of completion.

Overall, the work of the Access Office may be broadly categorised into three areas:

- ⇒ Pre-entry school activities at both primary and second level.
- ⇒ Post-entry students supports.
- ⇒ Outreach work in the community.

This report speaks to the tremendous, coordinated effort of the Access Office staff and its educational and community partners to persist and succeed in delivering quality services to children and young adults in need of educational, financial and emotional assistance and intervention in the face of the challenges imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

THE ACADEMY FOR CHILDREN

In line with the University's commitment to access and widening the participation of under-represented groups at third level, the Access Office established the Academy for Children in late 2020. The goal of the Academy is to inspire, encourage and support primary school children in local designated schools, captured by the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan, to reach their full potential and begin their journey onto higher education. The ethos of the Academy is embedded in a firm belief in partnership, in community and in keeping children at the heart of the decision-making process. Through its active engagement with the children, the Academy opens doors and expands horizons by introducing the University to those who do not know it and inspiring future graduates.

The UL's Academy for Children partners with DEIS Primary Schools in Limerick City and County and internal UL partners to deliver programmes to 5th and 6th year primary school children via two strands: In-School Bespoke Programmes and Exploration Days.

How our project works



Programmes designed for specific schools to meet their needs

Pilot school's needs:

1. Increased physical activity with links to community
2. Introduction of a foreign language as part of the transition to second level
3. Role modelling/careers talks by UL students
4. Parents/guardians programme designed by parents/guardians



Programmes open to all local DEIS schools:

1. On campus exploration days in common areas of interest e.g. STEAM, Music, Physical Activity, Business, Life as a Student
2. Activity books and competitions
3. Mailing list for any other UL activities that would be beneficial



The in-school programmes are developed in collaboration with the schools and are designed to address specific needs identified by the educational providers in collaboration with parents and guardians and their children.

The first school chosen to pilot the programme was Our Lady Queen of Peace National School. Aided by UL's student Academy Ambassadors, the school worked in a close collaboration with the UL Access Office, UL's School of Modern Languages, Limerick Sports Partnership and the Irish Athletic Boxing Association to design specific aspects of the programme.

The operationalisation of the Academy for Children is overseen in UL by Deirdre O'Connor, the Access Officer who is actively participating in the development of the programme with the assistance of a primary school access coordinator and student ambassadors.



5th class pupils from Our Lady Queen of Peace school participating in science activities led by Dr. Audrey O'Grady and the team (2023)

Thanks to a quick and coordinated response and facilitation of online communication and teaching platforms during the pandemic, the in-school Academy for Children aspect of the programme was successfully delivered remotely and resumed the in-school operations when the restrictions were lifted in autumn of 2021.



Science and Education Building, UL (2023)



Science and Education Building, UL (2023)

Since the programme's inception in 2020, two hundred and forty-six pupils from five schools availed of bespoke programmes. Additionally, in autumn 2021, one hundred and twenty pupils from five schools participated in workshops as part of the *College Awareness Week*. While the on-campus element of the Academy for Children had to be put on hold during the pandemic, in spring 2022, four hundred and twenty-five pupils from nine schools were involved in on-campus *Exploration Days*.

The Exploration Days are facilitated by interagency collaboration between the Academy, UL's faculty and community stakeholders. To date, the active supporters of the programme include Kemmy Business School, School of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics, Physical Education and Sports Sciences, Faculty of Science and Engineering, Lero, Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, Glucksman Library, Limerick Sports Partnership, Irish Athletic Boxing Association. Other UL departments and community stakeholders continue to join this important early education enterprise.

LOOK TO THE FUTURE, BROADENING HORIZONS, ORIENTATION DAYS & SLUSIK

As part of the Access Office second-level school activities, pupils who had fully completed and participated in *Look to the Future* and *Broadening Horizons* programmes receive invitations to take part in the *Orientation Days* offering them the opportunity to visit the University for a day, learn about UL, the degree programmes and social activities available. As part of the Orientation Days, academic staff volunteer to engage with the groups in an imaginative and creative way about topics such as science, engineering, and informatics to stimulate an interest in these subjects.

While on campus the students also get the opportunity to visit the Glucksman Library and socialise and avail of meals in the various UL canteens. The Orientation Days are designed to offer the visitors a feel for what it would be like to be a student at UL.



Access Office Orientation Days 2019

The health and safety restrictions, imposed by Covid-19, affected the manner in which the Access Office typically carries out the Pre-Entry Activities in secondary schools. Initially, the outreach work was impacted a lot due to the pandemic and the subsequent school closures resulting in limited access to schools. The school closures significantly affected the outreach work, consequently impeding the provision of important services engagement. It was also vital to ensure second-level students, parents, guardians, external agencies and the wider community continued to receive the necessary information they require about such schemes as HEAR.

The health and safety restrictions imposed on school activities during the pandemic necessitated new ways of delivery for the pre-entry programmes coordinated by the Access

Office. The move to virtual sessions and online engagement improved over time and brought many positive outcomes, particularly the engagement with pupils' parents/guardians. Due to the new virtual ways of working, there has been a big increase in participation of parents at HEAR and CAO Information Evenings, facilitated in conjunction with the DEIS schools.



Virtual Evening CAO Information Session for Parents and Guardians (2020)

The easing of Covid restrictions in Autumn 2021 enabled a return to schools to facilitate two programmes designed for first- and second-year pupils, *Look to the Future* and *Broadening Horizons*.

Returning to the classroom was welcomed as the face-to-face interactions with young people of that age group are crucial to their learning and development.



In-class *Look to the Future* in Ardscoil Mhuire, Corbally (2021)

Today, both programmes are running in seven linked schools with over seven hundred first- and second-year pupils benefitting from participation. On completion of the programme, those with excellent participation received a certificate at the *Access Schools Awards Ceremony*. The 2022 ceremony took place on the UL campus in May. The ceremony saw up to thirty pupils from each school, their parents and guardians, teachers and guidance counsellors attending the celebrations officiated by UL's provost.



The Access Schools Awards 2019

Due to the Covid-related restrictions the *Orientation Days* had to be postponed for two consecutive years and resumed on campus in 2022.

As part of the larger team of local partners, the Access Office is also an international stakeholder in a Pilot Programme called *Service-Learning Upscaling Social Inclusion for Kids (SLUSIK)*. This programme creates opportunities with community partners for our young people to discover how they can help address real problems, and in doing so find their own unique PLACE in the world. This Erasmus+ funded project involves seven European partners.



Debriefing session with students and teachers led by Partick Ryan (October 2022)

The **PLACE model** has five stages (Prepare, Link, Action, Celebrate and Effect) that integrate formal and informal learning within a ‘real-world’ context.



Through experiential learning, the programme aims to reduce the risk of social exclusion faced by many young people and to improve their participation in all aspects of society. So far in Ireland, this programme has run in three schools in Limerick City and County: CBS Sexton Street (24 pupils), Colaiste Iosaef in Kilmallock (47 pupils), and Ardscoil Mhuire in Corbally (23 pupils). Overall, **94 children** benefitted from participating in the programme. Despite the enormous challenges of the pandemic, Transition Year students from the participating schools succeeded in developing innovative community initiatives. The students’ ideas included addressing challenges in sustainable food, recycling, sexism, violence in communities, period poverty and declining bee populations. The PLACE model encourages personal reflection throughout, encouraging students with different skills to participate in their communities in ways they may not have thought possible.

DESTINATION COLLEGE

Aided by the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) and guided by the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2022-2028, Destination College is a programme dedicated to increasing participation by under-represented groups in higher education. Destination College adopts a multifaceted approach aimed at senior cycle students, comprising of the following four elements:

School and Community Peer Mentoring/Access Alumni Mentoring

This important initiative offers an opportunity for senior-cycle pupils to benefit from structured mentoring sessions facilitated by the UL Access students. The mentoring sessions run in schools and in after-school community settings, such as youth clubs, SCP's and community support services, and address important transition-related questions, such as:

- ✓ What can I study at college?
- ✓ How can I find out what subjects are in a degree?
- ✓ What are my career options?
- ✓ What are the routes to college?
- ✓ What supports are available when I get to college?

The programme also includes a separate Mentoring initiative facilitated by the Access Alumni in relation to the world of work and further study to the third and fourth year UL Access Students.

After-School Study Club

The Destination College **Study Club** (overseen by TUS and modeled on the Southside's UL Access Campus study club) is located on the Northside of the Limerick City. The key success of the **Study Club** is that it has increased the number of places available to young people from disadvantaged communities and schools in the City to:

- ✓ Avail of specialised tuition in ordinary and higher-level leaving certificate mathematics.
- ✓ Access online classes in a range of Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate subjects.
- ✓ Benefit from individual mentoring.

Parent/Guardian Programme

The ***Parent and Guardian Programme*** provides information, practical supports and guidance to parents and guardians around the key aspects of young people's transition from school to college, such as:

- ✓ College Programmes
- ✓ CAO application process
- ✓ SUSI grant application process
- ✓ Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) applications
- ✓ HEI student support services (with a particular emphasis on financial supports)
- ✓ Access and QQI pathways

Sessions are conveniently facilitated in community and school settings, as well as on campuses across the participating HEIs.

Transition and Scholarship Support

Through the ***Transition and Scholarship*** activities, targeted pre-entry subject specific academic support is provided to students to enhance their ability to meet the minimum requirements needed to enter the participating institutions. Transition and post-entry supports are also provided to the students in their progression into the unfamiliar culture of Higher Education. This includes regular one-to-one 'check in's' with students to discuss their progress and address any concerns that they may have. Students are also eligible, encouraged and supported to apply for a 1916 Bursary Fund.

To date a significant number of students, parents and guardians availed of the transition and scholarship supports, including:

- ⇒ 110 students took part in the on-campus exam revision programmes.
- ⇒ 205 students received on-line exam tuition.
- ⇒ 93 students benefitted from mentoring.
- ⇒ 140 parents participated in the parent information programme.



Destination College Revision Course (early 2020, before the lockdown)

The *Destination College* project has developed strong collaborative partnerships with a network of agencies, which are providing pre-entry, and family-support services to the community. This network consists of TUSLA's prevention, partnership and family support services, TUSLA's education and welfare support service, HSCL's, SCP'S, Limerick City and County Council, Family Resource Centre's, Youth Clubs, Limerick Children and Young Person's Services Committee, Parenting Limerick, Barnardos, Community Development Projects, Paul Partnership and Limerick Social Services Centre. These partnerships have enabled the *Destination College* programme to share resources, build capacity and exchange knowledge, identify needs among target groups and ensure that the supports on offer are responsive to these needs.

Despite the challenges posed by Covid-19, the Destination College programme had successfully functioned in remote and hybrid modes during the pandemic. Engagement with the community partners increased and strengthened throughout this time, keeping the student at the centre of the work to ensuring that none were further disadvantaged or left unsupported.

The partnerships have enabled the Destination College programme to reach over one thousand students and parents to date, which has contributed to increasing the number of young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds entering the Mid-West PATH 3 Cluster HEIs (UL, MIC and TUS). A sample of which includes two hundred educational support packs distributed to senior cycle target students, as well as other necessary supports provided to the children to ensure engagement with education during the period of school closures in March and April 2020.



Educational support packs & laptops distributed to children during 2020 school closures in conjunction with Tusla & HSCL'S

Also in response to school closures, a local partner - *Jump-a-Grade* had offered fifty free places to 6th year students attending DEIS schools to avail of their *12-week Leaving Certificate Revision Course*. Initially, only fifteen students had availed of the offer. Jump-A-Grade linked with the *Destination College* programme to advertise the course and to reach potential participants. Consequently, forty-five Destination College students availed of the offer and Jump-A-Grade expanded their programme to accommodate sixty students.

The emergence of Covid-19 introduced new dimensions and perspectives to widening-participation work. In respect to the challenges, feedback indicated that inconsistency of broadband hindered the ability of some to engage with learning and additional support programmes. Lack of a dedicated private study space in homes also rendered it difficult for some students to participate fully and concentrate on their studies.

However, there were also some unexpected opportunities that Covid-19 presented. Sessions previously held in a physical space had to transfer to online platforms. For many of the target students and parents and guardians, online and hybrid modes of programme delivery afforded more flexibility and thus facilitated access. Barriers, which could have previously prevented attendance in person, such as travel, were reduced. This highlighted the importance of adaptability, creativity and flexibility from all stakeholders involved in monitoring and delivering on the objectives of the PATH programme, going forward. A hybrid approach to delivery of the Destination College programme has become a permanent mode of participant engagement and continues to date.

UNIVERSITY ENTRY-ROUTE COURSES

Access to University Course

The Access to University Course is a full-time, 13-week programme that coincides with the UL's Spring semester. The programme provides opportunity to gain academic and social skills to enable the students to succeed at UL. The students also study a module from the degree they hope to start in the Autumn semester.

Transition to University Course

The Transition to University Course is a short intensive residential course attended by first-year students entering UL through the HEAR scheme. The intention of the course is to ease the transition from school to college by helping students to become familiar with the physical and academic environment and the supports and services available to them and connect with other students.

Throughout the pandemic both courses took place online and, as the next section outlines in detail, the students received post-entry educational supports from the Access Office to facilitate completion and ensure their progression to university.

POST-ENTRY ACCESS SUPPORT

While the pre-entry Access initiatives aim to reduce barriers to entry and raise awareness of the possibilities of higher education, the post-entry Access supports aid student transition from secondary school and offer a range of supports increasing the likelihood of completion of third-level education, at the same time ensuring that the student body reflects the diversity of our society.

The Access Office is a team of dedicated staff who aid students' academic success through service and provision of a bespoke range of equitable opportunities. Staff respond to students' enquires and offer support regarding varied academic, financial and personal matters. The key everyday student queries relate to course requirements, module registration, progression, contact with lecturers and administrative staff, logging calls with academic registry for and on behalf of students, and also student accommodation and financial supports. Staff also support students who encounter personal challenges and are equipped to deal with sensitive matters by offering individualised and targeted assistance and advocacy services. The Access team supports students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which include students with disabilities, members of minority groups and those who may be in care of the State. Thus, student success is at the heart of the post-entry Access work.

Student retention and progression

Access students in UL can be captured by their route of entry to the University. Students who have entered via AUC and HEAR routes are referred to as the Access Students. As evident in Figure 1, the retention rates of the first year Access students entering UL's undergraduate degrees via HEAR and AUC routes since 2016/17 academic year are consistently high. In the last five years, over 87% of Access students have successfully completed year 1. Despite the pandemic, in the academic year 2019/20, 95% of the students completed the first year of their undergraduate course. The increased retention may be explained by a variety of factors and changes that affected the processes of teaching and learning at the outbreak of Covid-19, including the increased level of supports directed at students at the time.

Academic Year	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
No. of students entering	274	276	215	224	235
No. of students exiting	33	32	24	11	27
% exiting	12.8%	12.3%	11.8%	5%	12.2%
% retained	87.2%	87.7%	88.2%	95%	87.8%

Figure 1: 5-year AUC & HEAR Enrolment & Retention in YR 1

Access student population graduating from UL undergraduate programmes has been growing year-on-year since 2011 with 62 students graduating that year to 225 graduates in 2021 and 183 in 2022 (see Figure 2).

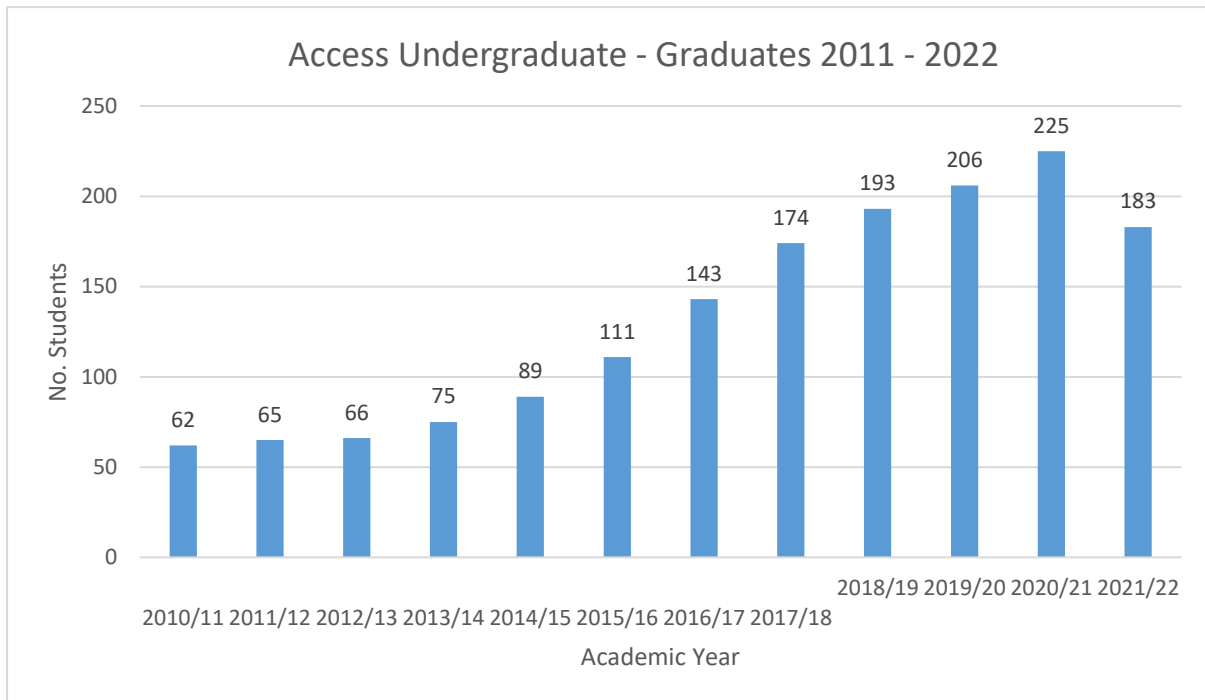


Figure 2: Access UG Graduates

Due to a variety of interruptions in the pre-entry outreach and educational activities, post-entry supports and services, and teaching and learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic the number of Access students in full-time undergraduate programmes has declined from 957 in the academic year 2019/20 to 875 in 2021/22 (see Figure 3).

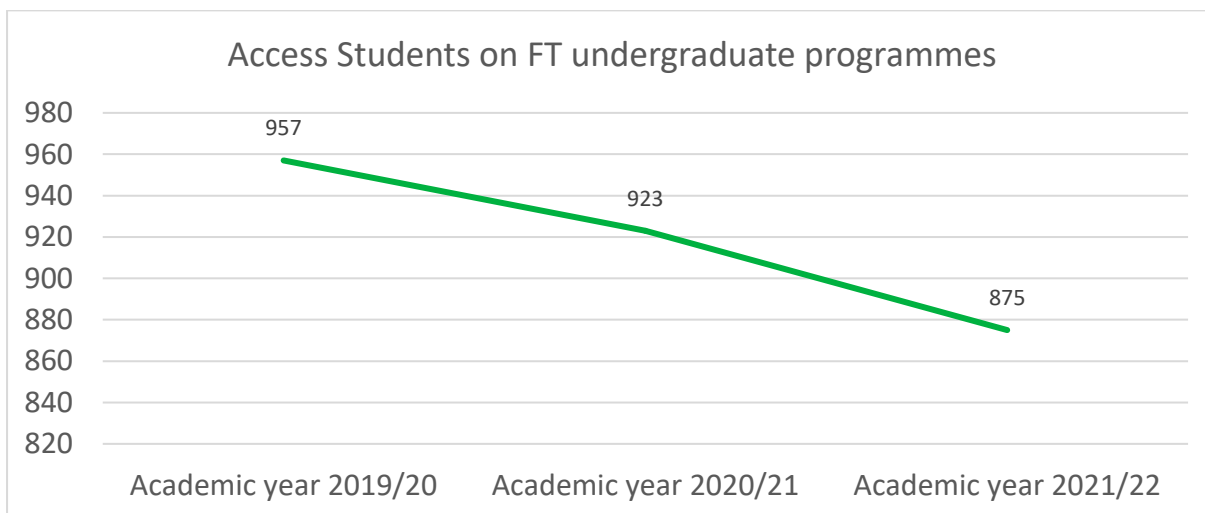


Figure 3: Number of Access UG F/T Students

The total intake of students entering UL via Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme and Access to University Course (AUC) dropped from 7.9% in 2019/20 to 7.8% in 2020/21 and 6.5% the following year (see Figure 4). The declining number of students entering UL via the alternative routes reveals the importance of the pre-entry programmes in helping students

facing socio-economic barriers in accessing third-level education. The same downward trend is also reflected in the percentage of all undergraduate students that are Access students in UL (see Figure 5).

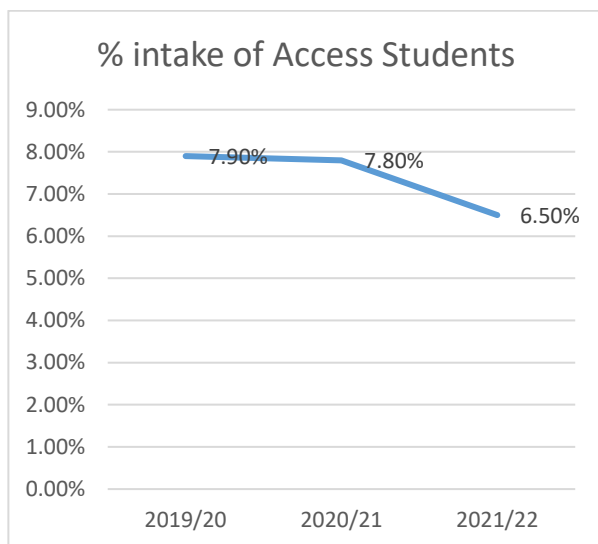


Figure 4

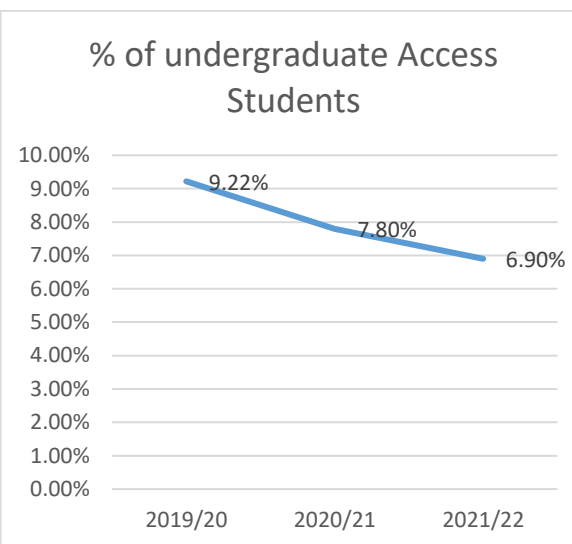


Figure 5

The data showing the total number of Access students by Faculty between 2019/20 to 2021/22 (see Figure 6) confirms in detail a declining pattern and losses experienced across all UL Faculties. The biggest loss of the Access students occurred in the Faculty of Business, followed by Interfaculty, Faculty of Education and Health Sciences and Science and Engineering. The Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, that on average has the highest number of the Access students, experienced the smallest decline during the pandemic.

Faculty	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences	256	257	248
Faculty of Business	197	191	176
Faculty of Education and Health Sciences	161	166	147
Faculty of Science and Engineering	205	201	196
Interfaculty	168	176	152
Total	987	991	919

Figure 6: Number of Access Students by Faculty

Looking at the number of full-time undergraduate students entering UL for the first time (see Figure 7), we observe that while overall population of students entering undergraduate programmes has grown in all faculties during the pandemic, the population of Access students has been declining from two hundred and twenty-seven in 2019 to one hundred and ninety-five in 2021. Only the Faculty of Science and Engineering experienced higher intake of the Access

students in the academic years 2020/21 and 2021/22 than in 2019/20. While the population of Access students on Interfaculty programmes grew from nineteen in 2019/20 to forty-nine in 2020/21, the intake has significantly declined to only twenty-six in the academic year 2021/22.

Faculty	2019/20		2020/21		2021/22	
	Access	Gen. Pop.	Access	Gen. Pop.	Access	Gen. Pop.
Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences	71	634	59	729	58	712
Faculty of Business	53	505	40	555	34	564
Faculty of Education and Health Sciences	45	322	27	323	30	354
Faculty of Science and Engineering	39	871	60	953	47	924
Interfaculty	19	415	49	458	26	458
Total	227	2747	235	3018	195	3012

Figure 7: Proportion of YR 1 Access & other UL students

The local feedback in respect to school engagement and undergraduate college applications during Covid-19 suggests that multiple factors had led to an overall lower number of college applications during that time, such as: school closures; pupils dropping out of school; late repeat exam results (February 2021) for 2020 intake; inability to receive the necessary financial documentation from DEASP due to the office closures; PUP bringing family income above threshold in some cases; not accepting offers due to the lack of accommodation.

In contrast, eighty-five postgraduate Access students have obtained an advanced degree between 2011 and 2022. The data is limited to the postgraduate Access students who have entered UL as undergraduate students via HEAR and AUC and on completion were successfully accepted on a postgraduate programme.

The number of Access students pursuing postgraduate programmes is steadily but consistently growing since 2011. Regardless of the Covid-19 pandemic, the trend continues, and shows that an increasing number of Access students who complete an undergraduate course successfully secure their placement on postgraduate programmes. Looking at the data for individual faculties (see Figure 9), only the Faculty of Business and the Faculty of Science and Engineering experienced lower levels of registrations for the academic year 2021/22. The Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences numbers accelerated from ten students registered in 2019 to sixteen students in 2021, and the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences recorded twenty-one registered students in 2019, twenty-two in 2020 and twenty-three in 2021. The number of access students pursuing interfaculty postgraduate programmes also grew significantly, from four students registered in the academic year 2019/20 to twelve in 2021/22.

Faculty	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences	10	13	16
Faculty of Business	11	15	10
Faculty of Education and Health Sciences	21	22	23
Faculty of Science and Engineering	16	16	11
Interfaculty	4	8	12
Total	62	74	72

Figure 9: Number of PG Access Students

However, as evidenced in Figure 10, the intake of postgraduate Access students between the academic years 2019/20 and 2021/22 by faculty shows that the number of students undertaking postgraduate programmes has slightly declined from forty-six in 2019 to forty-two in 2021, despite the higher uptake in 2020 when fifty Access students have enrolled on PG programmes in UL.

Faculty	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences	10	12	12
Faculty of Business	9	11	10
Faculty of Education and Health Sciences	10	14	9
Faculty of Science and Engineering	14	10	5
Interfaculty	3	3	6
Total	46	50	42

Figure 10: Intake of PG Access Students

There are a variety of challenges that affect Access students' entry and retention in Higher Education that explain the overall declining trends during Covid, such as the digital gap, hurried shift to online learning, and the wider economic impact on students from vulnerable groups. Thus, the challenges posed upon Higher Education communities by the pandemic required flexibility and a student-informed approach to reorganisation of the pre-pandemic infrastructure of services ensuring equitable access and student success in UL.

STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF ACCESS SERVICES

The Access Office sought feedback from their students in November 2020 and in March 2022.

- The first feedback was obtained from students to gain a better understanding of the issues that the students were enduring as a result of Covid-19 public health and safety restrictions and how those were affecting their ability to succeed as students. The aim was to inform the reorganisation of practices within the office to suit students' needs.
- The second feedback was sought to understand students' satisfaction with the suite of academic, financial and personal supports facilitated by the Access Office during the pandemic. The goal was to understand whether the reorganisation of services by the office worked well for the students.

In both cases, online student surveys were adopted as a method most useful in obtaining descriptive statistical information revealing student opinions on learning and support services.

Survey 1 Results

Overall, 216 students completed the first online survey. The feedback collected by the Access Office in late 2020 showed that the Access students struggled with a number of issues.

The key challenges identified by the students in the survey were:

- Lost income (personal and within families),
- Inability to access a good Wi-Fi connection and well-functioning computing equipment,
- Inability to access appropriate study spaces,
- Difficulties in finding motivation to study within an online/hybrid context.

Secondary issues reported by the students refer to:

- Increased academic workload and testing,
- Challenges in accessing study materials,
- Barriers in communication with academic and administrative departments and individual staff,
- Identifying the appropriate contact point and accessing up-to-date links on UL's website,
- Scheduling issues regarding the timetable of hybrid classes,
- Finding and securing accommodation,
- Getting to UL in a timely manner due to restricted accessibility of the public transport.

Key areas of impact reported by the students

According to the respondents, Covid-19 has affected Access students’:

- ⇒ Ability to succeed in college (30%),
- ⇒ Mental health (29%),
- ⇒ Financial situation (21%),
- ⇒ Living conditions (12%).

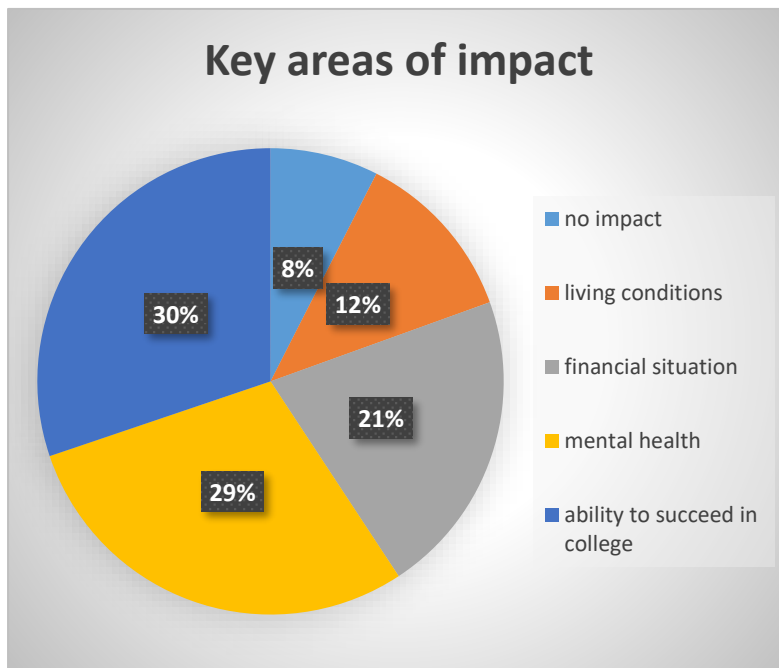


Figure 11

“I’ve had to move out of my home as my elderly grandmother is there and I do not want to pass COVID to her”.

“I can no longer see my family due to mother being high risk. Moving to college has been isolating”.

“I could not afford to stay in student accommodation”.

“My family are being evicted by our landlord for unemployment. We need to find a new living space or we risk being homeless”.

“My mother had to move in with me due to Covid as my siblings are front-line workers. Although I love my mother, she has her own illnesses, physical and mental, that makes it difficult to fully concentrate on my final year.”

“On lockdown in student accommodation with very little people around and nobody to talk to. Becoming quite bleak and hopeless here with the new restrictions. Can’t go home to family”.

Financial impact

The financial impact of Covid-19 on socio-economically disadvantaged groups was severe. The respondents in the survey revealed varied issues associated with the lack of income, in most cases caused by loss of employment by the student and / or their family members. Respondent students reported worrying about their own and family's financial situation, feeling guilty about being supported by parents, trying to work more to contribute to the family budget in cases where parents lost employment / income.

“My Mother who is a single parent and already prior to COVID felt the brunt of financial burdens, she has been let go temporarily from work twice now with the two lockdowns. I feel I now must work more hours at my part time job to support her while balancing my studies and to be frank it's exhausting”.

“It is harder than ever for me as a student to earn additional pay and my mother who does not speak fluent English is also having trouble finding work. Also my previous job has not allowed me to receive COVID-19 benefit payment”.

“The scale of job losses as a result of COVID-19 has put great financial strain on my family, coupled with meeting college costs. I am a student nurse and have had to give up my job as a result of placement. Student nurses are not paid so I have had to rely on my family for help”.

“I am so stressed because I go on placement in May-January 2021 (unpaid) and then I go on Erasmus in January and I can't even save for it now because I am out of work”.

“My mother takes care of children only part time and with the lockdown the children are not coming to her anymore, so we are very low on money and that's why I need to pay rent to help out but all I have is my savings and I need that money for accommodation for next semester”.

Impact on academic success

According to the respondents, the pandemic has had a substantial impact on their capacity to succeed in college, in terms of their interaction and engagement with lectures, accessing necessary educational resources, adopting to the online learning environment and taking responsibility for management of their academic workloads. 26% of students highlighted the impact of Covid-related restrictions (in terms of, for example, the format of lectures and tutorials, distant interactions with academic staff and peers and limited social and family life) on their motivation to study. As one of the students described it: *“It is harder to stay focused when it’s easier to stay in bed”*. In their answers to open-ended questions, students spoke about feeling isolated, overwhelmed with the workload and academic expectations, and becoming disinterested and unable to concentrate. Those whose degrees transformed from heavily practical to theoretical highlighted *“really falling behind and losing interest in [their] degree”*.

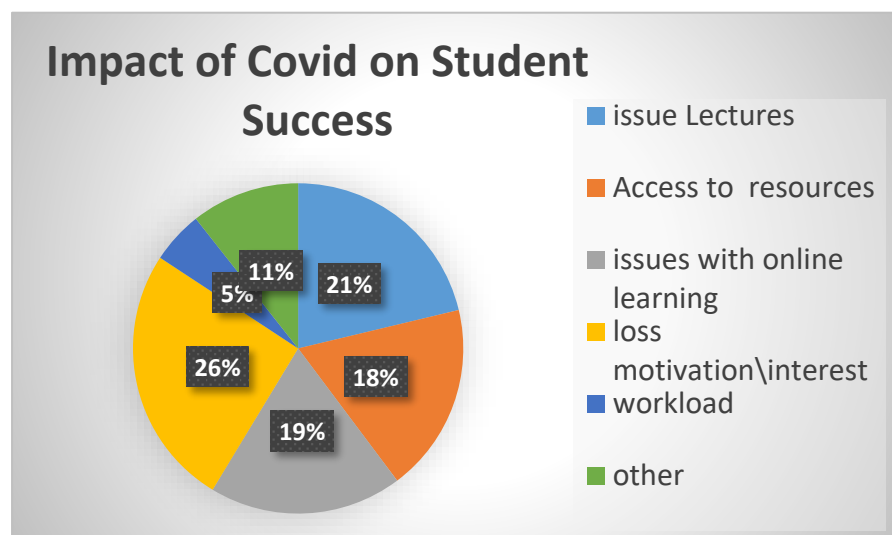


Figure 12

“Restrictions in the library have made it difficult for me to succeed in my college work as I find it very hard and distracting trying to work from my room”.

“I do not have a study space. I currently sit in the kitchen on a chair which is extremely uncomfortable as my family run in and out of the kitchen all day”.

“I haven’t left my room in over 2 weeks now, I just go to the living room to cook (...). The lack of a routine feels like a punishment specially designed for me, and I pray every day for this COVID nightmare to end so I can get back a semblance of my old life, and who I used to be before all this started”.

“The mostly online structure has made the course feel more like a chore more than something that I want to do”.

“I don’t always have access to good internet or the use of a decent laptop to study with, I usually would have used on-campus computers for that, it means that I can’t study as much as I need to. Being stuck inside alone most of the time is awful for my mental health and lack of routine makes it really hard to focus on school and learning”.

Areas for further support

In response to the questions about additional help from the Access Office, overall students' responses indicate their awareness around the structural nature of the issues experienced. Most students argued that the type of help they need is outside of the Access Office's reach. Students were grateful for the help and support they've received so far.

"Unless there was another payment made to access students, then no there's nothing that can be done".

"I think Access has played a great role so far in trying to help students in COVID and the constant emails are very reassuring that at least someone is trying to help. So thank you".

The students highlighted that what would help them is additional financial support. They argued that financial aid would have a positive effect on their overall living and studying situation as it would alleviate their anxiety and help with the everyday costs of living, including access to adequate nutrition and accommodation.

"Any sort of financial help or food aid would be amazing as I'm struggling to eat proper food".

"I can manage with everything else but due to my financial situation, everything else is being impacted".

"I hate asking, I am so independent and I never ask for charity, I just struggle along, but I am very desperate, so if there is any way that I could get some financial aid or a petition for a rent refund that would be greatly appreciated! Thank you for your kindness".

Survey 2 Results

In total 134 Access students completed the second round of feedback. The response rate is representative of over 10% of the Access student population registered as undergraduate or postgraduate students in the academic year 2021/22. The sample is representative of students pursuing varied undergraduate and postgraduate courses, such as Business, Arts, Construction, Engineering, Computer Science, Law, Psychology, Nursing, PE, Biochemistry, Journalism, Physiotherapy, Architecture, MSc Occupational Therapy, MA Sociology Applied Social Research, MA Sociology Youth Community and Regeneration, just to name a few.

The survey questions referred to four areas:

- The impact of Covid-19 restrictions on students' learning,
- Students' engagement with Access supports,
- Students' perceptions of Access supports,
- Quality of interactions with the Office staff during the pandemic.

Impact on learning

Following the basic demographic questions, the survey enquired about the students' perceptions on the impact of Covid-19 and the subsequent changes in the learning format on their motivation to study. The data shows that during the pandemic an overwhelming majority of Access students felt either less motivated to study (50.4%) or completely disinterested in studying (24.8%). 12.8% of respondents felt that the pandemic had no impact on their motivation, with the final 12% feeling more motivated to study during that time.

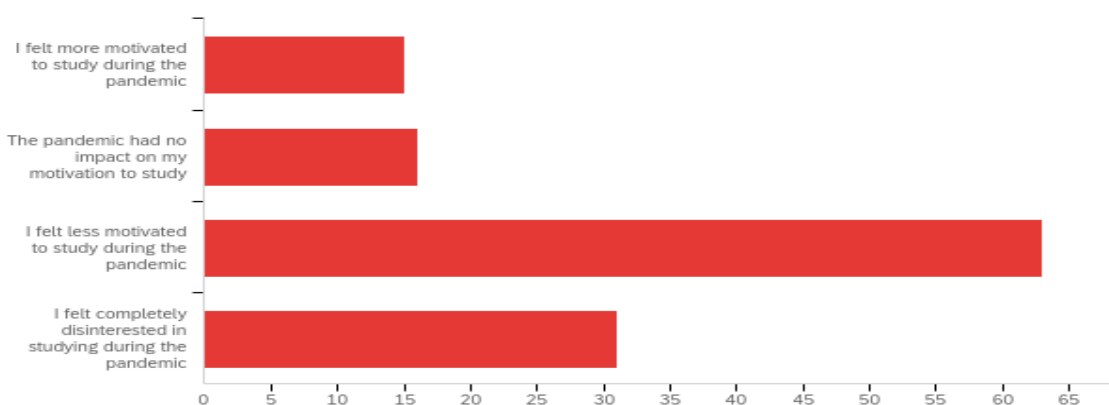


Figure 13: What impact has the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent changes in the learning format had on your motivation to study?

Despite the majority of students reporting negative impact of Covid-19 on their motivation to study, data in Figure 14 shows that 40% of respondents admitted that their grades stayed at the pre-pandemic level, and 22% reported that their grades actually improved. Still, a substantial proportion (38%) of students stated that the pandemic has adversely impacted their grades.

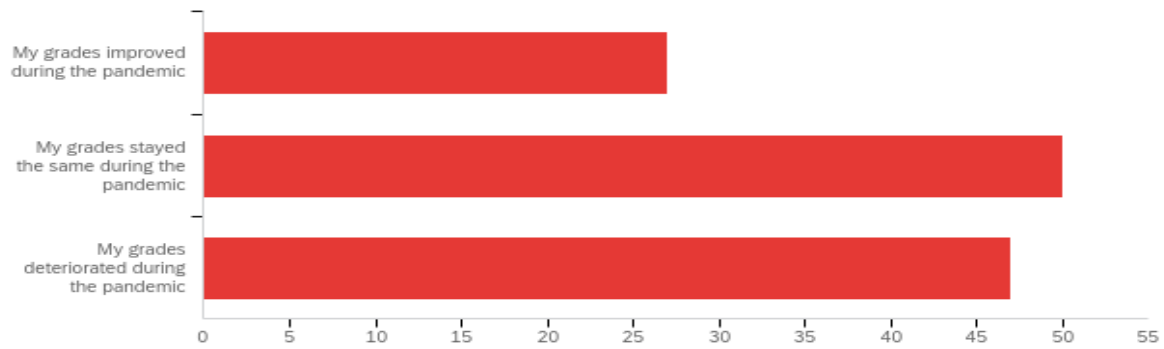


Figure 14: What impact has the Covid-19 pandemic had on your grades?

Financial, academic and emotional supports

Asked about their perceptions about Access Office support during the pandemic (Figure 15), 88.7% of students reported feeling either always or most of the time supported by the Access team.

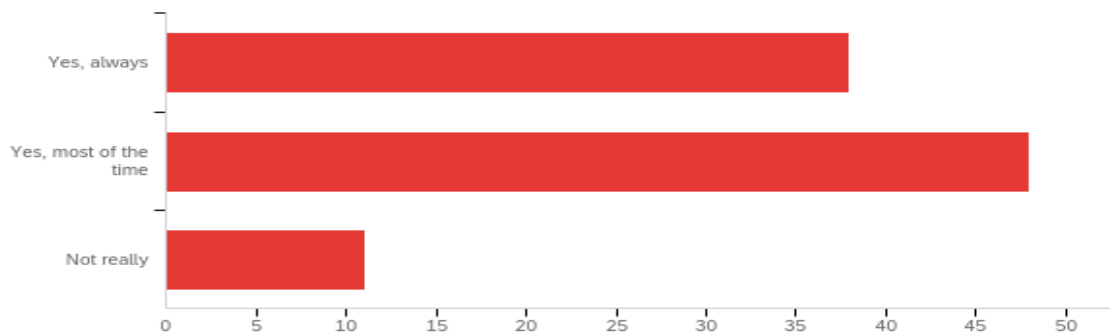


Figure 15: As a student, have you felt supported by the Access Office throughout the pandemic?

80% of student respondents reported receiving financial aid through the Access Office, 37% availed of information sessions organised by the Access team, 10% availed of one-to-one sessions and 6% of students reported contacting the office for emotional support.

#	Question	Yes	No
1	In the last 2 years, have you availed of any funding supports through the Access Office?	80.00%	20.00%
2	In the last 2 years, have you availed of any information sessions through the Access Office?	36.80%	63.20%
3	In the last 2 years, have you availed of any one-to-one sessions through the Access Office?	9.60%	90.40%
4	In the last 2 years, have you availed of any emotional supports through the Access Office?	6.40%	93.60%

Figure 16

Transition and progression through college

50% of respondents stated that the office was very helpful and 44% perceived Access as helpful to students transitioning from secondary school to college which was particularly challenging for first-year students during lockdowns and when hybrid teaching was in place. Similarly, with regards to progression through college, an overwhelming majority (94%) of students found the Access Office helpful or very helpful in the times of Covid-19 restrictions.

Question	Very Helpful	Helpful	Not very Helpful
In your experience, have those supports that you received from the Access Office been helpful in the transition from school to college during the pandemic?	50.00%	43.88%	6.12%
In your experience, have those supports that you received from the Access Office been helpful in the progression through college during the pandemic?	50.00%	44.32%	5.68%

Figure 17

Interactions with Access Office

The vast majority (96%) of respondents stated that the Access Office staff have been easy to communicate with during the pandemic. In terms of the frequency of communication with the Office, the data shows that the survey respondents didn't need to get in touch with the Office very often. The majority of respondents reported having to interact with the office either sometimes (28%) or rarely (39%). 28% of students reported almost never or never having to get in touch. Only 4% of students required frequent communication.

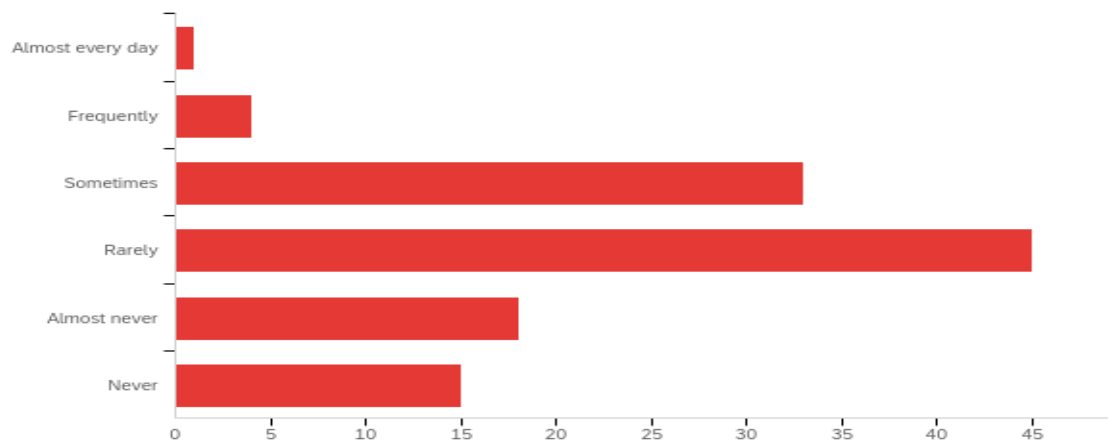


Figure 18: In the last 2 years, how often have you interacted with the Access Office staff?

Overall, when interacting with the Access Office, respondents felt very satisfied (44%) or satisfied (36%). 17% felt neutral, declaring that the services that they've received from the Access Office during the pandemic were just ok and 2% were not satisfied.

#	How would you rate your level of satisfaction with the services that you've received from the Access Office in the last 2 years?	%
1	Very satisfied	43.97%
2	Satisfied	36.21%
3	Just ok	17.24%
4	Not satisfied at all	1.72%
5	Extremely satisfied	0.86%

Figure 19

The last survey question asked students if there was anything else that the Access Office could have done to improve its support during the pandemic. The data shows that 39% of student respondents believe that the office couldn't have done any more than they did. 41% of students stated that the office staff helped them just enough. While 18% felt that they could have done a bit or a lot more (2%).

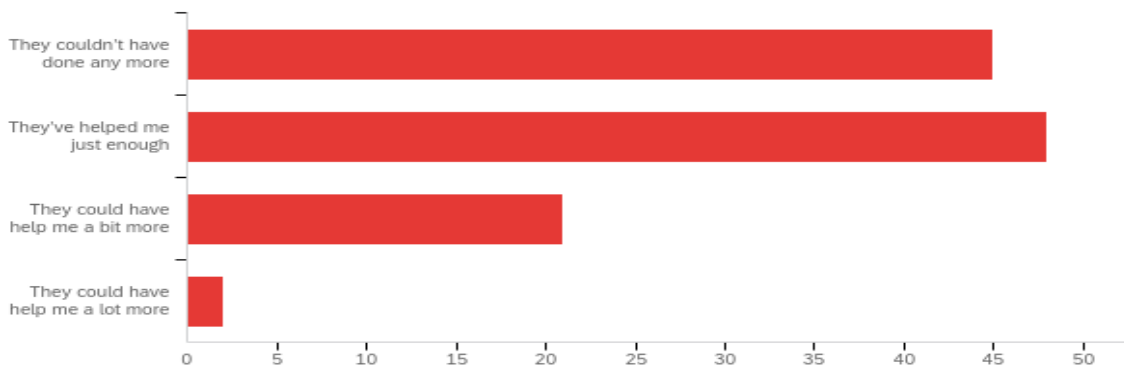


Figure 20: Was there anything else that the Access Office could have done to improve its support for you during the pandemic?

Overall, the feedback from both surveys reflects the magnitude of barriers that Access Students had to overcome throughout the pandemic, the level of supports they required and engagement with the Access Office. The findings are also a testament to the work of the Access Office team in supporting the students during those challenging times. The positive feedback from the students on the work of the Access Office is surely an outcome of the informed reorganisation of services undertaken by the office in response to students' challenges.

REORGANISATION OF THE POST-ENTRY SERVICES DURING COVID

The Covid-19 pandemic-related restrictions imposed a necessity for reorganisation of the Access Office's services. The remote nature of work, interaction and communication forced by the public health and safety restrictions necessitated a number of changes to how the Office had operated during the pandemic. The situation enforced all interactions between the Access students and staff to move from in-person to remote communication. Between March 2020 and January 2022 over 100 telephone and online meetings have taken place with the Access students.

The key changes to operation processes of the Access Office that arose as a result of the pandemic have been driven primarily by the student needs. The Access Office, to the maximum of its capacity, has responded to the challenges and barriers reported by the students and identified by the staff. The key changes in how the office had operated during that time can be categorised as the matters of privacy and confidentiality, targeted signposting and accessibility and efficiency.

Privacy & Confidentiality

The Access Office is a glass open office area where staff and visitors frequent. The visitors to the office are visible from the corridor. In addition, in the past, the first few weeks of each semester attracted queues of students seeking help. Considering that Access is described as supporting students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and with possibly reduced points of entry, this visibility can pose a barrier to interaction for a proportion of students availing of the in-person service, especially if concerned about the perception amongst their peers. The remote nature of interaction enforced by the pandemic has opened up a new avenue for the students in how their requests and queries are processed. The possibility of requesting an online meeting has particular benefits in terms of students' privacy. It also enables students to schedule their meetings instead of queuing outside of the office. Optional online and telephone services provide confidential choice and have become part of the everyday practice of the Access Office.

Targeted signposting

Throughout the pandemic additional actions have been taken to ease the challenges experienced by the students in terms of getting answers to varied queries. The Access Office has put on an automatic reply on the email inbox directing students to the appropriate contacts related to non-access queries. This meant that students were directed to the correct service to answer their query, for example, Disability Support Services, the Mature Student Office or Academic Registry. A similar message was put on the office voice mail. The Access Office has also offered quick responses to direct students to the appropriate service in a timely manner, for example, Student Support Officers, Student Life or Erasmus office.

Accessibility & efficiency

Since March 2020 systems have been developed to process all requests, course and bursary applications online. For example, prior to the pandemic, the Access to University Course application process was a paper-based application submitted in person or by post. Today, students interested in pursuing the course can do so by completing an online form. Similarly, prior to the pandemic, the Access students enjoyed an exclusive option to borrow hardcopy books from the Access Office's library. During the pandemic this service was not available. As a solution, the Access Office acquired more e-books to ensure that the students were academically supported. Lecture notes since then have also become available online. Both e-books and lecture notes are now accessibly available to Access students via the University's VLE (Virtual Learning Environment). This has not only created a convenient and environmentally friendly alternative to paper-based sources, but also the online applications and accessibility of e-books and online lecture notes removed the necessity to travel to UL, which for many students may be quite burdensome due to costs and/or rural residency barriers. In addition, the Access to University Course students received free laptops to ensure that they are not at a disadvantage when required to work from home.

Throughout the pandemic, a variety of academic activities provided by the Access Office also took on a remote format. The Transition to University Course was developed into a fully online course facilitated via Sulis. This required not only the development of an appropriate curriculum but also training the tutors to moderate the online modules while utilising the University's VLE.

FOCUS INTO THE FUTURE

The pandemic brought about many challenges for the Access Office's students and staff and their educational and community partners. It further exhibited the multifaceted nature of barriers and disadvantages that socio-economically disadvantaged students endure and the level of support that they require to have equitable opportunities of access and completion of third-level education. At the same time, it revealed the immense strength of the students and resourcefulness of the staff.

The individual, community and societal benefits of broader access and wider participation are broadly established. Building on its vast experience, lessons and successes to date, the Access Office will continue its work in reaching communities, building partnerships and supporting learners now and into the future by:

- Further expanding UL's Academy for Children through fostering the existing and developing new academic partnerships and increasing numbers of children benefitting from the projects.
- Through second-level educational inclusion programmes and initiatives for children, parents and guardians, the Access Office will continue supporting families experiencing deprivation and social exclusion, ensuring that secondary-school pupils reach their full educational potential.
- Strengthening its collaboration with the Mid-West Cluster institutions (MIC and TUS), and community and educational partners.
- Continuing the success and broadening the reach of the Destination College project to widen participation and access to third-level education for socio-economically disadvantaged children and young adults across the region.
- Increasing educational opportunities and in-college supports for the priority groups, including the members of Traveller Community and adopting a range of relevant access and participation initiatives for this minority group.

In collaboration with educational and community partners and through universally designed programmes, the UL Access Office contributes to equity and diversity in education in the Limerick region and beyond. The Office aims to continue in its current trajectory and further develop the evidence base to monitor and evaluate the impact of their programmes and initiatives. The evidence from this report shows that cost continues to pose the major barrier to participation in and completion of higher education. The financial problems manifest in different ways for individuals and their families and affect both: the possibility of accessing third-level education and chances of degree completion. This further highlights the need for sustainability of core and supplementary funding through each stage of the educational journey. Thus, the findings from this report reflect the key priorities for the future included in the National Access Plan (NAP) 2022-2028, namely the need for inclusivity, flexibility, clarity, coherence, sustainability and evidence-based approach in access and widening-participation work.