

SOUTH EASTERN REGIONAL COLLEGE

WIDENING ACCESS AND

PARTICIPATION PLAN 2021/22- 2023/24

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1.1 Please provide a high level outline of your institution’s Widening Participation policy in Higher Education and how this fits in with the institution’s strategic direction.

Lifelong learning and addressing social inclusion by providing progression for the whole community is central to the vision of government policy in the Further Education Means Success strategy, Higher Education Graduation to Success and the widening participation in higher education strategy Access to Success. It is also central to the Programme for Government with population outcomes aspiring to a more equal society and giving our children and young people the best start in life. SERC’s commitment to addressing these strategies and widening access and participation is embedded within the College Development Plan (CDP) 2020/21 with a detailed analysis of the needs of our community and reflects a revised approach to widening access introduced in 2017/18.

In 2017/18 SERC adapted a more structured approach to engaging with economically inactive individuals and community engagement generally, in keeping with its commitments under Widening Participation. It is acknowledged engagement processes are labour intensive and take time to grow the numbers of those re-entering education but the potential short and long-term impact on individuals can be significant and life-altering.

The below table offers a snapshot of some of the issues within SERC catchment area.

Age	Child Dependents	Disability	Gender
Highest Number of 16-20 year old at Downpatrick came from Quintile 2	Students with dependents enrolled more frequently with increasing Quintiles	Male enrolments higher at Downpatrick, Lisburn & Newtownards	Students with a disability highest in Quintile 5 overall
Students aged 41-59 increased in enrolments with increasing Quintiles	Students with dependents at Newtownards high in Quintile 5 & 2	Female enrolments increased sharply in Quintile 5	Autistic student enrolment high in Quintiles 2 & 3
Enrolments increase with students aged 51-65	Students with dependents lowest in Quintile 5 at Downpatrick	Male enrolments consistent across Quintile 2, 3, 4 & 5	Quintiles 2 & 3 had highest number of disabled students at Downpatrick

Highest enrolments with students 16-20 followed by 21-25		More female students in Quintiles 1, 2,3 &5 at Bangor	
Enrolments decreasing across ages 20-25 sharply in Bangor			

It is also acknowledged that barriers to individuals entering education could not be overcome by SERC alone and that flexibility in delivery was of essence if any initiative were to succeed.

SERC approaches widening access through a series of Community Based initiatives and a supportive Curriculum Planning process.

Strategic approach to Community Planning

As an active participant within new Community Planning Partnerships and their subgroups, we were able to work with our partners on a wider statutory, economic and community basis to address barriers and to enhance understanding of further education and our social inclusion agenda and further promote the offering available for individuals in deprived communities and increase awareness of education opportunity. Moreover, we applied to join various interagency fora, attended community events met with community leaders, identified gatekeepers, altered opening times of satellite campuses to accommodate and facilitate community volunteers. SERC has invested extensively in this programme allocating significant staff time to developing and embedding this approach. This process is continuing despite the fall in overall HE additional fee levels.

These approaches have resulted in a strong Access approach with a suite of programmes from restarting education through to university access provision.

Supportive Curriculum Planning process

The strong community-based widening access approach is reflected in the 2021/22 Curriculum Plan with a focus on returners to education a key theme. The Curriculum Plan inevitably works within the current economic climate and the challenges that this brings but STEM and priority skills are prioritised and demonstrates a continued commitment to upskill, develop and provide progression

for under-represented groups and particularly those in areas designated as deprivation quintiles 1 and 2 within the SERC catchment area. SERC also seeks to expand STEAM areas (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics) to extend the employability and academic opportunities available. Significant investment has been made in extending flexibility particularly with the use of technology enhanced learning. In March 2020, ETI noted of the science provision:

“The outstanding practice in planning for learning is predicated on a comprehensive knowledge of the students’ levels of prior attainment and experience.”

(See Evidence 1G)

1.2 What is your view of the success record of your institution in relation to recruitment, retention and progression for Widening Participation students?

For the period 2018/19 to 2020/21 SERC aimed to:

- Provide appropriate support for those within the SERC catchment who fall within the Access to Success target groups to progress in the long-term towards higher education;
- Respond to the changing needs of the target groups through review and evaluation of strategies and data; and
- Continue to promote suitable progression routes towards higher education

Between 2018/19 and 2020/21 SERC aim to meet the four-year average trend as provided by DfE below (section 1.3a) and enrol in higher education:

- 9% or 142 enrolments from MDM Quintile 1
- 40% or 633 enrolments from adult returners
- 9% or 105 enrolments from students with a disability
- 12 enrolments from students who have a Care Experience
- 27 young male students in MDM Quintile 1

The position for the year 2018/19 is:

- 8.3% or 123 enrolments from MDM Quintile 1
- 47% or 693 enrolment from adult returners
- 8% or 110 enrolments from students with a disability
- 14 enrolments from students who have a Care Experience

- 20 young males students in MDM Q1

Recruitment, Retention and Progression within the Target Groups

The position for 2018/19 reflects SERC's catchment for the target groups as measured within the most recent census and is expressed as a percentage.

Recruitment three-year average from 2016-2019 for deprivation areas Q1 and Q2 has stayed stable at 26.3%. The SERC approach to WAPP through the development of Access and Restart opportunities for adult returners has shown a significant increase in FT HE recruitment of 7.6% and 8% PT HE since 2016. The total number of adult returners growing from 1158 to 1352 during the period. This at a time when overall HE enrolments are in decline.

Retention of these groups was strong with retention of 96% and achievement of 95%.

Recruitment of those claiming DSA and self-declaring remained stable at 7.5% and was an increase of 3.5% over the 3-year period 2016/2019. Much of this is due to an improvement in enrolment processes through early intervention and signposting services. The co-ordination of admissions and pastoral care and support with tutors and students has produced a more streamlined and timely approach. The effectiveness of the support has been acknowledged by ETI in recent review activity (ETI June 2020). Retention reflected the College benchmarks.

The recruitment, retention and support of students with Care Experience (CE) onto HE programmes has continued to grow. In 2017/18 ten CE students were recruited and 9 retained all of whom were successful and progressing to further study or employment. This has grown again to a recruitment of 12 CE students and with again high retention and progression rates of 90%. This aspect of provision is closely aligned to the CDP.

Of note is the impact of bursaries on retention of target groups. SERC provided a 10% fee bursary to 129 students in 2018/19. The feedback from students was that they valued this payment and while it may seem small to the College it was of importance. In light of this SERC will continue to offer bursaries to this economically challenged group.

Progression from the target groups remains strong for WAPP groups on HE programmes. The results of the graduate outcomes survey should provide clearer evidence but HE student satisfaction rates remain at over 90%.

The majority of SERC's work in widening access is through opening routes towards HE. These routes start at Level 1/2 with Restart and Restart plus leading to Access. This provides a measured and managed individual development route the majority of whom have no qualification. The appetite for this progression remains strong and Restart programmes in 2018/19 were held in 11 out centres including Holy Evangelist, Atlas Women Centre and Conway Mill and Ballynahinch. Outcomes continued to improve with achievement rates in Restart of 88% from retention of 84%. Within the full Access suite of programmes the progression to QUB, Ulster University and SERC within the competitive programme areas of Social Work, Nursing, Health and Care continues to be strong. In 2018/19 retention in Access provision was 86% with achievement of 95% of which over 70% achieved a high commendation in final grading.

In 2020/21 the Access provision with QUB will be revalidated with the aim of further alignment to health, science, care and legal pathways. The validation of the provision by QUB is important to aspiring Access students.

The recruitment and retention of Young Males from Q1 remains a challenge. The Steps to Education (see Appendix A Part 2) initiative is focused on developing partnerships with hard to reach community leaderships. Community outreach is focused on Q1 and Q2 postcodes within Ards, Lisburn and Down District catchment. The engagement of Adult returners and Young Females is strong but Young Males continue to be difficult to attract. In 2018/19 Open Days and taster sessions were introduced in association with NIACRO, Lisburn Church City Community Trust, Poleglass community association and Lisburn SureStart. The impact of this outreach work will be measured as part of the evaluation for 2019/20 which is currently being completed.

The College will continue to invest in this area with a focus on developing relevant communication and support. The lessons learned through COVID-19 lockdown will be utilised in planning for Steps to Education project for 2021/22. A Pathfinders drop-in facility was launched in January 2020 as a keeping in touch initiative for

prospective students. In March 2020 with lockdown the provision was moved online and a virtual community engagement project grew. It is hoped that the use of online and social media will provide further avenues of possible connections with hard to reach groups.

1.3 Please outline the Widening Participation aims, objectives and targets for the next 3 years for your institution.

For the period 2021/22 to 2023/24 SERC aims to:

- Provide appropriate support for those within the SERC catchment area who fall within the Access to Success target groups to progress in the long-term towards higher education;
- Respond to the changing needs of the target groups through review and evaluation of strategies and data; and
- Continue to promote suitable progression routes towards higher education.

Approach to Targeting

Targets are based on the sector information pre-populated on this plan by DfE showing the four-year trend. They form the basis of the targets going forward. SERC does not believe that the current restrictions arising from COVID-19 will impact significantly on targets going forward as contingency measures have been put in place including development of greater use of social media for outreach.

The overall numbers of Higher Education enrolments both part and full-time is continuing to decline and the MaSn allocation for 2020/21 has been reduced but the College will continue to meet the four year trend data and monitor the percentages within the target groups.

Targets

Between 2020/21 and 2022/23 SERC will aim to enrol in higher education:

- 9% or 137 enrolments from MDM Quintile 1
- 40% or 633 enrolments from adult returners
- 9% or 105 enrolments from students with a disability
- 22 students in receipt of DSA
- 12 enrolments from students who have a Care Experience
- 27 young male students in MDM Quintile 1

1.3a TARGETS

You will note that the tables numbered (i) to (vi) below have been prepopulated with your institution’s average enrolment for the last 3 years. You are now required to insert numerical targets for each of the groups identified across the **3 years 2021/22 – 2023/24**. These groups are regarded as being underrepresented in Access to Success.

- (i) Group: **MDM Quintile 1**
Outcome: **To increase participation of those from NI MDM Q1**

Average (based on 4 years 2015- 2019)		Target/ Outcome		
4 Year Average		2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
137	Number of Students	137	137	137

- (i) Group: **Students with a Disability**
Outcome: **To increase the number of students who declare a disability**

Average (based on 4 years 2015- 2019)		Target/ Outcome		
4 Year Average		2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
105	Number of Students	105	105	105

- (ii) Group: **Students with a Disability**
Outcome: **To increase the number of students in receipt of DSA**

Average (based on 4 years 2015- 2019)		Target/ Outcome		
4 Year Average		2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
NA	Number of Students	20	22	24

- (iii) Group: **Young Males from Quintile 1**
Outcome: **To increase participation of young males from NI MDM Quintile 1**

Average (based on 4 years 2015- 2019)		Target/ Outcome		
		2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
27	Number of Students	27	27	27

(iv) Group: **Adult Learners**

Outcome: **To increase the number of adult learners participating in HE**

Average (based on 4 years 2015- 2019)		Target/ Outcome		
		2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
633	Number of Students	633	633	633

As HESA data is largely incomplete for the following area, the figure that you provided in a previous WAPP for 2016/17 has been inserted as a base line.

(ii) Group: **Number of Care Experienced enrolments**

Outcome: **To increase the number of enrolments for those from a care background**

Base Year 2016-2017		Target/ Outcome		
		2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
5	Number of Students	12	12	12

Please now outline the estimated 'direct' expenditure required to meet the identified objectives in the table below. You may wish to refer to Part 2 of the guidance notes in "How to Complete your Widening Access and Participation Plan" for a definition of direct spend. Whilst we appreciate that figures for later years are only indicative, we do require estimations inserted in each of the categories.

Activity	Estimated Spend 2021/22 (£)	Estimated Spend 2022/23 (£)	Estimated Spend 2023/24 (£)
Bursaries	35750	35750	35750
Scholarships	--	--	--
Other financial Support	--	--	--
Outreach	73355	73355	73355
Retention	1500	1500	1500
Research Activity	--	--	--
Staffing/ Administration	5500	5500	5500
TOTAL	116105	116105	116105

1.4 List below the key programmes/projects financed from additional student fees that will contribute towards your institution’s performance.

(Please refer to the appropriate section of the guidance notes before completing.)

Outreach activity

Returning Adults - pre-entry Access and Restart plus

The University Access provision has been very successful. The retention and achievement figures and student feedback is strong (Restart retention 84% achievement 88%; Access retention 86% achievement 95%). The provision is delivered in hard to reach areas such as Newcastle and Ballynahinch. The programme was rewritten and rebranded in 2015 with the aim of providing the key skills in literacy, numeracy, science, social science and study skills necessary for progression. It was particularly useful in attracting women returners who have proven difficult to enrol on a STEM heavy HE curriculum. The success has helped to increase the number of returning adults into HE.

It has been more challenging to attract males into the programmes. The aim is to continue to extend and embed the provision to increase the level of male participants especially in Q1 and Q2 and provide further support for progression. An enhanced engagement strategy began in 2018/19 through the Community Planning Partnerships in the SERC area and has continued to develop. The recent restriction of face-to-face activity refocused the

Community Hub initiative where activities moved on-line using a range of platforms. This initiative will continue along with continued planning for joint engagement activities aimed at increasing the level of male participants especially in Q1. The Restart Plus programme will continue to be developed to meet the needs of this group.

The additional fee money will be used to support and enhance the learning experience of these groups with relevant activities including visits and guest speakers.

A new initiative is the provision of a creche in Newcastle to provide childcare support for learners. This is due to open in 2020/21 and while additional fee money will not be used in its support it illustrates the continued enhancement of facilities for adult returners. (**Evidence 1A**)

Steps to Education

Analysis of the participation of adult returners, those with Q1 and Q2 postcodes and young males from Q1 has indicated lower enrolments than would be expected within Ards, Lisburn and Down District catchment.

SERC introduced an initiative in 2014/15 to raise awareness and maintain enrolments within higher education. The building of awareness through enrolment on entry to Access and Access has developed greater involvement from hard to reach communities.

SERC will hold or participate in a range community-based activities along with continuous community contact throughout the year. A number of these activities will be led by Community Planning Partners such as the Councils, Health Trusts and Community Voluntary Sector organisations. These will target adult returners and young men in the catchment areas. They will highlight the range of educational opportunities and financial support available to the target groups. It will include information on the comprehensive range of support services that SERC can offer and provide an opportunity for participants to ask questions and obtain further information and for those who decide to progress to prepare individual development plans. It will be supported by targeted marketing to Q1 and Q2 postcodes within the SERC catchment area including the enhanced use of social media.

Continuity will be provided through the support of Community Development Officers.

Research

The well-established self-evaluation review, student survey, market intelligence and GIS systems will continue to provide the information which can be used to populate the Kirkpatrick Model.

Retention

Getting the Edge – development of employability and enterprise skills

The project aims to introduce students to and develop competence in soft skills necessary to gain employment. Employers regularly report that graduates do not have the employability skills necessary within the workplace. Students within the WAPP groups tend to be at the greatest disadvantage. Research through the Curriculum Directorate has shown that many of the skills displayed by our students are entrepreneurial. The employability skill opportunities have been added to this retention initiative.

As part of induction all full-time students undertake a competence-based employability award. Students complete either a City and Guilds Level 2 Employability or ILM Level 3 Leadership and Management award. The awards are delivered using a competence framework and activities are both practical and academic. Skills are developed through team building including presentations using media technology and by individual preparation which focuses on skills valuable in interviews and support preparing employment applications.

The entrepreneurial stream provides opportunities to develop business ideas and skills using project-based learning as the catalyst. Mentoring is provided through dedicated enterprise staff and industry mentors.

The project is reviewed annually and in addition to a dedicated two weeks to assist in embedding skills, a calendar of events is scheduled throughout the year to share best practice and provide skill reinforcement. This pedagogical strategy of project-based learning targets wider-skills highlighted in the NI Skills Barometer as lacking in graduates. The additional fees help to support the practical nature of the initiative and the development of learning materials and providing extra-curricular opportunities to implement newly acquired skills in a safe environment e.g. competitions and students cross-college sharing at such events as CAST, an interdisciplinary sharing of student project research and mentoring by industry.

Support of those with a Care Experience

Students with Care Experience have been identified as having multiple barriers to entering and continuing in education. The College identified that 4% of FT and PT students in FE are from a care background but very few progress to higher education. The College has continued to grow the numbers of students who do progress and aims to engage and

support students to progress to higher education and those who are engaged in level 4-7 study.

In addition to the support already in place for children from a care background or former Looked After Children, the College works closely with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. This project has several elements which introduce both Care Experienced, their carers, social work team and other supporters to the educational pathways available in the College and the wider pastoral care and support available. The project commenced in 2018 with the 14-15 age group with a view to encouraging them continue with their education. There was a significant increase in 2017/18 of care experienced enrolments (increase to 9 FT and 3 PT HE students) and the College will continue to work closely with local agencies to provide support and signposting.

1.5 Please provide a short summary of how your activities link to the key actions within Access to Success.

The activities listed target those groups which may be under-represented within the SERC catchment area and assist learners to progress ultimately to higher education. The support and guidance provided by the College are long-term measures to reduce barriers and raise aspiration and success across the target groups as defined by *Access to Success*. The projects have evolved over a number of years and provide greater development opportunities for progression to higher education but it may take many years for the target groups to reach this goal especially as the strategy is currently focusing on the hardest to reach. There has been a modest improvement particularly in recruitment for MDM Q1 and number of adult learners. The activities aim to keep learners within the education process and support them as they progress through the system in a way that meets individual learner needs.

1.6 How do you plan to communicate information on the availability of financial and other assistance to students?

Student Finance Officers are on every campus and are the nominated source of information and advice for students on higher education fees and support mechanisms.

At application stage all students are informed as part of a finance briefing about bursaries and support. This is reinforced through subsequent parents' evenings in the year prior to the student commencing their course.

At enrolment Student Finance Officers support students and encourage sharing of information through the SLC portal. Academic tutors are briefed on support mechanisms and encourage students to share information.

The College website and student handbook includes information about financial support and this is highlighted during induction and at key points in the year.

Information on bursaries and support is updated regularly and current and prospective students are reminded about financial support through regular finance clinics and at pastoral tutorials.

The Students' Union are briefed on fees and bursaries as they are set.

All students who share financial information and meet the set criteria automatically receive a bursary.

1.7 How do you plan to monitor progress against the targets and the achievement of outcomes?

The Governing Body through the Education Committee review quality and performance targets twice a year. The Annual Report for the Department for the Economy provides further oversight. The Engagement Update Reports and the College development Plan progress reports provide further detail. They are available at ***Evidence 1 B, C, D.***

1.8 Please provide an additional evaluation on how you think your institution is performing or provide us with relevant documents in line with section 1.8 of the guidance document.

In order to ensure consistency across institutions we would ask that you use the Kirkpatrick Model for this exercise. The concept is that individual institutions will learn from this self-evaluation and obtain evidence to influence future widening participation activity and plans. You may evaluate the institution's widening participation activity as a whole, or evaluate individual projects.

The following sub headings should help focus your response. The Department expects that most institutions will be able to evaluate widening participation activity to at least Level 3 (as below).

Level 1 Evaluation – Reactions

What participants thought and felt about the programme

The feedback from those students who have been involved in Restart, pre-Access and Access is overwhelmingly positive. There was a satisfaction level in excess of 90% for each cohort. This has been consistent for two years since the introduction of the measurement. The reasons for this remain the support provided by staff, the flexibility of the programme and the achievement felt by participants.

The early support provided for adult returners and care experienced students is highly valued by these groups which brings achievement early in the programmes. The students firmly believe that they are treated equally and this increases confidence and self-esteem.

Tracking the change in perceptions during the programme remains significant particularly in terms of feeling of belonging to the student body. The small group teaching and ease of access to the individual allocated personal tutor is valued throughout the programme but soon it is belonging to the larger student body that is valued.

For 2016/17 and 2017/18 the Student Governor came from the WAPP target groups and acknowledges the support provided which gave them the confidence to stand for the role. The Student Union continues to embrace with WAPP ethos through its

contribution to the development and implementation of the 'Developing Well-Being and Resilience Framework' which provides targeted support.

Level 2 Evaluation – Learning

The resulting increase in knowledge or capability

91% of Access and restart students believe that they are learning skills that are of value in real life and 96% enjoy and are satisfied with the course. Student report that they feel confidence in progressing to next steps with 95% believing that tutors have helped them progress to the best of their ability. A significant proportion of students feel that they have currently reached their limit and want to take some time to absorb the skills. Others feel that they have achieved the skills they need for employment. Women with children still find the benefit system challenging in terms of progression especially to higher education. Appreciating the qualification as 'stand alone' and economically relevant was strongest for those completing Foundation Degrees and they had the clearest route to employment.

See Evidence 1E 2018-19 student survey attached.

The tracking of the Q1 and Q2 student attitudes are more challenging but the overall trends within the College show a high level of satisfaction and enjoyment across the programmes at 93% and 92% respectively. ***See Evidence 1F 2018-19 DfE Big 14 student survey attached.***

Level 3 Evaluation – Transfer

Behaviour - extent of behaviour and capability improvement and implementation/application

Confidence was the word most used by participants when they evaluated their experience. The focus on gaining tangible skills as well as putting to rest fears over old academic areas such as Maths and English was valued. Gaining Maths and English was perceived as opening doors to employment as well as new programme routes. Resilience and time management were by-products of the programmes. More central was the development of digital skills and the support given was appreciated by students. The flexible support provided by tutors who were available through a range of mediums and times was felt to be key by students. The issue of age in transfer and progression to use skills was an issue for

students at the beginning of study. There was concern that they were 'just too old' to learn and that no-one would take them seriously. The role of the tutors in providing guidance for progression overcame these concerns and by the end of the programme they ceased to be an issue.

Level 4 Evaluation- Results

Results- the effects resulting from performance

Progression rates for WAPP students were high. The University Access provision has been very successful. The retention and achievement figures and student feedback is strong (Restart retention 84% achievement 88%; Access retention 86% achievement 95%). Successful progression to competitive programmes such as nursing and allied health progression remains strong.

The development of strong community links has led to the growth in Adult Returners and Care Experienced entrants. The overall satisfaction levels and the RAS figures point to the contribution made by the WAPP strategy.

The challenges, particularly around attracting young males, remains central to the CDP. Development of resilience skills across the WAPP groups also remains a resourced strategy within the CDP.