

NATIONAL OFFICE FOR EQUITY OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

HEA

Higher Education Authority
An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas

ANNUAL REPORT 2006 AND OUTLINE PLANS 2007

JANUARY 2007



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**ANNUAL REPORT 2006 AND
OUTLINE PLANS 2007**

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FOREWORD

I am very pleased to introduce the second annual report of the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education, particularly in light of the significant progress made in 2006. Recent surveys indicate that the national targets set for participation in 2006 have been exceeded for students with a disability and for students facing social and economic barriers and have almost been reached in the case of mature students. Major strides forward have been taken to establish equity of access as an integral part of higher education policy and practice in Ireland, not least through a number of funding initiatives introduced by the HEA in 2006. These include the new Recurrent Grant Allocation Model and the Strategic Innovation Fund. Significant progress in higher education institutions was reported in the national evaluation of access programmes and there are also exciting new access developments in communities and local groups.



Michael Kelly, HEA Chairman

Notwithstanding this progress, we still have a considerable way to go. Together with the higher education institutions, community groups, representative networks and other key actors, we need to re-double our efforts during 2007 to achieve equity of access in our higher education system. The HEA will continue to place its full support and resources behind this work.

The advisory group to the National Access Office has once again been an invaluable source of support and advice and we thank them for their work in 2006. We look forward to a new year of continued good partnership and co-operation with students, parents, education and social partners.

Michael Kelly

Chairman, Higher Education Authority, December 2006

SUMMARY OF MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2006

The main achievements in 2006 are set out below under each of the six goals in the national action plan.

1 Communicate the rationale for equity of access

- Dialogue on access to higher education with wide range of state departments, agencies, student groups, teachers, and representative networks and organisations
- Engagement with cross-border and international audiences
- Extensive print media and radio and television coverage of access issues
- Access an integral part of higher education policy and practice in Ireland

2 Develop a national framework of policies and initiatives

- First national evaluation of access programmes in higher education published and work begun on next steps
- Completion of survey of links with primary, second level, further education and community/adult education

3 Create routes of access and progression to higher education

- Research on progression routes to university published in co-operation with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and the Irish Universities Association
- National framework of qualifications promoted through meetings, briefings and publications
- Range of new arrangements and progression routes from further to higher education

4 Introduce a broader range of teaching and learning strategies

- Paper on teaching and learning in the context of access to higher education presented at international conference
- New teaching and learning strategies supported through the Strategic Innovation Fund
- Contacts established with teaching and learning co-ordinators and networks

5 Provide the necessary financial support and resources

- Funding allocated in time for incoming students through the Student Assistance, Disability and Millennium Partnership Funds
- Further improvements in funding guidelines and support
- Further strategic development of access funding through the HEA Recurrent Grant Allocation Model and the Strategic Innovation Fund
- Implementation of recommendations in review of current funding programmes
- 20% increase in students benefiting from the Disability Fund

6 Evaluate and learn from what works

- Progress on 2006 participation targets
- Further development of new student records database to gather data on student participation
- Progress on defining and targeting students from under-represented groups in higher education

INTRODUCTION

This report reviews progress made during 2006, the second year of the three-year national action plan *Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland*. It also reviews issues arising and presents outline plans for 2007.

The action plan sets out six goals to be achieved:

- 1 Communicate the rationale for equity of access
- 2 Develop a national framework of policies and initiatives to achieve equity of access
- 3 Create routes of access and progression to higher education
- 4 Introduce a broader range of teaching and learning strategies in higher education
- 5 Provide the necessary financial support and resources
- 6 Evaluate and learn from what works

Progress in 2006 is reviewed under each of the six goals and action points in the plan and with regard to participation targets for 2006 which were set in the 2001 *Report of the Action Group on Access to Higher Education*.



National Access Office staff: L to R (standing): Brian Johnston, Diane Swanton, Modesta Mawarire, Alan McGrath, Orla Christle, Peter Brown. L to R (seated): Jane Wall, Mary-Liz Trant, Justin Synnott.

REVIEW OF PROGRESS IN 2006

Communicate the access rationale

The need to make equality an integral element of the intellectual, cultural, social and economic ethos of higher education, and practical ways of doing this, were discussed during the year with senior officers in higher education institutions, officials in the Department of Education and Science and state educational agencies such as the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). This goal was also discussed with the Oireachtas sub-committee on education, teachers, student groups, including the Union of Students in Ireland, community groups and organisations representing Travellers, people with a disability and other minorities. Seminars and roundtable discussions were held with the national Traveller organisations, support teachers for Travellers, Pobal and the post-primary Inspectorate.

New funding programmes and approaches introduced by the HEA in 2006 established access as an integral part of national strategy in Irish higher education. It is a key feature of the new Recurrent Grant Allocation Model and the Strategic Innovation Fund.

Print media coverage on access to higher education included articles and references in national and regional newspapers on several occasions during the year. Three radio interviews and one television interview were also broadcast; points of discussion included part-time education and opportunities for adult learners, financial support for students, the need for better data on student access and participation, and a call for new initiatives to tackle educational disadvantage in the Traveller community.

Contacts were made with a number of cross-border and international audiences, including educationalists from England, Scotland and Wales, practitioners in higher education from the United States, New Zealand and Australia and the Equality Commission, Northern Ireland.

Develop a framework of policies and activities

A practical framework of access policies and initiatives emerged from a national evaluation of access programmes which was published in October 2006. The evaluation used a methodology of self-evaluation in twenty-seven higher education institutions and took into account existing research on good practice. The framework that emerged from the evaluation specifies the elements of policy, practice, partnership and targeting that are required for a successful access programme. The framework will assist higher education institutions in their work to attract and support students from under-represented groups. Eight steps for future action are recommended; these include development of an



Cynthia Deane, author of the 2006 evaluation of access programmes.

access plan in each institution, development of stronger links between higher education institutions and the rest of the education system and improved systems of funding to support progress and achievement.

Links to schools and communities

Another action point for progress was to establish arrangements to link disadvantaged schools and communities to access programmes in higher education institutions in their region. A significant amount of work was completed on this in 2005 and the findings were analysed with reference to the new group of primary and second level schools in the DEIS programme. DEIS replaces the earlier scheme of designated disadvantaged schools. The survey work is now complete and dialogue is under way with higher education institutions to enhance existing links and develop new links where none exist.

Create routes of access and progression

A number of new routes from further to higher education operated successfully during 2006. These include an initiative involving Whitehall College, Dun Laoghaire College of Further Education and Dublin City University. Twenty-two of the twenty-six students who completed a one-year course in the further education colleges progressed to a degree programme in DCU. The students report that they are enjoying their course and are doing well. Fifty-one further education students in Plunkett College, Liberties College and Pearse College participated in an initiative with Trinity College. Thirty-nine students completed the course and twenty-one subsequently progressed to higher education.

Progression research

Research on transfer and progression was published jointly by the NQAI, the Irish Universities Association and the National Access Office in October 2006. The report examines routes of transfer and progression to university Honours Bachelor degree courses among non-Leaving Certificate students. Findings from the report are that students currently progressing from further education, including access courses, comprise only 4% of first time entrants. The numbers transferring from institutes of technology to university Level 8 degree courses have decreased significantly in the past three years and are now less than 4% of entrants. The report includes a number of recommendations which include broadening the criteria for progression for students with FETAC qualifications and exploring alternative entry arrangements into high points healthcare courses and teacher training courses.

Access courses

At present, there are a number of access courses offered in higher education for both mature students and school leavers. They generally run for one year and aim to prepare students for third level. The Department of Education and Science would like the courses to be offered in colleges of further education with progression arrangements in place. Providers have argued, however, that the courses provide an important route of access to higher education. Some funding support for these courses has been provided by the HEA; however, students on the courses are not entitled to higher education grants or access to programmes such as the Fund for Students with a Disability. The National Access Office has discussed the issue with a range of stakeholders and is preparing a review paper for the Department.

Links with DEIS

It is important that effective links are in place between DEIS and activities in higher education. During the year the National Access Office continued to liaise with the Social Inclusion Unit which manages DEIS. Key points of discussion included the national evaluation of access programmes, opportunities to promote equality in education and more informed education choices through DEIS, and general ways of co-ordinating work more effectively.

Introduce broader teaching and learning strategies

Progress in new strategies for teaching and learning and recommendations for the future were set out in a paper presented by the head of the National Access Office at a conference in NUI Galway in June 2006. The strategies mentioned included incentives and support in higher education institutions for teaching development, and inservice and qualifications for teachers and lecturers. Excellence in teaching is explicitly recognised for promotion in some institutions, and progress has been made on modularisation of courses so that students can access them flexibly. Increasingly, teachers in third level are developing skills in small group teaching, problem-based learning, use of learning contracts, how to engage students in large classes, developing critical thinking, and learning styles based on Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. New e-learning strategies include use of Moodle and Blackboard, ways of making course material and lecture notes available to students through the web and ensuring that students with visual and hearing disabilities can access all relevant materials.

Support for teaching and learning continued through the Strategic Initiatives Scheme and funding was also allocated for some major new initiatives in the first round of the five-year Strategic Innovation Fund. These initiatives include co-ordinated professional development for teachers in institutes of technology and further development of the modular curriculum. They will get under way in 2007.

Provide adequate financial resources

The new Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM) was introduced by the HEA in 2006, and through this new model, baseline funding to support equity of access was allocated as part of the core grant to the seven universities. The amounts for 2006 were similar to those allocated for access activities through the Strategic Initiatives Scheme in 2005; however, in future years it is planned that this funding will be calculated based on the number of students from under-represented groups in each institution. The 2006 allocation was specifically tagged and each institution will be asked for details of their spending. The National Access Office gathered information on implementation of the new model through the advisory group and this monitoring will continue in 2007.

Access was an important element of the HEA-managed Strategic Innovation Fund which was introduced in 2006. The National Access Office provided advice and support to the international panel assessing proposals from universities and institutes of technology. €10.2 million was allocated for projects to promote access and lifelong learning.

The National Access Office manages three funding programmes: the Fund for Students with a Disability, the Student Assistance Fund and the Millennium Partnership Fund. These were allocated on time to students and institutions in 2006. The funds are managed with the assistance of Pobal, the Department of Education and Science, and officers in further and higher education institutions. In the case of the Disability Fund, 2032 students with a disability were approved for funding in 2005–6, an increase of over 330 students (20%) from the previous year.

The Disability, Student Assistance and Millennium Partnership Funds are supported by the European Social Fund, and an audit of spending was carried out by the European Commission in March 2006. There was a successful outcome, with a number of minor recommendations implemented.

A submission on access to third level was made for the next round of the National Development Programme, and it is hoped that this will result in improved resources in the coming years.

Review of funding

Implementation of the recommendations in the 2005 review of access funding began in 2006. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) is undertaking a study of the cost of going to college for different kinds of students, including those with childcare and family responsibilities. It is intended that this will be completed by mid-2007. Work is at an advanced stage on co-ordinated information for students, parents and communities on the financial supports available to them in further and higher education. A proposal on support for adult learners in part-time education is being prepared for the Department of Education and Science and it is expected that the forthcoming Student Support Bill will include a review system for students who lose grant support in certain circumstances.

Whole-community projects

Two new community projects have begun. These aim to achieve equity of access to higher education using a whole-community approach. One project is in County Offaly and the other in Clondalkin, West Dublin. The projects will run for three years. It is hoped that they will provide insights into the initiatives and relationships that are needed to make equality of access a reality on a local and regional basis.



John Flanagan, Liam McGlynn, Minister Brian Cowen, Tony Doolin, Maria Bennett and Paul Cullen at the launch of the whole-community access project in County Offaly.

Evaluate and learn from what works

In addition to providing a framework of good practice, the national evaluation of access programmes also identified certain key issues for the future. An opportunity to debate these issues was created at the launch of the evaluation and it is intended that the dialogue will continue. A large part of the work of the National Access Office involves evaluation and we remain committed to doing this in a democratic and inclusive way.

Data collection

Access to data on student participation remains a key action point for the HEA and a large number of planning meetings and document preparation took place during 2006 to finalise a national system of data collection. Such a system is essential for both the HEA and for each higher education institution so that progress can be assessed and participation targets can be set locally and nationally. The data will also provide a basis for continuing and increased resources to achieve equity of access.

In May 2006 a document was circulated to all institutions setting out definitions of target groups and a method of collecting the information through the national student records system. Not all institutions were able to put arrangements in place for 2006, but those that did reported a satisfactory outcome and a more complete profile of their students. Implementation groups have been appointed to resolve any outstanding implementation issues and it is intended that the information will be collected in all institutions in 2007.

Participation targets for 2006

The 2001 *Report of the Action Group on Access to Higher Education* recommended percentage-based targets for 2006 for three of the under-represented groups in higher education. Participation of students with a disability was to increase from 0.8% of the undergraduate population in 1998 to 1.8% in 2006. Participation of full-time mature students was to increase from 4.5% of new entrants in 1998 to 10% in 2006. Participation of students facing social and economic barriers was to rise from 16% in 1998 to 27% in 2006. No targets were set for the Traveller community or minority students.

A number of recent surveys indicate that significant progress has been made. A 2005 survey by the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) shows that 2.4% of undergraduates are students with a disability. A survey of entrants to higher education in 2004 by the ESRI indicates that 9.4% of full-time entrants are mature students. And 33% of the age cohort of students from lower socio-economic groups entered higher education in 2004 compared to 23% of the same group in 1998. New participation targets will be set in 2007 that build on the progress made from 1998–2006 and that include targets for other minority groups.



Professor Tom Collins and Michael Kelly at the launch of the 2006 evaluation of access programmes



Ann O'Brien and Peter Brown at the launch of the evaluation of access programmes



Martin Murray and Tanya Govan at the launch of the evaluation of access programmes.



Pat Kelleher and Tom Boland at the launch of the evaluation of access programmes

REVIEW OF ISSUES ARISING

Seven issues were identified in the 2005 annual report as having a negative impact on progress. These were:

- 1 The perception that equality and excellence can be in competition with each other.
- 2 Higher education institutions do not always take into account the needs of their communities.
- 3 There are barriers between different parts of the education system.
- 4 Equality of access is not yet part of the day-to-day agenda of higher education institutions, and access personnel sometimes feel on the margins.
- 5 Students and their families find it difficult to navigate their way through the maze of financial support systems.
- 6 There are significant variations in funding available to institutions to achieve equity of access.
- 7 There is a lack of essential student data to tell us how we are doing and what we need to do next.

Although it was acknowledged that these issues are long-standing and will take time to resolve, initial work on possible solutions which began in 2006 can be summarised as follows.

Some institutions have created new opportunities for engagement with their local community and for listening to suggestions on how people can feel more included in the educational community. In this context, the two whole-community projects in Offaly and Clondalkin should provide ideas and examples of good practice.

The issue of access personnel sometimes feeling marginalised was tackled to a certain extent through the evaluation of access programmes. The evaluation methodology required access personnel to work with senior administrators and the academic staff and

it was reported that this exercise had a positive impact on the access agenda. It also led to greater understanding of the responsibilities and demands on access personnel.

Students and their families will be assisted in navigating existing financial support systems through a new website and accompanying financial information that is being developed for new college entrants. The forthcoming Student Support Bill should also help to streamline the grants system.

The variations in access funding were addressed in part through the first round of the Strategic Innovation Fund. The Fund was available to both universities and institutes of technology.

Despite some indications of progress, it is clear that work needs to continue on these issues and this is reflected in plans for the coming year.



Advisory group 2006

L to R (standing): Cathal Kelly, Peter Brown, Declan Treanor, Orla Christle, Ann Heelan, Lewis Purser, Jane Rooney, Gary Granville, Rory O'Sullivan, Justin Synnott, Brian McGonagle, Patricia O'Malley and Alan McGrath.

L to R (seated): Bernie McDonnell, Loman Conway, Mary-Liz Trant, Brendan Goggin and Aine Galvin.

Group members not pictured: Finola McDonnell, Tommy Cooke, Aine Hyland, Conor Maguire, John McGabhann, Fiona McGaughey, Sarah Craig, Edwin Mernagh, Carmel Quinlan, Bernadette Farrell.

OUTLINE PLANS FOR 2007

The plans for 2007 build on work completed over the past two years and aim for further progress on the issues identified as barriers and the goal to establish equity of access as an integral part of higher education policy and practice. They are grouped under the six goals of the action plan.

Communicate the access rationale

The rationale will be re-examined with a view to providing a more robust social and economic justification for its importance. Data on the participation and achievement of students from under-represented groups at undergraduate and post-graduate level will be examined with reference to the goals set out in the National Development Plan 2007-13, the most recent National Economic and Social Council (NESC) reports and the latest partnership agreement *Towards 2016*. Equity of access will continue to be promoted as a core element of national policy in the HEA and through the print media, radio, TV, the HEA website, and at meetings and seminars with practitioners and public representatives.

Policies and activities

The steps accompanying the 2006 evaluation of access programmes will be implemented in 2007. Higher education institutions will be asked to produce a coherent access plan that draws on comprehensive student information. Work on new national and local targets for access will get under way. Financial resources will support and incentivise progress towards equality of access. Schools participating in DEIS will be encouraged to liaise with institutes of technology and universities in their region. Work will continue to further co-ordinate the goals of the DEIS programme and access activities in higher education. Work on intercultural strategies in higher education will get under way with a national conference scheduled in October 2007.

Access and progression routes

Routes of access and progression from further to higher education will be promoted with reference to the national framework of qualifications and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), and a review of progress during 2005–7 will be completed. Where appropriate, specific access courses will be supported and developed. Liaison work will continue with the Social Inclusion and Further Education Units in the Department of Education and Science and collaboration will also continue with other agencies, including the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the National Council for Special Education, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and the National Educational Welfare Board. Information on access routes will be available on the new student website.

Introduce teaching and learning strategies

A number of new projects on teaching and learning are being funded through the Strategic Innovation Fund. These include innovative curriculum development and assessment strategies and expanded opportunities for professional development, and the National Access Office will assist with support and monitoring. New teaching and learning strategies will be encouraged in all higher education institutions, and practical incentives for excellence in teaching will be promoted. These include encouraging institutions to give equal value to good teaching alongside research in the criteria for promotions, use of regular and comprehensive student surveys, and opportunities for initial and ongoing professional development.

The National Access Office will also support the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) during 2007 to produce good practice guidelines for students with a disability and these should assist further progress in inclusive teaching and learning practices.

Adequate financial resources

Implementation of the 2005 funding review recommendations will continue in 2007 with publication of the study on the cost of going to college for different kinds of students, information and guidance on financial support for students in further and higher education, and a proposal on support for part-time students in higher education. Assistance and advice will also be provided on the forthcoming Student Support Bill. Planning will be completed on initiatives in the next National Development Plan and the partnership agreement *Towards 2016*.

An alternative means of allocating the Student Assistance Fund will be considered in 2007. It has been proposed that, in the future, the fund is allocated based on the number of students from lower socio-economic groups in each institution.

Implementation of the HEA Recurrent Grant Allocation Model will continue with support and monitoring by the National Access Office. A review of the costs for Irish institutions to promote and support access will be completed during 2007. It is planned that the next allocation of the Strategic Innovation Fund will be made in 2007 and the Access Office will provide support and assistance in this process.

Evaluation

The work on data collection on student participation began in 2005 and it is intended that by mid-2007 all higher education institutions will be ready to gather comprehensive information on their students through the HEA student records system. This will provide institutions with much improved information and enable new participation targets to be set both locally and nationally. Liaison will continue with the Department of Education and Science on data collection at primary and second level and with the Further Education and Training Council and the Central Applications Office on participation and progression in further education and training. The findings of the evaluation work will be disseminated and discussed, and ongoing monitoring of progress in access programmes and activities will be encouraged.

The lifespan of the current access action plan ends in twelve months' time, so work on a new plan will get underway in 2007. It will be accompanied by a comprehensive review of progress during 2005-7.

APPENDIX 1

National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education Published documents and materials

2004

Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland: Action plan 2005–2007,
Dublin: HEA

*Towards a National Strategy: Initial Review of HEA Targeted Initiatives to Widen Access
to Higher Education*, Dublin: HEA

2005

*Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education: Setting an Agenda for Action in
Ireland. Conference Proceedings*, Dublin: HEA

Evaluation of the Millennium Partnership Fund for Disadvantage, Dublin: HEA

“Opportunities for All”. Package including audio-visual DVD and educational support
material

“Towards comprehensive data collection and evaluation on access to higher education”
Position paper

“Systems review of ESF third level access measure returns”

Progressing the action plan: Funding to achieve equity of access to higher education,
Dublin: HEA

2006

Annual Report 2005 and Outline Plans 2006, Dublin: HEA

“Creative and innovative teaching in the context of wider access to higher education in
Ireland”. Paper presented at conference on teaching and learning, NUI Galway and to be
published in conference proceedings

*Towards the Best Education for All: An Evaluation of Access Programmes in Higher
Education in Ireland*, Dublin: HEA

APPENDIX 2

Members of the Advisory Group to the National Access Office

Member	Organisation/Network
Paula Fitzell / Aine Galvin	Access Made Accessible (AMA)
Finola McDonnell	AONTAS
Ann Heelan	Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD)
Brian McGonagle Brendan Goggin	Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology
Declan Treanor	Disability Advisor Workers Network (DAWN)
Dr Tommy Cooke	Dublin Institute of Technology
Professor Aine Hyland	Educational Disadvantage Committee
Professor Gary Granville	Higher Education Authority
Conor Maguire	Irish Business Employers Confederation
John MacGabhann	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
Jane Rooney	Irish Travellers Movement/Pavee Point/Irish Traveller Womens Forum
Lewis Purser	Irish Universities Association
Loman Conway	Irish Vocational Education Association
Rory O'Sullivan	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (Adult and further education committee)
Fiona McGaughey	National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI)
Sarah Craig	National Council for Special Education
Patricia O'Malley	National Parents Council
Edwin Mernagh	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
Dr Carmel Quinlan	Network of Mature Student Officers (NIMSO)
Bernie McDonnell	Pobal (formerly Area Development Management)
Cathal Kelly	The Equality Authority
Richard Morrisroe / Bernadette Farrell	Union of Students of Ireland

HEA MEMBERS

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Professor Sarah Moore

Deputy Chairperson, Dean of Teaching and Learning, UL

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Mr. Colm Hamrogue

President of the Union of Students in Ireland

Ms Carol Herron

Home School Community Co-ordinator, Co. Cavan VEC

Dr. Pat Kelleher

former Director Cork IT

Mr. Patrick J. Kirby

Group Commercial Director, Alphyra

Professor Elizabeth Meehan

Former Head, Institute of Governance, Queen's University Belfast

Professor Ciaran Murphy

Department of Accounting, Finance and Information Systems, UCC

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