

# **NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN 2022 – 2026**

## **CONSULTATION PAPER**

**APRIL 2021**



An Roinn Breisoideachais agus Ardoideachais,  
Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta  
Department of Further and Higher Education,  
Research, Innovation and Science

**HEA** | HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY  
AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS

# 1 Introduction



- 1.1. An inclusive higher education system is a national and European priority. Inclusion is one of the six strategic goals set out in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) Statement of Strategy. Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris TD, has stated his priority is to deliver a more equitable higher education system.
- 1.2. This priority is actioned through a series of goals and actions in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education ('National Access Plan'). The current Plan will expire in 2021. DFHERIS and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) are now starting a consultation process for the next five-year National Access Plan.
- 1.3. Education has the power to transform lives, lift people out of poverty and break down cycles of disadvantage. The objective of achieving equity of access to higher education is rooted in principles of equality and social inclusion and has been a longstanding national policy priority in Ireland. Inclusion is also a stated European Union priority e.g., the European Pillar of Social Rights. Access to higher education should be available to individuals independent of their socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, disability or other circumstances.
- 1.4. It is essential that pathways to higher education are available to all of those seeking to upskill or further their personal development through higher education. Our economy requires a supply of innovative and critical thinking graduates who bring diverse ideas to their places of work. Similarly, our wider social and cultural development as a nation also requires learners who are creative, socially engaged and equipped to challenge traditional ways of thinking.
- 1.5. We can only supply these graduates if there is a diversity of students entering higher education. An inclusive higher education system is a priority for our country's economic, social and equality objectives. We want to be a society that embraces diversity and where higher education is accessible by all regardless of background, disability, ethnicity or financial means.
- 1.6. Despite progress made in recent years, we know that our higher education system is still not as inclusive as we want it to be. There are still communities and parts of our population who are not accessing higher education. We know that some prospective students simply do not see themselves as belonging to a university, institute of technology or college in the first place. This needs to change.
- 1.7. In developing the next National Access Plan, we need to hear from as many stakeholders as possible (members of the public, students, higher education institutions, community partners, schools) on what more needs to be done to ensure that our higher education population reflects our wider society and what we can do in order to achieve real and sustainable progress over the next five years.

# 2 Context for the National Access Plan, 2022-2026



- 2.1. The current National Access Plan runs from 2015 to 2021 and is the third national plan aimed at achieving and promoting equity of access to higher education following the publication of the first plan in 2005. The continued articulation of goals and objectives within these various plans has helped to embed a vision for access to higher education as well as the setting of participation targets for target groups. The strategic vision set out in successive national access plans has been supported by funding programmes and initiatives.
- 2.2. Central to engagement with students from under-represented backgrounds and their communities are the Access Offices and staff in place in each higher education institution (HEI). These offices are established through core HEI funding from the State (approximately €43m in core funding to HEIs in 2021 was on the basis of access metrics). It enables all HEIs to have an access infrastructure in place that provides for the pre-entry and post-entry work required to support students from target groups access and successfully complete higher education.
- 2.3. The Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) supports HEIs in ensuring students with disabilities have the necessary supports to enable them access, fully participate in and successfully complete their chosen course of study. In 2019/20 academic year, over 14,000 students received supports eligible for funding under the FSD. The Student Assistance Fund (SAF) provides financial support to full or part-time students who are experiencing financial difficulties while attending college. In the 2019/20 academic year, over 14,000 students were supported under the SAF.
- 2.4. The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) has provided additional funding to support access to higher education since the 2017/18 academic year. Funding will amount to over €40m over six years and is supporting initiatives across its three strands - access to teacher education (PATH 1), 1916 Bursary Fund (PATH 2) and Higher Education Access Fund (PATH 3). It is expected that the full impact of PATH will be seen over the lifetime of the subsequent national access plans.
- 2.5. Over the period of the current National Access Plan there has also been progress towards the embedding of whole-of-institution approaches to access. This means making access the responsibility of everyone in a HEI – not solely access or disability officers but also academics, administration staff, etc. We have seen the development of student success strategies that focus on providing a quality educational experience for all students. We have also seen the strengthening of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles that seek to develop inclusive learning environments and practices for all students.



- 2.6. Our understanding of the profile of students in our higher education population has improved over the lifetime of the current National Access Plan. Enhanced approaches to data collection to support evidence-based policy making have been an important feature of progress and led to the publication by the HEA of Deprivation Index Scores (DIS). This data allows for a more accurate understanding of the socio-economic profile of our higher education population and supports more targeted approaches to equity of access. DIS will be a critical tool in setting targets for the next National Access Plan.
- 2.7. These funding programmes (both longstanding ones such as FSD and SAF and more recent ones such as PATH) are important drivers in progressing the objectives of the National Access Plan. Progress in the area of student success, UDL and data collection are key achievements that have taken place during the lifetime of the current Plan.
- 2.8. However, we know that our student population is still not diverse or inclusive enough. The DIS analysis shows that in 2018/19 only 10% of the student population in Ireland came from disadvantaged areas compared to 20% from affluent areas. Our current student population is still some way from being one that fully reflects wider Irish society. This means that a significant challenge remains for policymakers and HEIs.
- 2.9. This challenge has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the disproportionate impact it has had on students from disadvantaged communities. Their college experience has been significantly affected – access to broadband, laptops, lack of available study spaces, social isolation. Covid-19 has brought the ‘digital divide’ and the impact of disadvantage to the fore.
- 2.10. The Government has sought to help alleviate these issues through targeted funding supports. This included the doubling of SAF funding, a ring-fenced fund to support Traveller students access and participate in higher education, the introduction of a laptop loan scheme and additional once-off funding for HEI access services to address emergencies arising from the pandemic. Connectivity issues are beginning to be addressed through the further roll-out of the HEAnet eduroam network across the country. Additional funding was also provided for student wellbeing and mental health supports. However, the true impact of Covid-19 will be long-term. We are mindful of this challenge as we progress to the next National Access Plan.

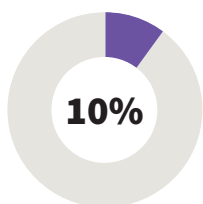
# 3 Review of Progress



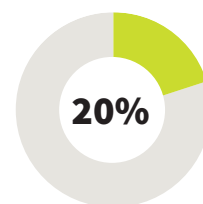
- 3.1. Moving to a new National Access Plan, it is important to reflect on progress to date and consider the extent to which the current Plan has delivered on increases in student numbers from target groups.
- 3.2. For students who are socio-economically disadvantaged, there was evidence that participation rates among target groups were moving in the right direction (as shown the in the 2018 Progress Review of the National Access Plan). However recently published data shows that a significant challenge remains, and socio-economic disadvantage continues to be a barrier to accessing higher education.

## Socio-economically disadvantaged students

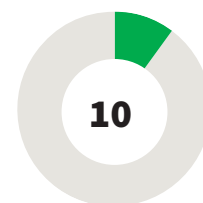
In 2018/19:



**10%** of the student population came from disadvantaged areas compared to **20%** from affluent areas



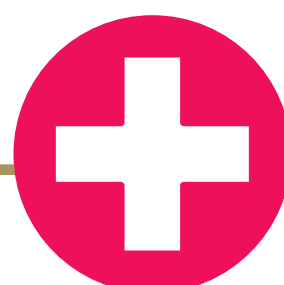
There were **4.9** students from disadvantaged areas to every **10 students** from affluent areas



Only **55** students in the country came from 'extremely disadvantaged' backgrounds,



In a high points course such as medicine, **4%** of students come from disadvantaged areas.

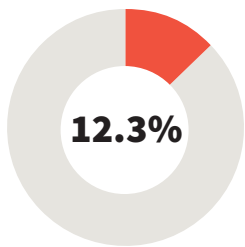




3.3. For students with disabilities, trends are positive with a sustained increase in participation rates and in the number of students in specific disability categories. But the higher education population of students with disabilities does not reflect the wider population. It will be important to sustain and build on progress that has been made.

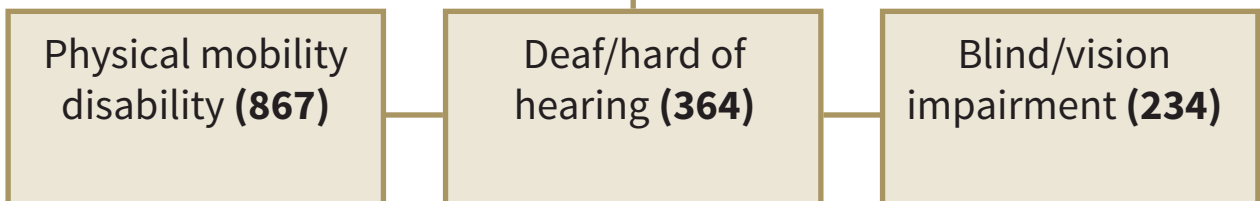
## Students with disabilities

In 2019/20:



**12.3%** of new entrants were students with disabilities. The original National Access Plan target of **8%** has now been exceeded.

**Continued increases in numbers of students with/who are:**



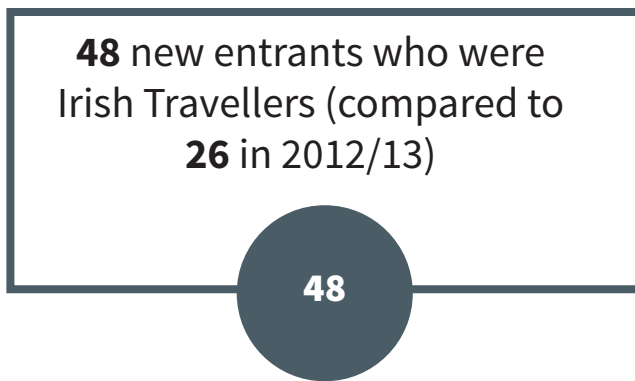
The National Access Plan targets for these groups have now been exceeded



3.4. For students who are members of the Irish Traveller community, there have been marginal improvements in numbers, but they continue to remain at disappointingly low numbers:

### Students who are members of the Irish Traveller community

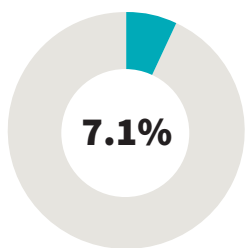
In 2019/20:



3.5. In the case of mature students, participation rates are significantly behind original National Access Plan expectations:

### First-time mature students

In 2019/20:



**7.1%** of full-time new entrants were mature students (compared to **13%** in 2012/13 and below the National Access Plan target of **16%**)

3.6. The data points to the scale of the challenge to grow participation from under-represented groups in higher education. The next National Access Plan must address this challenge and deliver sustainable progress. Clearly, the next Plan needs to be innovative and radical. We need a diversity of voices and perspectives to inform the ambitions and approaches for this Plan.

# 4 Consultation for the next National Access Plan



- 4.1. The HEA and DFHERIS are commencing a consultation process for the new National Access Plan that will run from 2022 until 2026. Submissions are invited from all interested parties.
- 4.2. The consultation process underpinning this new Plan is critical and it is essential that the Plan reflects the perspectives of a diverse range of stakeholders - students, HEIs, advocacy and representative organisations, community groups, policymakers, public sector partners, schools, parents, etc.
- 4.3. Persons or organisations wishing to make a submission may wish to be guided by the following questions. However, these questions are not exhaustive and anyone making a submission should not be limited by them.

What should our overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022-2026?	Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan? How do we ensure that vulnerable members of our society are included (e.g., learners currently in care or who have experience of being in care)?	How can pre-entry and post-entry activities be developed?
How can current funding programmes be better utilised to further the objectives of the National Access Plan?	How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded within HEIs?	How can a whole-of-education approach to widening participation in higher education be achieved?
How can pathways between further education and training and higher education be better developed?	How can other social inclusion initiatives outside of the higher education sector be harnessed to support equity of access objectives?	What challenges has Covid-19 presented in relation to an inclusive higher education system and how can they be addressed?





4.4. Submissions from students (current, former and prospective) are particularly welcome and encouraged. The student voice is critical to the development of the next National Access Plan. In addition to the questions above, we are keen to hear from students about:

What aspects of equity of access to higher education currently work or do not work from a student perspective?

What is the biggest challenge for students in accessing higher education?

What can make a difference for students accessing and completing higher education?

How has Covid-19 impacted on students e.g., academic, financial, health, college experience and how can we address these impacts?

4.5. Submissions should be emailed to [access@hea.ie](mailto:access@hea.ie). The closing date for receipt of submissions is **Friday 18 June 2021**.

4.6. When making a submission, persons or organisations should advise the HEA if they do not wish to have their submission published. The HEA will only publish submissions with identifying information removed.

# Appendix 1 – Useful links



## **National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019**

<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Plan-for-Equity-of-Access-to-Higher-Education-2015-2019.pdf>

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## **Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021**

<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/01/HEA-Progress-Review-2021-NAP.pdf>

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## **Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Strategy (DFHERIS) Statement of Strategy 2021-2023**

<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/strategy/>

<https://assets.gov.ie/125743/0d1fe077-ba66-4ba9-977d-4f0a2f3b0ef1.pdf>

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## **HEA Strategic Plan 2018-2022**

<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/HEA-2018-2022-Strategic-Plan-FINAL.pdf>

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## **HEA Deprivation Index Score Analysis (DIS) for 2018/19**

<https://hea.ie/2020/12/07/new-hea-data-provides-in-depth-insight-into-the-socio-economic-profile-of-our-universities-and-institutes-of-technology/>

<https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/socio-economic-data-and-maps/>

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