



PATH Strand 4

Phase 1 – Universal Design Fund

Supporting inclusive universally designed higher education environments for all students

Implementation Guidelines



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

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Section A - Context for PATH 4

National Access Plan

The Department of Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) are currently finalising a new National Access Plan - A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education ('National Access Plan' or 'NAP').

Ambition

The new Plan articulates **the ambitions** for equity in higher education system as follows:

“that the higher education student body entering, participating in and completing higher education, at all levels and across all programmes reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population,

and

that our higher education institutions are inclusive, universally designed environments which support and foster student success and outcomes, equity and diversity and are responsive to the needs of students and wider communities.”

Goals

The new plan will place the student at the centre. At its core will be five student-centred goals:

1. **Inclusivity**
2. **Flexibility**
3. **Clarity**
4. **Coherence**
5. **Sustainability**

Underpinning these five goals is an additional sixth goal that is also core to the Plan:

6. **Evidence-Driven Approach**

Each of these goals will be underpinned by objectives that will deliver outcomes for students and actions that describe how these outcomes will be achieved.

Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH)

PATH is a strategic funding programme, established in 2016, for the delivery of equity of access objectives. It supports the implementation of National Access Plan objectives by providing funding to higher education institutions (HEIs) to deliver innovative measures to improve participation and retention of specific target groups in higher education.

PATH was confirmed as a permanent fund in 2020 and has a current investment envelope of €42 million over the period 2016 to 2022. It currently consists of three strands:

- PATH 1 - supporting access to initial teacher education by the target groups
- PATH 2 - 1916 Bursary Fund for the most socio-economically disadvantaged students from within target groups
- PATH 3 - supporting institutional capacity in developing regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education

PATH funding complements other investments in equity of access including core funding supporting access infrastructure in HEIs, the Student Grant Scheme as administered by SUSI and other targeted initiatives such as the Student Assistance Fund (SAF), Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) as well as other DFHERIS-funded initiatives.

PATH 4

Budget 2022 allocated additional funding to support priority actions within the new National Access Plan.

DFHERIS has determined that a new time-bound PATH strand, to be known as PATH 4, will be commenced, complementing existing funding streams, in respect of the following objectives which are aligned to the new National Access Plan:

- To support the implementation of relevant objectives and actions under the **inclusivity** goal of the new NAP.
- To enable the creation of an inclusive environment in higher education which can be accessed by all and which supports increased engagement, progression and success for all students, benefiting **all priority groups** in the NAP, **(including students with intellectual disabilities and autistic students)**.
- To develop the higher education sector's capacity for inclusive teaching, learning and assessment to enable **greater opportunities for participation in higher education by all students including students with intellectual disabilities and autistic students**.
- To understand how engagement in higher education can support real outcomes, including employment, for students with intellectual disabilities.
- To support a more diverse student body in higher education that includes students with intellectual disabilities.

- To advance a holistic student-centred partnership approach within the tertiary education sector which will enable students with intellectual disabilities reach their potential.
- To support an evidenced-based whole-of-tertiary, whole-of-education and whole-of-Government approach, which will inform future policy on successful transitions to and within higher education for students with intellectual disabilities.

PATH 4 will be supported by funding of €12m over a **four-year period** starting in 2022 and will be implemented on a phased basis as follows:

- **Phase 1 (2022) – Universal Design Fund - Supporting inclusive universally designed higher education environments for all** (once-off fund based on allocation/approved project plan basis to PATH-funded HEIs – see Section B and Appendix 2)
- **Phase 2 (2023-2025) – Proposals for course provision for Students with Intellectual Disabilities** (competitive call for proposals)

Phase 1 will support the embedding of Universal Design (UD) approaches and inclusive practices in HEIs which **will benefit all students** and in particular autistic students and enable the building of capacity in HEIs for greater participation by students with intellectual disabilities in higher education.

Phase 2 will involve a three-year pathfinding pilot to support an enhancement of course provision for students with intellectual disabilities and to inform future policy considerations for students with intellectual disabilities.

PATH 4 will be a key driver in delivering the following objectives, under the Inclusivity goal in the new National Access Plan:

- To embed a whole-of-institution approach to student success and universal design
- To improve opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to engage in higher education=

A list of HEIs covered by PATH 4 can be found in Appendix 2 and is consistent with the HEIs currently participating in the PATH programme.

Section B - PATH 4 Phase 1 – Universal Design (UD) Fund

Under **Phase 1** of PATH 4, a once-off fund of €3m in 2022 will be allocated to PATH-funded HEIs to support the further development and implementation of Universal Design principles and practices.

Purpose of funding

The funding allocated under Phase 1 of PATH 4 is intended to contribute to the following:

- Development and implementation of **UD practices** that support the participation and success of *all* students enabling the creation of an environment in higher education which can be accessed by all and enables full engagement, progression and success for all students.
- Capacity-building and embedding of **UD policies** and approaches in the delivery of teaching and learning in higher education institutions at both strategic and operational levels.
- To improve opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to engage in higher education including the development of the **higher education sector's capacity for inclusive teaching, learning and assessment**.
- To enable the enhancement of an **inclusive environment** in higher education which can be accessed by all and which supports increased engagement, progression and success for all students, benefiting **all priority groups** in the National Access Plan, **(including students with intellectual disabilities and autistic students)**.
- The implementation by HEIs of the **Inclusivity goal**, and its related objectives and actions, of the new **National Access Plan**.
- For HEIs who wish to participate in Phase 2 of PATH 4, **provision for students with intellectual disabilities**, projects and activities funded under Phase 1 are expected to assist the HEIs' readiness to develop inclusive learning environments for students with intellectual disabilities.

Policies and principles for Phase 1 funding

Types of projects and activities that can be supported by this funding include:

Policies

- The development of a **conceptual framework for universal design** and that could be adapted for the higher education sector
- Policies for more **inclusive environments for students** with intellectual disabilities
- Engagement which **supports the development of a sector-wide approach to inclusive practice and universal design principles including the development of agreed metrics for assessing progress and impact of inclusive practices**
- Funding **evaluation** of existing inclusive teaching practices
- Research and development of policies on **assisted decision making and safeguarding**

Environment

- **Design of a service** or approach to student support and engagement that will accommodate the diverse range of student needs e.g., approaches that assist with transitioning into new learning environments, managing substantially increased workloads, building relationships with peers and faculty
- **Accessible showcases that support clarity** for students on how to access supports within the HEI on all course programmes and assessments, particularly first year students
- Campus **accessibility improvements** that demonstrate best practice in Universal Design (UD) and **support autism-friendly campuses** e.g., wayfinding apps, signage, small-scale capital works such as **autism-friendly spaces** or quiet zones
- Measures that support autonomous and independent learning by students with disabilities including in particular autistic students
- **Technology-based solutions** that support inclusive practices in teaching and learning, e.g., online learning platforms, virtual learning environments, and student services e.g., library, student support
- Measures that **support blended and flexible learning** e.g., recording of lectures, captioning, etc
- Enhancing best practice and **compliance in accessibility** e.g., accessibility audits, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines
- **Training for students** to support learning and utilising assistive technology and upgrading students' digital skills
- Measures to deepen understanding of needs of new NAP priority groups and plan for varied needs of priority group students including **autistic students and students with intellectual disabilities**

Capacity

- **Training and professional development for HEI staff** (academic, student services, technical and administrative) including training resources and recruitment of UD specialists or officers. This can include building greater awareness of autism as a spectrum condition
- Development and enhancement of **inclusive teaching, learning and assessment practices** including evidence of student co-design and input
- Supporting **UD leaders or champions** in academic departments and student services
- Making services available at times which suit students' needs
- **Development of curricular and training resources** in inclusive education
- **Sharing of best practice** on inclusive teaching practices

Intellectual Disabilities

- **Measures that will support** the development of inclusive learning environments for **students with intellectual disabilities**. HEIs may choose to develop these further as part of the call for proposals under Phase 2 of PATH 4.
- Measures which support the process of change necessary to prepare HEIs to make **programmes for students with intellectual disabilities** a success.
- Development of **linkages with service providers** who are currently supporting students with **intellectual disabilities** to establish level of demand and to deepen understanding of the needs of this group.

Phase 1 funding allocation

HEI allocations are based on a base allocation for each institution combined with the numbers of students and numbers of students with a disability attending each institution.

The HEA Executive in partnership with DFHERIS will facilitate an online meeting on Monday 13 June to address any queries regarding the scope of the PATH 4 Universal Design Fund and to address any feedback. Invitations will be circulated shortly.

Project plans

Under Phase 1 of PATH 4, HEIs are required to prepare project plans for the activities they wish to use their funding allocation for. Clear linkages should be demonstrated on how this funding will support the objectives above and how they are reflected in the HEIs' access, participation and success strategies. Governance arrangements should be clearly outlined. HEIs are encouraged to collaborate with each other in the development and implementation of projects and engage with students in the planning and implementation phases.

HEIs must submit these project plans to the HEA by close of business Friday 2 September 2022. HEIs may commence implementation of their project plans once the HEA has approved them. Project plans should be submitted to the HEA Executive's Access Policy section at access@hea.ie. Project plans may be submitted to the HEA in advance of the deadline and the HEA Executive will seek to address any queries and approve plans as soon as possible after they are submitted.

Following approval of project plans by the HEA Executive, funds will be transferred to HEIs as soon as possible.

Reporting requirements

HEIs will be required to report to the HEA Executive on the operation of the Universal Design fund. The HEA Executive will provide HEIs with a reporting template following the approval of project plans.

PATH 4 – phase 1 conditions of funding

The following conditions of funding apply:

- Projects and initiatives funded under PATH 4 – Phase 1 are expected to commence before the end of 2022 and funding must be spent by 31 December 2023.
- This is a once-off enabling fund in 2022 to support additional universal design measures. PATH 4 funding is not intended to be used on measures which are already supported by other Exchequer funding – although this may be considered where there the funding stream for these activities has been or will be exhausted.
- Funding can be used to address capacity issues as part of the development and roll-out of projects. Funding can support staff costs. However, HEIs should ensure that project plans avoid creating future liabilities or expectations beyond the lifespan of projects.
- HEIs must ensure that the funding is used in line with relevant public financial procedures.
- Appropriate monitoring and control arrangements will be put in place by the HEA, to ensure that any unallocated or unspent funding is returned to the Exchequer by HEIs no later than end of 2023.
- Funding cannot be used to support core grant-funded activities or schemes.
- Funding is for current expenditure. As per the policies and principles for Phase 1 funding in Section B, funding under PATH 4 may be used for campus accessibility improvements and small-scale capital works. Otherwise capital expenditure should be considered under the Devolved Capital Grant.

Appendix 1 – Understanding of Universal Design

Universal Design in education is understood to be the creation of an environment which can be accessed by all and enables full engagement, progression and success for all students. While Universal Design began as a design approach to accommodate people with disabilities, Universal Design has been significantly developed and transformed, and now offers a framework for the inclusion of all students in education. Universal Design is based on the principles of flexibility and choice for all students, recognising that a well-designed service or approach will accommodate the diverse range of student needs. So, one size does not fit all, but a well-designed service will. Universal design will however particularly benefit students with disabilities including autistic students.

Universal Design is a proactive approach to inclusion, which eliminates the need for students to be labelled in order to be included in education. Universal Design is a framework which embeds flexibility and choice for students turning the deficit model on its head. It weaves inclusion into the fabric of the student experience. Universal Design encourages a reflective, inclusive approach, identifying and removing the barriers or potential barriers to the engagement of a diverse student population. It addresses those proactively, rather than relying on a reactive approach to providing bespoke solutions or temporary fixes.

Appendix 2 - List of HEIs covered by PATH 4

Dublin City University (DCU)
National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG)
Trinity College Dublin (TCD)
University College Cork (UCC)
University College Dublin (UCD)
University of Limerick (UL)
Maynooth University (MU)
Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin)
Munster Technological University (MTU)
Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (TUS)
Atlantic Technological University (ATU)
South East Technological University (SETU)
Mary Immaculate College (MIC)
National College of Art and Design (NCAD)
St. Angela's College. Sligo
Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dún Laoghaire (IADT)
Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT)
Marino Institute of Education (MIE)
RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences (RCSI)