



Submission by the Dyslexia Association of Ireland to the HEA as part of the consultation on the next National Access Plan that will run from 2022 to 2026.

Date of Submission: 11 June, 2021.

The Dyslexia Association of Ireland (DAI) welcomes this consultation to develop the next National Access Plan (2022-2026). As the representative body for people with dyslexia, a learning difficulty that affects up to 1 in 10, DAI hopes that this submission will inform improvements in the strategy and services available to students with dyslexia.

People with dyslexia may experience greater stress and frustration as they endeavour to learn, resulting in heightened anxiety, particularly in relation to educational acquisition. Dyslexic difficulties occur on a continuum from mild to severe. According to the National Access Plan 2015-2019, equity of access to higher education is a fundamental principle of Irish education policy, its vision is to ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. Therefore, as **dyslexia affects approximately 10% of the population**, it is imperative this population's voice is heard and their concerns addressed.

We hope that the new access plan will have a strong and specific focus on students with additional needs, (whether those needs have been formally identified or not). If we get it right for individuals with dyslexia and other disabilities, we will get it right for everyone. The principles of **universal design for both learning and assessment** of learning should underpin the new plan; however, there **should also be a provision for individualised or tailored supports for those learners who require this**. The needs of disadvantaged learners and those with dyslexia and other neuro-diverse profiles should be paramount. The needs and voices of these learners must be incorporated early and often within the national access plan, and its roll out.

The learning and progression goals of individuals will likewise be very different and this needs to be accommodated in both general awareness campaigns and in more **specific awareness campaigns for people with dyslexia and other neuro-diverse profiles**. Better understanding within the education sector, and within government on topics such as dyslexia, is critical if we are to better support the needs of the student body with dyslexia and fully enable and support them to achieve their potential. It is important to resource a

wide range of awareness campaigns on both general awareness and on specific topics such as dyslexia. In trying to reach groups who are notoriously hard to reach, a very wide net needs to be cast both nationally and locally using all media and social media channels, as well as linking with community groups and representative bodies.

A **holistic approach** is needed to enable open discussion, creating a welcoming environment for individuals identified with dyslexia and those seeking more information on dyslexia. **Fear of disclosure** remains a significant concern for many, and this can only be addressed if government and society become more aware, more open and more responsive to the needs of individuals with dyslexia.

As dyslexia has a range of impacts on reading, writing, comprehension, working memory and organisation skills, no two individuals are similarly affected. The same is true of other neuro-diverse conditions such as dyspraxia, ADHD and autism. **The diversity of these spectrum conditions means that a one size fits all approach will not work.** A spectrum and diversity of responses to meet these varying needs is essential. Universal design for learning will work for inclusion of many, but this needs to be accompanied by individualised supports for some who need that extra provision.

Those providing supports to students need to be trained in dyslexia and understand the emotional toll it can have, and their provision of support must be sensitive to that emotional aspect. Awareness also needs to be given to the language that is used. Accessible language and the provision of alternative formats should be the norm across the education sector so that students with dyslexia are not excluded.

It is critical to ensure that individuals are not alienated or excluded. Welcoming environments and positive responses are critical especially for those who may be hesitant to engage, regardless of age or ability. **Goal-orientated approaches and success stories would be key to providing examples of real-world outcomes.** However, as literacy and numeracy

have different meanings to individuals, so does success. Therefore, examples of success must cover a very wide range to cater for this.

Continuous Professional Development is also key in upskilling the educational workforce to become more aware of dyslexic individuals needs and appropriate supports. DAI is working in this area, but with limited capacity. Increased resourcing as part of this new access plan could enable further development and rollout of a range of CPD courses on dyslexia. DAI currently provides dyslexia awareness training, training on support strategies for dyslexia, and dyslexia assessment of need training for HEI and FET sector staff. **DAI is calling for a mandatory module on neuro-diversity for all educators**, including universal design, identification of dyslexia and dyscalculia, best practice in-classroom support and useful technology to support inclusion and independence.

A significant issue facing adults with dyslexia is that many may not have been able to access a formal identification of their dyslexia previously, and there is no free public assessment service for adults with queried dyslexia. Currently, HEIs will only accept a formal identification of dyslexia when registering students and making an application to the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD). This means **a large cohort of unidentified dyslexics are not getting the support they need.**

Access to dyslexia identification must be available to those adults who need or want formal identification. This could be with increased funding to DAI towards our low cost adult educational psychology assessment service as well as by resourcing continued rollout of our dyslexia assessment of needs training course for education staff, to enable low cost and local identification of dyslexia. While a diagnosis of dyslexia may not be required to access certain supports, it is often very empowering emotionally, giving validity to the individuals lived experience, and enabling them to connect with others. The affirmative model of disability shows the social and emotional importance of identity. The UNCRPD enshrines the right of people with disability to have their own identity and to share their

experience with others like themselves. The government must fulfil its UNCRPD obligations in supporting individuals with specific disabilities like dyslexia to access their identity.

DAI has collaborated with NCBI on the **Bookshare library of alternative formats** which is now available to students with vision or print disabilities including dyslexia. Greater awareness and resourcing for the Bookshare library would enable a wider number of students to access alternative formats of their textbooks.

Integration of mental health supports is also critical. Mindfulness techniques in education can support effectiveness, personal development, and challenge negative self-talk. The goal should be to enable successful independent lifelong learners. Everything needs to be underpinned with a belief that all individuals, with the correct support, can succeed. The research consistently shows how the expectations of educators are strongly linked to outcomes for learners. **High expectations, proper recognition, and appropriate accommodation will enable levels of success for all.**