

RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences

Response to Higher Education Authority

Consultation Paper

National Access Plan 2022-2026

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About RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences

RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences has been at the forefront of educating healthcare professionals since 1784 when we were granted the authority and responsibility to set and support professional standards for surgical training and practice in Ireland, a responsibility that remains central to the College to this day. This proud surgical heritage remains at the core of RCSI's mission 'to educate, nurture and discover for the benefit of human health'.

Today we are an innovative, world-leading international health sciences university with undergraduate and postgraduate schools and faculties across the spectrum of health sciences. We are home to numerous national healthcare institutes and world-leading research minds that drive pioneering breakthroughs and inform policy in human healthcare.

Ranked joint second globally for Good Health and Well-being in the Times Higher Education (THE) University Impact Rankings 2021, RCSI is among the top 250 universities worldwide in THE World University Rankings (2021) and our research is ranked first in Ireland for citations.

Access at RCSI

Consistent with the vision, goals and target groups outlined in the **National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-19** RCSI is committed to widening participation in higher education and to the creation of a socially inclusive learning environment.

RCSI Engage strategy (2019 – 2023) encompasses community engagement and pre-entry widening participation work of **REACH RCSI Programme**, a unique programme working in partnership with our local community of South Inner City Dublin and DEIS Schools therein to deliver educational programmes, enhance educational attainment, facilitate access to further and higher education and to improve health and wellbeing.

RCSI Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

In 2017, RCSI established a dedicated Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Unit to implement RCSI's commitment to embedding equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) across everything we do. This ensures we can all work and learn in an environment defined by dignity and respect and ensure that everyone in RCSI is treated fairly regardless of age, disability, family status, gender, marital status, membership of Travelling community, race, religion, sexual orientation or socio-economic status.

HEA Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH)

RCSI is a member of the HEA Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Leinster Pillar 1 Cluster, a six-college consortium, working collaboratively with UCD, IADT, MIE, NCAD and TCD to promote and advance equality of access to higher education for under-represented groups.

Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE)

RCSI participates in the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR), which supports school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) which supports students applying to RCSI with a disability.

RCSI reserves 12% of School Leaver places for students applying through the HEAR and DARE Schemes.

In 2020, RCSI registered twenty-five students from the identified PATH target groups in Medicine, Pharmacy and Physiotherapy:

- Fourteen students from socio-economically disadvantaged communities or low levels of participation in higher education.
- Four first-time Mature Entry students.
- Six students with a disability, prioritising sensory and physical DARE students, one of whom is also HEAR eligible.
- One Irish Traveller, also HEAR eligible.

RCSI Scholarships

RCSI offers a number of access scholarships to facilitate widening participation and encompass reduced points entry, financial support, accommodation costs (if students are from outside Leinster)

- Aim High Scholarship (Medicine x 3 in 2020)
- Kiran Pathak Scholarship (Pharmacy x 1 in 2020)
- Traveller Community Access Programme Scholarship (Medicine x 1 in 2020. RCSI's first TCAP graduate was in 2012).

Additionally, RCSI offers three 1916 'Leaders and Learners' Bursary funded by the Department of Education and Skills.

RCSI response to the Consultation Paper:

RCSI welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education and below is our response to the consultation paper guiding questions:

1. What should the HEA's overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022-2026?

RCSI supports the current vision “*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*”.

However, it is important to note that creating equity of access is rooted in targeted action in early childhood and continuous, targeted supports are necessary throughout the educational journey, particularly in light of the impact of COVID-19.

2. Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan? How does policy ensure that vulnerable members of our society are included (e.g., learners currently in care or who have experience of being in care)?

RCSI supports the target groups however suggest clearer definition is required together with research conducted to explore the barriers faced by each to ensure adequate support:

- Entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education;
- First time, mature student entrants;
- Students with disabilities;
- Part-time/flexible learners;
- Further education award holders; and
- Irish Travellers

Recommendation for inclusion of vulnerable societal members:

- Strengthening of access to free guidance counselling and support in the community e.g. via Area Partnerships. Access to guidance and support in the community is particularly key for prospective students not currently in education and at key transition points such as graduating from further education.
- Consolidation of links between higher education and community based educational supports such as the aforementioned and youth/community sector.
- Ensure equal access to courses where appropriate, to include continuation of SUSI grants, for students who may require for access reasons, to take full time courses over a longer period of time

- Consider a funding model for students, where placements and travel, is a core element of their course. Students should not be limited in educational experiences that they can benefit from, due to financial issues.

3. *How can pre-entry and post-entry activities be developed?*

- Collaboration and co-creation in partnership with schools and community partners is pivotal to participation of target groups.
- Support research into participation and progression of target groups
- Ensure awareness of opportunities and application support to further and higher education for students from target groups who attend non – DEIS schools.
- Opportunities to engage remotely due to the impact of COVID-19 have facilitated engagement by socio economically disadvantaged students who geographically would ordinarily not have been in a position to participate.

4. *How can current funding programmes be better utilised to further the objectives of the National Access Plan?*

- Enhanced access to data and support for research on the access and participation of targeted groups across the educational journey.
- Support research into the career progression of access graduates.
- Consider streamlining application processes (SUSI, HEAR, DARE, CAO), to reduce administrative burden on targeted students, and facilitate their access of such support.

5. *How can a whole-of education approach to widening participation in higher education be achieved?*

- Enhanced support for guidance counselling both in school and in the community to build awareness of opportunities and support prospective students with further and higher education application processes.
- A holistic approach involving the wider school staff could help raise aspirations and build awareness of opportunities if started much earlier e.g. at key transition points and consistently throughout the post primary journey.
- Enhance availability of UDL training and demystify disabilities so all members of university staff, academic, professional and support staff understand how best to engage and welcome students from all backgrounds

6. How can pathways between further education and training and higher education be better developed?

- Enhance communication of opportunities to build awareness of opportunities available to, and facilitate participation of, further education award holders
- Increase formal and informal guidance support available to further education holders to facilitate application processes.

7. How can other social inclusion initiatives outside of the higher education sector be harnessed to support equity of access objectives?

- Strengthening of community based supports such as those facilitated via Area Partnerships, youth and community work sector who have established relationships with target groups in their communities would support access and participation pre and post entry.
- Consolidation of links between further and higher education and community based educational supports and enhanced communication between formal and informal education.

8. What challenges has Covid-19 presented in relation to an inclusive higher education system and how can they be addressed?

- While acknowledging the ICT fund provided in 2020 for disadvantaged students in schools and at tertiary level, some gaps remained in terms of Wi-Fi accessibility and the cost of same posing a barrier.
- Evidence suggests school closures will have had the most impact on those already disadvantaged both academically and socially. It is important to enhance support e.g. literacy and numeracy to minimise the achievement gap.
- Consider broadening access to evidenced based programmes such as “The Incredible Years” and the “FRIENDS for Life’ programme school-based positive mental health programmes.