



Trinity College Dublin

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education
(National Access Plan) 2022-2026.

Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin

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Executive Summary

Trinity welcomes the opportunity to present a submission to inform the development of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (National Access Plan) 2022-2026. Trinity's submission is informed by a variety of voices including representatives from Trinity staff and students, and second-level teachers (Trinity Access partner schools). This executive summary presents Trinity's key recommendations, which are as follows:

Target groups to be specified in the National Access Plan 2022-26

- In addition to general efforts to support the most impoverished and marginalised communities in accessing and participating in Higher Education, certain groups would benefit from special attention, including the Traveller community, the Roma community, Asylum Seekers and migrants, ex-offenders, care-leavers, lone-parents, and students who have experienced homelessness.
- The definition of Mature Student should be revisited.

Development of pre-entry and post-entry activities

- Address course-specific requirements in languages and mathematics that are significant barriers to accessing STEM programmes in HE.
- Provision of well-resourced pre-entry supports for adult learners from lower socio-economic groups that are research-informed, grounded in best practice and implemented in association with State agencies, schools, community groups and further and higher education institutions.



- Review of grant system to ensure prospective students have sufficient funding to access, participate and experience full breadth of student experience.
- Provide all students with access to the hardware, software, and internet connectivity required to effectively participate in their programme of study.
- Provide greater opportunities and supports for students with disabilities to participate in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, international exchange programmes, and work placement/internships.

Better utilisation of current funding programmes to further the objectives of the National Access Plan

- Greater flexibility in the SUSI grant and other funding mechanisms is required to ensure that students who experience challenges during the student lifecycle do not lose out on funding due to having to repeat a year of study.

Mainstreaming within HEIs

- Greater collaboration across and within Schools/departments and disciplines to co-develop pre- and post-entry supports for students.
- Embed principles of accessibility in the curriculum and in all teaching and assessment activities and learning environments where feasible.
- Provide professional development to all HEI staff on the inclusive curriculum and principles and practices relating to accessibility.

A whole-of-education approach to widening participation

- Provision of additional funding, supports and resources targeted at students at critical junctures.



- Reform the Leaving Certificate examination so that it is more equitable and reflects the diversity of the student population.
- Develop a single repository of data nationally that captures robust, comprehensive and up-to-date data on student progression and retention at all levels of the educational system to inform policy-making.

Developing pathways between FET and Higher Education

- Rationalise entry requirements and routes to higher education from FET colleges to support progression to all undergraduate programmes.
- Develop FET-Higher Education partnerships to develop defined pathways from FET to higher education.

Harnessing of social inclusion initiatives outside of higher education to support equity of access objectives

- Development of community partnerships with higher education institutions to support access and progression to higher education.



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Trinity Submission for the National Access Plan 2022-2026

Introduction

Trinity strives to create a culture of diversity and inclusion among its staff and student body. The strategic importance of equality, diversity and inclusion is apparent across the whole of the university, is an integral part of its college structures, its models of teaching and learning, the student clubs and societies, student services and its research and development. Since 1993, Trinity has set clear targets relating to entrants from widening participation groups, moving from an initial target of seven percent of non-traditional students comprising, mature students, students who are socio-economically disadvantaged, and students with a disability, to 10%, 22%, and which now currently stands at 25% (Trinity Strategic Plan, 2020-2025).

Trinity welcomes the opportunity to shape the development of the National Access Plan 2022-2026, and has sought the views of undergraduate students, Trinity staff, Trinity Access partners, supporters and second-level teachers, to inform the Trinity submission.

Context

Trinity Disability Service

The Disability Service (DS) in Trinity addresses the needs of students with disabilities through the provision of advice, support, and academic accommodations in



partnership with service users and academic departments/schools and service areas.

The DS has two principal functions:

- To provide supports and services to the Trinity community with disabilities (students, staff, and indirectly, visitors), and to recommend policy and procedural changes as required.
- To ensure Trinity is compliant with the Disability Act 2005 and other relevant legislation and codes of practice.

Since its inception in June 2000, the DS has undergone enormous growth and development. Students registered with the service have increased from 64 in 2000-01 to 1,888 in 2020-21. During this time a comprehensive range of student supports have been developed to enable students with disabilities to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes across each of the university's faculties.

[Trinity Access](#)

Trinity Access has worked in partnership with schools, educators, communities and businesses to reduce education inequality since 1993. It strives to ensure that the campus community attracts and supports a diverse student cohort through a continuum of supports. Expansive outreach forms the basis of Trinity Access's engagement work. Trinity Access's alternative entry routes, the post-entry programme including social, personal and academic supports, as well as structured career development and progression programmes, scaffold the student life cycle. Longitudinal research and evaluation is a fundamental corner stone of the work of Trinity Access, which is student-centred, evidence-based and innovative. Trinity Access established the first outreach initiative with primary schools, played a key role



in the centralisation and expansion of the HEAR scheme, and the Trinity Access Foundation Programme has been expanded internationally. Its work continues to generate nationwide college-going cultures through the proliferation of the Trinity Access 21 project and the College Awareness Week campaign. Trinity Access has responded proactively during the pandemic through the roll out of Tech2Students.

Trinity Response to the Consultation Questions

What should our overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022-2026?

Trinity promotes the following vision for equity of access to higher education:

1. To ensure that the student population entering, participating in, and completing further and higher education reflects the diversity of the population of Ireland.
2. To develop a model of education that is accessible and inclusive at all stages of the student lifecycle underpinned by teaching and learning excellence grounded in the principles of accessibility.
3. To adopt an education sector wide commitment to accessibility and address challenges and barriers that students from under-represented groups may face in accessing Higher Education, progressing, and achieving success on their programmes of study.
4. To develop partnerships with the education partners, across government departments, non-government organisations (NGOs) and community



organisations to advance equity of access to Higher Education and progression to further study and employment.

5. Policy, guidelines and practice on widening access to education and employment to be underpinned by robust, accurate and up-to-date data, and to be informed by research.

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)?

Access without support is not opportunity. It is recommended that target groups should be expanded to include students and groups who are at most risk of not progressing, as well as groups that are under-represented at the point of entry.

1. *Integrated Approach:* Students live, work and study in communities and their aspirations for further and higher education are influenced by and shaped in their homes, schools and communities. The next National Access Plan would benefit from advocating for an integrated approach which brings together related government departments and agencies, community organisations and NGOs, with the common aim of addressing growing poverty levels in Irish communities, supporting the integration of marginalised communities, and supporting educational reform, which promote more equitable outcomes. Timely and targeted supports relating to health, education, welfare and housing will facilitate students in fulfilling their educational potential, and of overcoming the challenges and barriers that structural inequalities present.



- 2. Targeted Approach:* a targeted approach should be considered to support the most impoverished and marginalised communities in Ireland, such as, Irish Travellers, Roma, asylum seekers and migrants, ex-offenders, students in care and care-leavers, lone parents (including teenage parents), students who have experienced homelessness, early school leavers and students who identify as LGBTQ+. In addition, students outside of the formal school system such as in Youthreach Centres should also be targeted.

Students returning from prolonged periods of hospitalization/rehabilitation/off books or medical repeat would benefit from specialist support. These may include students with mental health difficulties, students with autism, and students who are Deaf (sign language users) and deaf (who are hard of hearing but who have English as their first language and may lipread and/or use hearing aids). While more needs to be done to assist students who have a physical or sensory disability in accessing Higher Education, more also needs to be done to support students with autism and students with mental health difficulties to progress and complete their higher education journey and successfully transition to employment. Students in these cohorts are 25% more likely to repeat a year or not progress and drop out.

- 3.* The increasing number of progression routes from FET into university is welcomed. However, the system is complex for students to navigate. The next NAP should inform the expansion of clear pathways from school, to FET to HE, leading to the development of clearly articulated and simplified progression routes, with an increased availability of places.



4. The target towards increasing mature student entrants is welcomed, however, the primary challenge with the term *mature student* is the reliance on a simple age-related definition. This definition masks the complex and intersectional identities of individual mature students who have varied work, life and educational experiences. Another challenge with the definition mature student is that it considers mature students to be ‘first-time entrants’. There is a growing trend (for reasons, including Springboard, part-time provision, advanced entry routes, NFQ level 6 FET routes) of students (mature or otherwise) having completed an NFQ level 6 or 7 major award and progressing to full-time NFQ level 8 study. The current requirement for mature students to be ‘first-time entrants’ excludes many mature students from being recognised as such and may result in a fees liability which is a significant barrier for some.
5. The next NAP should set targets for adult learners, of all ages and stages of life, focusing resources on those with intersecting disadvantages. A focus on joined-up-thinking between government departments will mitigate against conflicting goals and aspirations, for example, the raising of mature participation targets on one-hand while reducing student funding (BETA/OPFP/ student grants) on the other, inevitably hampered progress on targets for the last NAP. Importantly, any student progressing to a full-time degree should be eligible for free fees.
6. Finally, a plan that continues to encourage and monitor the diversity of post-graduate students would be welcomed. This can be achieved through funding postgraduate scholarships and grants for those from under-represented groups. The plan may support universities in engaging collaboratively to share, exchange and generate knowledge and practice, and inform the development



of robust recruitment strategies, transitions programmes and supports, for students who intersect between categories, for example socio-economic disadvantage and disability.

How can pre-entry and post-entry activities be developed?

Subject Barriers:

Course specific requirements in languages and mathematics present challenges to the target groups and the barriers relating to the requirements need to be addressed as they present challenges to progression among target groups. More pre-entry resources and supports are required to target these areas. A joined-up approach between HEIs, offering complementary programmes to the same schools would help in reducing the current duplication of effort, and expand the variety of supports available. A blended online/in-person format would also facilitate engagement from more rural DEIS schools and communities.

Community Partnerships:

The model for pre-entry relies heavily on partnerships with primary and secondary schools. To engage a greater number of students across the target groups, these partnerships could be extended to include community groups, e.g., after school initiatives such as Citywise Education and An Cósán, and to Youthreach Centres.

Teacher Engagement:

School partnerships often focus on recruiting students for pre-entry activities. It is critical for outreach to be targeted at teachers also. By adopting a train-the-trainer model, activities can be codified and schools supported to deliver them locally for



entire cohorts of students rather than a select few. Teachers should also be supported in transforming teaching and learning through the adoption of innovative pedagogies based on the principles of UDL. The Trinity Access 21 project and National College Awareness Week are two examples of successful initiatives incorporating this model of engagement.

Pre-entry for adults:

NAP target group members, particularly Socio-Economically Disadvantaged (SED) adults, have low educational attainment. To realise change, pre-entry activities for adult learners from lower socio-economic groups should be intensive, well-resourced, grounded in best practice and delivered in conjunction with relevant (State) agencies and community groups (Prison Service/Traveller groups/lone parent's groups etc.). Pre-entry activities for adults should be seen as akin to, and as important as, pre-entry work with primary and secondary schools in breaking the cycle of educational disadvantage in our society, and this needs to be recognised in funding models.

Increased cost of Living:

Of critical importance to post-entry supports is increased grant funding for students, including support with accommodation and travel. In recent years the increase in accommodation costs has proved prohibitive for many students with more and more opting to remain locally rather than travel to attend a more desirable course elsewhere. The current grant level should be reassessed based on the reality of renting in Ireland (in particular in the cities) and the cost of living.



Devices for students:

The pandemic has highlighted the increasing digital divide. It is critical that all students have a suitable device to support engagement with their studies. The current HEA loan scheme must continue to be funded year on year. The tech2students programme is an example of a successful initiative that has reduced the cost of providing these devices at scale.

Key Stages:

The National Access Plan should focus more specifically on key stages and transitions of the student journey, particularly for students with recognised difficulties in these areas e.g. neurodiverse students. Secondary school teachers, SEN teachers and guidance counsellors could play a greater role in supporting the transition of students with disabilities to Higher Education to ensure that no student is left behind. A continuum of support is required to support students in making transitions from school to FET/HE. Post-entry, more can be done to develop peer-to-peer mentoring among students with disabilities. Peer-to-peer support and community advocacy (volunteer mentorship) works well for students. Former student/alumni activities/initiatives could be useful also in supporting students.

Alongside student advocacy and mentorship, students with disabilities should be provided with opportunities to participate in the full range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, international exchange programmes, and internships/placements to enhance their personal, educational, and career development. Such opportunities will provide students to develop the skills necessary to transition to further study and employment beyond graduation.



The European Commission country Report for Ireland 2019 revealed that Ireland has one of the lowest employment rates for people with disabilities in the EU (European Union) (26.2 % compared to 48.1 % in the EU in 2017). Ireland also has one of the highest gaps between people with and without disabilities (45.1 percentage points) in employment. With significant investment by the Irish Government in making access to third level a realistic option with approximately eight-percent of students in third-level having a disability, progression to employment is critical to ensuring this access does not stop here.

The low rate of employment and progression of students with disabilities into employment post-graduation is of concern. ‘Disability and health reasons’ were highlighted by approximately 13% of graduates who were engaged in ‘other’ activities (and not in employment) in the nine months following graduation (HEA, Graduate Outcomes Survey 2018). Apart from restricting their participation in society it also ties people with disabilities into state-dependent low-income situations. Therefore, it is not surprising that Ireland’s poverty figures reveal that people who are ill or have a disability are part of a group at substantial risk of poverty.

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

Funding for Students:

Funding remains one of the most significant barriers to creating more equitable educational outcomes. Funding and supports need to be available throughout the student lifecycle, especially at transition points such as to further and higher



education. This includes sufficient funding to cover the costs of books, field trips, accommodation costs, placements, travel costs, and to support students with caring responsibilities.

Greater flexibility is needed in the SUSI grant for students repeating a year of their course due to medical and disability grounds. Students should not be penalised for taking a year out of their studies due to a health or a disability issue.

Funding Structures:

Universities too are facing a funding crisis, highlighted in the Cassells Report, 2016. The cost of delivering a world-class university education needs to be carefully considered and the costs should not be transferred to students of families who are from low socio-economic backgrounds. The funding structures for access offices should also be carefully considered. Funding for access offices is awarded based mainly on the number of 'access' students, which can vary from year to year. There is a need for a minimum baseline funding model that reflects the fixed costs of 'access' and additional funding based on numbers over and above this baseline would help further develop these structures.

How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded within HEIs?

Collaboration with Schools/Departments:

HEIs can engage at the Department/School level to co-develop pre- and post-entry supports for students. The Pathways to Law programme is an example of the successful implementation of this approach. As a result of this engagement, the Trinity School of Law has increased its HEAR quota above the institutional average



and has taken on joint responsibility for fundraising and delivery for pre- and post-entry activities. Support and professional development to support Schools/departments with embedding inclusive practices into all aspects of the curriculum and in teaching and assessment activities should be provided.

Funding Models:

The HEA should work with research funding bodies to make pre-entry engagement with access programmes an important element of funding applications from third-level researchers.

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

Accessible and Inclusive Education System:

Develop a model of education that is accessible and inclusive for all, one which has a model of supports that are timely, targeted, student/family centred, and that lead to student success.

Leaving Certificate Reform:

The calculated grades process adopted due to COVID-19 restrictions has resulted in a significant increase in the number of HEAR students offered a university place in 2020. This has highlighted the enormous impact that Leaving Certificate reform can have. The Leaving Certificate would benefit from a more holistic and inclusive model of assessment that embraces diversity and focuses on student success.

Data driven decision-making:



Collaboration across primary, secondary, FET and Higher Education to capture robust data and research on student progression, retention, and student success to facilitate evidence-based decision making on policy and best practice.

Career Pathways:

Greater representation of target groups in professions such as teaching is required, and this can be developed through the creation of pathway programmes to teacher education programmes and the provision of scholarships for students to pursue postgraduate study.

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

Rationalisation of Entry Routes:

Current entry routes across the sector are complex. Coherency of sector entry requirements for FET to HE applicants will address the plethora of module combinations for progression to HE.

Develop FET-HE Partnerships:

The development of FET-HE Partnerships is essential in advancing the FET-HE agenda. The NAP should support the development of a national partnership scheme between FET and HE similar to the HEAR and DARE schemes, where FET students have pre- and post-entry supports, and where there are defined pathways from further education to higher education programmes.



Staff engagement:

There is a need to develop greater awareness amongst Higher Education staff on the pathways that exist between FET and HE. More needs to be done to identify the pathways, and to expand and promote them.

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

Seminars and Training:

Virtual seminars should be delivered for staff working in health, education, housing, welfare, and justice to establish ways in which policies, practices, and procedures can better support the advancement of all students through the education system (courses/ careers). More needs to be done to increase public awareness through the use of media on the benefits of accessing a third-level education and to demystify course curriculums.

School Based Access Programmes:

The Trinity Access 21 project is an extensive outreach programme for students in its post-primary linked schools. This project is highly successful, though it is limited to 20 linked schools in Dublin and would benefit from expansion nationally.

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



Covid-19 presented many challenges to an inclusive higher education system, including:

Financial: students lost employment which is vital for them to pay accommodation, travel, and childcare. Although some were able to access the PUP payment, others who had intended to secure part time jobs to fund their studies were unable to do so.

Caring Responsibilities: Caring responsibilities, lack of childcare and having to home-school children also had an impact on students' ability to focus on their studies and keep up with the workload. Many students also lacked family support and access to wider support networks.

Isolation: With the move off campus, many students mentioned feeling isolated and alone, and struggling to make friends or have the 'real college experience'. Lots of students highlighted that Covid-19 has had a negative impact on their mental health. Many students felt like their motivation and studying was negatively affected and that they missed out on peer support and the consolidation of learning, as well as the informal learning through interactions on campus.

Accessibility: The remote world has improved accessibility for students with disabilities by challenging HEI's to deliver teaching, learning and other activities in alternative formats. This has been positive overall, however, further work is needed on inclusion and accessibility. There has been a loss of informal social interaction, which has severely impacted on the traditional student experience. In this environment, students who face additional challenges - such as a disability - have little to no opportunity to be or to feel included. At times, providing students with the opportunity to realise and express their isolation has been beneficial. More needs



to be done to continue to do this and to plan for re-orientation and continued supports for on campus attendance.

There is a 'digital divide' among students who have unequal access to technology (including WIFI and space and time to study productively) and the financial means to access books where these are not available / accessible in the library.

To address these issues, it is important that the digital divide is addressed. While students received laptops this year, they were faced with other issues such as Wi-Fi connectivity, hardware, software, and access to quiet and safe study spaces. There should not be a cap on the number of counselling or mental health support sessions that students can avail of each year. More face-to-face interactions, regular check-ins from staff and a mentoring/ buddy system throughout their time in the university would benefit students.

Students have cited the need for revision courses to allow them to catch-up on any learning loss due to the implications of Covid-19. As the world opens again, Access students need to be prioritised in terms of gaining placements, funded internships and employment.

Additional Areas of Consideration

In relation to the Disability processes and activities you are responsible for - what can we further address or improve upon to enable students with disabilities to participate and engage in college?

While access and pre-entry has been a focus of the National Access Plan, a further focus on stages of the student journey such as transition and retention are required



with a particular focus on groups that have been identified to have lower retention and completion rates such as neurodiverse students.

Students with disabilities would benefit from greater access to professional placement, internships, Erasmus/International Study Abroad, and workplace preparation and greater supports are needed to support students in accessing and participating in these opportunities.

Any other ideas for inclusion in the Trinity submission to the next Access Plan 2022-2026

- Future HEA reports on progression, retention and completion should include Access student cohort groups. These groups have been included in Access Plans for many years but are never identified in studies and reports on progression, retention, and completion. This is a missed opportunity for the HEA sector to monitor progress, identify deficiencies and plan for more targeted approaches.
- According to [AHEAD \(Association for Higher Education and Disability\) research](#), 'there has been a steady increase in the rate of students with disabilities represented at undergraduate level, however, there has been a persistently low representation at a postgraduate level. The 2018/19 data shows that the number of undergraduate students with disabilities registered with disability support/access services across the responding institutions was 14,490 representing 7.1% of the student population at undergraduate level. The number of postgraduate students with disabilities registered was 1,206 representing 2.4% of the total postgraduate student population, down 2%



from 1,233 (2.8%) in 2017/18. In 2018/19, postgraduate level continued to have a significantly lower participation rate of students with disabilities than at undergraduate level across the responding institutions as in previous years of this survey (AHEAD 2019, 2018; 2017; 2016; 2015; 2013; 2012; 2011).’ In Trinity, in 2019/20, students with disabilities made up 12% of the undergraduate population and just 3% of the postgraduate population. More can be done to highlight the supports that are available to postgraduate students. There is also a lack of insight into the barriers that may exist for students with disabilities progressing to postgraduate level, including the application and admissions process, funding availability and the specific supports that are needed by postgraduate students and how best to provide these supports. Any assistance the HEA can provide on addressing these issues is welcome.

Conclusion

Over the past two to three decades, the Access agenda has been a strong priority in Trinity. There are now more students coming to Trinity through Access routes than ever before. Over time, while new entrants have become graduates, Access policies, practices and supports have developed and improved. So too, has the collective knowledge and insight into Access issues. There is now a strong evidence-base from which to strive to create a greater culture of diversity and inclusion among Higher Education staff and the student body. The strategic importance of equality, diversity and inclusion is apparent across the whole of the university and is an integral part of



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its structures, its models of teaching and learning, the student clubs and societies, student services and its research and development.

The collective evidence-base on Access in Trinity is highlighted in the depth and breadth of areas highlighted in this submission. The common themes that have emerged relate to the need for more targeted initiatives in areas such as funding structures, transition planning into, through and from HE to employment; and the development of partnerships with students, and between community organisations, FET, and HEA 'whole-of-education' approach to access and inclusion must mean that funding and support structures are focused on where they are needed most. This means not only increasing admissions but also supporting student success in the form of progression, completion and the transition to further study and employment. These common themes relate to a deeper understanding of the diverse range of students who wish to access Trinity and the different barriers and challenges that individuals and groups face in doing so.