

Mid-term Progress Review of the National Access Plan (2022-2028)

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Riailas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



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

HEA

An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas
The Higher Education Authority



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Foreword

James Lawless TD

Minister for Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science

Supporting inclusion and diversity in the higher education system is an established policy priority of the Government and the Department. This is reflected in the expansive focus of the current National Access Plan beyond the point of entry to higher education to the participation and student success of disadvantaged cohorts.

This is an ambitious Plan, and an essential part of the review process is reflecting on the challenges impacting on the Plan's implementation and identify appropriate measures to address and overcome these. However, it is equally important in the context of such an ambitious Plan that we also celebrate the significant progress to date and consider how further progress can be built on these achievements.

Since the publication of the National Access Plan, there has been enhanced investment in targeted supports for the most disadvantaged students. The Student Grant Scheme has been significantly expanded, and the Part-time Fee Scheme introduced in 2024 is facilitating greater flexibility in provision and in student supports for the most disadvantaged learners. There have also been successive increases in the Student Assistance Fund to support students when they need it most.

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) has continued to be an important driver of progress in the implementation of the National Access Plan. Building on established evidence of their considerable impact in progressing the ambitions in the National Access Plan, sustainable funding was confirmed for PATH 1 and PATH 3 in 2025. This significant milestone will enable HEIs to adopt longer-term strategic approaches to supporting the access, participation and student success of the most disadvantaged cohorts in our communities.

The positive increases in the proportion of new entrants with disabilities is welcome, with the target of 16% over the lifetime of the NAP met at mid-term stage. The ambition within this Plan ‘for inclusive universally designed higher education environments’ recognises the challenges in responding to this welcome increase in diversity, and almost €6m has been invested by Government in supporting Universal Design implementation in the higher education system under PATH 4 Phase 1 since 2022.

Students with intellectual disabilities are a priority group for the first time in this National Access Plan, and 193 students with intellectual disabilities are enrolled on programmes across 11 of our higher education institutions. This is a significant development under the National Access Plan.

Participation rates for some priority groups, however, remain too low, including mature new entrants from disadvantaged areas and while consistent in growth, the rate in Traveller new entrants is not as high as expected at this midway stage. While achieving the respective targets will be challenging in the context of a full employment economy and ongoing cost of living challenges, this Review reaffirms Government’s commitments to the ambitions in the Plan, and to supporting further concentrated efforts in the second phase of NAP implementation.

I wish to thank Professor Stella Jones-Devitt and Dr Antony Alexiev of Applied Inspiration Ltd for undertaking this independent review, and Sinéad Lynch and Seán McDermott, the student advisors who led the student consultations and greatly enriched this review. I also extend my thanks to HEA who commissioned and supported the review process and to all the stakeholders who so generously contributed their expertise and insights. This Review demonstrates the considerable progress made to date and working together in partnership, I am committed to continuing the work towards achieving a higher education system that is diverse, inclusive and responsive to the needs of students and our wider communities.



Preface

Dr Alan Wall

Chief Executive, Higher Education Authority

Since its establishment in 1971, the HEA has supported the attainment of equality of opportunity in higher education. The central role of the HEA in promoting equity of access, participation and student success in higher education was further enshrined in the reform of the HEA's founding legislation shortly following the publication of this National Access Plan (NAP) in 2022.

This fourth national access plan emerged in the wake of a period of unprecedented global disruption. In reflecting on progress against its goals, it is important to consider the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the heightened cost-of-living challenges that have succeeded it.

The higher education system has shown remarkable resilience, and the student population has continued to grow and to diversify. In 2024/25, there were 48,845 full-time new entrants to higher education compared to 41,580 full-time new entrants in 2019/20, and as this Mid-term Progress Review identifies, there have been increases in the diversity of the higher education student population in this period.

While progress against some of the national targets has been slower than anticipated, the Review highlights the considerable achievements of our higher education institutions in developing flexible, innovative and responsive measures to support disadvantaged students. These evidence-informed targeted interventions are being supported through increased investment at national level, including the expanded Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH), and will drive further progress toward the NAP's ambitions in the second phase of its implementation.

The NAP recognises Universal Design as the foundation of our response to increasing diversity in the higher education system, and the Review identifies the significant progress that has been made by HEIs in building capacity and in progressing toward whole-of-institution approaches to Universal Design implementation with the support of PATH 4. The sustained commitment and leadership of HEIs that has driven progress to date will be essential to delivering the integrated and cohesive implementation of Universal Design across the system.

A key achievement under the evidence-driven goal in the NAP is the completion of the second Access Data Plan in 2025. It provides a roadmap to enhance the quality and breadth of data on equity of access and participation, and the ongoing implementation of its recommendations is supporting a more robust evidence base to inform future policy objectives.

I am grateful to the staff and students of our higher education institutions, and wider stakeholders and partners who lent their expertise and experience to this Review. Thank you to Professor Stella Jones-Devitt and Dr Antony Alexiev of Applied Inspiration Ltd, who led this independent Review with the support of student advisors, Sinéad Lynch and Seán MacDermott.

The achievements to date are underpinned by the embedded culture of collaboration across the higher education system, and the partnerships that have been forged and strengthened with community and regional stakeholders. This student-centred collaboration will be key to guiding the implementation of the recommendations within this report and to realising the ambitious goals within the National Access Plan to 2028.

List of Acronyms

AMLÉ	Aontas na Mac Léinn	NAP	National Access Plan
CAO	Central Applications Office	NAP SG	National Access Plan Steering Group
CSO	Central Statistics Office	NCSE	National Council for Special Education
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education	NDPAC	National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee
DCDE	Department of Children, Equality and Disability	NStEP	National Student Engagement Programme
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools	NTF	National Training Fund
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	NTO	National Tertiary Office
DIS	Deprivation Index Scores	NTRIS II	National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024–2028
DEY	Department of Education and Youth	PATH	Programme for Access to Higher Education
DRCDG	Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht	QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
EAS	Equal Access Survey	RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
ESF	European Social Fund	SAF	Student Assistance Fund
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute	SED	Socioeconomically disadvantaged students
FE/FET	Further Education/Further Education and Training	SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
FSD	Fund for Students with Disabilities	SRS	Student Record System
GenAI	Generative Artificial Intelligence	SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
HCI	Human Capital Initiative	ToC	Theory of Change
HEA	Higher Education Authority	TRES	Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030
HEI	Higher Education Institution	TUA	Technological Universities Association
ITE	Initial Teacher Education	UD	Universal Design
IUA	Irish Universities Association	UDL	Universal Design for Learning
KPI	Key Performance Indicator		

Note on the use of language

In this publication, the terms 'students with disabilities' and 'disabled students' are used interchangeably. It is recognised that different terminology is prevalent and culturally dominant in different regions and spaces, and we respect the right of individuals and communities to self-determine.

We recognise that the term 'disabled people' is recognised by many within the disability rights movement in Ireland to align with the social and human rights model of disability, as it is considered to imply that people with an impairment are disabled primarily by barriers in the environment and society as opposed to their conditions. This is known as 'identity first' language.

However, we also recognise that others prefer the term 'persons with disabilities' to indicate that they are first and foremost human beings and are therefore entitled to enjoy human rights. This 'person first' terminology also reflects the language used in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

We are committed to reviewing our approach to language when developing the next National Access Plan, and consulting with disabled persons organisations around the issue. On this occasion, where initial targets referenced in the National Access Plan utilise person first language, person first language is retained for clarity and consistency. Elsewhere, the interchanging language used in this publication is intended to be inclusive and respectful of all.

Note on departmental and stakeholder organisation title changes

Since the publication of the National Access Plan in 2022, the titles of certain government departments have changed. These departments include the Department of Education and Youth (DEY), the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) and the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (DRCDG).

Separately, the Union of Students of Ireland (USI) and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) are now called Aontas na Mac Léinn (AMLÉ) and the Technological Universities Association (TUA) respectively.

This report uses the most up to date titles.

Section 1: Background and Context

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1.1 National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education, 2022–2028

The Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022–2028 (NAP) was published in August 2022. The fourth National Access Plan succeeds the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019 and the Progress Review of 2018, which extended the objectives of the third Plan to 2021.

The NAP builds on the vision of previous plans and ambitions for a more inclusive and diverse student population in higher education. Its ambition extends beyond the point of entry to a greater focus on participation, student success and outcomes, *independent of socioeconomic status, geography, or personal circumstances*.

The NAP was developed following widespread consultation with stakeholders within the education system, across Government, in social inclusion and community organisations, and people with direct personal experience of marginalisation. The student is at the core of every aspect of the NAP with each action directed at delivering positive and inclusive outcomes for priority group students at every stage of their higher education journey.

The two overarching ambitions of the NAP are:

- that the higher education student body, 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 student success and outcomes, equity and diversity.

The NAP identifies three main priority groups: socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED) students, students with disabilities including intellectual disabilities, and Irish Traveller and Roma students. The NAP also acknowledges that within the socioeconomically disadvantaged cohort there are a number of different life situations that can lead to disadvantage. These include lone or teen parents, carers, those with experience of the care system, experience of homelessness, experience of the criminal justice system, survivors of domestic violence, migrants or refugees or ethnic minorities.

The NAP sets four targets and identifies nine KPIs to monitor participation by priority groups over its lifetime. It includes a commitment to review progress in its implementation in 2025, and this report presents an independent assessment of that progress with a view to informing priorities for the second phase of NAP implementation to 2028.

1.2 The Post-Covid Higher Education Environment

As the National Access Plan acknowledges, the Covid-19 pandemic transformed Ireland's higher education landscape and the disruption caused by the pandemic is likely to continue to have an impact on equity of access, participation and success over the lifetime of this strategy. Research on the impact of Covid-19 highlighted that disadvantaged students were disproportionately negatively affected by the disruption than other cohorts of the population. Negative impacts included social isolation, reduced learner engagement, heightened mental health challenges and barriers to progression and online remote learning¹. The rapid shift to emergency remote learning also placed a significant strain on HEIs and their Access Offices.

Recently published research from the ESRI based on Growing up in Ireland data highlights the longer-term impact of school absence on participation in higher education. The report indicates that longer school absences at age 13 are significantly related to lower chances of progressing to higher education and achieving a degree by age 25. There has been a considerable increase in the number of school days missed since the Covid-19 pandemic and the findings of the research demonstrate that disadvantaged groups are more likely to be absent².

The years following the Covid-19 pandemic have been marked by rising inflation and cost-of-living challenges. Across the higher education system, the number of students seeking financial support and experiencing student accommodation challenges are rising. HEIs have reported increasing numbers of students engaging in full-time employment while undertaking their studies and commuting long distances, which is negatively impacting attendance rates, engagement with learning and the wider higher education experience, and progression rates.

The marked decline in non-progression rates in the 2019/20 year that coincided with the pandemic was followed by sharp increases in 2020/21 and 2021/22, with non-progression rates consistently higher for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While the non-progression rate in 2022/23 represents an improvement on the previous two years, it remains the case that non-progression rates are higher for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. The overall non-progression rate was 13% in 2022/23, and 18% for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas.

In response to the challenging environment, there has been increased investment in core funding for higher education, and in direct financial supports for students. In addition, HEIs have undertaken significant efforts to embed the flexible modes of study adopted during the pandemic and to mainstream the associated pedagogical innovations to enhance the learning experience. HEIs are responding to the high volume of commuter students by timetabling on-site provision in blocks where practicable and supporting access to on-campus facilities in the early morning. HEIs have also invested in building institutional data capacity to better capture the lifecycle of learning and to identify students who may be at risk of non-progression and put in place the necessary targeted interventions.

1 Skledar Matijević, A. (2022). 'Planned online learning vs. Emergency remote teaching implemented during Covid-19 in higher education: lessons learned', NESET Ad hoc report no. 3/2022.

2 Smyth, E., Moya, A., and Darmody, M. (2026). The long-term outcomes of school absence. ESRI Research Series 220.

HEIs and students are also grappling with the opportunities and challenges presented by the rapid rise in the availability of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools. While there is awareness of the potential of GenAI to enhance student learning, there are ongoing concerns in relation to equity of access, bias, inaccuracy, intellectual property, and environmental impact. In December 2025, the HEA published a national Policy Framework focusing on GenAI in teaching and learning. The Framework sets out 5 principles to provide an ethical and pedagogical foundation for how HEIs approach GenAI. Principle 2 is focused on Equity and Inclusion and emphasises the imperative that GenAI adoption does not become another mechanism through which existing inequalities are reproduced or amplified. Equity of access to AI-enabled education is underlined, recognising that equity 'extends beyond access to encompass how GenAI systems are trained, how they perform across languages and cultures, and whether their use in assessment privileges certain styles of expression or modes of engagement'.³ The HEA has also established a dedicated [AI Resource Portal](#), providing centralised access to guidelines and open educational resources for teaching and learning in GenAI-mediated contexts.

In addition, significant policy, governance, and operational developments since 2022 have changed further the context of the current National Access Plan (2022–2028):

- The HEA Act, 2022 launched a co-regulation model of higher education that increased the accountability of HEIs to the HEA and emphasised the promotion of student engagement, success, and voice.
- Access and Participation is one of the four pillars of the [System Performance Framework \(2023-2028\)](#), a key accountability mechanism in higher education.
- HEIs are required to reflect national access plans in institutional strategies and to report annually to the HEA on institutional progress with implementation of the NAP, providing visibility of the diverse range of initiatives being undertaken by HEIs to support priority group students.
- The [National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024-28 \(NTRIS II\)](#) was published in 2024 and was accompanied by the 2024–30 [Traveller and Roma Education Strategy \(TRES\)](#)⁴, setting out the Government's approach to Traveller and Roma education across the education system. The cross-departmental approach to these strategies is consistent with the emphasis in the NAP on the whole-of-government and coordinated approaches necessary to drive enhancements in the educational experience and outcomes for Traveller and Roma learners.
- The [National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030](#) was launched in September 2025 and adopts a whole-of-government approach to advancing the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Strategy has five interconnected pillars: Inclusive Learning and Education; Employment; Independent Living and Active Participation in Society; Wellbeing and Health; Transport and Mobility. Within Pillar 1, there is enhanced focus on supporting transitions and inclusion, which aligns with and complements the disability-focused actions in the NAP.

3 HEA (2025). [Generative AI in Higher Education Teaching & Learning Policy Framework](#). Page 10.

4 Developed by the Department of Education and Youth (DEY) in collaboration with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE), and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS).

1.3 Implementation Structures

Overall responsibility for delivery of the National Access Plan resides with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). Following the launch of the NAP in 2022, DFHERIS set up and chairs the NAP Steering Group, the purpose of which is to oversee NAP implementation. In the context of the current NAP, this includes:

- Monitoring progress with the 2022–2028 NAP.
- Advising on challenges and opportunities during implementation.
- Coordinating activities under the Plan.
- Supporting development of targeted initiatives and actions.
- Participating in sub-groups for specific initiatives.
- Assisting with the planning of the annual National Access Forum for reporting on progress under the NAP.

1.4 Terms of Reference for this Mid-term Progress Review

The Terms of Reference were agreed by the NAP Steering Group in advance of the Mid-term Progress Review and specify that the Review should:

- a. Review and evaluate the extent of progress against the actions underpinning each NAP objective; assess the ongoing relevance of these actions; identify where refinements/developments are needed and where actions are not progressing, identify appropriate remedial actions.
- b. Review progress in respect of the four national targets and nine KPIs outlined in the NAP, having regard to the findings and recommendations of the [second Access Data Plan \(2025\)](#), and assess whether refinements to the existing targets and/or additional targets and KPIs are required.
- c. Provide a clear set of evidence-based recommendations in relation to priority actions, targets, and KPIs for the second phase of NAP implementation with the parties responsible for leading implementation of each recommendation clearly identified.

Section 2: Report Structure and Methodology

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2.1 Report Structure

Section 1: Context for the Mid-term Progress Review

Section 2: Methodology summary

Section 3: Evidence of progress towards NAP objectives and actions

Section 4: Progress towards NAP KPIs and targets

Section 5: Conclusions and priority recommendations for the remainder of the NAP

Section 6: Implementation Plan arising from the recommendations

2.2 Methodology

The Review used a mix of theory-based and participatory approaches, including:

1. A **Theory-of-Change (ToC)** for the Review that maps the planned activities for evaluating progress with the NAP's goals, KPIs, and targets.
2. **Stakeholder Consultations:** Evidence collection through focus groups with students and staff, as detailed in 3. below, alongside facilitated discussion at the National Access Forum in 2025. Evidence gathering was stimulated by early analysis of progress review documentation submitted annually to the HEA by HEIs, alongside accessing materials from relevant agencies and departments responsible for NAP KPIs. Student consultations were led by two trained Student Advisers, recruited from NAP priority groups.
3. **Focus Groups:**
 - a. **Round 1 (July–Oct 2025):** 16 staff groups (115 participants from 17 HEIs) and 5 student groups (20 participants from NAP priority groups, Student Union, Access Forum, etc.).
 - b. **Round 2 (Oct 2025):** 3 staff groups (43 participants from 13 HEIs) and 2 student groups (10 participants).
 - c. Student participation in the Mid-term Progress Review consultations was sought through a) direct targeting – via posters and snowballing communications for participation in the focus groups, and via a specially designed Padlet⁵, for anonymous participation; and b) indirect targeting for participation in the focus groups through emails to HEIs, Access Offices, Student Unions, and representative organisations, asking them to cascade to students from the priority groups.

⁵ Padlet is an online platform where users can create digital bulletin boards to collaborate and share content.

4. **Documentary Analysis:** Review of NAP-related documents, performance reports, and case studies.
5. **Data Analysis:** Quantitative analysis of available data on progress against NAP KPIs and targets.
6. **Synthesis:** Integration of all found evidence to evaluate progress, identify challenges, and co-create recommendations with stakeholders during Round 2 focus groups and via NAP Steering Group feedback.

Section 3: High-Level Findings

3.1 Overview

The NAP 2022–28 focuses on six priority goals and three main priority groups of students: socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED) students, students with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, and Irish Traveller and Roma students.

The NAP aims to deliver positive, inclusive outcomes for all priority groups through six student-centred goals: Inclusivity, Flexibility, Clarity, Coherence, Sustainability, and an Evidence-Driven Approach.

Stakeholder consultations confirmed that students and HEI staff perceive these goals to be relevant, appropriate, and necessary, and should therefore continue to drive the development of policy and practice and the implementation of activities for greater access and participation in higher education.

At this mid-way point in implementation, there is evidence of significant progress against the NAP goals. There is also evidence of activity beyond that set out in the NAP that is contributing positively to the achievement of the NAP goals, reflecting developments in the intervening years since its publication, including the HEA's [Review of the Irish National Framework for Student Success in Higher Education](#).

The review has identified areas where the pace of progress is slower than anticipated at this mid-way point and the stakeholder consultations highlighted some challenges and barriers to effective implementation of the NAP.

The key achievements and challenges set out below inform the recommendations of this review by spotlighting areas of success on which to build further progress and areas that warrant further prioritisation to ensure that the related objectives can be successfully realised over the lifetime of the strategy.

The review also identified some actions in the NAP that have been superseded by developments in the intervening years. High-level updates on progress against each action in the NAP and relevant related developments are provided in Appendix 2.

3.2 Key Achievements

Increased participation by some priority groups

- There have been positive increases in the participation rates of disabled new entrants, with an upward trend observable since the publication of the NAP. There has been a recent modest increase in the transition rate between school and higher education for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Progress has been slower to date than anticipated, and it will be important to continue monitoring transition data in light of projected demographic changes in the second phase of NAP implementation. There have also been increases in the number of Traveller new entrants. Data relating to the targets and KPIs is presented in Section 4.

Increased system-level investment

- There has been significant additional investment in the higher education system since the launch of the NAP, including successive increases in core funding arising from Funding the Future (2022) with an additional €164.4 million secured to date and a further €100 million to be made available by 2030 from the National Training Fund (NTF).
- An independent impact evaluation of PATH strands 1–3 has been completed since the publication of the NAP, which highlighted the positive and far-reaching effects of the strands in building capacity within access offices; in facilitating whole-of-institution approaches to widening participation and supporting student success; in developing and enhancing partnerships between HEIs and community stakeholders and between HEIs within and across regions; and in enabling targeted outreach and the extension of wraparound supports to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged students. The report also noted the increased participation by underrepresented groups in higher education programmes since the establishment of PATH.
- In response to the recommendations within the PATH Impact Assessment and in recognition of the significant contribution of PATH 1 and PATH 3 to delivering on the ambitions of successive national access plans, both PATH 1 and PATH 3 transitioned to sustainable funding streams in 2025. This commitment by Government to sustainable investment for these strands is a significant milestone and will enable HEIs to adopt longer-term strategic approaches to the provision of innovative pre-entry, transition, and post-entry supports to the most disadvantaged students and to build on the progress and learnings from two time-limited phases of implementation.
- €3 million was allocated to HEIs under the PATH 4 Phase 1 Universal Design Fund implemented between 2022 and 2024. This funding supported the embedding of Universal Design approaches and inclusive practices in HEIs to the benefit of all students, in particular neurodiverse students, and enabled the building of capacity for greater participation by students with intellectual disabilities in higher education. While fully embedding a comprehensive Universal Design approach will require sustained commitment and investment over time, this funding served as a key enabler in achieving significant progress towards the

adoption of inclusive teaching and assessment practices and more inclusive physical and digital environments in HEIs. Outcomes reported included enhanced capacity among academic staff; improved accessibility of online learning platforms; increased availability of innovative technologies; and improvements to the physical infrastructure on campus, including autism friendly measures such as the development of quiet spaces and calm zones across campuses; the introduction of sensory cubbies, the development of sensory maps, way-finding apps, campus tours, and improved signage across campuses.

With the support of the PATH 4 Phase 1 Universal Design Fund, 25 education stakeholders also collaborated to develop a Universal Design framework for the tertiary sector, the ALTITUDE Charter, which was formally launched in March 2024. Informed by national and international literature and substantial learning from practice to date, it functions as a roadmap for institutions to guide the adoption of an effective, holistic and coherent approach to embedding a Universal Design approach across the sector. The Charter identifies 4 key pillars: Learning, Teaching & Assessment; Supports, Services & Social Engagement; the Physical Environment; and the Digital Environment.

A further €2.8 million was committed by Government under PATH 4 Phase 1 in December 2024 to enable institutions to continue to advance and build on progress towards embedding Universal Design and inclusion up to the end of 2026. The Inclusive Environment Fund also includes ringfenced support to tackle prejudice and racism, in particular towards Traveller and Roma students.

Expansion of targeted supports

- Students with intellectual disabilities are identified as a priority group for the first time in the current NAP, alongside a commitment to improve opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to engage in higher education. PATH 4 Phase 2 is a landmark three-year pathfinding programme initiated in 2023 with the dual objectives to enhance course provision for students with intellectual disabilities and to inform future policy considerations in respect of students with intellectual disabilities in higher education. PATH 4 Phase 2 is the first time that funding has been provided at national level to support provision for students with intellectual disabilities in higher education with an initial investment by Government of over €11 million. 193 students are enrolled to date across programmes in 11 participating HEIs. In February 2026, a two-year extension of PATH 4 Phase 2 was confirmed by DFHERIS.

The HEA established a PATH 4 Phase 2 Community of Practice, which is convened biannually to support the implementation of this innovative initiative and to facilitate system-level knowledge sharing. All participating HEIs are also undertaking related research and conducting evaluations of their programmes to inform future policy development. In addition, PATH 4 Phase 2 funding is supporting the INCLUDE-ID network, which is a cross-institutional consortium of 6 of the 11 PATH 4 Phase 2 participating HEIs and has a substantial collaborative research focus. A systematic review of the evaluation and research outputs from PATH 4 Phase 2 was initiated by the HEA in March 2026 to synthesise the evidence gathered to date by HEIs.

- PATH 5 aims to increase the participation and progression of Traveller and Roma students in higher education and was launched in 2022 as a three-year programme. Building on initiatives supported through the Dormant Accounts Fund, PATH 5 provides €450,000 in dedicated funding support to HEIs in each year of the programme to build new and strengthen existing linkages with Traveller and Roma communities and to provide pre-entry and post-entry support to Traveller and Roma students in higher education. In December 2025, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Mr. James Lawless TD, confirmed a one-year extension of PATH 5.

Expansion of financial supports and streamlining of application processes

- The Student Grant Scheme has been expanded since the launch of the NAP. A new part-time fee grant scheme was introduced in 2024 for specified part-time undergraduate courses targeting students from disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. Over 100 part-time courses are available in the 2025/26 academic year, an increase from 62 in the previous year. There has also been an increase in maintenance grant rates, a restoration of postgraduate maintenance grants, a reduction in the distance criterion for students to qualify for the non-adjacent rate of grant and increases in the deduction allowable for student earnings outside of term time. In addition, once off cost-of-living measures saw the student contribution reduced by €1,000 for all free fees' eligible students and an increase in the Postgraduate Fee Contribution Grant of €1,000. Budget 2026 delivered a permanent reduction in the student contribution fee of €500, the first reduction since free fees were introduced in 1995.
- Funding for the PATH 2 1916 Bursary Scheme has been substantially increased since the launch of the NAP and provides tiered bursary support to eligible priority group students. Co-funded by the ESF+ programme since 2023/24, 600 students are currently in receipt of Tier 1 and Tier 2 PATH 2 bursaries per annum, increasing from 374 bursaries since the commencement of the NAP. In addition, 1,573 once-off Tier 3 bursaries have been allocated since 2022.
- Further to considerable inter-institutional collaboration and leadership, a Centralised Application and Assessment Facility (CAAF) for the PATH 2 1916 Bursary Fund was developed in 2023. The new applications portal is hosted by SUSI and has streamlined both the application process for learners and the management of the application and assessment process by HEIs. The CAAF significantly reduces the administrative burden for applicants who can opt to share the information provided as part of their SUSI grant application for the purposes of assessment of eligibility for the PATH 2 Bursary. The CAAF has also reduced the time associated with the processing of applications, resulting in payment of bursaries within the first semester. In 2024/25, over 1,300 eligible PATH 2 applications were received.
- In response to cost-of-living challenges in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, there were successive once-off increases to the Student Assistance Fund (SAF). An additional €8 million was provided to SAF as part of cost-of-living measures in 2022, and an additional €8.1 million was provided in 2023 and 2024 for this purpose. In 2024, a further €1 million was provided in ringfenced funding to support low-income families with childcare costs. Over 22,400 students received support from the SAF in 2024/25. In 2025/26,

€19.3 million was committed to the SAF. While these additional once-off increases are welcomed by the sector, there has been no accompanying increase in the core funding for SAF. The notification of once-off increases in SAF at later stages of the academic year makes it difficult for HEIs to manage the funding allocations efficiently and strategically for the benefit of students in need of support.

- There have been successive and welcome increases in the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD). In 2024, FSD funding increased by 5%, and by a further 20% in 2025. The total FSD allocation in 2025 was €9.54 million and increased by a further 10% to €10.54 million in 2026. Data on the number of students in receipt of FSD is presented in Section 4.
- In November 2025, over €630,000 was allocated in the first round of the 2025/26 Student Accommodation Assistance scheme, supported by the Dormant Accounts Fund, benefiting 116 students, 79 from Traveller and Roma backgrounds and 37 with experience of the care system. During the 2024/25 academic year, €412,000 was allocated, supporting 85 students, including 64 Traveller and Roma students and 21 with experience of the care system. The next round of funding is scheduled for disbursement in Q1 2026.

Increased pathways to higher education

- The National Tertiary Office (NTO) was established in December 2022 to advance a strategic approach to enhancing the pathways between further education and training and higher education and is jointly managed by the HEA and SOLAS. Students registered on tertiary programmes commence their third level experience in further education and complete it in a partner higher education institution. Since its inception, the NTO has initiated 38 tertiary bachelor's degree programmes at Levels 7 and 8, with 471 unique starters in 2025/26. These students are in addition to those reported as entering higher education on the basis of a FET award in Section 4.
- The proportion of higher education courses accessible on the basis of a FET award has increased over the last number of years. 91% of courses offered by publicly-funded HEIs through the CAO in 2025 had a FET access route, up from 86% of courses in 2022.

Increased engagement with international mobility experiences

- More students from disadvantaged backgrounds are now undertaking an international mobility experience. Latest data indicates that the number of students participating in Erasmus+ has increased from 4,800 in 2021/22 to over 6,100 in 2024/25. This represents a significant growth of over 27%. In parallel, the proportion of participants from underrepresented backgrounds has also increased. Based on 2023 data, students with fewer opportunities⁶ represented 31% of all mobilities, up from 23% in 2021/22.

⁶ In the context of Erasmus+, people with fewer opportunities means people who, for economic, social, cultural, geographical or health reasons, a migrant background, or for reasons such as disability and educational difficulties or for any other reasons, including those that can give rise to discrimination under article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, face obstacles that prevent them from having effective access to opportunities under the programme.

Enhanced evidence and data collection

- A core commitment in the NAP was the development of a second Access Data Plan to consider mechanisms to collect reliable data on priority group students. Published in November 2025, the report includes a systematic review of the international literature on equity of access and an assessment of the priority groups identified in the NAP. The development of the second Access Data Plan represents a significant achievement and its recommendations when implemented, will inform the next phase of NAP implementation and the development of future access policies. The findings and recommendations within the second Access Data Plan also provide welcome clarity to the system in terms of the potential to collect national level data on participation by socioeconomically disadvantaged groups facing a range of life circumstances.
- There has been considerable development of the available evidence on the lives of children in care arising from the Care Experiences Project managed by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE). The CSO published the third in its Frontier series in 2025 focusing on the educational attendance and attainment of children in care and children who left care since April 2018.

3.3 Key Challenges

Cost of living

- The stakeholder consultations undertaken as part of the review process highlighted the additional barriers to access and progression facing priority group students post-pandemic. The current cost of living challenges are being experienced acutely by priority group students, including challenges in relation to student accommodation. Stakeholders noted that the pressures on priority group students to work during their studies is having a negative impact on attendance, progression, and on the experience of higher education.

Capacity constraints

- At system level, effective implementation of the NAP is impacted by capacity constraints. The welcome increases in the diversity of the higher education student population are placing additional pressure on the access and disability support structures within HEIs. The data outlined in the next section of this report demonstrate that the sustained increases in the proportion of disabled students in higher education has also been accompanied by an increase in the complexity of need of the students presenting for support, requiring whole-of-institution responses. Stakeholders consulted as part of this review highlighted that there have not been comparable increases in the support infrastructure within higher education to meet the increased and diverse demand.

- In addition, HEI stakeholders highlighted the vast number of access-related pilot initiatives that have been initiated in recent years. While the increased investment through these initiatives was welcomed, HEI stakeholders noted that these initiatives were not always accompanied by increases in HEI resources, and that often new and additional activity was being delivered by staff whose time was already fully committed to existing activities. The lack of provision for sufficient lead-in time between the announcement and expected implementation of new initiatives was also cited as a significant challenge by HEIs, leading to initiatives commencing without appropriate resourcing in place from the outset to ensure their success. Stakeholders highlighted challenges with the timeliness of decision-making at national level and the resulting adverse impacts. While the transition of PATH 1 and PATH 3 to sustainable funding streams was widely welcomed across the system, the delays in the decision-making process at national level affected continuity and led to a loss of highly valued expertise and adverse impacts on partnerships with community organisations that had taken considerable time and effort to cultivate.
- The timebound nature of initiatives and the short-term nature of funding schemes continues to remain difficult for HEIs to manage. Stakeholders consulted as part of this review highlighted challenges associated with the recruitment and retention of staff given the short-term nature of contracts, and the difficulty in longer-term strategic planning to best optimise the allocated funding. It was emphasised that access measures rely on the development and strengthening of partnerships with community stakeholders which take time to build and rely on trust. The short-term nature of funding can damage these relationships and the progress achieved if there is interruption or discontinuation of funding.

Data collection

- During consultations with HEI stakeholders, concerns and challenges were expressed in relation to the collection of national level data on socioeconomically disadvantaged students with particular life experiences set out in the NAP, particularly students with experience of homelessness, the criminal justice system and survivors of domestic violence. Stakeholders also expressed concerns in relation to the availability of the requisite expertise in HEIs to provide the appropriate supports to these students. Since the consultation sessions were conducted, the second Access Data Plan was published, and its findings and recommendations provide welcome clarity to stakeholders in relation to the collection of data on participation by students with experience of homelessness, the criminal justice system, and survivors of domestic violence. While the collection of data on these cohorts is not recommended in light of ethical and data protection considerations, the promotion of higher education opportunities to students with these life circumstances should continue. HEIs are encouraged to partner with relevant community and regional groups to guide the identification and provision of appropriately tailored pre- and post-entry, and transition supports to students with these life experiences to enable access, progression, and success.

Structural barriers

- The evidence emerging from research into the effects of Covid-19 on teaching and learning during the pandemic highlighted the importance of a flexible higher education system and the continuation of blended and hybrid models of teaching as a means of developing more accessible and flexible modes of learning for students.⁷ While pathways to higher education have expanded since the commencement of the current NAP, including FET routes, apprenticeships, the increasing recognition of prior learning (RPL) and the expansion of part-time study options, challenges persist in relation to equity of access to digital infrastructure, variation in the provision of assistive technologies and digital supports, and the availability of flexible models of study. Students consulted as part of this review highlighted the opportunities for greater flexibility in the mode of course delivery to harness the innovative technologies and approaches adopted during the pandemic. These areas will require further focus in the next phase of NAP implementation.

Participation and progression of some priority groups

- While solid progress has been made, participation rates for some priority group cohorts remain too low. The increases in participation by Traveller students are welcome and reflect year-on-year growth, however, further efforts are required to accelerate participation and progression rates for this cohort.
- There has been a decrease in the proportion of mature students from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas entering higher education since the launch of the NAP. This decline in participation is also observable in the overall mature student population in higher education. The monthly unemployment rate in Ireland for 25–74 year olds was 3.8% in December 2025⁸, and the full employment economy is likely a significant factor impacting participation by this cohort.
- The updated data presented in Section 4 demonstrates that participation in postgraduate education by priority groups continues to be much lower than their peers. The successive increases in participation by students with disabilities in undergraduate education has not been accompanied by increases in participation by this cohort at postgraduate level. In response to this persistent trend, the HEA is funding a three-year partnership between the National Disabled Postgraduates Advisory Committee (NDPAC) and AHEAD aimed at breaking down barriers and facilitating enablers to postgraduate study for disabled people. LaunchPAD is amplifying the lived experience of diverse voices within the community with a view to influencing policy development, and in November 2025, new research on the experiences of disabled postgraduate students entitled '[Voices in the Community: Experiences of Disabled Postgraduate Students in Irish Higher Education](#)' was launched. The outputs from this partnership will inform future policy in relation to enablers of progression to higher education for this cohort.

7 AHEAD, 2021. [Learning from home 2021: A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities Learning through Covid-19](#).

8 CSO (2026). [Monthly Unemployment December 2025](#).

- Challenges in relation to progression rates have been evident across the system in the years succeeding the pandemic, with higher non-progression rates evident for priority group cohorts. Addressing non-progression rates is a system-wide priority, supported by the HEA's Policy Forum on Progression, and is reflected in individual Performance Agreements between the HEA and HEIs under the System Performance Framework. HEIs have initiated diverse and innovative interventions in response to increases in non-progression rates and have enhanced institutional data systems and institutional data analysis capacity to support early detection of students at risk of non-progression. It is important that the resulting interventions designed by HEIs recognise the specific challenges faced by priority group students and include targeted and bespoke supports for these cohorts.

Effective oversight structures

- The NAP Steering Group is intended to play a critical role in monitoring progress and overseeing the implementation of the NAP. The Steering Group is comprised of representatives with diverse cross-sectoral expertise that can provide insights into enablers and barriers impacting on effective implementation of the strategy. During the consultation process conducted as part of this review, members raised some concerns as to the effectiveness of the current Steering Group and the extent to which it is fulfilling its intended role. Members expressed the need for greater engagement at Steering Group level and identified opportunities for members to better influence NAP implementation, including through a greater focus on matters of strategic importance and opportunities to shape meeting agendas.

Section 4: KPIs and National Targets

4.1 Introduction

The Terms of Reference for the Mid-term Progress Review of the current NAP include reviewing the progress toward national targets for access of specified priority groups.

The Review reports therefore on the four national targets, which concern the intake of students from the following groups:

1. New entrants from areas of SED⁹.
2. New mature entrants (≥ 23 y.o.) from areas of SED.
3. New entrants with a disability.
4. New entrants from the Traveller community.

Additionally, the Review conducted trend analyses for eight of the nine quantitative KPIs included in the NAP. Data for some aspects of Graduate outcomes (KPI 9) were not available for analysis at the time of the review.

The NAP KPIs are organised into four themes, which map directly onto NAP goals:

1. **Flexibility within higher education**
 - a. Participation by Part-time/Flexible Learners
 - b. Progression from FET to HE
2. **Diversity across programmes and levels**
 - a. Postgraduate study among selected priority groups
 - b. Student diversity across selected fields of study
3. **Access and Participation for Priority Groups**
 - a. Disabled students supported by FSD
 - b. Students attending DEIS schools
 - c. Students who are lone parents
4. **Student Success and Engagement**
 - a. Progression and completion among selected priority groups
 - b. Graduate outcomes among selected priority groups

9 The HEA uses Deprivation Index Scores (DIS) to assess the socioeconomic profiles of higher education students in Ireland. DIS assigns a relative measure of deprivation or affluence to students based on the Census small area they come from for the purposes of aggregate analysis. DIS scores range from around -40 to +40. Scores less than -10 are considered disadvantaged and more than +10 is considered affluent in the context of the NAP. Further information on how the HEA uses DIS is available [here](#).

As set out in the NAP, the purpose of monitoring the nine KPIs is to support the identification of longitudinal trends over the lifetime of the NAP. The KPIs should therefore be interpreted in the context of broader trends over time, rather than year-on-year fluctuations.

The baseline data years for the NAP are 2019/20 and 2020/21. The data from these years demonstrates the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important that the interpretation of target and KPI data is sensitive to this context.

The number of new entrants to higher education has increased since the pandemic in line with demographic projections. In 2019/20, there were 43,580 new entrants to full-time undergraduate higher education. This increased significantly to 46,195 new entrants in 2020/21¹⁰. There was a decrease in new entrant figures observed in 2021/22, however, the number of new entrants to higher education has continued to increase in the years subsequent, with a total of 48,845 full-time undergraduate new entrants in 2024/25. The progress in relation to national targets and data updates in respect of national KPIs should also be viewed in the context of the overall growth in new entrants to higher education since the publication of the NAP.

4.2 KPI Data

KPI 1: Part-time/flexible learners

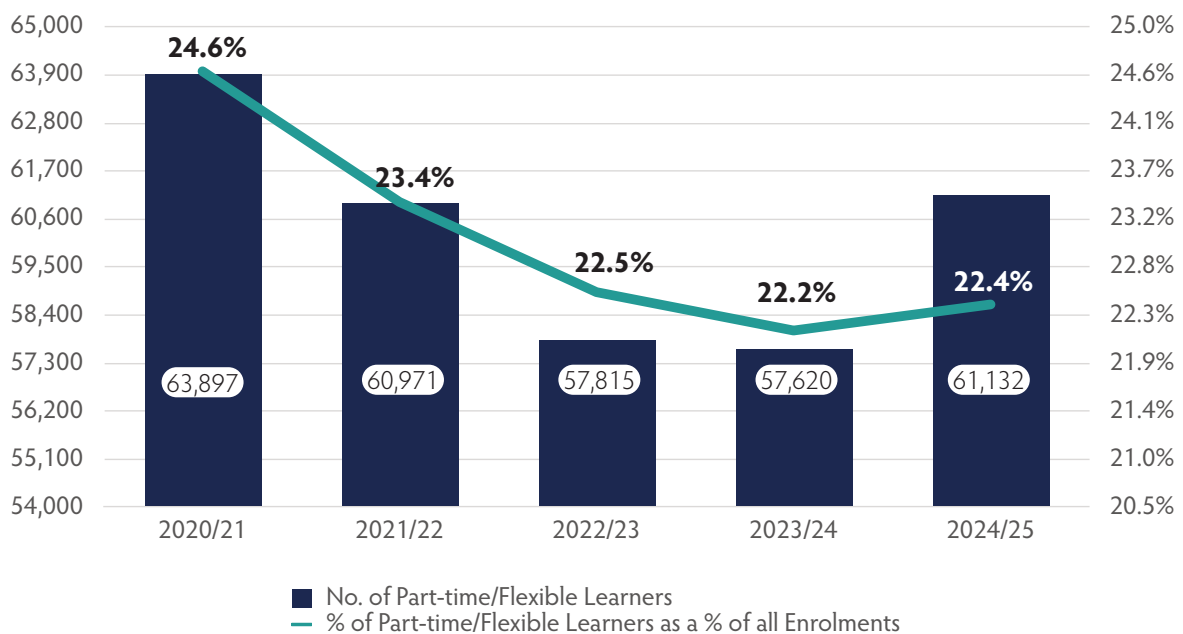


Fig 1 Percentage and number of part-time/flexible learners from 2020/21 to 2024/25 (Source: HEA SRS data).

¹⁰ Total new entrant figures from 2023/24 onwards include National College of Ireland (NCI).

Postgraduate	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Mean DIS score of part-time students	4.6	4.3	3.8	3.8	4.2
Mean DIS score of full-time students	3.4	3.4	3.0	3.2	3.2
Undergraduate					
Mean DIS score of part-time students	1.6	1.7	1.1	1.0	0.9
Mean DIS score of full-time students	1.7	1.7	1.6	1.8	2.0

Table 1 Socioeconomic profile of part-time and full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students using mean DIS scores from 2019/20 to 2023/24 (Source: HEA SRS/DIS data).

KPI 2: Progression from further education to higher education

Entry Basis	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Second Level School Leaving Exams	69.7%	70.5%	72.5%	71.5%	69.3%
Access/Foundation Course	0.5%	0.4%	0.3%	0.2%	0.3%
Advanced Entry (e.g. to 2nd year)	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
DARE	4.3%	5.5%	6.1%	7.5%	8.1%
Direct Entry Route	6.6%	6.0%	6.9%	6.6%	6.6%
Further Education Award or Equivalent (e.g. BTEC)	6.1%	5.7%	4.5%	5.0%	6.1%
HEAR	4.5%	4.6%	4.2%	3.9%	4.1%
Mature Years	4.5%	4.3%	2.9%	2.7%	2.6%
Other Access Routes	0.5%	0.8%	0.5%	0.3%	0.3%
Portfolio/Audition	3.0%	2.1%	2.1%	2.2%	2.0%
Previous HE Participation	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Total	100.0%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Table 2 Percentage of new entrants to HE by entry route from 2018/19 to 2024/25 (Source: HEA SRS).

KPI 3: Postgraduate study among selected priority groups

	2019/20 (NAP Baseline)	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Postgraduate Mean Score	4.0	3.8	3.3	3.5	3.7
Undergraduate Mean Score	1.7	1.7	1.5	1.7	1.8
PhD Mean Score	4.5	4.5	4.0	4.2	4.5
Taught Masters Mean Score	3.9	3.8	3.3	3.4	3.4
Research Masters Mean Score	1.6	1.3	1.6	1.8	2.1

Table 3 Analysis of postgraduate study using mean DIS scores from 2019/20 to 2023/24 (Source: HEA SRS/DIS).

	2019/20 (NAP Baseline)	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
% of mature postgraduate students who are disadvantaged	6.5%	6.7%	6.6%	6.6%	6.4%
% of non-mature postgraduate students who are disadvantaged	7.6%	7.5%	7.6%	7.5%	8.4%

Table 4 Proportion of mature disadvantaged postgraduate students compared to non-mature disadvantaged postgraduate students using DIS data from 2019/20 to 2023/24 (Source: HEA SRS/DIS).

	2020/21 (NAP Baseline)	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
% of Traveller students engaging in postgraduate study (as a % of all Traveller students)	6%	7%	3%	7%	5%
% of Traveller students engaging in undergraduate study (as a % of all Traveller students)	94%	93%	97%	93%	95%

Table 5 Proportion of Traveller students undertaking postgraduate study and undergraduate study from 2020/21 to 2024/25 (Source: HEA SRS/EAS).

	2020/21 (NAP Baseline)	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
% of students with a disability engaging in postgraduate study	6%	4%	3%	3%	4%

Table 6 Proportion of students with a disability undertaking postgraduate study from 2020/21 to 2024/25 (Source: HEA SRS/EAS).

KPI 4: Student diversity across fields of study

	2019/20 (NAP Baseline)	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
% of new entrants to secondary teacher education courses who were disadvantaged	8.7%	12.0%	8.5%	8.7%	8.4%
% of new entrants to primary teacher education courses who were disadvantaged	6.1%	8.6%	7.0%	6.1%	5.1%
% of all new entrants who are disadvantaged	10.8%	11.0%	10.1%	9.7%	9.5%

Table 7 Percentage of disadvantaged new entrants to teacher education courses using DIS data from 2019/20 to 2023/24

(Source: HEA SRS/DIS)

	2019/20 (NAP Baseline)	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Economics	2.3%	4.2%	3.9%	3.7%	3.6%
Medicine	5.2%	5.5%	7.0%	5.2%	8.2%
Financing, Banking & Insurance	9.6%	5.9%	6.1%	7.7%	4.3%
Law	10.9%	12.7%	11.6%	11.7%	9.8%
Nursing & Midwifery	13.0%	11.8%	11.5%	11.8%	11.1%
Social Work & Counselling	19.4%	21.5%	19.4%	19.8%	21.7%
Childcare & Youth Services	21.9%	20.4%	17.3%	17.2%	18.1%

Table 8 Percentage of disadvantaged new entrants to selected fields of study using DIS data from 2019/20 to 2023/24

(Source: HEA SRS/DIS)

KPI 5: Students with a disability who are supported by FSD

Disability Category	2020/21 (Revised) ¹¹		2021/22		2022/23		2023/24		2024/25	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
ADD/ADHD	906	6%	1,255	8%	1,670	10%	2,241	11%	2,944	14%
Autism	1,403	9%	1,634	10%	1,931	11%	2,439	13%	2,935	14%
Blind/Visual Impairment	233	1%	223	1%	237	1%	252	1%	261	1%
Deaf/Hard of Hearing	403	3%	457	3%	431	2%	466	2%	487	2%
Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia)	1,137	7%	1,191	7%	1,162	7%	1,312	7%	1,324	6%
Mental Health	2,301	15%	2,441	15%	2,437	14%	2,555	13%	2,562	12%
Physical Disability/ Mobility Impairment	860	5%	879	5%	871	5%	908	5%	958	4%
Significant Ongoing Illness	1,716	11%	1,727	10%	1,788	10%	1,874	10%	1,985	9%
Specific Learning Difficulties	5,882	38%	6,052	36%	6,043	34%	6,488	33%	6,851	32%
Speech, Language and Communication Disorder	128	1%	185	1%	228	1%	229	1%	267	1%
Neurological Condition	701	4%	655	4%	728	4%	724	4%	754	4%
Total	15,670	100%	16,699	100%	17,526	100%	19,488	100%	21,328	100%

Table 9 Number and proportion of students supported by FSD across all categories of disability from 2020/21 to 2024/25 (Source: HEA FSD).

¹¹ The number of students supported by FSD in 2020/21 was 15,670. This is an update to the figure provided in the NAP to reflect institutional returns received after its publication.

KPI 6: Entry to higher education for students attending DEIS schools

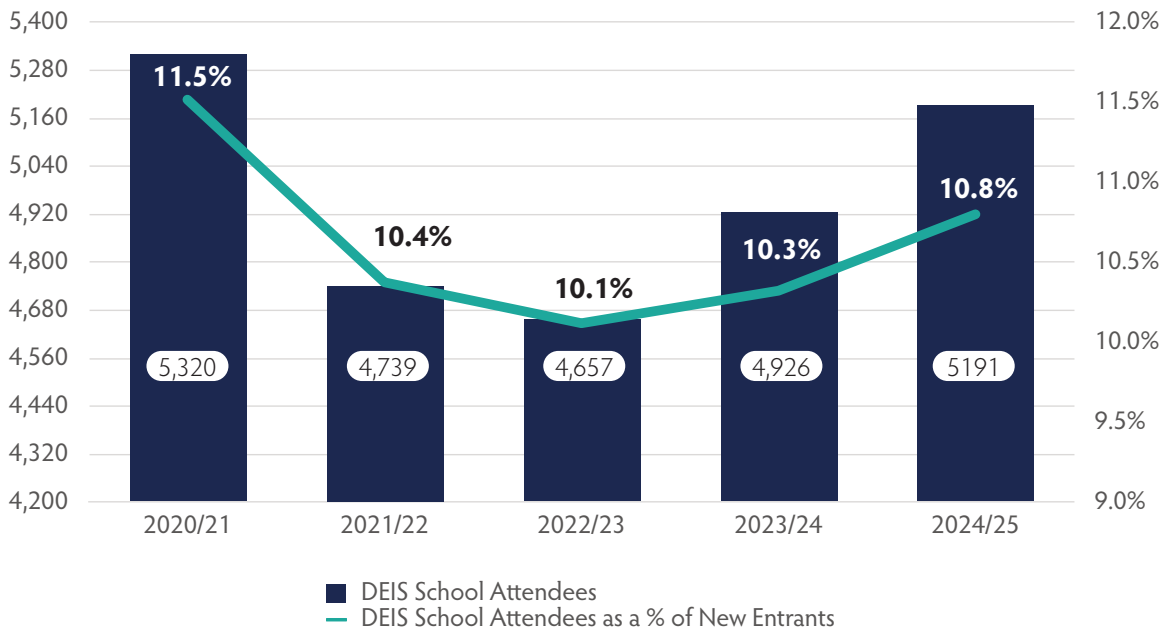


Fig 2 Number and proportion of new entrants from DEIS schools entering higher education from 2020/21 to 2024/25 (Source: HEA SRS).

KPI 7: Lone parents in higher education

	2019/20 (NAP Baseline)	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Number of new entrants reporting as parents	782	893	760	601	677	743
% of new entrants reporting as parents	2.0%	2.0%	2.0%	1.3%	1.4%	2%
% in receipt of lone parent allowance of those reporting as parents	26.0%	23.0%	21.0%	22.6%	22.8%	22%

Table 10 Analysis of Parental Status Field from 2019/20 to 2024/25 (Source: HEA SRS/EAS).

KPI 8: Progression and completion among selected priority groups (for example, students from disadvantaged areas and mature students from disadvantaged areas)

	2019/20 (NAP Baseline)	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Overall non-progression rates	9%	12%	15%	13%
Non-progression rates for those from disadvantaged areas	12%	17%	22%	18%
Non-progression rates for mature students from disadvantaged areas	15%	21%	19%	16%

Table 11 Non-progression rates¹² for selected priority groups from 2019/20 to 2022/23 (Source: HEA SRS data).

	2010/11 (NAP Baseline) New Entrants	2017/18 New Entrants	2018/19 New Entrants
Completion rates for socioeconomically disadvantaged students	75%	70%	69%
Overall completion rates	78%	78%	78%

Table 12 Completion rates for SED new entrants compared to all new entrants (Source: HEA EAS data).

KPI 9: Graduate outcomes among selected priority groups (for example, students from disadvantaged areas and those attending DEIS schools)

	Affluent Graduate Earnings	Disadvantaged Graduate Earnings	Difference
Class of 2020	€38,000	€36,600	€1,400
Class of 2021	€38,562	€37,640	€922

Table 13 Graduate earnings for the class of 2020 and 2021 (Source: HEA Graduate Outcomes Survey data).

Data on graduate earnings by school type was not available at the time of conducting this analysis.

¹² Students who transferred to another HEI to progress their studies are considered to have not progressed in the methodology used to calculate non-progression rates in the NAP.

4.3 Progress in Relation to National Targets

Target	Baseline in the NAP	NAP target by 2028	MTPR Update
Transition rate between school and higher education for new entrants from SED areas	42% (2019/20)	54%	43% (2023/24)
% of mature new entrants from SED areas (as a % of all new entrants from SED areas)	11% (2019/20)	20%	9% (2023/24)
% of new entrants with a disability (as a % of all new entrants)	12.4% (2020/21)	16%	16.3% (2024/25)
Number of Traveller new entrants	33 (2020/21)	150	57 (2024/25)
% of Traveller new entrants (as a % of all new entrants)	0.07% (2020/21)	0.32%	0.12% (2024/25)

Table 14 Summary of National Targets comparing baseline in NAP to 2023/24 and 2024/25 data.

4.4 Commentary on Data

Disabled students

The most considerable progress has been made in relation to the proportion of new entrants with a disability which has increased significantly to 16.3% in 2024/25. The target of 16% which was set for the lifetime of this National Access Plan has now been achieved at the midpoint of implementation. In tandem with this, there have been substantial increases in the numbers of students seeking support from the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD), rising from 15,670 in 2020/21 to 21,328 in 2024/25. The largest proportion of students supported by FSD in 2024/25 presented with specific learning difficulties (32%), followed by ADD/ADHD and Autism (each at 14%). The proportion of disabled new entrants via the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) has also risen considerably from 4.3% in 2020/21 to 8.1% in 2024/25.

However, this progress at undergraduate level is not mirrored in participation rates at postgraduate level. As data from KPI 3 indicates, the participation of disabled students in postgraduate study has declined by two percentage points from 6% in 2020/21 to 4% in 2024/25.

Traveller and Roma students

Data in relation to Traveller participation indicates that there has been progress towards the target set in this National Access Plan. The number of Traveller new entrants has increased from 33 in 2020/21 to 57 in 2024/25. The NAP target of 150 will be challenging to achieve, and sustained efforts by stakeholders across all levels of the education continuum is required to accelerate progress toward this target.

Of the Traveller students enrolled in higher education, a much lower percentage are engaging in postgraduate education, which is consistent with the gap in participation rates at undergraduate and postgraduate levels for other priority groups.

It should be noted that the data presented in the NAP and in this review relates to participation by Traveller students in higher education. Data on participation by Roma students in higher education has been collected via the Equal Access Survey (EAS) since 2021/22 and is being monitored by the HEA as part of its quality assurance approach to the introduction of new data points. However, in light of the recommendations within the second Access Data Plan to transition to administrative data sources for the purposes of measuring participation in higher education by ethnicity, baseline data and associated targets in relation to Roma participation in higher education will be progressed as part of the development process for the next NAP.

Socioeconomically disadvantaged students

The pace of progress toward the target transition rate¹³ from school to higher education for new entrants from disadvantaged areas has been slower than anticipated at this point in NAP implementation. The 2019/20 baseline data provided in the NAP indicated that the transition rate was 42%. There was a peak in the transition rate to 44% in 2020/21, however the latest available data from 2023/24 shows that the transition rate is 43%, compared to 66% for the overall Leaving Certificate student population. The transition rate for new entrants from disadvantaged areas mirrors trends at national level in terms of transition rates from school to higher education in this period whereby in 2020 there was a notable increase in the overall transition rate likely due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important to note that the 2023 transition rate nationally was at its highest level in the period measured from 2019–2023, except for 2020, suggesting that we are making progress towards this national target¹⁴.

13 The transition rate in this context refers to the proportion of students entering higher education directly from second-level education. Estimated transition rates for those who transferred directly from second level to higher education are calculated by dividing the number of full-time new entrants (aged 18–20) in each of the relevant DIS deprivation categories by the number of Leaving Certificate students in the same category.

14 Department of Education and Youth, 2025. [Education Indicators for Ireland](#).

The proportion of mature new entrants from disadvantaged areas has declined by two percentage points, from 11% in 2019/20 to 9% in 2023/24. Of note, this coincides with a continuing decline in the proportion of mature new entrants over time (from 13% in 2013/14 to 7% in 2019/20 and 5% in 2023/24). The data points to the scale of the challenge to grow participation for mature new entrants from disadvantaged areas in higher education and suggests that the NAP target of 20% of mature new entrants from disadvantaged areas by 2028 will be very challenging to achieve.

A likely contributory factor to the decline in participation is the full employment economy. Mature new entrants are also more likely to have additional caring responsibilities and therefore measures to enhance the flexibility of provision and support, including part-time options, are critical. The data presented in this report in relation to the proportion of part-time and flexible students suggests that there is an opportunity to enhance flexible programme offerings. It is important that flexible models of delivery are accompanied by flexible student supports to ensure that these are feasible options for priority group students.

Section 5: Progress Review Recommendations

As this midway juncture, it is evident that substantial progress has been made towards the development of a more inclusive, diverse and responsive higher education system. Despite the extreme challenges presented to the sector by the Covid-19 pandemic and the very immediate challenges facing students amid cost-of-living challenges, progress has been made across the majority of the objectives and key actions contained in this National Access Plan and toward its targets. There are areas that require further prioritisation in the next phase of NAP implementation, and this Progress Review makes eleven key recommendations in this regard.

1 National Targets & KPIs

Following analysis of the available data and having regard to the context of the baseline data, it is recommended that the national targets for the lifetime of the NAP are maintained.

- The transition rate between school and higher education is 43% in 2023/24 representing an increase of 1 percentage point from the NAP baseline of 42% (2019/20). While it will be challenging to achieve the NAP target of 54% by 2028, progress is being made against this target.
- Progress in attracting new mature entrants from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas has slowed, with participation by this cohort dropping from 11% in 2019/20 to 9% in 2023/24. The NAP target of 20% will be challenging to meet, however it is recommended that the current target is maintained and that further work is undertaken to promote the participation of mature students from priority groups in higher education.
- Participation by new entrants with disabilities has exceeded expectations at this mid-way point of NAP implementation, rising from a 12.4% baseline in 2020/21 to 16.3% in 2024/25. It is recommended that supports for students with disabilities are enhanced to ensure consistent growth in the representation of this cohort in higher education.
- The number of Traveller new entrants has experienced a consistent increase between 2020/21 and 2024/25. It is recognised that there is significant ongoing targeted work being undertaken across the system to improve participation by this cohort, including through all five strands of PATH.
- With regard to the nine KPIs integrated across the NAP dimensions – namely flexibility, diversity, access and participation of priority groups, and student success and engagement – the primary recommendation is to continue to monitor data longitudinally by conducting trend analyses on the existing data points over defined periods of time. These analyses should inform the next NAP.

2 Traveller and Roma participation in higher education

The participation of Traveller students in higher education remains too low. Since 2021, Government has provided ringfenced funding to increase the access and participation of Traveller and Roma students in higher education through Dormant Accounts Funding initially and more recently through PATH 5. This investment complements existing targeted support provided across the other four strands of PATH and resources committed at HEI level. Emerging evidence from the implementation of PATH 5 to date demonstrates its positive effects and the potential longer-term impacts of interventions and aspiration-raising initiatives targeting learners at the earlier stages of the education continuum. The appointment of dedicated Traveller and Roma Outreach Officers from the Traveller and Roma communities as part of PATH 5 has proven particularly effective.

In recognition of the ongoing and potential future cumulative impacts of PATH 5, and to support complementary objectives in NTRIS II, TRES and the NAP, it is recommended that dedicated funding to support Traveller and Roma participation in higher education via PATH 5 transitions to a sustainable basis.

3 Students with intellectual disabilities

PATH 4 Phase 2 is a landmark development, representing the first time that State funding has been provided to support programmes for students with disabilities in higher education at national level. In addition to the learnings and data collected by the HEA as part of the PATH 4 Phase 2 monitoring and reporting process, the 11 participating HEIs have been undertaking innovative research at local level and in collaboration with other HEIs, and conducting programme evaluations. The HEA is initiating a systematic review to synthesise the findings and learnings from these research and evaluation processes. It is recommended that this review is completed within the lifetime of the programme to inform policy at national level and to enable timely decisions in relation to longer-term funding support for higher education provision for this cohort.

4 Participation by mature students from priority groups

The data examined as part of this review highlights a growing challenge in the participation rates of mature students in higher education nationally, and this challenge is more pronounced in the case of mature students from priority groups, particularly in the context of full employment nationally. Taking account of the findings and the implemented recommendations in the [Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education](#) (2021), it is recommended that further work is undertaken to understand the barriers to participation by mature students from priority groups and to identify potential enablers.

5 Supports for students with disabilities

The successive increases in the proportion of new entrants with disabilities is welcome and as the data analysed as part of this review demonstrates, exceeds expectations at this mid-way point in NAP implementation. Stakeholder consultations highlighted that there has been a simultaneous increase in the complexity of needs of students engaging with Access and Disability support services, and that this is placing additional demands on student services. In addition, the demand for support through the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) is increasing year on year. While the recent increases in FSD funding are acknowledged, they have not kept pace with the rising demand for FSD support. DFHERIS has initiated a Disability Project to map supports across the tertiary sector, and it is recommended that the findings of this exercise inform the scoping of a review of disability supports in higher education.

6 NAP Implementation Structures

The current National Access Plan foregrounds the importance of cross-sectoral engagement within a broader whole-of-government and whole-of-education approach. Stakeholders consulted as part of this review identified some challenges regarding the National Access Plan Steering Group (NAP SG), an important implementation structure underpinning the current National Access Plan. It is recommended that a review of the structure and operation of the Steering Group is conducted in consultation with members to improve ways of working and to better leverage the group's diverse expertise.

7 Whole-of-institution approaches to Universal Design implementation

Through PATH 4 Phase 1, substantial progress has been made by HEIs in a relatively short period of time in the rollout of Universal Design practices across the higher education system. To build on this momentum, it is recommended that HEIs explore ways to further embed whole-of-institution Universal Design approaches, having regard to the four pillars identified in the ALTITUDE Charter (Learning, Teaching and Assessment; Supports, Services and Social Engagement; Physical Environment; Digital Environment).

8 Student engagement

The NAP highlights the importance of student belonging and the student voice in decision-making on access, participation and student success policies, programmes and initiatives. It is recommended that further work is carried out to enhance the meaningful representation of student partners, taking account of national level structures to support student engagement in decision-making across Irish higher education, such as the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP). At HEI level, it is recommended that consideration is given to providing increased opportunities for integrating the voices of priority group students into the operational aspects of programme design, monitoring, and evaluation.

9 Clarity of information to priority group students

A key goal of the National Access Plan is the provision of clear and understandable information to prospective students on how to access higher education. This information should be user friendly and accessible to students and family members from diverse backgrounds and communities. There is evidence that significant progress has been made at system level to provide standardised information on financial supports and access routes and of a co-ordinated approach to outreach and pre-entry mentoring aimed at NAP priority groups. In the stakeholder sessions, students spoke positively of pre-entry mentoring programmes across the sector, the increased targeting of non-traditional learners and the increasing support with transitioning to higher education provided by Access Officers. It is recommended that further work is undertaken at national level to complement the efforts of HEIs and to ensure that high quality and clear information is available through centralised platforms.

10 Flexibility in models of delivery and student supports

- It is recommended that the expansion of flexible models of delivery to address the needs of priority group students and to support their participation in higher education is prioritised by HEIs.
- It is also recommended that ways to embed greater flexibility in the provision of student support services is explored at institutional level. For example, the availability of support services outside of core hours to facilitate students who are working while undertaking their studies or commuting long distances should be considered by HEIs. At national level, options to embed greater flexibility in student supports should be explored to ensure optimal alignment and coherence between policy intentions and supporting funding mechanisms.

11 SED students with diverse life experiences and the implementation of the second Access Data Plan

- Stakeholders consulted as part of this Review expressed concerns in relation to the collection and monitoring of national level data relating to socioeconomically disadvantaged students with particular life experiences set out in the NAP. It is important to note that the consultation process for this review concluded in advance of the publication of the second Access Data Plan. The second Access Data Plan provides welcome clarity in relation to the collection of national level data, and it is recommended that HEIs continue to work in partnership with community and regional stakeholders to provide the appropriate supports to students who have experience of homelessness, experience of the criminal justice system, and to survivors of domestic violence.
- It is also recommended that the recommendations of the second Access Data Plan are implemented in a timely manner, taking account of the ongoing review of the Student Record System (SRS) by the HEA and opportunities that may arise in this context, and the [National Equality Data Strategy 2026-2031](#).

Section 6: Implementation Plan arising from the Mid-term Progress Review

Recommendation	Actions	Responsibility
1. National Targets & KPIs		
It is recommended that the NAP targets are maintained for the second phase of implementation.	Continue to monitor national progress against the NAP targets and KPI's on an annual basis.	HEA/DFHERIS
2. Traveller and Roma participation in higher education		
It is recommended that dedicated funding to support Traveller and Roma participation in higher education via PATH 5 transitions to a sustainable basis.	Identify a sustainable funding source to support the continuation of PATH 5 on a permanent basis in advance of the end of the one-year programme extension.	DFHERIS/HEA
3. Students with intellectual disabilities		
It is recommended that the systematic review of evidence gathered as part of the PATH 4 Phase 2 pilot supports policy development at national level and timely decisions and communication in relation to longer-term funding.	Complete a systematic review of research and evaluation outputs gathered through PATH 4 Phase 2 to inform future national policy relating to provision for students with intellectual disabilities in higher education and to support timely decisions on longer-term funding for such provision.	HEA/DFHERIS
4. Participation by mature students		
It is recommended that further work is undertaken to understand the barriers to participation by mature students from priority groups and to identify potential enablers.	Establish an Advisory Group to facilitate knowledge sharing and to provide guidance on potential mechanisms to increase participation in higher education by mature students from the priority groups.	HEA/DFHERIS/HEIs
5. Supports for students with disabilities		
It is recommended that the findings of the mapping of supports and services for students with disabilities in Further and Higher education, under the Department's Disability Project, be utilised to inform the future direction of disability support provision in Higher Education.	DFHERIS to continue mapping of support and services across tertiary education and utilise the findings to inform next steps regarding the provision of disability services in Higher Education.	DFHERIS

Recommendation	Actions	Responsibility
6. NAP Implementation structures		
It is recommended that a review of the structure and operation of the National Access Plan Steering Group is conducted.	In consultation with Steering Group members, review the terms of reference and membership to support improved ways of working and to better leverage member expertise.	DFHERIS/NAP SG
7. Whole-of-institution approaches to Universal Design implementation		
It is recommended that HEIs explore ways to further embed whole-of-institution Universal Design approaches, having regard to the four pillars identified in the ALTITUDE Charter; (1) Learning, Teaching and Assessment; (2) Supports, Services and Social Engagement; (3) Physical Environment and (4) Digital Environment.	Drawing on evidence of the impact of the PATH4 Phase 1 Universal Design Fund and emerging learnings from the implementation of the Inclusive Environment Fund, HEIs to advance the further embedding of whole-of-institution approaches to Universal Design.	DFHERIS/HEA HEIs
8. Student Engagement		
It is recommended that further work is carried out to enhance the meaningful representation of student partners, taking account of national level structures such as NStEP. It is recommended that HEIs provide increased opportunities for integrating the voices of priority group students.	QQI, HEA and AMLÉ to undertake a review of the structure of NStEP to support its ongoing effectiveness. HEIs to enhance the engagement of priority group students in decision making in relation to programme design, monitoring and evaluation.	QQI/HEA/AMLÉ HEIs
9. Clarity of information to priority group students		
It is recommended that further work is undertaken at national level to ensure that high quality and clear information is available through both centralised and institutional channels.	Progress the review of the studentfinance.ie website. Continue to maintain and update Qualifax.ie and NurturingSkills.ie platforms on an annual basis to support the provision of quality information to learners. Implement the Digital Public Services Plan to improve the accessibility and quality of information for learners on diverse education pathways and related student supports.	HEA/DFHERIS QQI/DCDE DFHERIS

Recommendation	Actions	Responsibility
10. Flexibility in models of delivery and student supports		
<p>It is recommended that the expansion of flexible models of delivery to address the needs of priority group students and to support their participation in higher education is prioritised by HEIs.</p>	<p>HEIs to continue to develop hybrid and online models to enhance access and participation.</p>	<p>HEIs</p>
<p>It is recommended that ways to embed greater flexibility in the provision of student support services is explored at institutional level.</p>	<p>HEIs to review the provision of student support services to support engagement by students outside of core hours.</p>	<p>HEIs</p>
<p>It is recommended that options to embed greater flexibility in student supports at national level is explored.</p>	<p>DFHERIS and HEA to explore ways to enhance flexibility in student supports at national level.</p>	<p>DFHERIS/HEA/SUSI</p>
11. SED students with diverse life experiences and the implementation of the second Access Data Plan		
<p>It is recommended that HEIs continue to work in partnership with community and regional stakeholders to provide the appropriate supports to students who have experience of homelessness, experience of the criminal justice system, and to survivors of domestic violence.</p>	<p>HEIs to strengthen partnerships with community and regional stakeholders to guide the identification and provision of appropriately tailored pre- and post-entry, and transition supports to students with diverse life experiences.</p>	<p>HEIs</p>
<p>It is recommended that the recommendations of the second Access Data Plan are implemented in a timely manner.</p>	<p>HEA and DFHERIS to develop and agree an implementation plan to progress the recommendations within the second Access Data Plan, having regard to the ongoing review of the Student Record System (SRS) by the HEA and the National Equality Data Strategy 2026–2031.</p>	<p>HEA/DFHERIS</p>

Appendices

Appendix 1 Theory of Change (ToC) Map

Introduction

The approach utilised for this Mid-term Progress Review is grounded in leading principles of contemporary evaluation practice. As part of this process, a progressive Theory of Change (ToC) was developed and submitted for consideration to both the annual National Access Forum and the NAP Steering Group, reflecting a commitment to co-designing an effective review process with input from key stakeholders.

The original ToC comprised the following overarching components:

- **Defined Situation:** The HEA commissioned this independent Mid-term Progress Review of the National Access Plan (NAP) 2022–28, including an assessment of progress against national targets, KPIs, and key actions specified under each of the six agreed NAP goals.
- **Review Aims:** These are detailed in aggregated form within Section 1.4 of this document.
- **Rationale:** The Review seeks to a) identify implementation gaps and areas for improvement, b) provide actionable recommendations to support direction and prioritisation within the policy lifecycle, and c) facilitate informed decision-making aimed at promoting equitable access to education for priority groups identified in the NAP.
- **Assumptions:** Key assumptions include timing, targets, focus, availability of evidence, and access to critical data sources.
- **Evaluation Overview:** Outlines inputs, activities, and processes underpinning the selected approach.
- **Anticipated Outputs and Outcomes:** Encompasses short-, mid-, and long-term deliverables expected from the review.
- **Key Enablers and Barriers:** Stakeholder engagement surfaced factors such as motivations, expectations, trust, support, long-term resourcing, and the influence of economic and political stability on marginalised groups targeted by the NAP during the review period.

The following diagram presents a summary of progress to date towards the NAP goals, alongside the identified key challenges. Please note that these challenges are numbered according to stakeholder-identified priorities.

Theory of Change (ToC) Blueprint addressing NAP Mid-term Progress Review Findings

Completed Aims
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reviewed & evaluated extent of progress against actions underpinning each NAP objective. - Reviewed progress of Goals & KPIs outlined in the NAP. - Conducted consultation with a representative cross-section of stakeholders. - Provided a clear set of evidence-based recommendations. - Constructed an end report & dissemination of findings to sustain effective policy implementation.

Summary Overview Analysis of Progress Per Goal		
1. Inclusivity	2. Flexibility	3. Clarity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collective measures & outcomes point to substantial progress in fostering a more inclusive, flexible, & supportive educational environment, though ongoing monitoring & expansion of these initiatives will be essential to maintain momentum & address remaining barriers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Developments reflect a sector that is responsive, innovative, & committed to equitable access & lifelong learning opportunities during this period. Overall, progress towards enhancing flexibility, thus increasing access & inclusion within the HE sector has been significant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some sustainable progress has been made in enhancing clarity of student support & access in HE through integrated services & clearer communication. While accessible resources & targeted initiatives show ongoing improvement, there is room to advance further.
4. Coherence	5. Sustainability	6. Evidence-Driven
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Substantial progress has been made towards facilitating coherence targets & NAP infrastructure, leading to the establishment of robust partnerships and innovative pathways. Ongoing monitoring of access, participation, & success for priority student groups remains essential. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some progress has been made towards sustainability targets & outcomes, with anticipated progress deemed relevant for this stage in the NAP lifecycle. However, many initiatives are still in the early stages of development & have yet to fully mature and realise impact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Significant progress has been made, while challenges remain to deepen longitudinal analysis. Sector trajectory is promising towards fulfilling targets underpinning the evidence-driven goal to support more equitable access & successful progression within HE.

Enablers and barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Motivations & expectations. - Engagement, trust & support. - Longer-term resourcing for success.

Assumptions
<p>That the Mid-term Progress Review:</p> <p>a) Identified gaps & areas for improvement in implementation of the NAP.</p> <p>b) Provided a set of actionable recommendations to enhance direction & areas to be prioritised for the remainder of the NAP timeframe.</p> <p>c) Supported informed decision making & promoted equitable access to education for priority groups identified in the NAP 2022-2028.</p>

Identified Challenges Affecting Progress of Goal Achievements		
<p>1. Short-Term Funding (Goals 1, 4, 5)</p>	<p>2. Limitations in institutional data systems (Goals 1, 4, 6)</p>	<p>3. Limitations in NAP implementation structures (Goals 1, 3, 4, 5)</p>
<p>Challenge: Reliance on project-based &/or short-term funding produces uncertainty for the continuation of programme delivery and staff continuity.</p>	<p>Challenge: The data infrastructure within HEIs can be fragmented, thus limiting the ability to track priority groups over time.</p>	<p>Challenge: Limitations in the NAP implementation structures hinder effective cross-sectoral collaboration and the leveraging of expertise.</p>
<p>4. Participation and Progress of NAP Priority Group Students (Goals 1, 2, 3, & 5)</p>	<p>5. Building Universal Design capacity at mid-term stage (Goals 1, 2, 4 & 5)</p>	
<p>Challenge: Participation and progress of some NAP priority group cohorts remain too low.</p>	<p>Challenge: The embedding of Universal Design at institutional level is incremental and requires consistency in support.</p>	





Mediators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Access to NAP SG & stakeholder expertise. - Resources to implement sustainable actions. - Access to updated insights from second Access Data Plan

N. of key challenges possibly affecting progress, per Goal
<p>G1 = 5. G2 = 2. G3 = 2.</p> <p>G4 = 4. G5 = 4. G6 = 1</p>

Appendix 2 Progress across NAP Goals, Objectives and Key Actions

This appendix provides an overview of progress by stakeholders towards the goals, objectives and actions contained within the NAP.

Key

-  **Making good progress**
Work towards the actions supporting this objective are on track and progressing well.
-  **Making some progress**
Work towards the actions supporting this objective are delayed but some progress has been made.
-  **Making no progress**
Work towards the actions supporting this objective have not progressed.
-  **Work on this action is complete**
Work towards the actions supporting this objective have been completed and no further action is required.

Goal 1: Inclusivity

Objective	Action	Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator	Actions undertaken
<p>1.1 To support students from priority groups to access higher education and have an inclusive experience with a successful outcome.</p>	<p>HEIs to implement access, participation and success strategies that support delivery of the ambitions of this Plan. In these strategies HEIs should consider pathways to higher education and reserved places for students from priority groups.</p>	<p>HEIs, HEA, DFHERIS</p>	<p>HEIs report to HEA yearly on implementation of National Access Plan as part of Strategic Dialogue Process and annual data reporting through Student Records System (SRS) and Equal Access Survey.</p> <p>NFETL updates HEA on implementation of the Student Success Framework.</p>	<p>Access and Participation is a pillar in the System Performance Framework under which HEIs must report as part of the annual Strategy and Performance Dialogue process. HEIs report annually on their implementation of the NAP through the reporting process under the HEA Act, 2022.</p> <p>The NFETL operates under the auspices of the HEA, and the HEA has reviewed key NFETL policy documents including the Student Success Framework in 2025.</p>
<p>1.2 To support underrepresented, disadvantaged or vulnerable students through the Covid-19 pandemic with targeted funds.</p>	<p>To review the impact of the Covid-19 Contingency Fund and the extra once-off funding under the SAF as part of the wider vision of increased access, participation and success.</p>	<p>HEIs, HEA, DFHERIS</p>	<p>Number of students supported by targeted funds and associated qualitative outcomes.</p>	<p>HEIs completed institutional level reviews of Covid-19 Contingency Funding and additional SAF funding. According to this reporting, 20,669 students were in receipt of SAF in 2020/21, representing an increase of 44% on the previous year. In 2021/22, HEIs reported that 19,255 students were in receipt of SAF.</p> <p>According to estimates provided by HEIs, Covid-19 Contingency funding enabled ongoing engagement with more than 21,000 students in total from the NAP priority groups over the two-year period.</p>
<p>1.3 To embed a whole-of institution approach to student success and universal design.</p>	<p>To consider how PATH funding can be used to embed inclusive practices and help HEIs prepare for greater inclusion of priority groups including students with intellectual disabilities.</p>	<p>DFHERIS, HEA, HEIs</p>	<p>Evidence of inclusive practices, for example, accessible learning platforms, staff training, appointment of universal design champions, improved campus accessibility and qualitative review of universal design in HEIs.</p>	<p>In 2022, €3 million was allocated to HEIs by the HEA under PATH 4 Phase 1 to support the embedding of Universal Design and enable the building of capacity in HEIs for greater participation by students with intellectual disabilities.</p> <p>In recognition of the positive impact of this investment, a further €2.8 million was provided to HEIs in December 2024 under a subsequent round of PATH 4 Phase 1 funding. The Inclusive Environment Fund is supporting HEIs to build on the progress made in advancing Universal Design implementation.</p>

Objective	Action	Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator	Actions undertaken
<p>1.3 To embed a whole-of institution approach to student success and universal design.</p>	<p>To support and implement inclusive practice and design principles, for example, managing universal design-focused Strategic Initiatives funded under the Fund for Students with Disabilities</p>	<p>DFHERIS, HEA, HEIs, DCDE</p>	<p>Evidence of inclusive practices, for example, accessible learning platforms, staff training, appointment of universal design champions, improved campus accessibility and qualitative review of universal design in HEIs.</p>	<p>The FSD Strategic Initiatives encompassed over 100 projects, most of which were completed by the end of 2022.</p> <p>The projects focused on the strategic development of disability support services in HEIs, as well as enhancing supports for students with a disability, improving college campus environments and assisting HEI staff with training and development.</p> <p>Some of the main reported outcomes achieved with strategic initiatives funding include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation and mainstreaming of Universal Design (UD) principles on a number of HEI campuses. • The development and installation of autism-friendly spaces such as sensory pods. • The development of flexible learning materials and alternative formats of learning that support student independence. • Over 1,000 staff members have participated in trainings and inductions, including UDL Badge certification.
<p>1.4 To incorporate the voice of priority group students in decision-making on access, participation and student success policies, programmes and initiatives.</p>	<p>To use existing initiatives such as NStEP (National Student Engagement Programme) and StudentSurvey.ie to include the voice and experiences of priority group students.</p>	<p>DFHERIS, HEA, HEIs, QQI, AMLÉ, IUA, TUA, NStEP</p>	<p>Incorporation of NStEP</p> <p>Framework and student engagement principles within HEIs. Annual Report from Student Survey.ie outlining additional findings from priority groups students.</p>	<p>A review of NStEP is planned to support its ongoing effectiveness.</p> <p>A comprehensive review of StudentSurvey.ie has been undertaken with the redesigned survey to launch in 2026. Changes to the survey include substantial shortening of the length and completion time to support increased response rates, a recentring of the student within the questionnaire and the use of more accessible language. Questions have also been added to shed light on barriers to student engagement.</p>
<p>1.4 To incorporate the voice of priority group students in decision-making on access, participation and student success policies, programmes and initiatives.</p>	<p>To improve mechanisms for students to meaningfully contribute to access policy.</p>	<p>DFHERIS, HEA, HEIs</p>	<p>Future policy developments arising from the Plan include student voice in development and implementation.</p>	<p>Students from NAP priority groups were recruited through NStEP as advisors to work on the NAP Mid-term Review.</p> <p>The voice of students with intellectual disabilities was incorporated into the development and implementation of PATH 4 Phase 2.</p> <p>Priority group students are also included in sectoral events such as the Annual Access Forum.</p>
<p>1.5 To improve opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to engage in higher education.</p>	<p>To develop policies and implementation plans to promote meaningful participation of students with intellectual disabilities.</p>	<p>DFHERIS, HEA, HEIs, DCDE</p>	<p>Policy development and implementation commenced.</p>	<p>Further to an extensive consultation process, the three-year PATH 4 Phase 2 initiative was initiated in 2023 supported by over €11 million to date. Programmes for students with intellectual disabilities are being provided by 11 HEIs. A two-year extension of PATH 4 Phase 2 was confirmed in Q1 2026.</p>

Objective	Action	Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator	Actions undertaken
1.6 To consider how to achieve a more diverse student population across all programmes and all levels of study, both undergraduate and postgraduate.	To consult with stakeholders on ways to promote diversity and inclusion in the professions and in high points or high demand courses and at postgraduate (taught and research) level.	DFHERIS, HEA, HEIs, research funding agencies	Increase in diversity in programmes with a view to reflecting overall population.	The LaunchPAD partnership was established in 2023 to support the inclusion of disabled postgraduate students in higher education. Arising from the LaunchPAD partnership, in 2025, Research Ireland launched a pilot disability policy and supplemental grant to better support students with disabilities as they complete their research.
1.6 To consider how to achieve a more diverse student population across all programmes and all levels of study, both undergraduate and postgraduate.	To promote Erasmus+ mobility options among all students, including those who have fewer opportunities (in line with the stated priorities and targeted groups in the Erasmus+ Programme 2021).	DFHERIS, HEA, HEIs	Number of students participating in Erasmus+ mobility programmes including those receiving extra supports.	More students from disadvantaged backgrounds are now undertaking an international mobility experience. Based on 2023 data, students with fewer opportunities represented 31% of all mobilities, up from 23% in 2021/22.
1.7 To work towards a more diverse teacher workforce by supporting equity of access, participation and success in initial teacher education by priority groups.	To consider the impact of PATH 1 projects on students from priority groups and their ability to access ITE, including meeting entry requirements and overcoming barriers to access. To build on learnings from PATH 1, with increased focus on early intervention.	DFHERIS, DEY, HEA, Teaching Council	Findings of PATH impact assessment provide insight on how priority groups have been supported to access ITE. Increase in the number of students from priority groups on ITE programmes over the lifetime of the Plan.	An independent assessment of the impact of strands 1-3 of the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) was completed in 2024. Building on its recommendations, PATH 1 transitioned from a time-limited to a sustainably funded initiative in 2025, enabling HEIs to embed learnings from the prior phases of implementation.
1.7 To work towards a more diverse teacher workforce by supporting equity of access, participation and success in initial teacher education for the priority groups.	To develop baseline data on diversity in initial teacher education (ITE) programmes from priority groups.	DFHERIS, DEY, HEA, HEIs	Accurate comprehensive data gathered on students from priority groups on ITE programmes to inform decision-making.	Data indicators on entry to, and participation in, ITE programmes by NAP priority groups are being monitored by the HEA on an ongoing basis as part of NAP implementation. This data can be disaggregated by SED, disability and ethnicity, however there are limitations on publication of disaggregated data in line with best practice for statistical disclosure.
1.7 To work towards a more diverse teacher workforce by supporting equity of access, participation and success in initial teacher education by priority groups.	To include priority groups in campaigns to promote participation in the teaching profession.	DEY, Teaching Council	Promotional campaigns to feature members of priority groups where possible.	Teaching Council staff attended over 30 career and recruitment fairs across the Republic of Ireland in 2025. Access courses and supports for NAP target groups are promoted at these events.

Objective	Action	Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator	Actions undertaken
1.7 To work towards a more diverse teacher workforce by supporting equity of access, participation and success in initial teacher education by priority groups.	Consider the findings of the longitudinal study of reconfigured ITE programmes to inform the development of measures to support the supply, diversity and retention of newly qualified teachers.	DEY, Teaching Council	Findings from research commissioned by the Teaching Council and the Department of Education are considered.	The fifth research objective of the TC and DEY jointly commissioned and funded study, the Teachers' Professional Journeys: The First Decade (2024-2030) is to consider issues relating to teacher supply, diversity and retention during teachers' early careers as they complete ITE and become established in the profession.
1.8 To promote diversity in the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SLC) workforce to provide role models for children and ensure connections with families and communities.	To develop and introduce a mechanism for the funding of Early Years Educators to undertake Level 7/8 programmes in Early Learning and Care.	DCDE	New funding mechanism in place. Graduate-led workforce in Early Learning and Care by 2028.	Nurturing Skills Learner Fund is now in place in pilot phase. Proportion of Early Learning and Care staff with qualifications at Level 7 and above has increased from 25% in 2019 to 39% in 2024.
1.8 To promote diversity in the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SLC) workforce to provide role models for children and ensure connections with families and communities.	To evaluate a range of entry routes into Early Learning and Care in consultation with relevant Departments. To improve data collection and research on diversity in ELC and SAC workforce to improve target settings.	DCDE	Evaluation of potential entry routes and access programmes complete, and actions taken on evaluations. Baseline data gathered and potential targets examined.	Research on Alternate Entry Routes was commissioned in 2025. Promotion of the ELC & SAC profession currently being developed. TALIS Starting Strong Report published in Q4 2025.
1.9 To support students through universal and targeted funding programmes.	To continuously review targeted access measures and programmes to address priority policy areas.	DFHERIS	Number of students supported by targeted funds and associated qualitative outcomes.	Since 2023/24 600 students receive Tier 1 and Tier 2 1916 Bursaries co-funded by ESF+. 193 are enrolled in PATH 4 Phase 2 programmes to date. In 2024 FSD supported 21,328 students with disabilities. SAF supported over 22,400 students in 2024/25.

Goal 2: Flexibility

Objective	Action	Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator	Actions undertaken
<p>2.1 To support priority group students who study on a flexible basis and to promote flexible teaching and learning practices informed by inclusive practices and principles.</p>	<p>To consider measures to help priority group students who wish to study on a parttime or flexible basis, including direct financial support, HEI student services and adapting learnings from Covid-19 to enable a blended and inclusive student experience based on inclusive learning principles.</p>	<p>DFHERIS, HEA, IUA, TUA, HEIs, QQI</p>	<p>Implementation of recommendation in respect of part-time/flexible learning arising from Review of Student Grant Scheme.</p> <p>HEIs report yearly to HEA on implementation of National Access Plan as part of the Strategic Dialogue Process.</p> <p>NFETL updates HEA on implementation of the sectoral project: Next Steps for Teaching and Learning: Moving Forward Together.</p>	<p>A part-time student fee scheme was introduced for 62 specified undergraduate courses in 2024/25 and expanded to 100 programmes in 2025/26.</p> <p>In December 2025, the HEA published a new Strategy for Teaching and Learning, setting out a national vision to promote excellence in teaching and learning across higher education in Ireland.</p> <p>In 2023, QQI issued Statutory QA guidelines for providers of blended and fully online programmes.</p>
<p>2.2 To identify connectivity initiatives that facilitate all students to fully participate in remote learning.</p>	<p>To further advance connectivity supports by considering measures which enable greater and more widespread access to high-speed internet.</p>	<p>DFHERIS, HEAnet</p>	<p>Increase in provision of eduroam locations.</p>	<p>eduroam is now available in over 500 locations across Ireland, representing a major step in expanding digital connectivity for students, researchers, and educators.</p>
<p>2.3 To explore new routes for priority groups to access programmes and improve the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).</p>	<p>To develop a national approach to RPL and other prior learning outcomes.</p>	<p>DFHERIS</p>	<p>Implementation of HCI funded RPL project including roll-out of National RPL Framework. QQI scopes and publishes national approach to RPL in tertiary education.</p>	<p>All higher education institutions have RPL policies to enhance pathways to HE for all. Since 2020, 14 higher education institutions have partnered with the HCI-funded National Project for RPL in Higher Education, with the goal of creating and embedding a consistent approach to RPL across the higher education system. Although the HCI has now concluded, the work from the RPL project has continued in 2026, and has impacted over 12,000 learners to date, many of whom have gained access to third-level education based on their informal learning and work experience. Staff training in RPL across HEIs has been formalised through the development of an RPL Digital Badge and an RPL Toolkit. Further information can be found on the priorlearning.ie website.</p>

Goal 3: Clarity

Objective	Action	Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator	Actions undertaken
3.1 To give students, families and community partners clear consistent information and career guidance, as well as guidance on financial and other supports.	To conduct a review of studentfinance.ie with appropriate stakeholder consultation to ensure it meets the needs of priority groups.	HEA, DFHERIS	Review completed and website updated.	To date, a review of the studentfinance.ie has not been progressed due to the prioritisation of other activities, including PATH 4 Phase 2. This will be progressed in the second phase of NAP implementation taking account of related developments.
3.1 To give students, families and community partners clear consistent information and career guidance, as well as guidance on financial and other supports.	To develop a new Qualifax website providing information on learning opportunities, including access supports.	DFHERIS, QQI	Review completed and website updated.	QQI continues to promote Qualifax at a wide range of events.
3.1 To give students, families and community partners clear consistent information and career guidance, as well as guidance on financial and other supports.	To improve career information and career guidance tools for priority group students at all stages of the education lifecycle.	DEY, DFHERIS, DCDE, Tusla	Outcomes from progress implementation of 2019 Review of Career Guidance. Enhancement of the Right Course tool. Guidance resources for pilot projects which support transitions for students from priority groups.	NurturingSkills.ie website launched in May 2025 and is a central hub for information on ELS & SAC career information and training resources. The National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (2024–2030) and an accompanying action plan were published in December 2023. This aimed to support and strengthen lifelong guidance in Ireland and built on the 2019 Indecon Report on Career Guidance. Two progress reports have been published – one in 2025 and one in 2026. The Digital Public Services Plan aims to make 100% of key public services available online. One of the services outlined in the plan relates to providing information and guidance on tertiary education, and the aim is to have this available completely online by 2030.
3.2 To ensure greater coordination and consistency of pre-entry and mentoring work across HEIs.	To establish a working group across the higher education system involving stakeholder and community partner consultation to consider a coherent approach to pre-entry and mentoring.	DEY, DFHERIS, HEA, HEIs, SOLAS, DCDE, NCSE	Agreed set of best practice principles.	To date, progress has not been reported against this action.
3.3 To develop student-friendly processes and align existing access structures.	To implement a centralised application and assessment facility for the PATH 2 – 1916 Bursary Fund, including appointing a PATH coordinator and rolling out a promotional campaign.	DFHERIS, IUA	Centralised application and assessment facility for PATH 2 in operation.	A Centralised Application and Assessment Facility (CAAF) for the PATH 2 1916 Bursary Fund was developed in 2023, hosted by SUSI. A new PATH 2 Co-Ordinator is based in SUSI since 2025.

Goal 4: Coherence

Objective	Action	Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator	Actions undertaken
4.1 To develop strategic partnerships and approaches to support access, participation and success by students from priority groups.	To build on and improve partnerships and collaborative pathways between the FET and HE sectors, community education providers, community partners and employers as part of future development of PATH.	DFHERIS, HEA, SOLAS, HEIs, DRCDG, other stakeholders as appropriate	Increased participation by students from priority groups. Evidence of partnerships in place with outcomes for students from priority groups.	Collaboration is at the centre of each of the five distinct PATH strands. The confirmation of sustainable funding for PATH 1 and 3, and the one-year extension of PATH 5, will support HEIs to enhance and strengthen partnerships at community and regional level.
4.2 To develop a whole-of education approach to inclusion in education, with the need to target students earlier in the education cycle.	To equip all teachers to teach a diverse school population and support students to transition to further and higher education.	DEY, Teaching Council, DFHERIS, NCSE	Information gathered on how the core element of inclusive education, as defined in 'Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education' is being implemented across all ITE programmes on completion of the second cycle of accreditation of programmes.	The Teaching Council's second cycle of accreditation concluded in January 2024, and as an outcome of this, the Teaching Council completed a report that was shared with DEY, which had a particular focus on Inclusive and Global Citizenship Education, and the work that is currently being undertaken with the ITE providers in this field. The report showcased examples of good practice and will be used to inform the direction of the Céim Review, which commenced in Q4 2025.
4.2 To develop a whole-of education approach to inclusion in education, with the need to target students earlier in the education cycle.	To put in place a structure for formal engagement on transitions from post primary to further and higher education and to examine transitions to and within further and higher education – both with a particular focus on students from priority groups.	DFHERIS, DEY, QQI, NCSE	Structure in place. Common principles and a coordinated approach to inclusion developed that supports priority group students at all stages of the education cycle. Sharing of data on progression from different stages in the education cycle in place.	In Q1 2025, an official-level, interdepartmental working group on Transitions and Pathways was established between DEY and DFHERIS. The group provides a forum for information sharing and for developing a common approach to a broad range of issues relating to transitions from secondary to tertiary education. The group continues to meet on a regular basis. Under the Digital Public Services Plan 2030, DFHERIS is leading the development of a "life event" service focused on the transition from second to third level. The objective is to make it more intuitive for users to access information on, and apply for, relevant public services at the point of need. It is envisaged that the transitions life event will incorporate information on diverse education pathways, alongside student supports. A governance group for the life event service was established in Q1 2026, composing of public bodies which deliver relevant services and other important stakeholders.

Objective	Action	Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator	Actions undertaken
<p>4.2 To develop a whole-of education approach to inclusion in education, with the need to target students earlier in the education cycle.</p>	<p>To develop and implement a Traveller Education Strategy under the National Traveller and Roma Integration Strategy (NTRIS), building on the Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019–2021 and the roll-out of Dormant Accounts funding to support Traveller and Roma participation in higher education.</p>	<p>DCDE, DEY, DFHERIS</p>	<p>Publication of Traveller Education Strategy.</p> <p>Outcomes from PATH funding and Dormant Accounts funding.</p>	<p>Education is a key theme under NTRIS II 2024–2028, which is supported by the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024–2030 (TRES).</p> <p>The positive impact of the Dormant Accounts Funding provided to support Traveller and Roma participation in higher education informed the introduction of the three-year PATH 5 programme in 2023. A one-year extension of PATH 5 was confirmed at the end of 2025.</p>
<p>4.2 To develop a whole-of education approach to inclusion in education, with the need to target students earlier in the education cycle.</p>	<p>To support equity of access to Early Learning and Care (ELC) through the Access and Inclusion Model and target resources to address issues of socioeconomic disadvantage.</p>	<p>DCDE</p>	<p>Implementation of recommendations of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) Evaluation when finalised.</p> <p>Development of policy and implementation plan to address issues of disadvantage in ELC to include a focus on transitions.</p>	<p>An independent evaluation of AIM was published in January 2024. Based on the evaluation’s findings, AIM is now being extended on a phased basis as funding becomes available. Since September 2024, targeted AIM supports are available to ECCE-eligible children outside of ECCE hours – both during term time and in holiday periods.</p> <p>Equal Start is a funding model and a set of associated universal and targeted measures to support access and meaningful participation in early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) for children and their families who experience disadvantage. Equal Start was launched in May 2024 and initial roll-out commenced in September 2024.</p> <p>A National Transitions Policy statement will be published shortly by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, and the Department of Education and Youth. Thereafter, DCDE will commission an independent research digest to summarise the most recent and relevant research on transitions and to identify models of best practice.</p> <p>A subsequent implementation plan will outline the expectations being placed on ELC services and schools to ensure supported entry for all children into and through all stages of early education and beyond.</p>

Objective	Action	Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator	Actions undertaken
<p>4.3 To develop collaboration between government departments and agencies to ensure a whole-of-government approach to removing barriers to access, participation and success.</p>	<p>Strengthen synergies between the Plan and whole-of-tertiary education approaches and relevant national strategies.</p> <p>These include the Road Map for Social Inclusion, the National Disability Inclusion Strategy, the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, the Migrant Integration Strategy, Working to Change, and the Youth Homelessness Strategy when developed.</p>	<p>DFHERIS in partnership with other government departments and agencies</p>	<p>DFHERIS representation on groups and input to strategies.</p> <p>Structured links with regional bodies, community organisations and HEIs.</p>	<p>DFHERIS has representation on all groups listed and regularly attends the meetings of these groups where still operational and contributes to government policy.</p>

Goal 5: Sustainability

Objective	Action	Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator	Actions undertaken
5.1 To develop a sustainably funded higher education system that will support the objectives and actions of this Plan.	To build capacity within HEIs to support equity of access and student success for priority groups.	DFHERIS	Evidence of enhanced student supports and flexibility arising from increased resources to HEIs.	<p>There has been significant improvement in the funding to the higher education sector in recent years. Budget 2026 secured an additional €9.6 million in core Exchequer funding under Funding the Future which, combined with the €164.4 million secured in Budgets 2023, 2024, and 2025, brings the total additional core funding provided to date to €174 million.</p> <p>A further €100 million in core funding will be delivered by the end of the decade from the National Training Fund.</p> <p>The remaining funding gap of circa €33 million will be met by Exchequer funding in future budgets. It is anticipated that this additional Exchequer funding will be secured to fund commitments to deliver on priorities such as medicine places and tertiary programmes.</p> <p>The level of increase, particularly in light of other demands on Exchequer funding, demonstrates the Government’s commitment to the sector to fully realise its potential.</p>
5.2 To sustain funding and develop initiatives and activities that involve HE and community partnerships, funded through time-limited programmes.	To evaluate the impact of pilot projects funded through time-limited programmes to help identify projects that prove effective so as to continue these projects through core funding.	DFHERIS, HEIs, HEA	<p>Projects that show impact are sustained through core funding.</p> <p>PATH impact assessment completed.</p>	<p>Further to the recommendations within the independent assessment of the impact of strands 1-3 of the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH), PATH 1 and PATH 3 transitioned to sustainable funding models in 2025.</p>
5.2 To sustain funding and develop initiatives and activities that involve HE and community partnerships, funded through time-limited programmes.	To explore how the higher education sector can engage better with partners such as DEIS schools, further education providers, community and voluntary groups, existing local initiatives to tackle educational disadvantage, and Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs).	DFHERIS, DEY, SOLAS, DRCDG, DCDE	<p>Increased partnership between HEIs and partners to support transitions to and within HE.</p> <p>Roll-out of PATH programme. HEI representation on LCDCs.</p>	<p>Tertiary programmes, first launched in July 2023, are a new kind of educational provision which allows a student to begin a degree course in further education, before transitioning on to complete their degree in a higher education setting. As of Budget 2026, €4 million per annum is allocated towards the development of tertiary programmes.</p> <p>Entry to tertiary programmes is outside the CAO system, providing an alternate pathway to a degree for individuals who may not have received the requisite points for a course they are passionate about.</p> <p>The tertiary pathway also aims to increase access to higher education for those excluded from the traditional pathway.</p> <p>A total of 48 courses are running for the academic year 2025/26 including new courses in occupational therapy, nursing, social care and the creative arts.</p>

Objective	Action	Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator	Actions undertaken
<p>5.3 To expand funding to address the cost of going to college and enable parttime study for socioeconomically disadvantaged students from priority groups.</p>	<p>To implement the recommendations of the Review of Student Grant Scheme in respect of addressing the cost of going to college and considering extra direct financial support for students from priority groups under the PATH programme.</p> <p>To consider measures to help priority group students who wish to study on a parttime or flexible basis, including direct financial support.</p>	<p>DFHERIS</p>	<p>Increase to Non-Adjacent, Special Rate and Band A Maintenance Grants and increased opportunities for undergraduates from priority groups to continue to postgraduate study. Increase in PATH Bursaries.</p> <p>Implementation of recommendation in respect of part-time/flexible learning arising from Review of Student Grant Scheme.</p>	<p>The Student Grant scheme has been significantly expanded with increases to the non-adjacent, special rate and maintenance grants.</p> <p>A part-time fee scheme for specified undergraduate courses was introduced in 2024/25.</p> <p>Maintenance grants for postgraduate students were restored.</p> <p>With the support of ESF+ co-funding, the number of PATH 2 Bursaries awarded annually increased to 600 bursaries in 2023/24.</p>

Goal 6: Evidence-driven approach

Objective	Action	Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator	Actions undertaken
6.1 To develop the evidence base for inclusive access, participation and success to inform future policy and planning.	To arrange regular meetings between DFHERIS, HEA, HEIs and other partners to share information and best practice.	DFHERIS, HEA, HEIs	Annual Access Forum, annual community of practice events, Implementation Steering Group, IUA Access Steering Group, SUSI Advisory Group.	Regular meetings are arranged between stakeholders. These include the National Access Plan Steering Group, the Annual Access Forum and PATH 4 Phase 2 Community of Practice events. In addition, stakeholders meet through the IUA Access Leaders Group as well as other events organised by the sector.
6.1 To develop the evidence base for inclusive access, participation and success to inform future policy and planning.	To prepare a new Access Data Plan that meets the needs of this Plan and to consider data-sharing agreements to support its implementation.	DFHERIS, HEA	New Access Data Plan and improved evidence base for policymaking developed and implemented.	The second Access Data Plan was published in November 2025. The HEA and DFHERIS are developing an implementation plan in response to the report’s recommendations.
6.1 To develop the evidence base for inclusive access, participation and success to inform future policy and planning.	To review national and international trends in access, transfer and progression, including existing QQI provisions and context with recommendations for future.	DFHERIS, QQI	High-level review commissioned.	QQI published a Green Paper on its Access, Transfer and Progression Policy in December 2024.
6.2 To evaluate and monitor the impact of access and inclusion initiatives.	To carry out an impact assessment of PATH 1, 2 and 3.	DFHERIS, HEA	Recommendations of impact assessment implemented.	An independent assessment of the impact of strands 1-3 of the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) was completed in July 2024. The HEA and DFHERIS subsequently developed an Implementation Plan in response to its recommendations.
6.2 To evaluate and monitor the impact of access and inclusion initiatives.	To ensure updates to the Higher Education System Performance Framework reflect the learning from implementation of this Plan.	DFHERIS, HEA	Plan vision reflected in new System Performance Framework.	The System Performance Framework 2023–28 comprises four pillars and a series of transversals capturing national system level priorities and outcomes for the higher education and research system. Access & Participation is one of the four pillars in this framework and HEIs must report annually on progress towards this pillar.

Notes



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