

Response to the consultation on the National Equity of Access Plan 2022– 2026

On the development of the National Equity of Access Plan 2022–2026 by the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

The Royal Irish Academy welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) on the development of the next National Access Plan, which will run from 2022 to 2026.

The Academy is strongly supportive of the commitment of the HEA and DFHERIS to the delivery of an equitable and inclusive higher-education system. Higher education is correctly recognised for the transformative and beneficial impact that it can have on the individuals who participate in it as students and staff and on the local communities, region, economy and society in which it is situated.

The Academy welcomes the positive developments arising from the implementation of the previous iteration of the National Equity of Access Plan. In particular, it notes the following:

- positive trends in participation by students with disabilities and the successful meeting of targets to increase participation rates of students with specific disabilities;
- the provision of specified funding such as the Fund for Students with Disabilities, recognising the additional financial burden borne by many students with disabilities, and the Student Assistance Fund, to support students experiencing unexpected financial difficulties during their studies;
- a dedicated infrastructure in higher-education institutions through the development of a network of Access Offices focused on increasing participation rates of under-represented cohorts; and
- enhanced approaches to data collection to support evidence-based policymaking.

The learning and advances achieved through the emergency shift to online delivery of teaching and learning (T&L) during the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying investment in digital

infrastructure should be consolidated and built on in support of wider equity-of-access objectives. The pandemic has had immediate obvious effects on both the delivery and the accessibility of higher education for students, in terms of the switch to online learning and the inaccessibility of campuses for many student cohorts since March 2020. The likely longer-term impact on participation and attainment rates is more complex and somewhat unknown; however, the higher-education institutions (HEIs) have already moved to enhance their provision of support services to help students to transition back to full-time campus education and to reconcile and move forward positively from their own experiences of pandemic life. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of external, national infrastructures in enabling participation: for example, during the pandemic, access to suitable technology and high-quality, reliable broadband became *de facto* core infrastructures supporting student participation in online T&L.

The consultation paper notes that the current target to increase the participation rate of mature students is as yet unmet. The opportunities created through online T&L to facilitate participation by students beyond the traditional school-leaver cohort should be carefully considered in the development of the next National Access Plan. Ireland's national ambitions require a highly qualified workforce and a population with access to ongoing opportunities to upskill and enhance their personal development—to respond, for example, to the opportunities and challenges presented by the roll-out and take-up of new technologies and the need to develop responses to global climate action challenges. Access to differentiated lifelong learning will be key to this. As well as those mature students entering higher education for the first time, those already in the workforce with higher-education qualifications will require access to flexible provision of upskilling programmes. Consideration could be given to the expansion of HEAR/DARE to post-graduate programmes.

The consultation paper indicates that the next iteration of the National Access Plan will seek to:

- increase the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are given the opportunity to participate in high-points professional undergraduate and post-graduate courses (e.g. medicine);
- increase the participation of mature students; and
- be informed by the student voice and experience in developing and delivering effective and inclusive supports in higher education.

The Academy would like to state its support for these objectives.

The Academy also wishes to indicate its support for a continued emphasis on improving the higher-education participation rates of Irish Travellers and students from other minority racial or ethnic backgrounds. The Academy notes the potential for the next National Access Plan to support research with the objective of better understanding the experiences of students from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds and to draw on these research-generated insights to develop targeted, appropriate and valid supports. The Academy considers that the next iteration of the plan should seek to identify the factors that support student retention in higher education more generally. Recent research by the Economic and Social Research Institute examined how Irish HEIs compare in their student retention patterns, taking account of student characteristics such as prior academic performance. It found clear institutional differences reflective of the differences in the type of students enrolling in particular HEIs. However, it also found that some colleges with more disadvantaged intakes fare better, all else being equal, pointing to the role of academic supports, differentiated T&L approaches and student engagement in college life in promoting success.¹

The Academy considers that the next iteration of the National Access Plan could usefully specify actions to facilitate the participation of students with autism and similar neuro-developmental conditions, who would benefit from targeted supports to enable their participation in higher education. There has been a significant growth in the number of primary- and post-primary-age students with autism, and the number of higher-education-level students with these conditions may also rise significantly in the years ahead. Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) already make up 7.5% of new entrants to higher education.² There is an emerging body of Irish research^{3,4} that can be usefully drawn on to inform the plan's actions to support access, participation and retention of students with autism, including evidence of the importance of:

- programmes to help prepare students on the spectrum for the transition from post-primary to higher education;

¹ Selina McCoy and Delma Byrne, 'Student retention in higher education', in John Cullinan and Darragh Flannery (eds), *Economic insights on higher education policy in Ireland* (n.p., 2017), 111–41.

² AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability), *Numbers of students with disabilities studying in higher education in Ireland 2017/18* (Dublin, 2019); available at: <https://ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/Numbers%20of%20Students%20with%20Disabilities%20Studying%20in%20Higher%20Education%20in%20Ireland%202017-18.pdf> (accessed 1 July 2021).

³ Laura Colman, Annie Cummins and Julie O'Donovan, 'Gaining insight into transition and progression of students on the autism spectrum—DISCOVER a transition programme with a difference', *The AHEAD Journal* [online] 11 (2020); available at: <https://www.ahead.ie/journal/Gaining-insight-into-transition-and-progression-of-students-on-the-autism-spectrum-Discover-a-transition-programme-with-a-difference> (accessed 1 July 2021).

⁴ Alison Doyle, Claire Gleeson and Declan Treanor, 'A pre-college transition programme for students with autistic spectrum disorder in Ireland', *The AHEAD Journal* [online] 5 (2017); available at: <https://www.ahead.ie/journal/A-pre-college-transition-programme-for-students-with-Autistic-Spectrum-Disorder-in-Ireland> (accessed 1 July 2021).

- multi-domain supports—socialisation, educational and independent living—recognising that many students on the spectrum will need support across all three domains; and
- involving students with autism in the design and delivery of supports and an inclusive educational environment.⁵

Consideration should also be given to the specific inclusion of ‘university of sanctuary’ students in national access supports.

Employers and industry also have a role to play in supporting equity of participation and attainment by making a special effort to engage with under-represented student cohorts in higher education. This can be achieved through the provision of opportunities to take up paid work placements to help build students’ work preparedness and introduce them to new career opportunities, in support of greater equity of attainment among student cohorts and ultimately greater diversity in the workforce. The next iteration of the National Access Plan could usefully work with employers and employer organisations to identify successful exemplars of such initiatives that could be mainstreamed.

The Academy looks forward to engaging with the DFHERIS and the HEA on these issues. The Academy’s Higher Education Futures Working Group⁶ will report in September 2021, and its work will include a specific paper on building equality, inclusiveness and diversity in Ireland’s future higher-education system.

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17 June 2021

⁵ Colman, Cummins and O’Donovan, ‘Gaining insight into transition and progression of students on the autism spectrum’.

⁶ For more information on the work of the RIA Higher Education Futures Working Group please visit <https://www.ria.ie/policy-international/working-groups/higher-education-futures>.