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# National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019

## Introduction

The third National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 was launched by the Minister for Education and Skills on 16 December 2015. This new, five-year plan has been developed by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in conjunction with the Department of Education and Skills (DES). The plan forms part of an overarching policy for social inclusion in education and will be implemented as part of Ireland's National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (DES, 2011).

## Context

Equity of access to higher education has been a fundamental principle of Irish public policy for the last forty years and the economic and social rationale for the continuing prioritisation of this area of work remains strong. A highly educated workforce is one of Ireland's greatest assets. To attract and retain the high-end jobs that a modern knowledge-based economy generates, there is a need to tap into the skills and talents of all of our people, not just those groups who have traditionally progressed to higher education.

The individual benefits of gaining a higher education qualification are well rehearsed and include better employability and higher earning power. There are also many non-financial benefits: graduates tend to enjoy greater job satisfaction, participate to a greater extent in society, and have better health. They are also likely to pass down an appreciation for education and its benefits to the next generation and to their local communities.

There is also a moral imperative in continuing to prioritise access which is best illustrated by the data presented in the plan on participation by socio-economic group and also by Dublin postal code. This data shows how 100% of school-leavers from some communities progress to higher education, compared to 25% or less of those from other groups and areas. In consultation for the new plan, strong representations were made on behalf of lowparticipating communities who face barriers in accessing higher education.

**The aim of the new plan** is to support better choices and opportunities for many more learners from these communities over the coming years.

## Progress to-date

Ireland has made significant progress in increasing equity of access to higher education over the last 20 years. There has been a notable increase in participation by students with disabilities and also those studying on a part-time or flexible basis. However, there are still groups who remain under-represented in the sector, particularly mature students, those with sensory and physical disabilities, young people from socially disadvantaged communities and Irish Travellers. This is the first plan in which participation in higher education by the Traveller community has been addressed as a specific policy priority. Similarly, targets have been set for the first time to increase participation in higher education by graduates with further education qualifications. Collaboration between

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Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), The Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS) and the HEA, and work by regional clusters on the development of pathways will support the achievement of this target. The plan sets out the objectives, actions and indicators designed to address under-representation and deliver the national participation targets for 2019.

**Ireland is one of a few countries that uses targeted measures to increase participation by under-represented groups.** These targets have been at the core of National Access Plans and have underpinned the rationale for the continued investment of resources in this area. Programmatic and core funding - allocated since 1995 by the HEA - has supported higher education institutions in developing pre-entry outreach programmes with schools and communities, as well as post-entry services and supports, including disability support services. The outcome of this investment is the progress that has been achieved over the past two decades.

For example, the overall rate of participation in higher education among 18 to 20 year olds has grown from less than 40% to over 52% of this age cohort. In addition participation by mature learners has grown from 4% to 13% of entrants to the sector. There have been significant strides made also in participation by people with disabilities which have risen from 1% to 6% of students. Participation in part-time and flexible programmes of higher education has also seen significant growth over the last decade, from 7% to 19% of all students. The National Access Plan has set new targets for further increases in participation by 2019.

## Next steps

A framework of challenging but realistic objectives and actions are set out by the plan as the focus for work on access over the next five years. In particular, there is a renewed emphasis on the need for stronger systems of collaboration and partnership among a range of stakeholders if real progress is to be achieved over the period of this plan. The actions planned include support for new pilot regional and community partnership strategies targeting low participating groups and communities.

Overarching reforms and landscape changes to the higher education system being progressed as part of a **National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030** are also relevant in this regard. Equity of access is a core objective in this strategy and the mapping and development of more flexible pathways to higher education is one of the priorities identified for the period 2014-2016. Progress on this priority by institutions has been reviewed by the HEA as part of a process of strategic dialogue and performance development. The second HEA report on the overall performance of higher education sector on a number of national priorities, including equity of access, will be published early in 2016.

In consultation for the new plan the HEA and the DES noted the critical role that mentors and teachers play in nurturing the educational aspirations of primary and second level students. Another area of action therefore will be to advance a national, collaborative approach to mentoring and other outreach initiatives with second level schools. Increased access to teacher training as a profession, as well as the professional development of teachers will also be prioritised.

Measures focused on supporting the retention and participation of students from target groups are also the focus of the plan which calls for more strategic approaches on the part of higher education institutions in supporting equality of outcome among a more diverse student body. While the pioneering work by access offices will continue to lead

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innovation, consultation for the development of this plan indicates that the best interests of students are met where whole-of-institution approaches are being advanced.

Among the actions advocated by the plan is that:

- each higher education institution have an overall institutional access strategy that is aligned with the policy and targets set out by the National Access Plan.
- each faculty designate an 'equity of access champion' to advise and support implementation of the institutional access strategy.
- embedding more mainstream, Universal Design approaches is also relevant to supporting the needs of students with disabilities as well as students more generally.

Models of best practice are being developed by AHEAD and higher education institutions and the dissemination of these, as well as continued innovation will continue to be promoted and supported by the HEA over the coming years.

## Conclusion

The National Access Plan 2015-2019 represents a renewed, national commitment to the achievement of a more inclusive higher education sector as a core element of wider national recovery, renewal and growth. For each year of the plan there will be an annual forum to report on progress and a mid-term review of the National Access Plan will take place in 2017.

## References

[DES \(2011\) National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030](#)

[HEA \(2014\) Higher Education System Performance First Report 2014-2016](#)

[HEA \(2015\) National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019](#)



### **Orla Christie**

Higher Education Authority

Orla Christie is currently acting Head of Access Policy in the Higher Education Authority (HEA). She has been a member of the management team of the National Access Office since its establishment as part of the HEA in 2003. She worked on the development and implementation of three national plans for equity of access to higher education, the most recent of which, for 2015-2019, was published last December. Orla joined the HEA in 1993 and prior to her current role worked on reviews of access, retention and skills policy, strategic funding programmes and higher education data analysis. She is a graduate of Trinity College Dublin and a qualified Barrister.



### **Rosemary Sweeney**

National Access Office, HEA

Rosemary is working in the National Access Office in the HEA as part WAM placement through AHEAD. Her background is in arts and community development where she worked with various groups of people including, people with disabilities, homeless people, people with learning difficulties and children of all ages. She has also been an advocate for Employability Galway, promoting people with disabilities to access employment. She is a volunteer leader with SERVE in Solidarity - an Irish development organisation who are committed to tackling poverty in the majority world and has worked on an education and music programmes in Cebu in the Philippines.

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