

NATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY POLICY

Ireland



Policy Frameworks

Does equity with regard to supporting students from low-income or marginalized populations to enter or succeed in higher education feature in any government produced policy documents? If so, which government policy document(s) are these and can you provide website link(s) to them?

- The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 was published in December 2015.
- Equity of access to higher education is a fundamental principle of Irish education policy, and one that has been endorsed by successive governments in policy statements and commitments over the past thirty years.
- The vision of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 ('National Access Plan' is to ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. <https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/national-access-plan-2015-2019/>
- A Progress Review of the National Access Plan was published in December 2018 and extended the Plan until 2021. <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/01/HEA-Progress-Review-2021-NAP.pdf>

What policies and actions are described in these government policy documents in terms of supporting students from low-income or marginalized populations to enter or succeed in higher education?

The vision of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 is to ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population.

The plan set out five goals and more than thirty actions, developed following widespread consultation with stakeholders, with the aim of supporting increased access and participation in higher education by six main target groups:

- Entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education;
- First-time mature students;
- Students with disabilities;
- Part-time/flexible learners;
- Further education and training award holders; and
- Irish Travellers (an ethnic minority)
- The plan also indicated subgroups that require particular support, including lone parents, teen parents and ethnic minorities.

The priority goals of the plan are to:

- Mainstream the delivery of equity of access in higher education institutions;
- Assess the impact of current initiatives to support equity of access to higher education;
- Gather accurate data and evidence on access and participation and to base policy on what that data tells us;
- Build coherent pathways from further education and to foster other entry routes to higher education; and
- Develop regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education with a particular focus on mentoring.

Is there a standalone policy document dedicated to equity promotion in higher education? If so, which document(s) is/are these? Can you provide a link(s)?

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

<https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Plan-for-Equity-of-Access-to-Higher-Education-2015-2019.pdf>

Which equity target groups are identified in the policy documents? (Please choose as many groups as apply in your own country)

- Low-income or lower socio-economic background students
- Older or mature learners
- Indigenous populations
- Students with disability
- Refugees of all kinds (internally and externally displaced; deported)
- Other: part-time/flexible learners and further education and training award holders

Does the country have concrete targets for the participation of specific equity groups in higher education?

See pages 35-38 of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education document.

Which agency has responsibility for policies related to equity in student participation/success in higher education?

The Higher Education Authority and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Which stakeholder groups are consulted during the equity policy formulation? (Please choose all the stakeholders that are invited to the consultation process in your own country)

- Higher Education Institutions' Associations
- Civil society organisations
- Student Organisations/Association
- Other: Non profit stakeholder organisations such as AHEAD (students with disabilities) and Pavee Point (Irish Travellers and Roma)

Achieving Policy Targets

Are there any non-monetary instruments such as outreach work between schools and universities, reforms to university admission etc. used to promote access/success for students from specific equity groups in higher education? If so, can you describe what they are?

- Publicly-funded higher education institutions have access infrastructures in place to support the goals of the National Access Plan and widening participation.
- The following would feature in the above-mentioned plans:
 - ↘ Outreach and other pre-entry activity with schools and other community partners (including mentoring)
 - ↘ Flexible pathways and transfers (e.g. from further education), recognition of prior learning
 - ↘ Orientation and transition programmes
 - ↘ Post-entry supports, e.g. teaching and learning supports, career guidance, peer mentoring,

counselling services

- separate admission schemes for students with disabilities (Disability Access Route to Education, DARE) and for school-leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Higher Education Access Route, HEAR). HEAR and DARE are joint initiatives agreed between the HEIs and originally seed-funded by the HEA (now funded by the HEIs themselves).

Are there any financial instruments such as bursaries, scholarships and loans used to promote access/success for students from specific equity groups in higher education? If so, can you describe what they are?

Student Grant Scheme

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science supports a range of measures which facilitate greater levels of participation by disadvantaged students, mature students and students with disabilities. The principal support in financial terms is the Student Grant Scheme. Under the terms of the Grant Scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means. The Student Grant Scheme contains a number of qualifying thresholds for various grant values. These gradations allow students just over a threshold margin, to remain in receipt of a grant, albeit at a reduced rate that reflects their relative income vis-à-vis other applicants. The scheme provides for different levels of income thresholds where families have (i) less than 4 dependent children (ii) between 4 and 7 dependent children and (iii) 8 or more dependent children. In recognition of the additional cost to families where more than one person is attending college, income thresholds may also be increased by up to €4,830 for each additional family member attending college at the same time. In this way, the Student Grant Scheme is responsive to the individual circumstances of particular families.

The statutory basis for the scheme is contained in the Student Support Act, 2011. The scheme and regulations are published annually via statutory instruments. The relevant SIs for the 2020/21 academic year are the Student Grant Scheme 2020 and the Student Support Regulations 2020. See links to the Act and statutory instruments below:

<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2011/act/4/enacted/en/html?q=student+support+act&years=2011>

<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2020/si/76/made/en/print?q=student+grant+scheme&years=2020>

<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2020/si/77/made/en/print?q=student+support+regulations&years=2020>

Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH)

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) was established subsequent to the launch of the National Access Plan and is a dedicated fund, comprising three strands, committed to increasing participation by under-represented groups in higher education.

➔ PATH Strand 1 - Initial Teacher Education

The objectives of PATH 1 are to:

- increase the number of students from under-represented groups entering initial teacher education; and
- provide more role models for students from these groups, demonstrating that there are pathways open to them to realise their potential through education.

PATH 1 will support a range of new initiatives and partnerships and it is expected that these activities will result in increased students from under-represented groups participating in initial teacher education programmes. Funding of €2.7m was initially provided over a three-year period. In early 2020 the Irish Government announced that this funding would continue for another three years.

➔ PATH Strand 2 - 1916 Bursary

The purpose of the 1916 Bursary Fund is to commemorate the centenary of 1916 and underline the Government's commitment to the type of equality of opportunity envisaged by the signatories of the 1916 proclamation. It forms part of the overall package of access measures to promote participation by under-represented groups in higher education. Starting in 2017/18, 200 bursaries a year (worth €5,000 per academic year of study) are awarded to students from target groups identified in the National Access Plan. Funding of €6m was initially provided over a three-year period for PATH 2. In 2019 the Irish Government announced that PATH 2 would continue for another three years. Further information at <https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/1916-bursary-fund/>

→ PATH Strand 3 - Higher Education Access Fund

PATH 3 is intended to provide funding to support the development of regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education by specified groups.

This funding has been allocated on a competitive basis to regional clusters of higher education institutions and is intended to facilitate the attraction and retention of undergraduate students from target groups. It is intended that higher education institutions will form effective partnerships within their clusters and show evidence of how they will engage with local DEIS schools, further education providers, community and voluntary groups and other relevant stakeholders.

Under PATH 3, funding of €7.5m has been provided over a three-year period.

Student Assistance Fund (SAF)

In general, the SAF has a dual focus and is designed to support students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds with ongoing needs for financial support and provide emergency financial assistance for other students. In 2019/20 academic year, funding of €9.1m was provided including €1m for part-time students who are lone parents and members of other National Access Plan target groups. Ring-fenced funding has also been provided for students on Professional Master of Education (PME) courses. For the 2020/21 academic year and as part of a suite of measures announced by the Irish Government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the SAF allocation has been doubled from €8.1m to €16.2m.

Further information at <https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/student-assistance-fund/>

Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD)

The purpose of the FSD is to provide funding to higher and further education institutions to assist them in offering supports and services to eligible students with disabilities so that they can participate on an equal basis with their peers. The allocation for Irish higher education institutions in 2020 was €7.5m.

Once-Off COVID-19 ICT Grant

As part of a suite of measures announced by the Irish Government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, €10m of once-off funding has been provided to higher education institutions to support disadvantaged students in accessing ICT devices. This initiative reflects concerns regarding the digital divide in the context of the shift to online and blended models of learning, which were identified by a range of stakeholders in the context of the Covid-19 structures put in place to co-ordinate responses among the further and higher education sectors.

Who is responsible for monitoring the impact of measures used to promote access/success for students from specific equity groups in higher education?

The Higher Education Authority.

What instruments, methods and data are in place to carry out the monitoring and evaluation?

The Higher Education System Performance Framework (<https://hea.ie/funding-governance->

[performance/managing-performance/system-performance-framework/](#)) sets out the national priorities and key objectives of government for higher education.

There are six key objectives in the Framework, one of which relates to "Significantly (improving) the equality of opportunity through Education and Training and recruits a student body that reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population"

The Framework is underpinned by performance compacts agreed between the HEA and an annual round of strategic dialogue meetings where HEI progress on meetings its targets are reviewed.

Programmes such as PATH are subject to ongoing reporting by institutions to the HEA

What kind of autonomy do higher education institutions enjoy in reaching the policy targets set by government?

Institutions are autonomous in relation to admissions procedures. Targets set under the National Access Plan are national targets and HEIs are expected to be mindful of these in developing their access strategies and own participation targets. See also above in relation to System Performance Framework.

How do you see the role of inter-governmental/international organisations in supporting higher education equity policies? In which areas would their contribution be the most valuable? (1= most valuable contribution 4=least valuable contribution)

1. Facilitating peer learning, exchange of experience among countries
2. Policy setting
3. Technical assistance and capacity building
4. Financial assistance (grants, loan financing, scholarships)

COVID-19 and Equitable Access and Success in Higher Education

How, if at all, has Covid-19 affected the existence and implementation of policies designed to encourage greater access and success on higher education of those from low-income/marginalized groups?

The imposition of COVID-19 restrictions has meant that many HEI access activities e.g. those relying on face-to-face meetings or engagement, were cancelled or postponed, or at the very least, significantly curtailed. Uncertainty around the recommencement of the school year, ongoing public health restrictions and issues relating to HEIs' capacity to host students and staff on campus from this September mean that many access office and services are operating within an uncertain context. Examples of events and activities affected include:

- ➔ open and college experience days, information evenings and school and community visits, workshops and summer schools; moved online where feasible;
- ➔ Priorities have also shifted for community partners e.g. schools focussing on supporting students and managing school operations in light of COVID-19
- ➔ Mental and physical health of students and their families
- ➔ Students from target groups living in vulnerable circumstances, many without an appropriate space to study, many with family caring responsibilities
- ➔ Access to technology - significant issues, students (and teachers) having to get to grips with technology and new ways of teaching and learning

In July 2020 the Irish Government announced a package of supports to cover costs incurred by institutions

during the Covid-19 pandemic and enable further and higher education students to return to college this September. This package includes some of the funding supports mentioned above (e.g. doubling of SAF allocation, once-off ICT grant).

Sources

This country brief was prepared as part of the [“ASEM National Equity Policies in Higher Education”](#) report, a collaboration between the [Asia-Europe Foundation \(ASEF\)](#) and the [National Education Opportunities Network \(NEON\)](#). The report was launched at the [8th ASEF Regional Conference on Higher Education \(ARC8\)](#) on *“Inclusive and Diverse Higher Education in Asia and Europe”* on 10 September 2021.

All information in this country brief was provided by the Access Policy of the Higher Education Authority of Ireland, as of 29 September 2020.