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

"As a country we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by increasing levels of participation in higher education among all Irish citizens"

FOREWORD

Equity of access to higher education is a national priority for my Department and the Government, and as Minister for Education and Skills I welcome the publication of this *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019* for the strong and clear commitment it shows to building positive social change and tackling inequality in our society.

As a country we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by increasing levels of participation in higher education among all Irish citizens. It makes sense socially and it makes sense economically; and at a policy level it has been central to both the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* and to the Department's *Higher Education System Performance Framework*. This *National Access Plan* now offers us the opportunity to energise and renew our commitment to broadening participation in higher education from groups and communities who have been under-represented up to now – in particular, those living with social disadvantage, mature students, people with disabilities and Irish Travellers.

We know that in building for social inclusion, we need to *start early* and *start local*. Starting early means that we put the building blocks in place as early as possible in the education lifecycle. Starting local means that we have to find ways of involving communities in creating their own future in education. And we also need to create clear pathways between the different education levels – in the context of this Plan that particularly means pathways between further education and higher education.

This *National Access Plan* proposes a course of action that will see the development of local partnership initiatives (involving educational, government and other stakeholders) in target communities where levels of educational participation and attainment remain low. In doing so, the Plan offers us the basis for longer-term gains in equality of opportunity for citizens – both in access to higher education and in sustainable jobs.

The publication of the *National Access Plan* now is timely as the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education is in the process of developing a framework for the sustainable funding of higher education. I know that the Expert Group wishes to ensure that the funding framework supports the objectives of this *National Access Plan*, and that it protects, nurtures and promotes equity of access to higher education for all of our citizens.

Jan O'Sullivan

Jan O'Sullivan, T.D.
Minister for Education and Skills

"Promoting equality of opportunity in higher education is a national priority that has been fundamental to the role of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) since its foundation in the early 1970s"

PREFACE

Promoting equality of opportunity in higher education is a national priority that has been fundamental to the role of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) since its foundation in the early 1970s. In that time we have seen considerable progress across the Irish education sector, but there are still groups in our society who are very under-represented in higher education. This social inequity must be addressed and this *National Access Plan* is targeted at bringing about real and sustainable change.
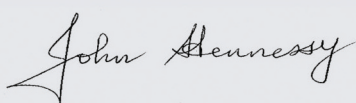
Ireland is well on the road to recovery after the economic shocks of recent years. If this is to be sustainable, however, more graduates will be needed to supply the expertise and skills required in vital areas of our economy. We must, for economic and social reasons, ensure that talent from all parts of society is mobilised. This *National Access Plan* provides us with a framework of actions that, over the next five years, will make available the skills and talents of people from groups in our society that have not accessed higher education up to now.

The implementation of this *National Access Plan* is integral to the overarching reforms and landscape changes taking place in our higher education system as part of the implementation of the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. Of particular importance is the work of the regional clusters of higher education institutions in the mapping and development of pathways to higher education. This is hugely significant and, in conjunction with this *National Access Plan*, will support better choices and greater opportunities for many thousands of students in the future.

A key theme in this Plan is how access is now 'everyone's business'. The pioneering phase of work to increase access has served us well and will continue to do so. In addition and to meet the needs of a more diverse student body, more strategic and holistic approaches are now required. The access mission must be fully integrated across all faculties and areas of work in institutions, and this will help us achieve an improved experience and better outcome for all students in higher education.

I look forward to seeing the goals, objectives and targets of this *National Access Plan* reflected in institutional strategic plans, as well as in the performance monitoring of each institution and regional cluster as part of the HEA's strategic dialogue and performance funding processes.

On behalf of the Board and Executive of the Higher Education Authority, I would like to thank the Department of Education and Skills who worked in partnership with the HEA in developing this *National Access Plan*. I would also like to thank the many stakeholders who have helped shape the development of this Plan, particularly those who made submissions as part of the consultation process and those we met and who gave generously of their advice and experience. I would also like to extend particular thanks to the members of the Advisory Group of the National Access Office for their guidance in the development of this *National Access Plan* and for their ongoing support of the work of the HEA in this key priority area.

John Hennessy

John Hennessy
Chair, Higher Education Authority

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION:
EQUITY OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR ALL CITIZENS

1

1. Introduction: equity of access to higher education for all citizens

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. Most recently, equity of access is identified as a core national objective for the higher education system in the Department of Education and Skills' *Higher Education System Performance Framework (SPF) 2014–2016*.

The *System Performance Framework* also sets out a range of high-level system indicators to assess and measure the higher education system's performance in this priority area. Specifically, one of the main objectives of the SPF is 'to promote access for disadvantaged groups and to put in place coherent pathways from second-level education, from further education and other non-traditional entry routes'.[1]

At European level, the Bologna Process[2] emphasises the objective of strengthening the drive for social inclusion and ensuring that higher education is more representative of the whole of society – including men and women, urban and rural dwellers, and members of all socio-economic groupings.

Working towards equity of access is also a priority for the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and among the statutory functions assigned to the HEA on its foundation is that of 'promoting the attainment of equality of opportunity in higher education'.[3]

The vision for this *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education* is fully consistent with Government, HEA and European objectives and is simply stated as follows:

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.

This *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education* (hereafter referred to as the *National Access Plan*) sets out the goals, objectives and actions that are directed at delivering this vision over the period 2015–2019.

---

[1]   Department of Education and Skills (2014), *Higher Education System Performance Framework 2014–2016*, p. 5.
[2]   The Bologna Process is a series of agreements contracted by ministers responsible for higher education in 47 countries, designed to create a European Higher Education Area, including commitments to address the social dimension of higher education.
[3]   Government of Ireland (1971), *Higher Education Act*.

THE VISION

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.

APPROACH TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE *NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN*

2

2. Approach to the development of the *National Access Plan*

The process for the development of this *National Access Plan* began in 2013 when the existing plan (the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008–2013*) was coming to the end of its term. The approach taken in developing the Plan involved the following stages:

1   Data collection to establish figures on access and participation in higher education; and analysis of the data relating to access and participation.
2   Wide consultation with stakeholders in higher education and in the wider community; and analysis of the outcomes of the consultation process.
3   Development of the *National Access Plan.*

Each of these stages is described in turn.

2.1   Data collection and analysis

Before developing this *National Access Plan*, we set out to determine the levels of participation in higher education by people from different socio-economic backgrounds and from different counties. In particular, we sought data on participation from the following national target groups:

›   Students from socio-economic backgrounds with traditionally low participation rates – for example, see Appendix A.3.2. for details of the differences in participation between some Dublin postal districts.

›   Students with disabilities.

›   Mature students.

This detailed data was presented in the consultation paper underpinning this Plan and is reproduced in **Appendix A**.[4]

Analysis of up-to-date statistical data

The analysis of the up-to-date data raised questions and new challenges for the HEA and the Department of Education and Skills (DES). It showed that there had been improvements in many areas but also highlighted underachievement on some of the targets set in the 2008–2013 Plan. This followed a period where there had been steady increases in access to higher education from the target groups.[5] The data also raised questions on what policy approaches might lead to greater equity of access to higher education. These included:

›   In areas with low participation rates in higher education, what measures can be taken at community level to bring about increases in those rates?

›   For all target groups, what is the long-term effectiveness of the access strategies that have been tried up to now, and what new approaches do we need to develop to achieve further progress?

›   Do existing access strategies always target the groups most in need?

›   Who are the people with the greatest influence on potential students and their decisions on whether or not to enter higher education? And how can we ensure that they regard higher education participation as something important?

›   What other education and training options should inform the decisions of potential students, and how should these options be presented?

---

4   HEA (2014), *Consultation Paper: Towards the development of a new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education.*
5   O'Connell, P., Clancy, D., McCoy, S., (2006), *Who Went to College in 2004?*

2.2 Wide consultation with stakeholders

In the light of the analysis of the statistical data and the questions it raised, the HEA and the DES took the view that consultation in relation to this Plan should extend beyond the higher education sector and include groups working with communities that experience poverty and social exclusion and where the rates of participation in higher education are low.

To facilitate wider consultation, in August 2014 the HEA and the DES published a *Consultation Paper: Towards the development of a new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education*. The idea behind the paper was to encourage openness, raise questions and generate new ideas, and to bring together the combined wisdom and perspectives of all stakeholders in the framing the next *National Access Plan*. The up-to-date data and performance indicators on equity of access were published in the *Consultation Paper* and all stakeholders were invited to give their views.

Analysis of responses to the consultation process

The consultation process brought a strong response, including a total of 58 written submissions, and stakeholders (including those within the higher education sector and those from other areas) showed a strong willingness to contribute to the development of the next *National Access Plan*. The HEA and the DES also engaged in a series of consultation meetings with community and voluntary organisations, Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and other organisations working in innovative ways to support equity of access to higher education. **Appendix B** lists the submissions received and the organisations who were part of the consultation process.[6]

The HEA and the DES place a high value on the contributions of those who took part in the consultation process, and on the valuable new insights and ideas that the process brought to light. The main points that emerged from the process are included below in Section 3 of this document. The consultation process also made a key contribution to the development of the goals and actions of this *National Access Plan*.

2.3 Development of the new *National Access Plan*

Following completion of the stages outlined above and the analysis of findings, the HEA and the DES developed this new *National Access Plan*. It is our view that, for the timeframe set out for them, the goals and actions described here are challenging and ambitious, but they are also realistic and attainable, and they represent new and innovative ways of bringing greater equity of access to higher education in Ireland.

We acknowledge that there are many issues that impact on access to higher education that cannot be addressed from within the higher education sector itself – including secondary school completion, academic attainment at second level, and the educational ambition and aspiration of potential students. However, as this Plan points out, there is still much that we can do. The Plan includes a robust system of evaluation and performance monitoring (integrated into the HEA's strategic dialogue process); and it also includes provision for a mid-term review of progress on the implementation of goals and actions.

---

6   Individual submissions are available to download at www.hea.ie.

POLICY CONTEXT

3

3. Policy context

3.1 Equity of access as a national priority

The objective of achieving equity of access to higher education is rooted in principles of equality and social inclusion and has been a longstanding national policy priority. Access to higher education should be available to individuals independent of socio-economic disadvantage, gender, geographical location, disability or other circumstances.

Consistent with its statutory functions, the HEA has continually prioritised improved equity of access to higher education, and considerable progress has been made in the last three decades: participation in higher education has risen from circa 20% of the relevant age cohort in 1980, to 44% in 1998 and to 52% in 2011.[7] This *National Access Plan* is not proposing what the levels of participation in higher education should be. However, the Plan is underpinned by the principle that everyone should have the opportunity to participate in post-secondary education and that the population of new entrants to higher education should be broadly representative of the general population (socio-economic mix, disability status, gender, etc.). All groups in Irish society have experienced increased levels both of participation in higher education and of educational attainment – including students with a disability, students experiencing social disadvantage (as measured by their socio-economic group classification) and mature students. These improvements have been achieved through the combined commitment of stakeholders throughout the education system:

> **Secondary schools** have worked to increase school completion rates – from around 60% in the early 1980s, to 81% in 2002 and to almost 91% by 2013.

> **Higher education institutions** have worked to develop access infrastructure to attract and retain students from the national target groups.

What the data tells us

The most up-to-date statistics relating to access and participation were set out in the *Consultation Paper: Towards the development of a new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education*, published in August 2014 and reproduced in **Appendix A** below. These show that while progress is being made, there is still work that needs to be done to address the under-representation of certain groups. There remain pockets of educational disadvantage throughout our society and access to higher education is not distributed equitably across different groups in the Irish population.

> Participation of those from the **semi-skilled and unskilled socio-economic groups** is at 26%, while there is practically full participation by those from the higher professional socio-economic group. And in Dublin there are differences in participation between postal districts – over 99% of 18–20 year olds in one postal district go on to higher education, while in another the rate is as low as 15% (see Appendix A.3.2).

> Students with sensory disabilities continue to be less likely to enter higher education than students with other types of disability.

> There is potential for increasing higher education attainment among the wider adult population and the rate of participation of **mature students** in higher education has increased; most of this increase has been on a part-time or flexible basis.

> Participation in higher education among **Irish Travellers** remains comparatively low.

---

[7] The baseline relevant age cohort changes between different years.

›   Among and across the national target groups there are also subgroups that experience difficulties participating in higher education and who require particular support – these include **lone parents, teen parents** and some people from **ethnic minorities.**

National and international policy contexts

The development of this *National Access Plan* takes place within the context of a range of other national anti-poverty and social inclusion policy measures in Ireland, including:

›   *The National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007–2016* (Department of Social Protection)

›   *The National Disability Strategy* (Department of Justice and Equality)

›   *The Action Plan for Jobs* (Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation)

›   *Pathways to Work Strategy* (Intreo / Department of Social Protection)

›   *Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy* (Department of Education and Skills)

›   *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: the national policy framework for children and young people 2014-2020* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs)

Irish national policy is consistent with European and international efforts, and the Europe 2020 strategy objectives on poverty reduction and social inclusion contribute to policy in Ireland.[8] The Bologna Process is also influential in strengthening the drive for social inclusion and for ensuring that higher education is more representative of the whole of society. Ireland is one of only a few countries in the European Higher Education Area that uses targeted measures to increase participation in higher education by under-represented groups. Ireland is also among the leading countries in providing alternative entry routes and in enrolments by students whose parents did not participate in higher education.[9] By contrast we have relatively low levels of participation in higher education by students from groups experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.[10]

Benefits of higher education

Access to higher education brings with it many benefits to the individuals who avail of it and to the wider society. For example, graduates are less likely to experience unemployment – even during the economic crisis from which we are just now emerging, the chances of a graduate becoming unemployed were half that of a non-graduate. And now in 2015, as employment levels are rising, graduates are being employed at a faster rate than non-graduates. Graduates also enjoy an earnings premium – men who are graduates earn on average 69% more than men without a higher education, while for women the equivalent figure is 90%.[11] There are also many non-financial benefits to having a higher education – as graduates tend to enjoy greater job satisfaction, participate to a greater extent in society, and have better health; and they are also likely to pass down an appreciation for education and its benefits to the next generation and to their local communities.

As well as the benefits that individuals derive from higher education, there are also wider economic and social benefits – our educated workforce is Ireland's greatest economic asset, and we need more people to take up higher education to drive economic progress. We are now beginning to see skills shortages in vital and dynamic areas of our economy such as ICT and pharma, and there is some evidence that other sectors too are beginning to experience skills shortages.[12] The Irish economy needs to tap into the skills and talents of all our people so that the economy can continue to grow and prosper.

8   For more information on Europe 2020 targets, see http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm.
9   European Commission, EACEA (2012), *The European Higher Education Area in 2012: Bologna Process Implementation Report*, pp 78, 86.
10   Bohonnek, A., et al (2010), *Evolving Diversity: an Overview of Equitable Access to HE in Europe*, p. 48.
11   OECD (2014), *Education at a Glance 2014, Country Note: Ireland.*
12   HEA (2014), *Higher Education System Performance First Report 2014-2016*, pp 32–39.

3.2 The principles that inform the *National Access Plan*

In developing this *National Access Plan*, the HEA and the DES have drawn on the following fundamental principles in relation to higher education access, participation and completion rates for people in the target groups:

i.   Equity of access policies must span the entire education spectrum and take a 'whole of education' approach to social inclusion.

ii.   Strengthening relationships and communication between families, schools and higher education institutions is key to supporting student aspiration, engagement and achievement.

iii. Consultation with students and prospective students should inform the development of access policy and implementation at national and local level.

iv.   Pathways from further education to higher education must be improved to broaden opportunities for entry to higher education, meet national skills needs and support regional development.

v.   Fostering partnerships between key stakeholders is critical to articulating the value and benefits of higher education and building social capital in communities with low levels of participation.

vi.   Systematic collection of relevant, comparable data is necessary to improve the evidence base for policy development and enable effective monitoring and review of national objectives on access, participation, completion and outcomes among under-represented groups in higher education.

vii. The overall structure of system funding and student financial supports impacts on the participation of under-represented groups in higher education and should be configured to improve access, participation and completion rates.

viii. Equity of access policies should be mainstreamed into the everyday life of higher education institutions to enhance the quality of the learning experience and progression outcomes for all students.

These eight principles underpin the development of the goals, objectives and actions that are the core of this *National Access Plan*, and they drew wide support during the consultation process. Each of these principles is set out in more detail below.

i. Equity of access policies must span the entire education spectrum and take a 'whole of education' approach to social inclusion

Educational disadvantage and disengagement from education can occur at any stage in the education cycle, and policies to address equity of access to higher education must span the entire education system, from pre-school, through primary, secondary and further education.

› **Young people who experience social disadvantage** are at a higher risk of being exposed to factors that impact on their opportunity to progress successfully through first and second-level education – for example, low family income levels, early alcohol consumption, requirement to work part-time, history of poor school attendance, and so on.

› **Students with a disability** require support and access to the right technologies as early as possible in the education cycle so they can successfully transition to higher education.

› DES has implemented a range of equity of access policy initiatives throughout the education system, including the **Early Start Programme** in the pre-school sector, and the **DEIS** (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme in the school sector. In addition, the **Active Inclusion** pillar of the *Further Education and Training Strategy* (published by DES and SOLAS in 2014) seeks to provide more training programmes and supports for those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

› *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: the national policy framework for children and young people 2014-2020*[13] commits government to research and adopt strategies to strengthen transitions through the educational system: into primary school, from primary to second level, from second level into higher or further education, employment or, in the case of early school-leavers, to YouthReach.[14]

Currently the DES is in the process of developing an overarching policy on social inclusion, spanning pre-school education through to higher education, and the *National Access Plan* will form a key component of this integrated policy. In this context the DES will draw on the valuable contributions made in the consultation process in the development of this overarching policy.

ii Strengthening relationships and communication between families, schools and higher education institutions is key to supporting student aspiration, engagement and achievement

› Schools and HEIs need to work together to foster positive perceptions of higher education among second level students.

Open days, on-campus activities, information sessions – these are just some of the ways in which access offices in HEIs engage with second-level students in their regions and seek to get the students to aspire to higher education. Such engagement is part of a wider effort to break down misconceptions about HEIs and to present them as friendly and open places where there is room for people from all backgrounds and income groups.

Among the schools that have taken part in the DEIS programme, there has been consistent improvement in the literacy and numeracy levels of pupils. While HEIs' access strategies support DEIS and the School Completion Programme and focus particularly on DEIS schools, it is important that in seeking to expand access to higher education, they also engage with schools that are not currently part of DEIS but who may have students who are experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

› Teachers have a critical role to play in raising academic aspirations.

Students who have successfully participated in higher education often reflect on the role an individual teacher played in providing them with the support they needed to realise their educational aspirations. Because teachers play such a critical role in shaping student expectations, it is vital to ensure that the value of that role is understood during initial teacher education and in continuing professional development (CPD) programmes.

All initial teacher education (ITE) programmes must meet the Teaching Council's Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers. Among the sixteen mandatory areas that all ITE programmes must include are: Inclusive Education (Disadvantage, Multiculturalism, Special Education), Differentiation and The Teacher and External Agencies. Learning outcomes for graduates of ITE programmes currently include that the graduate will demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the unique role of the teacher as professional in providing for the holistic development of students, and the complex and intricate nature of teaching, as explicated in the Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers. The graduate must also be able to motivate, inspire, acknowledge and celebrate success and effort and must be able to articulate and represent student's interests, as appropriate.

The Teaching Council intends to review the Criteria and Guidelines for ITE providers in 2016. A more specific reference to the role that teachers can play in raising academic aspirations in the school environment – particularly in situations where families or communities are not in a position to support participation in higher education – can be considered as part of this review. The development of related CPD for serving teachers can be considered during the development of National Framework for Teachers' Learning by the Teaching Council.

› Guidance counsellors and mentors are valuable in encouraging higher education take-up among under-represented groups.

---

13   Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2014), *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The national policy framework for children and young people 2014–2020*.
14   See www.youthreach.ie.

For a student who has no family history of participating in higher education, or who comes from a community or school background where there are very low expectations of accessing higher education, the decision to go to college can be a very difficult one. Students in such situations require particular support and advice on the value of higher education and on a whole range of more practical issues:

› What opportunities are available.

› How to get through the application processes.

› How to access financial support.

› How to deal with the very different social and learning environment that they will meet in higher education.

Guidance for students on all of these matters is valuable, even more so in schools where there are low expectations of higher education participation among students' families and in the local community.

Also of importance is the contribution that people who have successfully accessed and progressed in higher education can make in mentoring individual students, particularly where such mentors are from the same community or social background. Preferably such mentoring should take place in the early years of second-level.

Parents should also be a key target group in promoting the benefits of participation in higher education. The National Parents Council (NPC) post primary is a key stakeholder in this respect and are represented on the advisory group to the HEA National Access Office. The potential of the NPC to further support the dissemination of key messages about the value of higher education will be explored through this strategy.

iii. Consultation with students and prospective students should inform the development of access policy and implementation at national and local level

The Department of Education and Skills seeks to engage the views of students in developments that affect them in key areas of the education system. For example, students are consulted in relation to the development of new curriculum specifications, the provision of psychological services to schools, and in relation to aspects of the school inspection process. In addition, the Department currently supports the operation of the Student Council system in post primary schools and is seeking to promote the establishment of more student councils in primary schools.

At third level, second Irish Survey of Student Engagement has been conducted, and the student body is represented on the Board of the Higher Education Authority and also on the advisory group to the HEA National Access Office.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs has also recently published the first *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making*.

Structured consultation with second and third level students, particularly those that are the intended beneficiaries of the *National Access Plan*, should be a central component of the access policies developed by individual higher education institutions. This will ensure that overall policy is informed and strengthened by the views of those most affected by that policy.

iv. Pathways from further education to higher education must be improved to broaden opportunities for entry to higher education, meet national skills needs and support regional development

For many students who go onto further education, their FE qualification is an end in itself and with it they can achieve an entry qualification for the labour market; for others, it is a step along a pathway to higher education. Currently, however, there are not enough opportunities for further education graduates to make the transition to higher education, and the number of students who do so is low. The DES and the HEA believe that mechanisms are in place that could help improve this situation:

› The **National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)** provides a mechanism for HEIs to understand qualification levels and awards from all areas of the education system, and this could be used more effectively by HEIs seeking to understand the standard and outcomes of qualifications held by further education graduates and how these fit with entry requirements into higher education.

› The ongoing work by **Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)** on putting in place a national framework for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) should help HEIs to recognise and accredit learning that has been achieved in a non-formal or informal educational context.[15]

› Making the **HEAR** and **DARE**[16] schemes available to further education graduates could also make a significant contribution in this area.

The Regional Clusters[17] that are being formed as part of the structural changes in the higher education landscape provide a framework of institutions through which students can progress to the level they aspire to. Most HEIs have traditionally had links with individual FEIs and have enrolled graduates from these institutions into certain higher education courses. In conjunction with work being carried out by SOLAS and QQI, such links will be systematised over the next four years, so that any student undertaking a further education course will be aware of the pathways available from their course into higher education.[18] Making these pathways clear is the first priority of the Regional Clusters, and some good work has already been done in this area. For example, closer links are being developed between some HEIs and local Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and FEIs, and in some cases this has happened in parallel with the development of online tools that clearly map out all the educational options and pathways available to students in a region.

Further linkages between further education and higher education are proposed in the context of regional development.[19] The ongoing review of apprenticeship training is also leading to collaboration between SOLAS, the FEIs and the institutes of technology.[20] Such partnerships will have a positive impact on overall engagement and increased movement of students between the two sectors.

v. Fostering partnerships between key stakeholders is critical to articulating the value and benefits of higher education and building social capital in communities with low levels of participation

A better chance of getting a better job, greater job satisfaction and prospects of career progression – these are among the key benefits that higher education brings, and it is a message that we need to communicate clearly and effectively. Teachers, higher education staff, guidance counsellors and mentors already play an important role in communicating the benefits and value of higher education to those in second level and further and adult education. For those who are currently outside formal education, however, it can be difficult to access clear, comprehensive information on the range of options and supports that are available and this is an issue that we need to address.

---

15   QQI (2013), *Green Paper on the Recognition of Prior Learning.*
16   HEAR and DARE are two schemes operated by several HEIs that offer higher education places on reduced points for school-leavers with a socio-economically disadvantaged background or a disability – see www.accesscollege.ie.
17   Five Regional Clusters: Dublin I (UCD, TCD, IADT, NCAD, MIE); Dublin II (DCU, MDI, SPD, NUIM, AIT, IT Dundalk; DIT, IT Tallaght, ITB); Mid-West (UL, LIT, MIC); West/North-West (NUIG, GMIT, LKIT, IT Sligo, St. Angela's College); South (UCC, CIT, IT Tralee, WIT, IT Carlow).
18   QQI (2014), *Green Paper on Access, Transfer and Progression*; DES and SOLAS (2014), *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019.*
19   Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (2015), *A Framework for the development of Regional Enterprise Strategies.*
20   DES (2014), *Review of Apprenticeship Training in Ireland.*

The chances that a student has of participating in higher education are directly related to the community the student comes from, and it is very clear that there is much lower participation in higher education among people from communities experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.[21]

The higher education sector needs to open up to communities experiencing entrenched socio-economic disadvantage and to address inequality of access at a policy level. Among the initiatives that are enabling HEIs to present higher education as a realistic option in communities with little tradition of participation are:

› Initiatives by community and voluntary groups in some areas to assist and encourage young people to participate in and complete higher education.

› Individual HEI access programmes and initiatives such as HEAR, which offers higher education places to students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds on reduced CAO points.

› Participation by HEIs in the recently formed Local Community Development Committees[22] – these offer ready-made points of liaison through which HEIs (working through their regional clusters) can become more involved with communities experiencing disadvantage.[23]

› Participation by some HEIs in the new Children and Young People's Services Committees that have been established at county level.[24]

vi. Systematic collection of relevant, comparable data is necessary to improve the evidence base for policy development and enable effective monitoring and review of national objectives on access, participation and completion among under-represented groups in higher education

Through their access offices and through schemes such as HEAR and DARE, HEIs can help ensure that they identify and target students who might not otherwise access higher education. But in order to do so they need to have a good evidence base, particularly on the socio-economic groupings that are associated with disadvantage.

Since 2007 the HEA has collected equal access data on the socio-economic, ethnic/cultural and disability background of incoming students, and this data has been valuable in informing funding decisions. Changing perceptions and definitions of different socio-economic groupings, however, do present challenges in how to interpret such data. For example, there has been an increase in the numbers of students whose socio-economic group is 'unknown', and there are also difficulties of definition in relation to the profiling of the non-manual group in terms of disadvantage.[25] The HEA is working to address these challenges and has implemented some solutions.

The HEA and the DES will continue to use socio-economic groupings with reference to national census data as a key indicator in determining targets and calculating financial allocations to institutions. However, over the term of this *National Access Plan* we will also develop other, parallel indicators of disadvantage – these could include other data such as that collected by Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), more detailed data on participation from students in DEIS schools, and more detailed analysis by postal area.

---

21   See Appendix A.3.2. See also HEA (2015), *Student Grant Recipients from a First Year Full-Time Undergraduate New Entrant Cohort for the Academic Year 2013/14 in HEA Funded Institutions.*
22   Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (2012), *Putting People First: Action Plan for Effective Local Government*, p. 11; Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (2014), *Guidelines for the Establishment and Operation of Local Community Development Committees*, p. 19.
23   The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government supports participation by HEIs in these committees.
24   See www.cypsc.ie for further information on the Children and Young People's Services Committees; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures.*
25   HEA (2010), *Hidden Disadvantage? A Study of the Low Participation in Higher Education by the Non-Manual Group.*

vii. The overall structure of system funding and student financial supports impacts on the participation of under-represented groups in higher education and should be configured to improve access, participation and completion rates

Going to college costs money, and for people from the target groups this presents a particular challenge. The funding supports that are currently in place (including fee grants, maintenance grants and other supports) enable many students to access, participate in and complete higher education. At a policy level, however, we need to establish how well such supports work to counter the cost disincentives that people from economically disadvantaged communities experience.

Issues raised during the consultation process include funding support for part-time students, including part-time students with a disability. Another issue of concern is the financial support options for students wishing to undertake postgraduate education. Consideration of these issues will have to take place within the context of overall financial resources available for higher education. The recommendations of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education may also be relevant here.

viii. Equity of access policies should be mainstreamed into the everyday life of higher education institutions to enhance the quality of the learning experience and progression outcomes for students

While students from the target groups may access higher education, there has been an increase in non-progression rates – in particular among those undertaking level 6 and level 7 courses, where in 2010/11 almost 30% of new entrants did not progress to second year, up from 26% three years earlier.[26] The National Forum for Teaching and Learning has been established to research and develop policy and practice on teaching and learning in higher education. This work will enhance the quality of the learning experience for all students and contribute to increased progression rates. The National Forum on Teaching and Learning is currently supporting research into the reasons for student non-completion and will develop solutions and interventions that can be adopted across the sector.[27]

It is acknowledged that students from the target groups may require additional academic or other supports in order to complete, but this must be done in accordance with the principles of universal design for learning and should not label them in any negative way. Any such support measures must be transparently available to all students.

---

[26] HEA (2014), *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education Institutions, 2010/11-2011/12.*
[27] See Project 4 at http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/t-l-scholarship/national-forum-research-projects.

PRIORITY GOALS OF THE
NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN

4

4. Priority goals of the *National Access Plan*

Five priority goals have been developed for delivery over the period of this *National Access Plan*. Each of these goals is underpinned by at least one of the fundamental principles described in section 3.2 above.

The five goals are:

1.	To mainstream the delivery of equity of access in HEIs.
2.	To assess the impact of current initiatives to support equity of access to higher education.
3.	To gather accurate data and evidence on access and participation and to base policy on what that data tells us.
4.	To build coherent pathways from further education and to foster other entry routes to higher education.
5.	To develop regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education with a particular focus on mentoring.

Each goal is broken down into a set of realisable objectives and each objective is accompanied by:

> **Action:** describing the practical step(s) through which the objective can be realised.

> **Lead responsibility:** identifying who is responsible for the objective/action.

> **Key performance indicator(s):** indicating how the achievement of the objective is to be measured and assessed.

The implementation of each objective and its accompanying action will contribute to the achievement of the targets for equity of access that are set for the term of the *National Access Plan*. Responsibility for the delivery of many of the actions lies broadly with the HEIs and other education providers, and with agencies such as QQI, SOLAS and the Teaching Council. The HEA and the DES are committed to providing the necessary policy and infrastructure framework to facilitate delivery on the goals of the *National Access Plan*.

Through its strategic dialogue process, the HEA will evaluate each HEI's performance against equity of access criteria, and this will be taken into account in the allocation of performance funding.

4.1 Goal 1: To mainstream the delivery of equity of access in HEIs

The HEA very much welcomes the setting up of access offices and associated infrastructures as a clear signal of the priority that HEIs attach to equity of access. The next stage is to integrate the principle of equity of access more fully into the everyday life of the HEIs so that it permeates all faculties and departments, and is not marginalised as the responsibility of the designated access office.[28]

Where institutions take such an approach, the benefits are likely to be felt across the board in an improved education experience for all students. A number of HEIs have led the way in this regard and have developed good practice approaches that might serve as models for those that are not so far advanced yet. In following this path, however, it will be important to ensure that local approaches are consistent with the wider objectives of this *National Access Plan*.

In addition to encouraging and opening access to entrants from the national target groups, HEIs also need to ensure that such students have a positive experience of participation and are adequately supported towards successful completion of their courses.

Goal 1: Summary of objectives and actions

	Objective	Action	Lead Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator(s)
1.1	To embed whole-of-HEI approaches to institutional access strategies so that access for under-represented groups is prioritised across all faculties.	Each faculty to designate an 'access champion' to support and advise on implementation of institutional access strategy.	HEIs Review by HEA	Mid-term review to assess progress.
1.2	To address issues that may arise for students from the target groups within mainstream supports and services.	In consultation with access services, supports (including post-entry supports) for students from target groups to be addressed primarily through mainstream student services.	HEIs Review by HEA	All student supports mainstreamed by 2019.
1.3	To reflect the goals, objectives and targets of this *National Access Plan* in HEI and joint institutional strategies and in the annual compacts arising from the strategic dialogue process.	HEI access strategies to be aligned with the policy and targets as set out in this *National Access Plan*.	HEIs Review by HEA	All HEI access schemes aligned by 2019.

---

[28] This goal arises from principles ii and vii, section 3.2.

	Objective	Action	Lead Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator(s)
1.4	To address the issue of non-completion of programmes, particularly for those in under-represented target groups.	A working group will consider the issues contributing to non-completion with a view to producing recommendations. The working group's deliberations will be informed by research commissioned by the HEA and progressed by the National Forum for Teaching and Learning.	DES/HEA/ National Forum for Teaching and Learning	Research[29] published in 2015-16. Working group established, 2016. Working group report by the end of 2016.
1.5	To research how teaching and related supports for students from target groups can be reflected as part of the overall strategy of each institution.	Seminar series and other research will be drawn on to advise on the best academic supports for students from target access groups.	National Forum for Teaching and Learning	Seminars and research, 2015-16.
1.6	To extend the use of mentors and student role models beyond pre-entry stage, and to continue to support students while they are in higher education.	HEIs to review post-entry mentoring programmes. Model of how best to use mentors and student role models agreed and developed.	HEIs HEA	Review in 2016. Published, 2017.
1.7	To increase access by students from target groups to initial teacher education.	Development of access programmes and routes to teacher training. This will be informed by previous work in this area by Colleges of Education.	HEIs/HEAR/ DARE	Call for proposals by the HEA, 2016. Projects start, 2016. Outcome evaluated, 2018.
1.8	To ensure that teacher education and professional development programmes support the raising of expectations among students in relation to their higher education potential.	HEA will input into the current Teaching Council consultation process on CPD. The HEA will input into the review of the Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers.	HEA/Teaching Council HEIs/Teaching Council/HEA	HEA input into Teaching Council CPD framework, 2015/16. HEA input into Teaching Council review of ITE Criteria and Guidelines.

---

[29]   National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2015), *Why Students Leave: Findings from Qualitative Research Into Student Non-Completion in Higher Education in Ireland*

4.2 Goal 2: To assess the impact of current initiatives to support equity of access in HEIs

The HEA and the DES are committed to examining how the overall structure of institutional funding and student financial support impacts on participation in higher education by people from under-represented groups, and to consider how financial supports can best be targeted to improve access, participation and completion rates.[30]

Goal 2: Summary of objectives and actions

	Objective	Action	Lead Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator(s)
2.1	To review how the HEA's Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM) supports an access infrastructure in each HEI.	The access infrastructure in each HEI will be considered (including the extent to which the access functions are reflected across the institution); and to determine if core funding is being applied appropriately to support an access infrastructure in HEIs.	HEA/HEIs	Analysis in 2016. Results published, 2017.
2.2	To review the Student Assistance Fund (SAF).	The HEA will commission an independent review of the SAF to determine if the fund is fit for current purpose; and to make recommendations on future policy and operation of the fund.	HEA	SAF review to be completed, 2016.
2.3	To review the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).	The HEA will commission an independent review of the FSD which will make recommendations for the future policy and operation of the fund.	HEA	FSD review to be completed, 2016.
2.4	To examine the issue of financial supports for part-time students from under-represented target groups.	The HEA and the DES will consider the potential for reviewing options for funding access to part-time studies in the context of the overall financial resources available for higher education and in light of the recommendations of the Expert Group on Future Funding.	HEA/DES	Options to be considered by the HEA and the DES Higher Education Equity of Access Unit within the context of available resources.

---

[30]   This goal and actions are underpinned by principle vii, section 3.2.

4.3 Goal 3: To gather accurate data and evidence on access and participation and to base policy on what that data tells us

Good quality data collection, evidence and analysis are essential to inform the development of appropriate policy interventions; and we also need good mechanisms to disseminate information on the actions and initiatives that have the best chance of success. The HEA is currently developing an overall data development and knowledge management strategy for the higher education sector, and the data collection and analysis initiatives undertaken as part of this *National Access Plan* will be part of that strategy. Over the term of this *National Access Plan* it is, an objective of the HEA to continue to develop data collection and analysis methodologies so that these underpin policy-making and the supports provided for students who need them – the deeper our knowledge on target groups, the better equipped we will be to focus resources better through national and local initiatives.[31]

Goal 3: Summary of objectives and actions

	Objective	Action	Lead Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator(s)
3.1	To develop an overall data strategy for equity of access.	Progress HEA–SUSI data sharing project. Explore new projects with SOLAS and other agencies.	DES/HEA/SUSI/ CAO/IUA/IoTI HEA, SOLAS and other agencies	First report on student grant recipients in HEA institutions published, 2015.[32] Second report published in 2017. HEA input to development of SOLAS learner database (PLSS), 2015-17. Data strategy on access published in 2016.
3.2	To review current and new data to see how this may be developed to identify geographic areas with high levels of disadvantage; and to analyse rates of participation in higher education from those areas.	Develop model to analyse geographic patterns of access to higher education. Subject to the outcome of this work, review targets for participation.	HEA/HEIs	Model developed, 2016. Review targets, 2017.
3.3	To develop mechanisms to track progression, retention rates and the student experience of under-represented target groups, including students being supported by the SAF and the FSD.	Further develop systems to track progression, retention rates and the student experience of target student groups.	HEA/HEIs	Data developed and published, 2015-17.
3.4	To review progression to employment and postgraduate studies by students from target access groups.	Review current and potential data sources in order to develop a methodology to track outcomes for students from target groups.	HEA	Methodology developed, 2015–16.

---

31   This goal and objectives have been developed in view of principles iii and vi, section 3.2.
32   HEA, *Student Grant Recipients for the Academic Year 2013/14.*

	Objective	Action	Lead Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator(s)
3.5	To monitor the participation and outcomes for entrants from DEIS schools.	Continued analysis by DES and HEA.	DES/HEA	Reports published by DES. HEA review of participation from DEIS schools to serve as an additional socio-economic indicator.
3.6	To consult with students and prospective students to inform the implementation and development of access policy.	Structured engagement with student representatives, in particular those from groups targeted by access policies.	HEIs/HEA	Review of progress, 2017.
3.7	To share knowledge and disseminate information on effective initiatives relating to access.	Convene annual forums of access practitioners, researchers and community/voluntary groups working in higher education through the REAL network[33] for research on access and lifelong learning.	HEA/HEIs	Forums/seminars held, 2016-19.
		Commission a research project to analyse existing HEI linkages and associated access-related activities with schools, and to identify and disseminate effective practices.	HEA	Research commissioned and completed 2016-17.
3.8	To review the qualitative indicators of progress on access already in place in HEIs, and to advise the HEA on developing a framework to support good practice.	Qualitative indicators reviewed as part of the strategic dialogue process.	HEIs/HEA	Review of indicators, 2016.
		A framework to support good practice will be developed based on this review and other evidence.	HEA	Framework developed, 2017.

---

[33] A HEA facilitated network of those progressing research on themes relevant to higher education access, equality and lifelong learning issues, policy and practice; see HEA (2013), *How Equal? Access to Higher Education in Ireland*.

4.4 Goal 4: To build coherent pathways from further education and to foster other entry routes to higher education

Access to higher education in Ireland is too concentrated at the point of school leaving, and this goal is concerned with broadening the opportunities for entry to higher education. This goal focuses particularly on opportunities for transition from further to higher education, and sets the target of having 10% of new entrants to higher education coming from the further education sector by 2019.[34] This is in line with the further education progression target included in the *National Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019* published by SOLAS.[35]

In addition to direct entry from further to higher education, the regional clusters will provide the context for much deeper collaboration between FEIs and HEIs. This should include partnership at regional cluster level in the development and delivery by FEIs of higher education access and foundation courses.

Goal 4: Summary of objectives and actions

	Objective	Action	Lead Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator(s)
4.1	To support a more coherent and systematic approach by institutions (working within their regional clusters) providing different pathways and supporting the transition to higher education.	As agreed in the 2014–16 compacts, each regional cluster to map and develop clear student pathways, including those between further and higher education as well as other alternative pathways.	Regional Clusters HEIs/QQI/ SOLAS/ETBs	Initial mapping of all pathways[36] supporting entry to undergraduate programmes in each cluster submitted by HEIs to HEA in 2015. Results of analysis to be published by HEA in 2016 as part of overall report on systems performance.
4.2	To develop and implement Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy across the higher education sector.	All HEIs to put in place a RPL policy, and to engage with QQI in the development of an overall national RPL framework.	HEIs/QQI/DES	HEI progress to be reviewed in the strategic dialogue process.
4.3	To ensure further education graduates from target groups are eligible for supplementary access routes on the same basis as Leaving Certificate applicants.	To extend the HEAR and DARE schemes, in conjunction with stakeholders, to allow for the inclusion of further education graduates.	HEIs/HEAR/ DARE	Further education graduates entering higher education through the HEAR and DARE schemes by autumn 2016.
4.4	To increase access to the professions, high-points courses and postgraduate courses by students from target groups.	Review evidence on access by target groups to professional disciplines and high-points courses. Develop recommendations to increase access by target groups to the professions and high-points courses.	HEA/HEIs	Report and recommendations by 2017. Targets included in mid-term review of *National Access Plan*.
4.5	FEIs and HEIs to work in partnership to develop access and foundation courses that would be delivered through further education.	HEIs to review access and foundation course provision in collaboration with FEIs as part of work to develop student pathways within regional clusters.	HEIs/FEIs	Access and foundation courses to be delivered in partnership between FEIs and HEIs and offered through FE sector by 2019.

---

[34] This goal and actions are underpinned by principle iv, section 3.2.
[35] DES and SOLAS, *Further Education and Training Strategy*, p. 106.
[36] Pathways other than the Leaving Certificate or those followed by international students.

4.5 Goal 5: To develop regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education with a particular focus on mentoring

For communities that currently experience lower than average levels of participation in higher education, we believe that targeted initiatives can make a particular contribution to encouraging higher education take-up. Such initiatives should be developed in partnership with the communities, draw on a deep analysis of all available data at local level that enables greater understanding of the socio-economic groups in the communities, and accordingly should respond appropriately to their expressed needs.

The establishment of the regional clusters and the Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) at city or county level provide an opportunity to launch and support such initiatives. Such committees typically have members who represent a wide spectrum of local community interests, including local authorities and other State agencies, local and community bodies, economic and social partners, and including HEIs. Initiatives or strategies that emerge from such engagements should have some or all of the following elements or characteristics.[37]

> A 'whole-of-education' approach to access.

> Communication of the value of higher education.

> Provision of clear information on education pathways.

> Reinforcement of HEIs' engagement with communities and other stakeholders.

> The use of mentors/role models from within communities – to enable students to make informed decisions about their post-secondary education options.

> Involvement of parents and teachers as key advisers to students.

A number of successful mentoring programmes have emerged around the country, and these will contribute to the development of a template for such programmes nationally.

Goal 5: Summary of objectives and actions

	Objective	Action	Lead Responsibility	Key Performance Indicator(s)
5.1	To develop strategies for increasing access to higher education in communities with low participation levels.	Local pilot initiatives will be established in the context of the new regional clusters and the LCDCs with a view to increasing access and participation in higher education.	HEIs/HEA/DES	Call for proposals by HEA, 2016. Projects commence, 2016. Review pilot projects, 2018. Increased number of students from target areas, 2019.
5.2	To strengthen the linkages between higher education institutions and local communities.	Implementation by each HEI/regional cluster of civic engagement strategies. These should be included in compact objectives.	HEIs	Report on compacts 2015.
5.3	To develop mentoring programmes and initiatives for students in second level by regional clusters in collaboration with second-level schools, enterprise and community groups.	Regional clusters and local taskforces examine scope for increasing current provision. HEA to identify and disseminate best practice.	HEIs/regional clusters	Programmes in 50% of DEIS schools (2017), 75% (2019). *Note: this is an indicator, it does not imply that other schools should be excluded.*

---

[37]   This goal and actions have been developed in view of fundamental principles i, ii and v, section 3.2.

TARGETS FOR INCREASED PARTICIPATION: 2015–2019

5

5. Targets for increased participation: 2015–2019

5.1 The targeted under-represented groups

For the five-year duration of this *National Access Plan*, the HEA and the DES are committed to increasing participation in higher education by groups who have been under-represented up to now. The particular groups targeted are:

> Entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education.

> First time, mature student entrants.

> Students with disabilities.

> Part-time/flexible learners.

> Further education award holders.

> Irish Travellers.

The increased participation targets for each of these groups are described in sections 5.2– 5.7 below. We have also set some further benchmark indicators by which we will measure participation growth over the period of the *National Access Plan* – these are described in section 5.8.

Why set targets?

Having clear targets helps the HEA and the DES to assess progress in individual institutions and nationally; and it helps the institutions to put in place practical actions to promote access among the target groups. The targets we set out for increased participation among the targeted groups are ambitious but achievable. They have been established with reference to the *2008–2013 National Access Plan* and they draw on our analysis of higher education demand for the next five years. They have also been the subject of detailed consultation with stakeholders in the higher education sector and in the wider community. They formed the background to discussions on equity of access with HEIs at strategic dialogue meetings and in the agreement of the HEIs' 2014–16 compacts and profiles.

The data on participation by socio-economic group, county and Dublin postal district, refers to 2011–12; all other data refers to 2012–13.

Participation rates and targets in this Plan relating to socio-economic group count only undergraduate new entrants aged 18–20 years as a proportion of those from that age group in the wider national population. The current national target for overall participation in higher education (including mature student entrants) is 72% by 2020.[38] This target was set in 2007 and is under review as part of the development of a new national skills strategy.

Reviewing progress

A mid-term review of the national targets will take place in 2017. This will assess progress against targets and also consider how these may be refined or developed further, particularly in view of new or enhanced data that may become available over the course of the Plan.

---

[38]   Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007), *Tomorrow's Skills – Towards a National Skills Strategy*, p. 2.

5.2 Participation in higher education by people disadvantaged by socio-economic barriers

	Current	Target
Non-manual worker group (percentage of 18-20 cohort)	23%	**30%**
Semi/unskilled manual worker group* (percentage of 18-20 cohort)	26%	**35%**

* Includes agricultural worker group

Targets have been set to increase participation in higher education by those socio-economic groups that continue to be under-represented in the sector. In numerical terms, these targets will represent student numbers in those groups increasing by approximately 1,500 new entrants over the next five years. The basis for these targets is a comparison of higher education entrant and census data across different social groups. This confirms that some of those groups continue to be significantly under-represented in higher education compared to their numbers in the wider national population.[39] European and Irish educational policies have set the objective that student bodies are to be more reflective of diversity within national populations.[40]

5.3 Participation in higher education by 'first-time' mature students

	Current	Target
Full-time mature entrants to higher education (percentage of all new entrants)	13%	**16%**
Full and part-time/flexible (combined) mature entrants (percentage of all new entrants)	19%	**24%**

Mature students in Ireland are defined as those 23 years or over on 1 January of their year of entry to higher education. It has been national access policy since 2005 to target support for those mature students who have not previously benefited from higher education and who enter college to complete a full-time course. However, reflecting the increasing importance of part-time and flexible learning opportunities for mature students and the decrease in the numbers of those seeking full-time options, we have also set a national target for combined full-time and part-time participation. Part-time/flexible participation in higher education is defined as participation that leads to less than 60 credits per academic year. In numerical terms, these target percentage figures represent an increase of approximately 3,500 mature student entrants (full and part-time/flexible) over the next five years.

---

[39] See Appendix A.2.
[40] DES, *Higher Education System Performance Framework*, p. 5.

5.4 Participation in higher education by people with disabilities

	Current	Target
Students with disabilities as a percentage of all new entrants to higher education	6%	**8%**
Number of students* with physical/mobility disability	390	**570**
Number of students* who are deaf/hard of hearing	210	**280**
Number of students* who are blind/have a vision impairment	140	**200**

*All full-time students in receipt of the Fund for Students with Disabilities

Three under-represented groups among the disability community were focused on in the *2008–2013 National Plan* – those with physical, sensory and multiple disabilities. For the current *National Access Plan* we will continue this focused approach, and we will also set an overall target for entry by people with disabilities – based on 2011 Census data and HEA equal access data. In addition baseline data on the number of students with disabilities in second-level education will be monitored. In numerical terms the percentage target represents an increase in the region of 1,200 in the number of undergraduate new entrants with disabilities over the next five years.

While there are specific targets for students in particular categories of disability, the HEA and the DES are committed to continuing to support students in other categories of disability (for example, students with a learning disability, with mental health conditions or with neurological conditions) and to ensure that all students with disabilities can access and participate in higher education on an equal basis.

5.5 Participation in part-time/flexible higher education

	Current	Target
Percentage of students studying on a part-time/flexible basis (all undergraduates and postgraduates)	19%	**22%**

Part-time/flexible participation in higher education is defined as participation on a programme of less than 60 credits per academic year, and the target presented here relates to participation in part-time/flexible higher education among students of all ages and backgrounds. Progress in this area is a central reform objective in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*.

In numerical terms, these percentage figures represent an increase in the region of 11,000 part-time and flexible learners (total enrolments) over the next five years.

5.6 Progression to higher education by holders of further education qualifications

	Current	Target
Percentage of new entrants to higher education whose basis for admission is a further education qualification	6.6%	**10%**

The target for progression from further to higher education was set in the *Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019* published last year by SOLAS.[41] Collaboration between QQI, SOLAS and the HEA, and work by Regional Clusters on the development of pathways between further and higher education will support the achievement of this target.

---

41   DES and SOLAS, *Further Education and Training Strategy.*

In numerical terms, this target represents an increase of about 2,000 in the number of new entrant students progressing to higher education on the basis of their further education award over the next five years.

5.7 Participation in higher education by Irish Travellers

	Current	Target
Number of Irish Travellers in higher education (full and part-time undergraduate new entrants)	35	**80**

This is the first time that a national target has been set for increasing participation in higher education by people from the Irish Traveller community. The need for such a target was identified in consultation with Traveller representative groups and with Travellers who have succeeded in accessing further and higher education in Ireland.

Given the very small number of Traveller students accessing higher education each year (0.1% of entrants), a numerical rather than a percentage target is proposed.

5.8 Additional indicators

Among the points raised (particularly by access officers) in the course of the consultation process was the need for a more refined, multi-indicator approach to how we target different areas of disadvantage. And to help achieve this objective, we need further development of systems for collecting and analysing data as part of a wider higher education data strategy. Over the next five years we envisage that, in addition to the main targets outlined above, a number of additional indicators will inform implementation of this *National Access Plan* and reviews of progress; these include the following:

Entry to higher education from students who have attended DEIS schools. Analysis by the Department of Education and Skills indicates that 24% of students completing the second year of senior cycle in DEIS schools progress on to higher education, compared to 50% for all schools.[42] DEIS schools account for 12% of entrants to higher education, of which 8% come from rural areas and 4% from urban areas.[43]

Students in receipt of the special rate of grant. Students entering higher education who are on the special rate of grant are from backgrounds with long-term social protection-dependency. SUSI and the HEA are working on the development of new mechanisms for sharing and analysing data.

Data based on postcodes. Over the term of this *National Access Plan*, we will explore how the new system of postcodes (launched July 2015) might help us target parts of Ireland with low rates of participation in higher education. In advance of that, we will continue to monitor participation by Dublin postal districts.

---

[42] DES (2013), *School Completers – What Next? Report on School Completers from Post-Primary Schools – pupils enrolled in 2009/2010 and not in 2010/2011*, p. 12.
[43] HEA, *Towards the development of a new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education*, p. 21.

EVALUATION AND MEASUREMENT

6

6. Evaluation and measurement

6.1 Strategic dialogue – primary mechanism for review of HEI performance on equity of access

The HEA requires every HEI to have in place a strategy for equity of access to higher education and to have associated metrics and evaluation approaches.

As part of the annual strategic dialogue process, the HEA will formally review the performance of each HEI on its agreed targets. In relation to equity of access, HEIs must be able to show the steps they are taking to advance the national priority for equity of access (specified in the *Higher Education System Performance Framework 2014–2016*) and how they are contributing to the goals, objectives and targets set out in this *National Access Plan*. The HEA will allocate performance funding based on the outcome of these reviews.

The HEA will also work with HEIs (including those participating in the HEAR and DARE schemes) through the strategic dialogue and agreement of compacts process, to ensure that students from target groups and communities are more equitably represented across different disciplines and professions.

Mid-term review

A mid-term review of this *National Access Plan* will take place in 2017. This will assess progress against the Plan's goals, objectives and targets and also consider how these might be refined or further developed, particularly in view of new initiatives and better data that becomes available.

Annual Fora

For each of the years of the Plan there will also be an annual forum to report progress to stakeholders on progress made under the Plan. The first forum will be held in 2016.

Appendix A: Data tables and charts

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Data tables and charts

A.1 Current estimated national participation rates (all target groups)

	Per cent
Estimated national participation rate (new entrants aged 18–20)	52%
Estimated participation rates of target groups	
Non-manual worker group (new entrants aged 18–20) as a percentage of the population	23%
Semi/unskilled manual and agricultural worker group (18-20 year old new entrants) as a percentage of the population	26%
Mature students (full time) as a percentage of new entrants	13%
Mature students (full and part-time) as a percentage of new entrants	19%
Students with a disability as a percentage of new entrants	6%
Flexible and part-time students as a percentage of all enrolments (undergraduate and postgraduate)	19%
Entrants admitted on the basis of a further education award as a percentage of new entrants	6.6%
Irish Travellers as a percentage of new entrants	0.1%

The estimated national participation rate is arrived at by dividing the number of first-year undergraduate new entrants (aged 18–20) by the average of the relevant (17–19 year old) age cohort in the national population from Census 2011.

This is also the method used to calculate national participation by socio-economic group.

Participation rates by other target groups are calculated as a percentage of new entrants.

A.2 Socio-economic background of new entrants to higher education in 2011 (18–20 year olds)

Socio-economic group	General population aged 17-19 number and %	New entrants, aged 18-20 number and %	Estimated participation rate
Employers and managers	10,531 (19%)	6,617 (23%)	64%
Higher professional	3,222 (6%)	3,842 (13%)	119%
Lower professional	6,790 (12%)	3,229 (11%)	48%
Non-manual workers	13,976 (25%)	3,154 (11%)	23%
Manual skilled workers	7,429 (13%)	3,800 (13%)	51%
Semi-skilled workers	7,531 (13%)	1,840 (6%)	24%
Unskilled workers	3,064 (5%)	751 (3%)	25%
Own account workers	1,963 (3%)	2,860 (10%)	146%
Farmers	1,620 (3%)	2,692 (9%)	166%
Agricultural workers	470 (1%)	280 (1%)	60%
Total	56,596 (100%)	29,164 (100%)	52%

This table shows the socio-economic background of new entrants (in the 18–20 age range) to higher education in 2011. For comparison it also shows the numbers for each socio-economic group in the general population.

› The general population figures are those for 17–19 year olds in each socio-economic group in the general population as counted in the 2011 census. An assumption is made that this age group will be one year older (i.e. 18–20) by the time they enter higher education.

› The new entrants figures are for 18–20 year olds in each socio-economic group who are first-year undergraduate entrants to higher education – this data is taken from HEA Equal Access Survey data.

› The estimated participation rates for each socio-economic group are arrived at by dividing the numbers of first-year undergraduate new entrants (aged 18–20) in each socio-economic group by the numbers in the 17–19 year old age cohort for that socio-economic group in the national population from Census 2011.

For the general population figures, those whose socio-economic group is 'unknown' have been redistributed among other groups using a methodology developed for *Who Went to College in 2004* (HEA, 2006). Of the 'unknown' group, 40% are distributed pro-rata among the non-manual socio-economic groups and 60% are distributed pro-rata among the manual socio-economic groups.

There are, however, some statistical anomalies – for example, some socio-economic groups have estimated participation rates of over 100%. These are accounted for by the fact that two different data sets are being compared, and these have been gathered at different points in time and from different individuals. A student might report that she belongs to one socio-economic group (based on one parent's occupation, while the Census return for her family reports a different one (based on the other parent's occupation). There are also some differences in the way those in the 'unknown' socio-economic group are distributed. For all of these reasons, comparative analysis of the two gives us only *estimated* participation rates.

A.3 Participation by geographic area

A.3.1 Estimated participation by county

The data here relates to first-time undergraduate new entrants aged 18–20 in the 2011/12 academic year as a percentage of the total number in that age cohort.

When new entrants to HEIs in Northern Ireland are excluded, the rounded percentages are the same for all counties except: Cavan (46%), Donegal (41%), Leitrim (60%), Louth (46%) and Monaghan (54%).
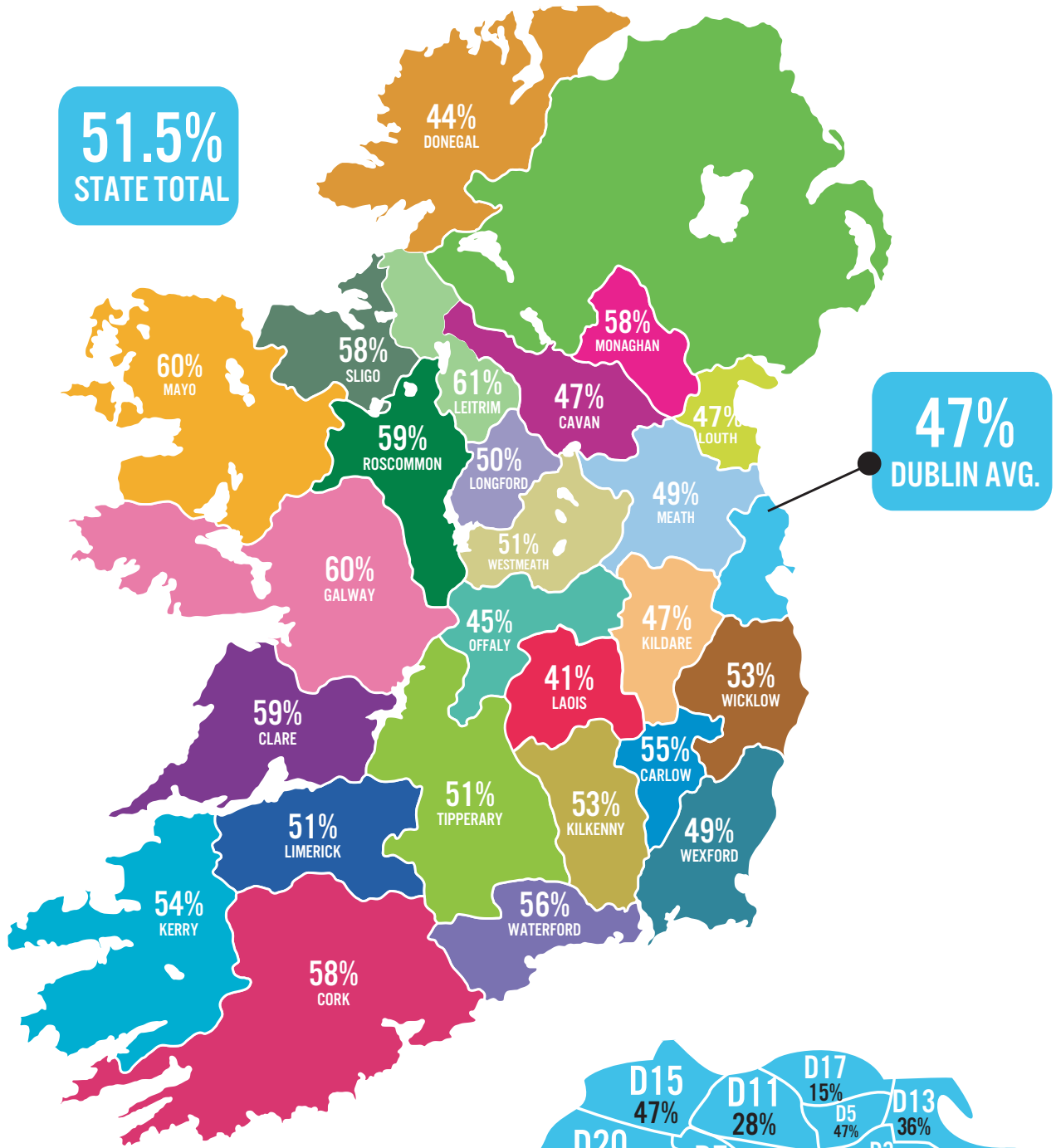
	Estimated participation rate (including Northern Ireland)
State Total	51.5%
Carlow	55%
Cavan	47%
Clare	59%
Cork	58%
Donegal	44%
Dublin	47%
Galway	60%
Kerry	54%
Kildare	47%
Kilkenny	53%
Laois	41%
Leitrim	61%
Limerick	51%
Longford	50%
Louth	47%
Mayo	60%
Meath	49%
Monaghan	58%
Offaly	45%
Roscommon	59%
Sligo	58%
Tipperary	51%
Waterford	56%
Westmeath	51%
Wexford	49%
Wicklow	53%

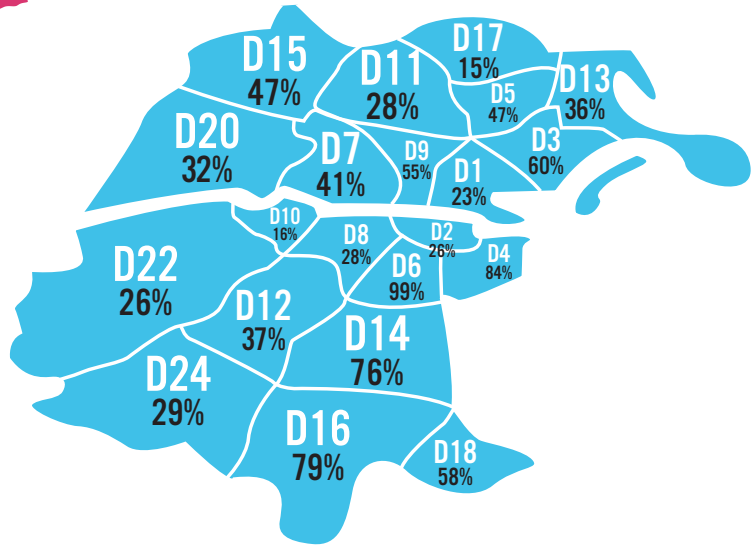### A.3.2 Estimated Participation by Dublin postal district

The data here relates to first-time undergraduate new entrants aged 18–20 in the 2011/12 academic year as a percentage of the total number in that age cohort.

	Estimated participation rate
Dublin Total	47%
Dublin County	53%
Dublin 1	23%
Dublin 2	26%
Dublin 3	60%
Dublin 4	84%
Dublin 5	47%
Dublin 6	99%
Dublin 6w	82%
Dublin 7	41%
Dublin 8	28%
Dublin 9	55%
Dublin 10	16%
Dublin 11	28%
Dublin 12	37%
Dublin 13	36%
Dublin 14	76%
Dublin 15	47%
Dublin 16	79%
Dublin 17	15%
Dublin 18	58%
Dublin 20	32%
Dublin 22	26%
Dublin 24	29%

51.5%
STATE TOTAL

47%
DUBLIN AVG.

44% DONEGAL

58% MONAGHAN

58% SLIGO

61% LEITRIM

47% CAVAN

47% LOUTH

60% MAYO

59% ROSCOMMON

50% LONGFORD

49% MEATH

51% WESTMEATH

60% GALWAY

45% OFFALY

47% KILDARE

41% LAOIS

53% WICKLOW

59% CLARE

51% TIPPERARY

53% KILKENNY

55% CARLOW

49% WEXFORD

51% LIMERICK

54% KERRY

56% WATERFORD

58% CORK

D15 47%

D17 15%

D11 28%

D5 47%

D13 36%

D20 32%

D7 41%

D9 55%

D1 23%

D3 60%

D10 16%

D8 28%

D2 26%

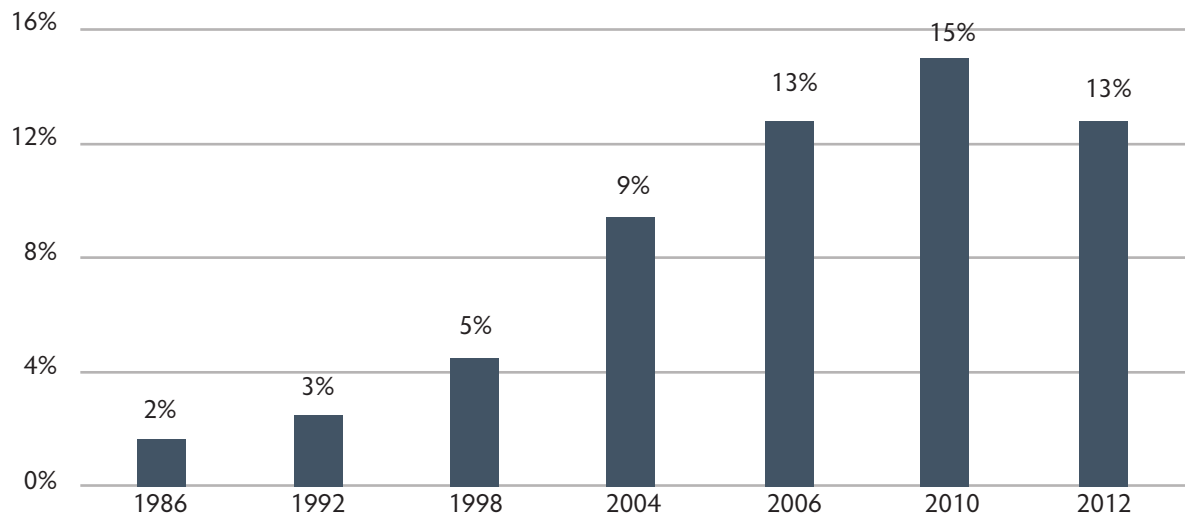D4 84%

D22 26%

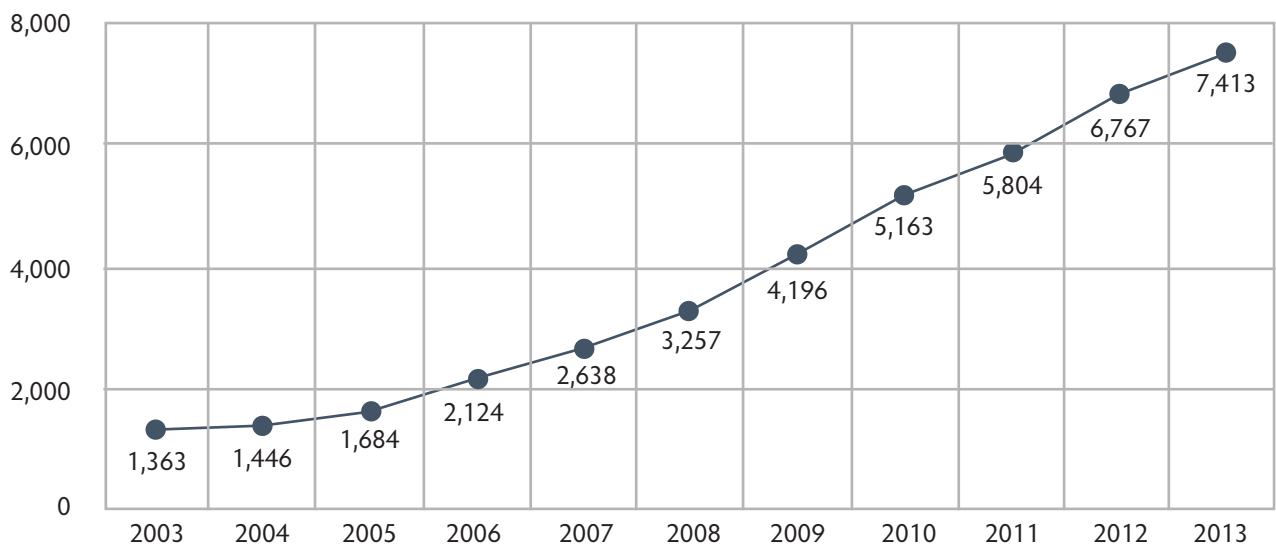D6 99%

D12 37%

D14 76%

D24 29%

D16 79%

D18 58%

A.4 Mature students (new entrants)

Mature entrants (aged 23+) as a percentage of all full-time, undergraduate new entrants, 1986–2012

A.5 Students with disabilities

A.5.1 Total number of higher education students supported by the Fund for Students with Disabilities, 2003–2013

A.5.2 Numbers of higher education students supported by the Fund for Students with Disabilities, 2003–2013, by category of disability

| Category of disability	Number of students				
	2003	2006	2009	2012	2013
Specific learning difficulties	831	1,482	2,729	3,814	3,929
Significant ongoing illness	93	114	303	588	681
Multiple disability	48	85	144	548	703
Physical/mobility	175	190	235	398	416
Deaf/hard of hearing	94	126	173	212	201
Blind/vision impairment	76	65	116	140	160
Other disabilities (Including ADD/ADHD, ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder), Mental Health Conditions)	46	62	496	1,067	1,323
Total	**1,363**	**2,124**	**4,196**	**6,767**	**7,413**

A.6 Part-time and flexible learners
Estimated percentage of all higher education students participating on a part-time/flexible basis, 2006–2012
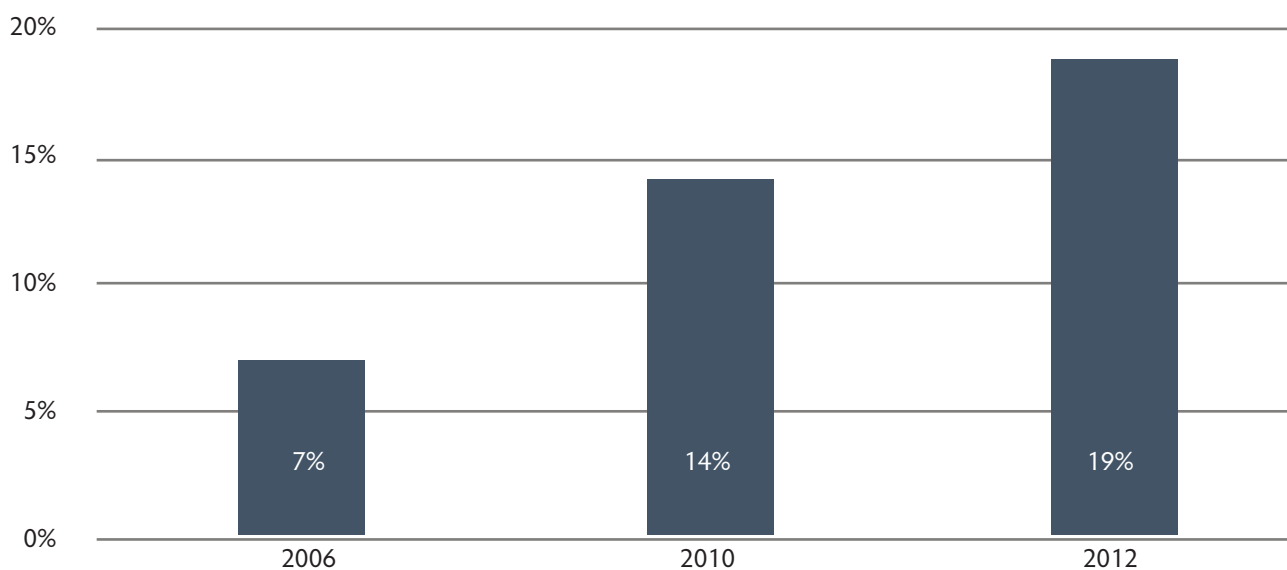
A.7 Further education entrants

Percentage of students entering higher education on the basis of a further education qualification, 2009–2013
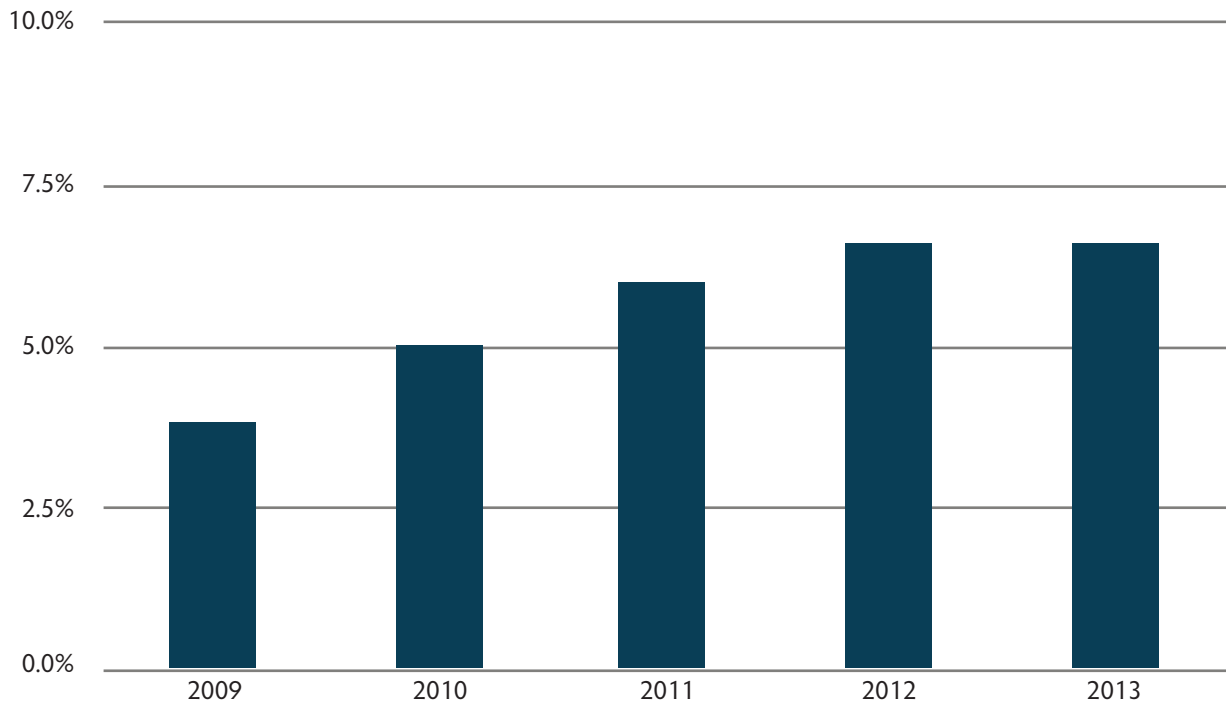
This data is an estimate of the percentage of students entering higher education based on a further education qualification. It is based on CAO data on the number and percentage of overall places in higher education accepted by applicants where the offer of a place was made on the basis of their FETAC/QQI award results.

A.8 What do students from the target groups study?

A.8.1 Field of study of target groups

Field of study	Socio-economic target groups	Mature students	Students with disabilities	General student population
Agriculture and Veterinary	1%	1%	3%	2%
Education	3%	2%	2%	3%
Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction	11%	9%	11%	11%
General Programmes*	1%	0%	0%	0%
Health and Welfare	14%	25%	13%	14%
Humanities and Arts	19%	20%	24%	19%
Science, Mathematics and Computing	18%	17%	19%	18%
Services	10%	7%	7%	7%
Social Sciences, Business and Law	25%	19%	21%	24%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

* General Programmes are courses in literacy, numeracy and personal development.

The figures in these two tables are taken from HEA SRS data and relate to new entrant full-time undergraduates (all ages) for 2012/13 and 2013/14. Double counting may occur in some cases because of the inclusion of mature students, so the percentages given should be taken as indicative of trends.

A.8.2 Socio-economic groups and selected undergraduate subjects

Socio-economic group	Selected subjects					All subjects
	Medicine / Dentistry	Pharmacy	Veterinary Medicine	Law*	Teacher Training*	
Employers and managers	18%	14%	26%	28%	27%	21%
Higher professional	44%	25%	19%	23%	8%	13%
Lower professional	13%	10%	10%	11%	15%	11%
Non-manual workers	7%	10%	7%	11%	8%	12%
Manual skilled workers	3%	8%	4%	8%	10%	13%
Semi/unskilled and agricultural workers	4%	6%	6%	8%	9%	13%
Own account workers	5%	11%	1%	6%	9%	9%
Farmers	7%	14%	25%	5%	16%	8%
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100

* *Law* includes only undergraduate degree courses in law approved by King's Inns, Dublin.

* *Teacher Education* includes only undergraduate courses in teacher-training colleges leading to a qualification in primary school teaching.

B

Appendix B: Consultation Process

APPENDICES

Persons and organisations from whom we received submissions[*]

ACE (Centre of Adult Continuing Education, University College Cork)

AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability)

AONTAS (National Adult Learning Organisation)

Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland

Cork Institute of Technology

Cudmore, Ms Pauline

DeafHear

Disability Federation of Ireland

DRHEA (Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance) Widening Participation Strand

Dublin City University

Dublin Institute of Technology

Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology

Dunphy, Ms Anne

Fitzgerald, Professor Desmond

Fleming, Mr Brian

Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology

Impact

Institute of Technology Carlow

Institute of Technology Sligo

Institute of Technology Tallaght

Institutes of Technology Ireland

Irish Blind Rights Alliance

Irish Business Employers Confederation

Irish Universities Association

Joint Networks (Mature Students Ireland; Disability Advisers Working Network; Access Made Accessible)

Jesuit University Support and Training

Kelly-Blakeny, Dr Eileen

Letterkenny Institute of Technology

Limerick Institute of Technology

Mary Immaculate College

Maynooth University

National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals

National College of Art and Design

National College of Ireland

National Council for Special Education

National University of Ireland, Galway

O'Leary, Ms Pamela, Terence MacSwiney Community College, Cork City

Pavee Point

Pobal

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Rehab Group

Rossa College, Skibbereen, Co. Cork

Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

South Kerry Development Partnership Limited

St Angela's College Sligo

St Dominic's Secondary School, Ballyfermot, Dublin 10

St Vincent de Paul

The Integration Centre

The Teaching Council

Treoir/Teen Parents Support Programme

Trinity College Dublin

Union of Students in Ireland

University College Cork

University College Dublin

University of Limerick

*Some of those who made submissions have asked not to be named.

Persons and organisations we met as part of the consultation process

AONTAS

Ballyfermot /Chapelizod Partnership

DCU in the Community

Downes, Dr Paul (St Patrick's College, Drumcondra)

Dún Laoghaire Further Education Institute

Education and Training Boards Ireland

Jesuit University Support and Training

Killester College of Further Education

Loreto Crumlin Adult Education

One Family

Pobal

St Vincent de Paul

Teen Parents Support Programme

C

Appendix C: Glossary of terms

APPENDICES

Access office/service	A unit or office(s) in each higher education institution that coordinates the planning and delivery of pre- and post-entry programmes targeting increased access and participation of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, of mature students, of students with disabilities, and of students from other under-represented groups.
Bologna Declaration	The Bologna Declaration to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was agreed by member states in 1999. Since 2001 there has been a focus on the access/social dimension of higher education. See www.pl4sd.eu
CPD	*Continuing Professional Development* The systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and skills and the development of personal qualities necessary for the execution of professional and technical duties throughout a practitioner's working life.
CSO	*Central Statistics Office* Agency that gathers and analyses population and other data, through the national census and other surveys.
DARE	*Disability Access Route to Education* A higher education admissions scheme that offers places on reduced CAO points to school-leavers with disabilities.
DEIS	*Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* Department of Education and Skills policy instrument that addresses educational disadvantage by prioritising the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities through enhanced support for designated primary and secondary schools.
DES	*Department of Education and Skills* The Department of Education and Skills is the Government department with responsibility for all levels of education and training.
EAS	*Equal Access Survey* Annual HEA survey of socio-economic background, disability status and ethnic/cultural background of first year, undergraduate new entrants to higher education. Summary analysis of survey results is published each year as part of HEA *Key Facts and Figures* publication.
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ETB	*Education and Training Board* From 2013, the former Vocational Educational Committees were dissolved and replaced by 16 Educational and Training Boards, with responsibility for the delivery of primary, post primary and further education in their regions, and the development of appropriate further education and training programmes in conjunction with SOLAS.
EU 2020 target	Targets for education as set out in the *Europe 2020 Strategy* (European Commission, 2010).
Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education	An expert group appointed by the Minister for Education and Skills to identify issues relating to the long-term sustainable funding of higher education in Ireland. The group is due to report to the Minister in 2015.
FE	*Further education* Post-second level, pre-higher education qualifications from Levels 1–6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).
FEI	*Further education institution* An institution, college or other provider of further education level courses.
FETAC	*Further Education and Training Awards Council* The former statutory awarding body for further education in Ireland, the functions of which were taken over by QQI in 2012.

FSD	*Fund for Students with Disabilities*
	Annual fund managed by the HEA on behalf of the DES to support students with disabilities in higher and further education.
	See www.studentfinance.ie
HE	*Higher education*
	Education at universities, institutes of technology, teacher-training colleges and some other educational institutions, with qualifications of levels 6–10 on the NFQ.
HEA	*Higher Education Authority*
	The HEA has a statutory responsibility, at central government level, for the effective governance and regulation of higher education institutions and the higher education system. In support of this mandate the HEA exercises functions in respect of funding, accountability, the quality of outcomes, policy research and advice to the Minister for Education and Skills, data analytics and knowledge management, communicating the value of higher education and co-ordinating interaction between public bodies and the higher education system.
HEAR	*Higher Education Access Route*
	A higher education admissions scheme that offers places on reduced points and extra college support to school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
HEI	*Higher education institution*
	One of the 7 universities, 14 institutes of technology, 7 colleges of education or other colleges offering higher educational qualifications.
Intreo	A service from the Department of Social Protection offering a single point of contact for all employment and income supports.
	Intreo offers practical, tailored employment services and supports for jobseekers and employers alike.
IOTI	*Institutes of Technology Ireland*
	Representative body for the 14 institutes of technology in Ireland.
IUA	*Irish Universities Association*
	Representative body for the 7 Irish universities and associated colleges.
LCDC	*Local Community Development Committee*
	Committees, formed under the aegis of the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, consisting of representatives from the local authority, public bodies that provide services in the area, and local community interests and bodies.
Mature entrant	A mature student who is 23 years of age or older on 1 January in the year of application for entry to a level 6 to 8, higher education programme.
Mentoring	A developmental relationship in which a more experienced or more knowledgeable person helps to guide a less experienced or less knowledgeable person.
National Forum on Teaching and Learning	Forum to research and develop policy and practice on teaching and learning in higher education, and to enhance the quality of the learning experience for all students at third level.
	See www.teachingandlearning.ie
NFQ	*National Framework of Qualifications*
	A ten-level system (1–10) giving an academic or vocational value to qualifications obtained in Ireland.
Part-time education	A higher education programme with a value of less than 60 credits per academic year.
Participation rate	The proportion of people from a certain population/age group that enters higher education in a given year. For more detailed information see Appendices A.1 and A.2.

Progression rate	The proportion of students who progress from first to second year of an undergraduate programme of study.
QQI	*Quality and Qualifications Ireland* State agency that maintains the National Framework of Qualifications and provides quality assurance for further and higher education in Ireland.
REAL Network	Network of people engaged in research on equality, access and lifelong learning.
Regional clusters	Regional clusters of higher education institutions, further education institutions and Education and Training Boards (ETBs) established to collaborate on implementation of the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*.
Retention rate	The proportion of students entering a higher education programme who successfully complete all years of that course and graduate within a specified time period – for example, in the case of a four year programme, within five years.
RGAM	*Recurrent Grant Allocation Model* Model for allocating the annual recurrent grant for funding HEA institutions.
RPL	*Recognition of Prior Learning* Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning as a means of fulfilling higher education entry requirements.
SAF	*Student Assistance Fund* A fund that provides financial assistance for full-time higher education students who are experiencing financial difficulties while attending college. See www.studentfinance.ie
SEG	*Socio-economic group* The population of Ireland is classified by the Central Statistics Office according to ten socio-economic groups. These categories are based on more detailed lists of occupations combined with employment status.
Sensory disability	A disability of the senses (visual, hearing).
SOLAS	*An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna* SOLAS is the state agency responsible for funding, planning and coordinating training and further education programmes.
SRS	*Student Record System* HEA system for gathering and analysing student data. This data is provided by each higher education institution to the HEA as part of an annual student statistical return.
SUSI	*Student Universal Support Ireland* Awarding authority for all higher and further education grants.
Transitions Reform	An initiative of the HEA, the DES and other stakeholders to enhance the transition from second-level education to higher education in Ireland.
Universal Design	Universal Design is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of their age, size or disability.

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