

Ireland

National Higher Education Equity Policy

Governance

Who is responsible for defining national policies in higher education?

- Department of Education and Skills: The mission of the Department of Education and Skills is to provide high-quality education which will enable individuals to achieve their full potential and to participate fully as members of society, and contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development.
- The Minister of State for Higher Education is part of the Department's team.
- The Higher Education Authority (<http://hea.ie/>) leads the strategic development of higher education in Ireland and is the policy advisory body to the Department of Education and Skills. It has a statutory responsibility for the effective governance and regulation of the higher education system.

Higher Education Policy Documents

What are the current key official documents defining the national higher education strategy/policies?

- National Strategic Plan
 - National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (launched in 2011)
 - National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (this plan is the third national access plan in Ireland)
- Universities Act, 1997. Institutes of Technology Acts (various). Technological Universities Act 2018.

Nondiscrimination Legislation

- The Employment Equality Acts 1998–2015
- The Equal Status Acts 2000–2015 (protects against discrimination outside of the workplace, including in education).

Equity Policy Documents

What broad and specific equity objectives do the policy documents identify?

The overall mission of the National Access Plan is that the diversity of the higher education population reflects the diversity of Irish society. There are four key target groups:

- Gender groups¹
- Students with a socio-economic disadvantage
- Students with a disability
- Irish Travelers
- First-time mature students (full-time and part-time)

The policies set targets for participation for the above groups.

- Targets are set out on pp 35-37 of National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019)

Is there a standalone policy document dedicated to equity promotion in higher education?

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

What specific interventions and/or instruments of equity promotion are included in the official strategy and policy documents (monetary and non-monetary)?

Monetary Policy Instruments

- **No tuition fees or low fees in public institutions / No fees for certain groups:** While Irish HEIs charge fees (currently just over €3000), the cost of attending higher education is heavily subsidized by the Department of Education through the “Free Fees Initiative.” Approximately 40% of students do not pay any fees (i.e. not the €3,000) on a means tested basis.
- **Needs-based scholarships and grants / Other grants targeted for equity groups:**
 - students who are eligible to not pay fees because of their socio-economic background or situation can also receive a study grant (see SUSI.ie for details – various income thresholds and rates apply)
 - support grant for students based on family and/or personal income
 - 1916 Bursary Fund will support 600 students over three years (starting in academic year 2017/18). This fund is aimed at under-represented groups, including single parents. The grant is for €5,000

¹ Additionally, the Higher Education Authority in Ireland promotes gender equity at staff and faculty levels (<http://hea.ie/policy/gender/>)

per academic year and students can be awarded a bursary and keep a SUSI grant.

- **Student loans:** Offered through major banks.
- **Equity-linked financial incentives built into the funding formula to allocate public resources to higher education institutions**
 - The Student Assistance Fund provides financial assistance for students in higher education who are experiencing extreme financial difficulties whilst attending college. The Fund for Students with Disabilities. Both funds are co-funded by the Irish Government and the European Social Fund as part of the ESF Program for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014 – 2020. HEIs can apply for funding on behalf of students. Funding goes to the provision of services and support of full-time and part-time students with disabilities.
 - The funding formula which allocates a block grant to the HEIs on the basis of student numbers and disciplines also provides a premium of 30% for each student enrolled from any of the priority access categories mentioned earlier. This block grant funding is to ensure that every higher education institution has an infrastructure in place across its institution to support access to, and successful participation by, students from the target groups.
 - The PATH Fund (consists of three strands of funding over a three-year period).

Non-Monetary Policy Instruments

Every HEI has an equity of access strategy in place and many initiatives such as below would feature in these plans:

- Outreach and bridge programs
- Academic and career guidance and counseling
- Peer mentoring
- Teaching and learning support
- Flexible pathways and transfers / Recognition of prior learning
- Reformed admission procedures / Affirmative action programs: separate admission schemes for students with disabilities (Disability Access Route to Education, DARE) and for school-leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Higher Education Access Route, HEAR). HEAR and DARE are joint initiatives agreed between the HEIs and originally seed funded by the HEA (now funded by the HEIs themselves).
- Retention programs

- Pre-admission language support or counselling is provided to migrants, refugees or foreign students

Financial Resources

What financial resources does the country devote to equity promotion measures?

- Student Grants Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) received 103,300 applications for the 2017/18 academic year, of which circa 82,000 were deemed eligible for grant support. Expenditure on student grant supports in 2017 amounted to approximately €371m
- Student Assistance Fund and Fund for Students with Disabilities 2018/19 academic year allocations (Higher Education only)
 - Student Assistance Fund €9.1m
 - Fund for Students with Disabilities: €8.0m

Quality Assurance

Do the quality assurance criteria take equity elements into consideration in its review process and criteria?

- Objective 3 of the quality review methodology is to evaluate the effectiveness of a HEI's statutory policy on access, transfer and progression.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- Who is responsible for monitoring the impact of equity promotion measures?
The Higher Education Authority requires every HEI to have an equity of access as part of the performance compacts between the HEIs and the government (through the HEA) through which targets are set in a strategic dialogue process and reviewed annually.
- What instruments, methods and data are in place to carry out the monitoring and evaluation activities? See above re performance contracts. HEA also prepares data on participation by the target groups. New Access Data Strategy has been developed and is being implemented. An interim review

of both qualitative and quantitative targets in respect of the National Access Plan is also being finalized and will be published shortly.

Dedicated Equity Promotion Agency

- Within the Department of Education and Skills, the Equity of Access to Higher Education Section focuses on equity in higher education.
- There is also a dedicated section in the Higher Education Authority with responsibility for access policy. The Access Funds – SAF, FSD and PATH – are managed within the HEA and the block grant (incorporating the element calculated based on access metrics) is also allocated from the HEA. It works in partnership with the Department of Education and Skills in the implementation of the National Access Plan.
- SUSI is the state body responsible for the management of the maintenance grant scheme.

Sources

National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019
http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/national_plan_for_equity_of_access_to_higher_education_2015-2019_single_page_version_01.pdf

Department of Education and Skills, Government of Ireland,
<https://www.education.ie/en/>

Higher Education Authority (<http://hea.ie/>)

National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030
<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/National-Strategy-for-Higher-Education-2030.pdf>

“Higher Education – Equity and Access” Department of Education and Skills
<https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Management-Organisation/Higher-Education-Equity-of-Access.html>

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“Fund for Students with Disabilities” Higher Education Authority, <http://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/fund-for-students-with-disabilities/>

“Course Fees” Higher Education Authority
<http://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/course-fees/>

“Guidance System in Ireland” *EuroGuidance*
<https://www.euroguidance.eu/guidance-system-in-ireland>

<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Corporate-Reports/Annual-Report/department-of-education-and-skills-annual-report-2017.pdf>