

Submission on the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2022-2026)



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National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

Introduction

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy are life skills that allow us to participate in, and make sense of, the world. These skills involve listening, speaking, reading, writing, using numbers and everyday technology to communicate, to build relationships, to understand information and make informed choices.

NALA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education.

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs in Ireland

- One in six (18%)¹ of the adult population struggle with reading and understanding everyday text. For example, reading a bus timetable or medicine instructions.
- One in four Irish adults (25%) has difficulties using maths in everyday life. For example, basic addition, working out a bill or calculating averages.²
- Over half (55%) of the adult population has low digital skills.³ For example, using a smart phone, googling and understanding information online. Note that the majority of people who have digital literacy needs have underlying literacy issues.

Current literacy provision

The 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) run the local adult literacy services where:

- 67,000 adults **attended** in 2019⁴. This includes adult literacy groups (including family literacy), English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE), Skills for Work (basic skills programme for employees) and one-to-one voluntary literacy tuition.
- Some of the learners work towards awards at QQI Levels 1 to 4. In 2019 there were 2,890 major awards⁵ achieved at Levels 1 to 3 (390 at Level 1; 1,123 at Level 2 and 1,377 at Level 3) and 1,735 at Level 4. There were also 30,413 minor awards achieved at Levels 1 to 3 in 2019 and 33,547 at Level 4.

¹ CSO (2013). [PIAAC 2012](#) (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) Results from Ireland.

² Ibid.

³ Cedefop (2020). Empowering adults through upskilling and reskilling pathways. Volume 1: adult population with potential for upskilling and reskilling. Luxembourg: Publications of the European Union.

⁴ SOLAS (2020). [Annual Report and Accounts 2019](#).

⁵ QQI (2019) [Annual Analysis of Awards](#) made by QQI.

Supporting unmet literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) are currently developing a **10-year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy** (due to be published in June/July). As part of this new strategy, we hope to see more literacy learning opportunities, the removal of barriers and availability of financial supports for participation, along with great progression routes to enable adults to access further and higher education opportunities.

NALA observations

The HEA consultation paper identified a number of questions that we will comment on here.

1. What should our overall vision for equity of access to higher education in Ireland be for 2022-2026?

The vision should be to ensure that 20% of students completing a higher education (HE) course are from underrepresented groups.

2. Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan? How do we ensure that vulnerable members of our society are included (e.g., learners currently in care or who have experience of being in care)?

We would like to see **named target groups** from underrepresented groups, including:

- Adult literacy students (who studied from Levels 1 to 4)
- Students from socio-economic backgrounds with traditionally low participation rates

To ensure the most vulnerable members of society are included we need:

Better systems:

- Ambitious targets and supports to attract people from groups with traditionally low participation rates into higher education.
- Widen the access points for people coming from further education and training (FET) and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) routes into higher education – not every adult wants to or can go through the CAO point system.

More inclusive culture:

- Inclusive and open higher education culture to encourage access and participation.
- More role models – do I see people like me in college – as a student, as a lecturer.

Greater awareness:

- Clearer pathways and navigation, awareness of options and clear and accessible information (plain language). Make people aware of their options, what is involved in the course and what it leads to, how the system works and how they can access it.
- Outreach and support through the application process and beyond.

Personal development:

- Build adults' confidence to attend ... for some adults you lose confidence in your skills and in learning when you have not had a great school experience. Need for coach and mentoring approach to build confidence as a learner.

Greater supports:

- Transitional and study skills supports to participate fully, including support in course related literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.
- Financial supports such as income support, childcare/eldercare, ICT, books and materials costs and transport.

3. How can pre-entry and post-entry activities be developed?

Pre-entry activities that would be useful are:

- All communications from Higher Education Institutions and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science should be in plain language.
- Review the application system for CAO and SUSI grant for accessibility and follow [plain English guidelines](#) in all publicly accessible information and documentation.
- Process to identify possible literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs for participating in the course, and completing assessments and provide short intensive supports where required.

- Longer orientation programmes to take the fear and stigma out of attending higher education and familiarising students with the institution. These could be combined with the pre-course preparations outlined below.
- Opportunities to improve course related literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills before the course begins. There may also be a need to offer time management, academic writing and presentation skills support.

We would like to see **post-entry activities** include the following:

- All communications from Higher Education Institutions should be in plain language.
- Course is delivered using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and in a literacy friendly way.

A 'literacy friendly' course is one that:

- uses inclusive active learning methods and materials to help overcome literacy barriers to participating and learning; and
- helps participants understand and use the key terminology, communication, literacy and numeracy they meet in the various contexts they are exploring.
- Customised support to improve course related literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills where needed.

4. How can current funding programmes be better utilised to further the objectives of the National Access Plan?

Current funding programmes should prioritise support for the students most in need. Additional income disregards need to be agreed with the Department of Social Protection to enable students to be able to bridge the funding gap between what is required to attend higher education and what is available

5. How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded within HEIs?

To have more diverse participation in higher education (HE), we need to:

- Review the culture to assess what inclusive and accessible approaches are in place or are needed.
- Have lecturers and teachers who come from the populations we are trying to attract.
- Have active outreach and supports for targeted groups.
- Consider delivery methods and how learner centred, user friendly, use universal design and plain language.
- Offer customised support to improve course related literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills where needed.

6. How can a whole-of-education approach to widening participation in HE be achieved?

We need to:

- Run a national campaign promoting and encouraging participation from groups with traditionally low participation rates. Work with media and journalists to dispel the notion that higher education is only for top scoring leaving certificate students from fee-paying schools. Create a counter narrative to the annual league tables coverage.
- Develop and promote more pathways between literacy and community education, FET and HE along with more standardised use of RPL and RPEL.
- Deliver courses that are learner centred, user friendly, use universal design and plain language and holistic. Consider issues around location of course and use of more part-time, modular, blended, distance and synchronous learning.
- Offer financial supports to cover the real cost for adults attending HE courses – this will depend on people's circumstances and range from:
 - Transport costs – getting to and from the centre
 - Childcare and elder care costs
 - Books, materials and printing costs
 - Technology costs such as price of a Smartphone, tablet/computer and broadband
 - Living costs such as rent / mortgage payments, food and utilities
 - Job related costs such as time away from work to attend courses
- Part-time students need access to supports, as full-time students have.

7. How can pathways between further education and training and higher education be better developed?

- Clearer pathways and navigation, awareness of options and clear and accessible information (plain language). Make people aware of their options, what is involved in the course and what it leads to, how the system works and how they can access it.
- Greater promotion of pathways by hearing from people who are in higher education (HE) through the non-conventional route.
- More guidance for adult learners especially adults in literacy and community education.
- Greater outreach and support through the application process.
- More bridging programmes to explore where to go after Community Education and, or FET.
- Transitional and study skills supports to prepare for full participation in HE.

8. How can other social inclusion initiatives outside of the higher education sector be harnessed to support equity of access objectives?

Social inclusion initiatives outside higher education should be resourced to work on a promotion and support programme to increase access, participation and successful completion.

Other student related questions

What is the biggest challenge for students in accessing higher education?

The biggest challenges for literacy students in accessing higher education are:

- lack of clear pathways from further education into higher education,
- confidence, and
- funding.

What can make a difference for students accessing and completing higher education?

Here are some actions that can make a difference:

- **Better systems:**
 - Set ambitious targets and supports to attract people from groups with traditionally low participation rates into higher education.
 - Widen the access points for people coming from FET and use of RPL and RPEL – not every adult wants to or can go through the CAO point system.
- **More inclusive culture:**
 - Inclusive and open higher education culture.
 - Where you can see people like me in college – as a student, as a lecturer.
- **Greater awareness and outreach:**
 - Clearer pathways and navigation, awareness of options and clear and accessible information (plain language).
 - More outreach and support through the application process.
 - Engage with adults from underrepresented groups and with traditionally low participation rates to build confidence to apply and attend higher education.
- **Greater supports:**
 - Offer transitional and study skills supports to participate fully, including support in course related literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.
 - Offer financial supports to cover the real cost for adults attending HE courses.

Further information

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