



Enhancing Access

Exciting Developments for the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) Scheme

MY name is Daniel McFarlane, I am the Access Manager in the Irish Universities Association with leading responsibilities for the Disability Route to Higher Education (DARE) for students whose disability has a negative impact of their education, and the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme for students from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds who are under-represented at third level.

DARE and HEAR have been national pathways since 2009 with the running, membership and governance of these schemes remain a collective and democratic effort with our HEI members. The Central Applications Office (CAO)

is responsible for the operation and assessment of the scheme.

Commitment to opportunity

DARE and HEAR represents the heritage of commitment made by our higher education institutions to provide life-changing educational opportunities for those under-represented in Higher Education.

Despite the growth in access, diversity and inclusion initiatives across Apprenticeships, Further and Higher Education in Ireland, DARE and HEAR remain critical pathways for many students. Each year nearly 20% of all CAO applicants apply through these schemes. For many, DARE and HEAR

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provide a crucial gateway to their desired higher education institution and course.

Initiatives such as HEAR remain unique – both in the European and International context in the educational opportunities they provide for specific social disadvantaged groups, the equitable measures they set as per each group's needs and cultural contexts, while operating with the public service and educational bodies such as Revenue, the Department of Social Protection, Tusla, the Health Service Executive (HSE) and Department of Education to ensure that access to higher education remains everyone's business.

New scoring systems

We are currently updating the HEAR scheme for the contemporary needs of disadvantaged students in Ireland while responding to the targets set by the National Access Plan (NAP) 2022 – 2028. These developments will see new scoring systems award those most disadvantaged while we roll out new equitable and targeted approaches for students from homeless, young parent, Traveller and Roma backgrounds. These will be live for the 2026 entry.

From 2027, HEAR will collaborate with SUSI whereby SUSI will begin to verify applicants for low income and social welfare payments, this will



DARE DISABILITY ACCESS ROUTE TO EDUCATION **HEAR** HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS ROUTE

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simultaneously lift the administration burden from students while providing the wraparound services we know are crucial for student transitions to higher education.

I believe these changes will provide both sustainable and equitable measures for student impact and sets our HEAR applicants up for greater security and opportunity to hit those first-year educational milestones we know their non-HEAR counterparts are able to enjoy.

New communications campaign

To aid our guidance counsellors as they field student applications and case management under these new HEAR developments, we will begin a new communications campaign and continuous professional development series once the new school year begins in September 2025.

This information will go live from September on the Access College website. We know these changes are required to ensure stakeholder success for guidance counsellors, parents and students. These changes to the HEAR scheme are required to meet the need and reality of educational disadvantage in Ireland today and continue to provide educational opportunities for the next generation of access students.

For further information, please visit accesscollege.ie

