

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation  
and Science, Simon Harris TD**

**Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Autism**

**22 November 2022**

Afternoon all. Thank you for having me here today.

I want to thank the chair and the committee members for this opportunity to update you on some of the work underway by my Department.

Many of you will already know this but breaking down barriers for autistic people is the very reason I entered politics. We have made really good progress as a country.

Access to primary and secondary education for autistic people has come a long way.

However, the same access has not applied for third level.

There has been a bit of a cliff edge for autistic people when it comes to the end of the traditional secondary school education.

Since my appointment as Minister for Further and Higher Education, I have sought to right those wrongs.

Third level can be an overwhelming experience for anyone but for disabled people, it can be extremely daunting.

On a practical level, over the last two years, we have funded autism-friendly rooms in nine colleges.

We also funded tactile wayfinding maps.

Our ambition took a significant step forward earlier this year, with a new policy proposal and dedicated funding stream.

### **National Access Plan**

Chair, I recently (August 2022) launched the fourth *National Access Plan - a Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education*.

An additional €35 million will be provided to deliver the targets in the new NAP.

I am delighted many of you could be with me for that launch.

We have made huge progress in increasing participation rates in higher education across all levels.

Our target under the last National Access Plan was 8% for people with disabilities. We've surpassed this with current figure standing at 12.3%.

Behind headline figures lies another truth. Which is that the level of access we rightly celebrate has not been achieved across all parts of society or the disabled population.

Our new National Access Plan for the period 2022- 2028 changes this.

The plan names three priority groups:

- Students who are socio-economically disadvantaged.
- Students who are members of Irish Traveller and Roma communities.
- Students with disabilities including people with intellectual disabilities and autistic people.

There are a number of new groups who we have never put a focus on before including those in the care system and those with intellectually disabilities.

We want a truly inclusive third level system where neither your background nor experience has a bearing on your ability to attend or succeed in higher education.

The Plan will measure access but it has, for the first time ever, put a very specific emphasis on participation and successful conclusion of higher education.

## **PATH 4**

When it comes to autistic students, we have set aside a specific fund to drive this change.

This is a new strand of the Programme for Access to Higher Education funding (PATH), which will be rolled out in two phases, over a four year period, with overall funding of €12m.

We are very grateful for the widespread engagement that allowed us to map out a realistic and phased approach. And let me assure you that in our plans the involvement of autistic people and their advocates will continue.

**Phase 1** is up and running and is directed towards advancing universal design and inclusive practices. It means every university will get a pot of money to underpin what we call

universal design learning which will have a benefit for all our students, including autistic students.

I am delighted to confirm 19 project plans have been received. The Higher Education Authority and the National Disability Authority are currently assessing these plans and their alignment with our goals to create more inclusive college campuses.

Some HEIs' projects and work packages include activities that intended to support autistic and neurodiverse students as well as projects that will assist HEIs' readiness to develop inclusive learning environments for all students with intellectual disabilities.

I am pleased to confirm we will be allocating funding next month.

Overall, these projects will lessen the feeling that a person arriving in a university campus might have if they are autistic and feeling lost without the supports which were available in secondary school.

Let me clear though. This is a good thing for our entire student population. It will support everyone, which is the magic of universal design.

This will help build the foundations we need. It will support student success for all students and learners in higher education and will be of particular benefit to students with special educational needs, including students with autism.

**Phase 2** of this new fund is a call out to all our universities to put their thinking caps on, to get creative and think how they develop courses for students with intellectual disabilities.

They should do this in collaboration and partnership with local organisations and taking on board the views of disabled people in their community.

We will put a pot of 3m in place every year over 3 years for universities and colleges to pitch their best ideas. I am so pleased we have been able to do this.

Entering a college campus is incredibly overwhelming for anyone but for an autistic student, sometimes there are greater hurdles to overcome.

## **Fund for Students with Disabilities**

The Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) provides funding to further and higher education institutions to assist them in offering supports and services to eligible students with disabilities, including autism, so that they can access, fully participate in and successfully complete their chosen course of study.

It also supports students from Ireland to study on approved courses in EU countries and in the UK, including Northern Ireland.

Overall, the number of recipients of the FSD in Higher Education has increased from 11,800 in 2017/18 to 15,145 in 2020/21. Of this 9% of students declare autism as their primary disability.

A contingency fund to provide additional support to HEIs which experience significant year-on-year increases in applications for support, in particular from high needs students, has also been established.

## **Further Education and Training**

In further education and training, specific supports are available also under the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).

This support is used for academic/learning support; assistive technology equipment & software; hearing impaired supports; examination supports; non-medical supports; and transport supports for learners with a disability.

SOLAS is also currently overseeing an independent evaluation of *Specialist Training Provision programme*, which provides training for disabled persons with higher support needs. The FET Strategy, which I just updated Government on this morning, commits to implementing the recommendations arising from the evaluation.

In particular, there is scope to increase accommodation of people with disabilities in mainstream FET rather than separate dedicated classes.



## **Action Plan for Apprenticeship**

Apprenticeship is a national resource which has been undervalued and underrated. Not anymore.

There are currently 66 apprenticeship programmes on offer. 41 programmes have been introduced since 2016 so there has been huge growth in this area.

Education and training providers offer learning and other supports to apprentices during their training and many employers also provide accommodations in the workplace to apprentices with disabilities.

Most importantly, what I want to highlight to you today, is that under the 'Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025' there are targeted actions to encourage participation from under-represented groups including people with disabilities, women and those from ethnic minorities.

The National Apprenticeship Office is launching its new Access Committee before the end of the year.

Apprenticeship provides an opportunity to target and widen the recruitment pool within the public sector and as a means to meeting Government commitments to increase the statutory target of 3% of employees with disabilities in the public service to 6% by 2024.

This, I believe, should and must include autistic students.

### **Part M Building Regulations**

As we know access to education is about more than support, the physical infrastructure of our college campuses must be inclusive also.

The Higher Education Authority, (the HEA), is in the process of finalising what it describes as a detailed space survey of the higher education estate.

As part of this survey, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been asked to indicate the compliance of their buildings with part M of the building regulations, which addresses universal access for all users regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.

Institutions can address issues of non-compliance - using funding from devolved capital grants or as part of a broader building upgrade project.

A new phase of capital investment calls have been launched which will include an emphasis on alignment with universal design principles and fostering inclusion in all its facets.

In further education and training buildings, all projects looking for funding from my Department, will be required to comply with universal accessibility or clearly identify barriers. This will enable us to work with colleges to craft universally accessible spaces.

## **Conclusion**

That is a brief synopsis of what is happening in at third level to embed universal design, improve access and advance opportunities for all learners including autistic learners and people who are neuro diverse.

It is my firm intention that our higher education student body should reflect the whole of society. This must include all disabled people.

Success takes many forms. We all grow when we have that sense of belonging, where our individual goals and aspirations are supported.

This is the true ambition of our new PATH 4 Fund and our policy intent.

We are going to measure access, participation and graduation of autistic students and students with disabilities from now on.

This will shine a light on the achievements of our universities and will spotlight where we need to do more.

The UNCRPD talks of an inclusive education system, the full development of human potential and a sense of dignity and self-worth.

This is our starting point today.

We are all only as abled as the environment and attitudes around us.

Today we are giving our universities a real chance to make their environment a place of opportunity for all students.

I look forward to discussing these issues with the Committee today and I welcome your feedback on how we can ensure that autistic people can successfully progress within third level education and continue to develop to their full potential.