

# Minister Harris announces a once-off COVID-19 contingency fund for Access Services for vulnerable students from target groups

From [Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science](#)

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Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Simon Harris TD has today (Friday, October 16th) announced a once-off COVID-19 contingency fund of €1.9m to support the delivery of access and support services to vulnerable students from target groups.

The funding will assist access offices in HEIs to implement supports to meet the needs of particularly vulnerable students, with priority given to National Access Plan Target groups, who have been most impacted by COVID-19.

This includes:

- entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education
- Irish Travellers
- first time-mature student entrants
- students with disabilities
- part-time/flexible learners and further education award holders entrants
- lone parents
- ethnic minorities

Speaking today, Minister Harris said:

"All students have suffered as a result of COVID-19 but it is clear some students face greater challenges than others.

"This fund will benefit first time-mature student entrants; students with disabilities; part-time/flexible learners; further education award holders; and Irish Travellers and Roma. It will support learner/student access; engagement or re-engagement activities; retention; progression: positive learning experiences; student success measures; the recruitment of temporary staffing to support access services; student advisory support; enhanced orientation programmes; outreach and pre-entry work.

"We must ensure we do everything we can to help students stay in college during this difficult period."

The funding is part of the €10m access support package provided for under overall €168m COVID-19 funding package which is supporting a return to education.

The overall goal of this targeted measure is to support the implementation of the [National Plan for Equity of Access \(2015-2021\)](#) and the [Programme for Access to Higher Education \(PATH\) Fund](#) objectives of attracting and retaining students from target groups.

Minister Harris said:

"We need to safeguard progress towards targets by ensuring successful transition to and retention in higher education during the COVID-19 period.

"Our students are our future and we are asking a lot of them at this formative stage in their lives, as we face the extraordinary challenges arising from the pandemic.

"I am absolutely confident that each of them will rise to the current challenges and as we work through the days and months ahead - we must all do our bit to ensure that their student experience is one which will help them blossom, by giving them confidence that the support is there for them when they need it."

**ENDS**

## **Notes**

### **Once-off COVID-19 Contingency Fund for access and support services**

The key objectives of the fund are as follows:

- to support the National Plan for Equity of Access (2015-2021) and PATH objectives of attracting and retaining students from target groups and to safeguard progress towards targets by ensuring successful transition to and retention in higher education during the COVID-19 period
- to provide additional resources to access and support services within HEIs to respond to the emerging needs of the COVID-19 pandemic
- to assist HEIs to implement appropriate adequate supports to meet the needs of particularly vulnerable students who have been most impacted by COVID-19. This includes: 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; and Irish Travellers and Roma

While priority will be given to NAP[1] target groups, it is acknowledged that many other students have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, HEIs can use some of this funding to support other vulnerable students not encapsulated in the NAP.

It is once-off contingency funding in the academic year 2020/21 which must be used for COVID-19-related responses which directly impact on NAP target group students and other vulnerable students. The funding should be used to provide additional COVID-19-related services and supports to students which complement existing activities, and assist with the re-orientation of access services in the context of the prevailing pandemic.

This access funding of €1.9m must be used for current expenditure activities only to inter alia: support learner/student access; engagement or re-engagement activities; retention; progression: positive learning experiences; student success measures; the recruitment of temporary staffing to support access services; student advisory support; enhanced orientation programmes; outreach and pre-entry work.

Funding will be allocated by the HEA to HEIs who are involved in Programme for Access in Higher Education (PATH) funded initiatives which support the implementation of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2021.

### **Student Assistance Fund (SAF)**

The Student Assistance Fund (SAF) provides financial assistance to students experiencing financial difficulties while attending third level. Students can be assisted towards costs such as rent, childcare costs, transport costs and books/class materials and costs of connectivity. Students on full or part-time courses leading to a higher education award (NQF level 6-10) in the universities, institutes of technology and other approved colleges can apply for the SAF.