



DARE & HEAR

Impact Report

2025



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Introduction

DARE and HEAR are key elements of Ireland's national strategy aimed at widening participation in higher education. Developed by higher education institutions in partnership with a broad range of sector stakeholders, these alternative admissions pathways seek to eliminate enduring structural barriers faced by learners whose educational achievements have been negatively impacted by disability and socio-economic disadvantage. DARE and HEAR function under the Central Applications Office (CAO), while the Irish Universities Association (IUA) manages the schemes on behalf of participating Higher Education Institutions* (HEIs) and fosters their sustainable growth in alignment with the National Access Plan 2022–2028.

In 2025, the IUA and all participating institutions made significant strategic advancements within both schemes. This included the introduction of revised HEAR eligibility criteria aimed at more effectively targeting disadvantage within the priority groups outlined in the National Access Plan. Simultaneously, we established a DARE Review Group to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of DARE's overall impact and future development, ensuring the scheme remains relevant, evidence-based, and adaptable to a changing policy environment.

This 2025 DARE HEAR impact report is designed to assist a diverse range of stakeholders interested in promoting equitable access to higher education, including higher education institutions, practitioners, policymakers, and sector partners. The data and analyses provided aim to enhance the collective understanding of DARE and HEAR, and a robust evidence base for access policy regarding alternative admissions pathways. Compiled by the IUA Access Team on behalf of participating HEIs, this report utilises admissions data to present a system-level view of applicant demand, eligibility, and progression outcomes.

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*For the full list of participating HEIs, please see accesscollege.ie

Our Schemes

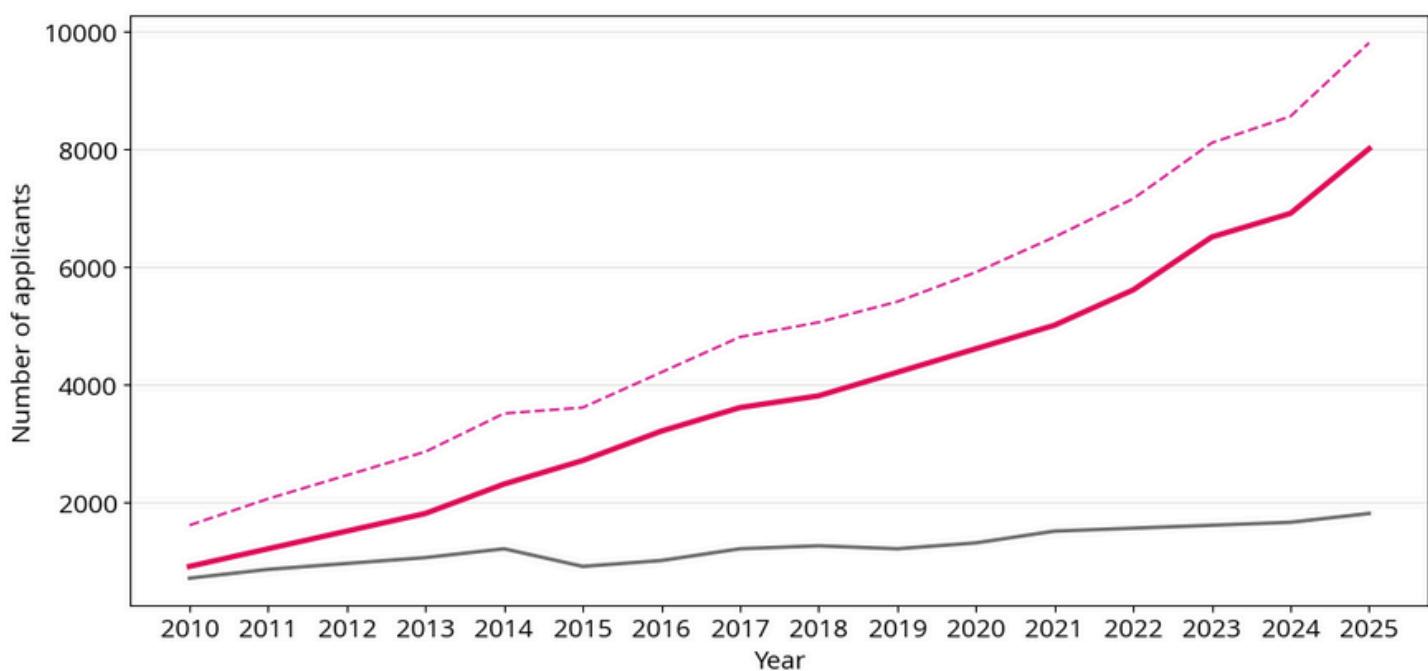
The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) and the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) are higher education admissions schemes established on a national basis since 2009. DARE and HEAR aim to promote equitable access to third-level education in Ireland.

DARE

DARE offers reduced-points college places to school leavers who, due to a disability, have experienced significant educational disadvantage during their post-primary education. As part of the application process, students must submit an Educational Impact Statement completed by their second-level school, along with appropriate evidence of disability documentation. DARE has experienced steady growth since its inception in 2009 (See Graph 1 below), climbing to over 9,702 applications assessed in 2025.

DARE Applications Assessed 2010 - 2025

Graph 1 — Eligible — Ineligible - - - Total applications assessed

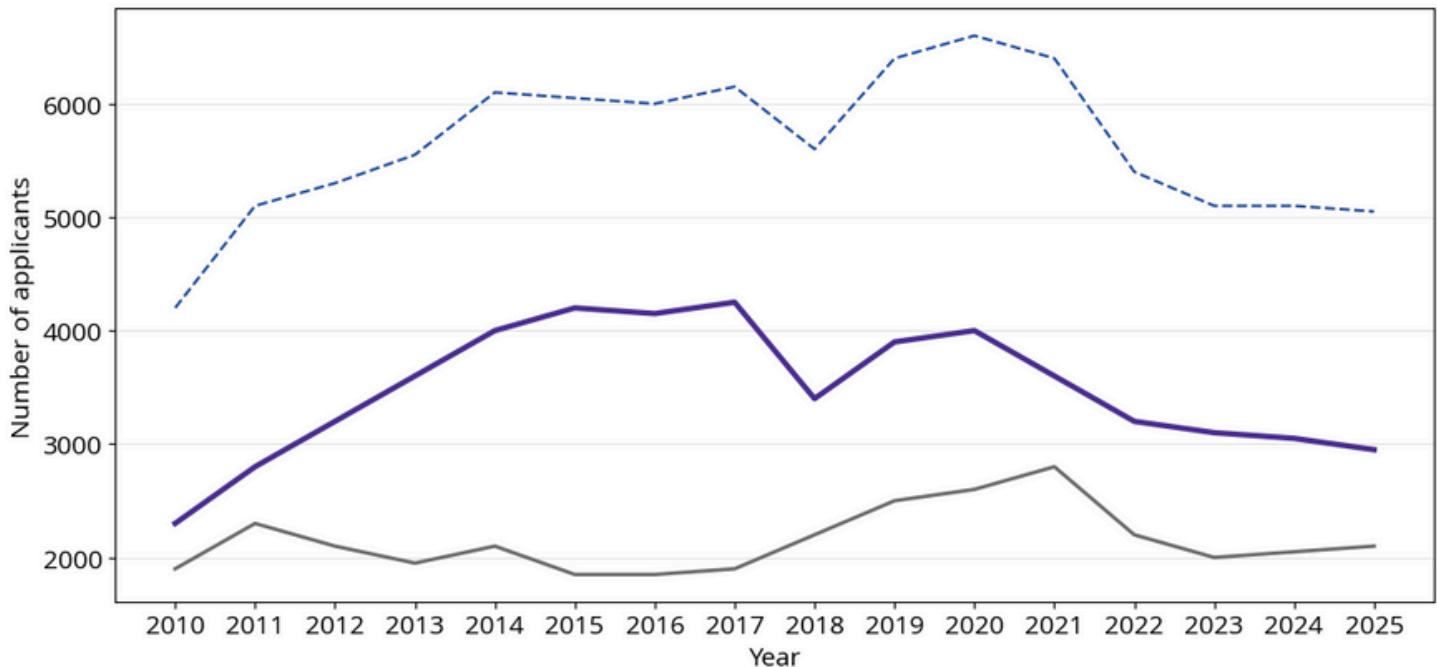


HEAR

HEAR provides reduced-points college places to students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who are traditionally under-represented in higher education. In 2025 applicants had to meet a combination of indicators including financial, social, and cultural indicators, with household income serving as the primary indicator. As per Graph 2 below, HEAR experienced steady application numbers from 2009 to 2016. However, HEAR applications have since declined by 18% from 6,080 in 2016 to 5,009 in 2025.

HEAR Applications Assessed 2010 - 2025

Graph 2 — Eligible — Ineligible - - - Total applications assessed



To address declining application numbers and respond to current forms of contemporary socio-economic disadvantage with known impacts on education, a HEAR review was undertaken. Revised HEAR criteria, including a new scoring system have been introduced for 2026 applicants, to ensure that those experiencing the highest levels of disadvantage are prioritised. The updated framework also incorporates new priority groups identified in the National Access Plan 2022 - 2028, including care-experienced students, members of the Traveller and Roma communities, young parents, and applicants who are eligible for both HEAR and DARE.

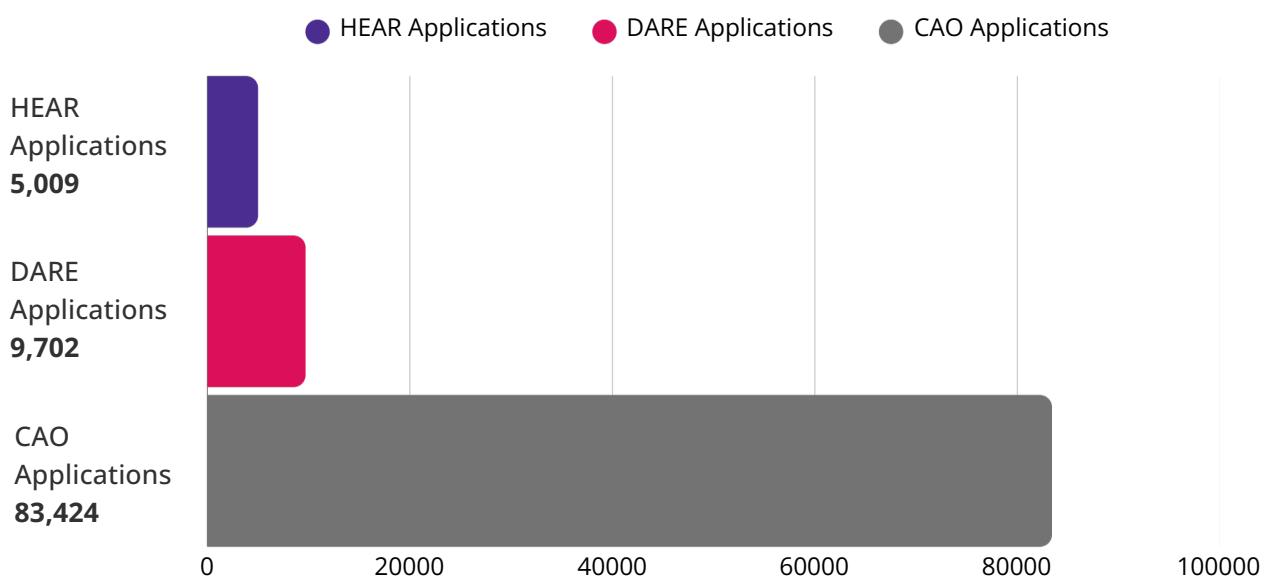
Revisions to these schemes are developed and approved by the 20 participating Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in collaboration with various public bodies such as the Health Service Executive (HSE), the Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS), Department of Education and Youth (DoEY) and Department of Social Protection.

Our Impact

The 2025 application process showed consistent growth trends in applications and admissions data in DARE (+18%) and decline in HEAR (-2%) compared with 2024. Chart 1 below illustrates that DARE and HEAR applicants now comprise 18% of all CAO applicants.

CAO Application Breakdown 2025

Chart 1



HEAR

In 2025, a total of 8,226 students indicated their intention to apply to the HEAR scheme via the CAO application process. Of these, 6,858 (83%) completed the online application, and 5,009 (73%) submitted the required supporting documentation. This cohort represented 6% of all CAO applicants. A total of 3,016 applicants were deemed eligible in 2025, compared with 3,081 in 2024 representing a 2% decrease in eligibility and continuing the downward trend observed in recent years.

There remains a significant gap between the number of students who initially express an intention to apply (n = 8,226) and those who ultimately complete the full documentation process (n = 5,009), representing a completion rate of 61% and a drop-off of 39% (n = 3,217). Current developments within the HEAR scheme, particularly enhanced outreach activity, targeted communications, streamlined application and verification processes – all part of promoting the revised 2026 HEAR criteria and new priority target groups - are explicitly intended to address these attrition points and support higher levels of applicant retention from initial expression of interest through to full application completion.

Our Priority Groups

Care-Experienced Applicants



Of the 200 applications received, 197 care-experienced applicants were eligible for HEAR in 2025. The numbers of care-experienced applicants to the HEAR scheme in 2025 provides a compelling evidence base for future scheme enhancement. This cohort demonstrates that when a National Access Plan priority group is supported through a clearly defined and externally validated intervention, developed in partnership with a state body such as Tusla, the administrative burden on applicants and aftercare workers can be significantly reduced.

The adoption of a single-point verification mechanism, such as formal confirmation by a state body, streamlines the eligibility process, increases accuracy, and results in higher numbers of successful applicants. This model illustrates how targeted and collaboratively developed interventions can be operationalised for other under-represented groups identified in the revised HEAR criteria, including Traveller and Roma students and young parents.

Furthermore, it underscores the potential of strengthened cross-agency cooperation with organisations such as Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), Tusla, and the Departments of Education and Youth (DoEY), Health, and Social Protection to support more coherent, equitable, and effective access pathways from 2025 onwards. HEAR continues to build greater collaborations across state bodies and to deliver shared objectives for data verification as mentioned in the Second Data Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2025).

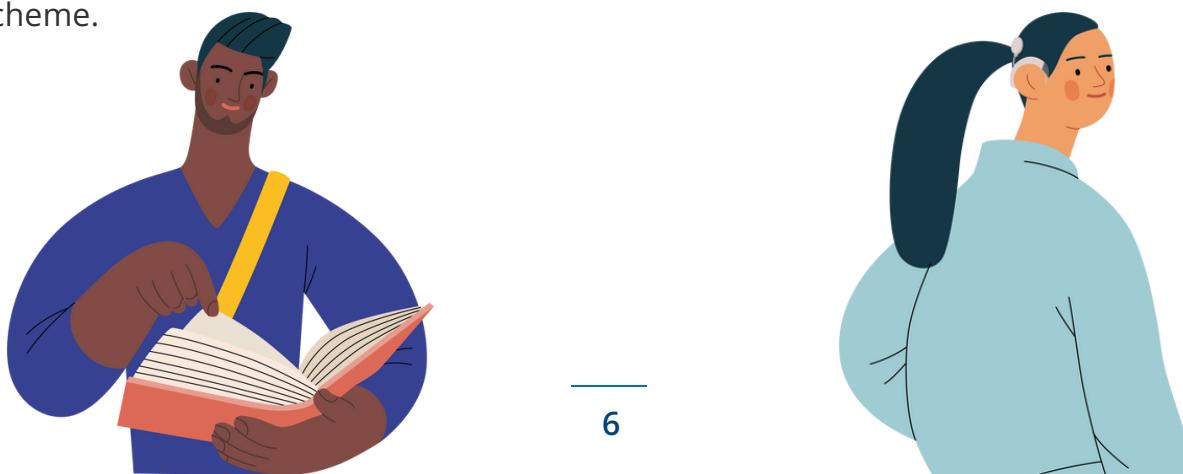
DARE

In 2025, 14,407 students indicated on their CAO application that they had a disability. Of these 12,085 (84%) completed the online DARE application and 9,702 (80%) submitted the required supporting documentation. This group represents 11.6% of all CAO applications. A total of 8,020 (80%) applicants were deemed eligible for DARE in 2025, representing an 18% increase in eligibility from 2024, and continuing the upward trend observed in recent years. Year on year, DARE applications have steadily increased (as per Graph 1 on page 2) with the most notable rises among applicants with Specific Learning Difficulties including Dyslexia and ADHD, while application numbers remain comparatively low in categories such as Blind/Vision-Impaired.

However, despite 14,407 applicants indicating a disability on the CAO application in 2025, only 9,702 submitted the required supporting documentation. This equates to a 67% completion rate between initial declaration and application completion of the DARE process. This gap suggests that a significant cohort of applicants who identify as having a disability either opt out of the scheme or encounter barriers that prevent completion of the DARE application process. The table below illustrates the disabilities categories of those who do complete their DARE application and the eligibility and ineligibility rates as per their respective disability.

The 33% of applicants who do not progress from initial disability declaration to completion of the DARE application may include a wide range of students. This group may likely include applicants who identify as having a disability, but may not meet the eligibility criteria for DARE, either because the verification requirements associated with their respective disability categories are not met or because the negative educational impact of the disability has been relatively limited due to the positive educational inclusion practices in primary and post-primary education. In these circumstances, some applicants may choose not to proceed with the DARE application process.

A deeper examination of these factors will be undertaken as part of the work of the DARE Review Group. This will include analysis of how disability type, evidentiary requirements, perceived eligibility and educational impact influence application completion. Findings from this work will inform the future development of the DARE scheme.



Breakdown of DARE Disability Categories in 2025

Disability	Eligible	Ineligible	Total	Eligibility Rate	Ineligibility Rate
ADD / ADHD	1,262	124	1,386	91%	9%
ASD	1,282	129	1,411	91%	9%
Blind / Vision Impaired	57	31	88	65%	35%
Deaf / Hard of Hearing	166	42	208	80%	20%
Dyscalculia	116	27	143	81%	19%
Dyslexia	2,553	507	3,060	83%	17%
Dyspraxia	548	65	613	89%	11%
Mental Health	750	274	1,024	73%	27%
Multiple Disabilities	677	364	1,041	65%	35%
Neurological	256	51	307	83%	17%
Significant Ongoing Illness	712	293	1,005	71%	29%
Physical Disability	235	85	320	73%	27%
Speech & Language Communication Disorder	85	47	132	64%	36%

Analysis of DARE Disability Categories in 2025

Based on the table above, Dyslexia remains the largest applicant cohort, with 3,060 applicants, of whom 2,553 were deemed eligible, representing an eligibility rate of 83%. This is followed by applicants with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), with 1,411 applicants and 1,282 deemed eligible (91%), and applicants with Attention Deficit Disorder / Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD), with 1,386 applicants and 1,262 deemed eligible (91%).

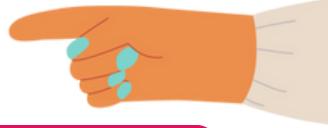
The Multiple Disabilities category comprises 1,041 applicants, of whom 677 (65%) were deemed eligible and 364 (35%) were deemed ineligible. This category reflects the intersectional and applicant-specific nature of disability, recognising that some applicants experience compounding negative effects on their education arising from the interaction of multiple disabilities. The Mental Health category similarly represents a significant and complex cohort, with 1,024 applicants, of whom 750 (73%) were deemed eligible and 274 (27%) were deemed ineligible. Taken together, Dyslexia, Mental Health, ASD, and ADD/ADHD account for a substantial proportion of the overall applicant pool and demonstrate consistently strong eligibility outcomes.

This pattern illustrates that, in 2025, these disability groups are both well represented within the DARE cohort and progress to higher education at high rates. The longitudinal representation and access outcomes of these cohorts will form a key area of focus for the DARE Review Group. Smaller disability cohorts—particularly Blind/Vision-Impaired applicants (88 applicants; 65% eligible), Speech and Language Communication Disorder applicants (132 applicants; 64% eligible), Physical Disability applicants (320 applicants; 73% eligible), and Deaf/Hard of Hearing applicants (208 applicants; 80% eligible)—continue to demonstrate a persistent dual challenge of low application volumes and sustained under-representation.

These groups are already recognised within DARE as priority cohorts due to their longitudinal under-representation in higher education, and the 2025 profile reinforces the need for continued and targeted intervention. The data indicate that barriers may arise across the application cycle, including identification and disclosure at post-primary level, accessibility and consistency of documentation pathways, and the alignment of evidentiary requirements with applicants' lived educational impact.



Implications for the DARE Review



Looking ahead, the DARE Review presents a strategic opportunity to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the scheme, including a detailed examination of disability representation patterns and year-on-year application trends. In 2025, we can see the trends in both represented and under-represented disability categories within the application cohort. The DARE Review Group will examine these trends and review current DARE eligibility criteria in light of the scheme's original mission.

These established trends provide a robust evidence base for longitudinal analysis, enabling the sector to assess how representation is evolving across the applicant pool over time. Critically, they also create space to examine, in a more structured way, those disability cohorts that remain longitudinally under-represented within higher education.

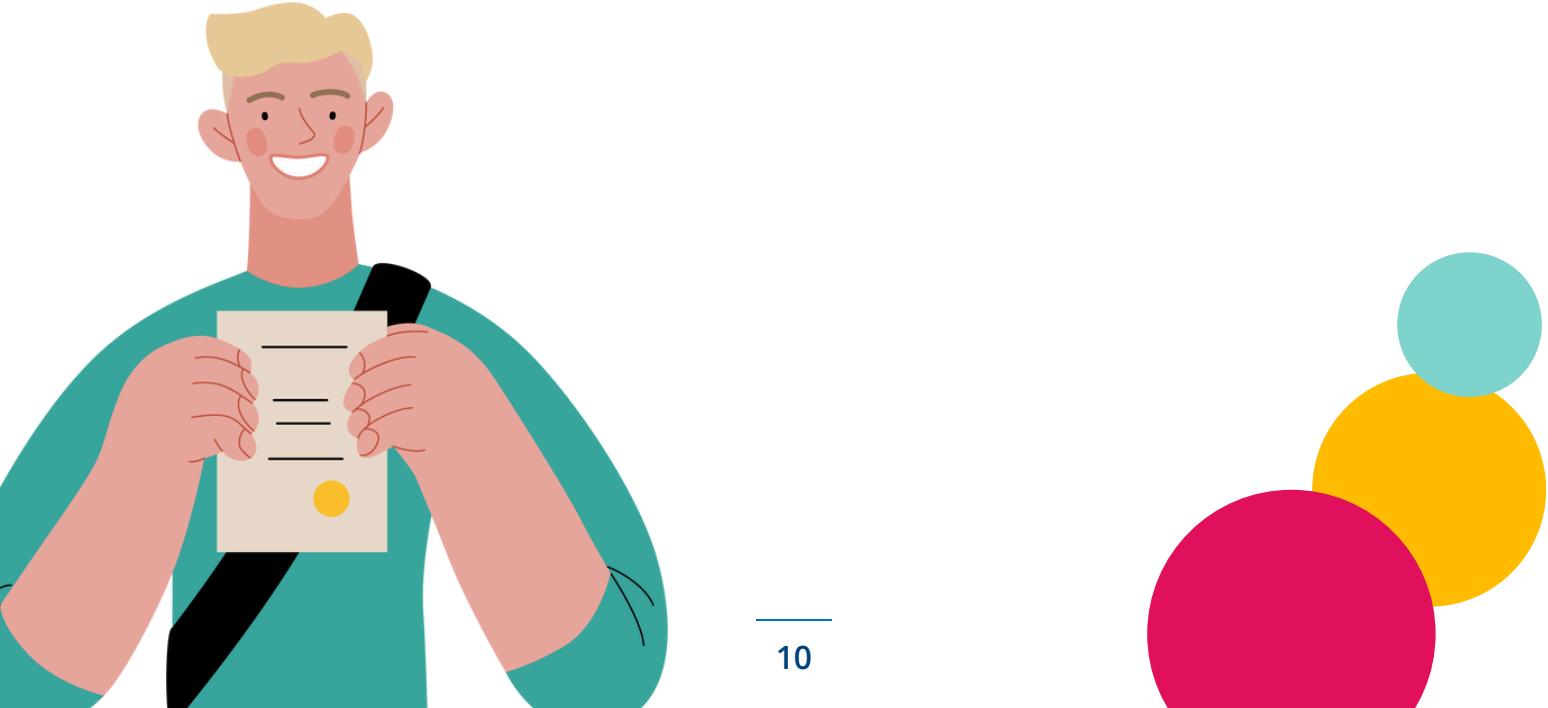
To support this work, the Irish Universities Association, in collaboration with participating higher education institutions, convened a DARE Review Group in 2025 comprised of institutional and sectoral stakeholder representatives. The group is mandated to conduct a full, evidence-informed review of the scheme within the current educational, societal, and policy context, drawing on admissions and operational data to inform future targeting, eligibility parameters, and policy direction.

Our Dual Candidates: Considering Intersectionality for DARE and HEAR Eligible Applicants

In 2025, 803 applicants applied to both DARE and HEAR, of whom 412 met the eligibility requirements for both schemes, representing an eligibility rate of 51% among dual applicants. This indicates that while a substantial number of applicants perceive themselves as potentially eligible for DARE and HEAR, a significant proportion do not meet the formal criteria for one or both schemes. This gap underscores the importance of continued clarity in guidance, improved information for applicants and schools, and ongoing monitoring to ensure that both schemes remain accessible and well understood.

Taken together with wider application patterns, the data highlights potential gaps at the intersection of socio-economic disadvantage and disability supports. In 2025, 14,407 applicants indicated a disability on the CAO application, however, only 9,702 submitted supporting documentation for DARE. Similarly, for the HEAR scheme, 8,226 applicants indicated intention to apply but only 5,009 submitted supporting documentation.

These patterns suggest a risk that applicants experiencing intersectional forms of disadvantage and disability may disengage from one or both schemes during the application process. Such applicants may face compounded barriers, including complex evidential requirements, differential access to healthcare and assessment support and varying levels of school-based guidance. Without sufficient nuance in how disadvantage and disability are jointly recognised and supported, there is a risk of unintended attrition among applicants who may be among the intended beneficiaries of access interventions. The reviews to both HEAR and DARE provide an opportunity to highlight and address these issues across the broader range of stakeholders and partnerships seeking to widen participation in higher education.



Our Offers

The data in the table below demonstrate a clear and consistent pattern across institutions and levels of study, with many students entering higher education through DARE and HEAR receiving offers above the standard points thresholds. This illustrates strong academic attainment across all eligible cohorts for both schemes. However, it is important to analyse the offers process for each scheme separately, as their intended policy focus on disability and socio-economic disadvantage remains distinct and crucially important.

	Offers (net)				Acceptances (net)			
	L6	L7	L8	Total	L6	L7	L8	Total
DARE Above the points	611	3,445	4,476	8,532	87	387	3,262	3,736
DARE Reduced points	21	210	2,162	2,393	6	91	1,661	1,758
DARE offers / net acceptances	632	3,655	6,638	10,925	93	478	4,923	5,494
HEAR Above the points	164	1,118	1,058	2,340	18	139	828	985
HEAR Reduced points	18	111	1,015	1,144	11	47	843	901
HEAR offers/net acceptances	182	1,229	2,073	3,484	29	186	1,671	1,886
DARE & HEAR offers /net acceptances	814	4,884	8,711	14,409	122	664	6,594	7,380



DARE Offers and Acceptances for 2025: The Changing Profile of Disability Impact

Looking to the table above, a total of 10,925 DARE offers were made across all NFQ levels, resulting in 5,494 net acceptances. Of these offers, 8,532 (78%) were made above the CAO points for each of those courses, with the remaining 2,393 offers (22%) made on a reduced-points basis. These offers translated into 3,736 above-the-points acceptances (68%) and 1,758 reduced-points acceptances (32%). This pattern is particularly evident at NFQ Level 8, which continues to account for the majority of DARE entry. At this level, 6,638 offers were issued, comprising 4,476 above-the-points offers (67%) and 2,162 reduced-points offers (33%). These offers resulted in 4,923 net acceptances, of which 3,262 (66%) were secured above the standard CAO points threshold and 1,661 (34%) through reduced-points offers.

At NFQ Levels 6 and 7 combined, a total of 4,287 offers were made. The vast majority of these—4,056 offers (95%)—were above the points thresholds, with just 231 offers (5%) made on a reduced-points basis. These offers resulted in 571 net acceptances, of which 474 (83%) were above-the-points acceptances, indicating very high levels of academic competitiveness among DARE applicants entering at these levels. These outcomes are significant when considered in light of the original policy rationale underpinning the DARE scheme. At its inception, DARE was predicated on the assumption that an applicant's disability was likely to have had a negative impact on their educational experience, with Leaving Certificate performance operating as a proxy indicator of that impact. This impact was understood to arise from factors such as loss of learning time, challenges engaging fully with learning and assessment environments, and barriers to equitable participation in State Examinations, in both the Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate. Reduced academic outcomes were therefore interpreted as a reflection of these constraints.

The 2025 offers and acceptances data indicate that, for a substantial proportion of applicants, disability does not translate into reduced academic attainment, at least as far as this is measured through CAO points outcomes. Nearly four in five DARE offers (78%) and over two-thirds of DARE acceptances (68%) were made above the points thresholds, suggesting that many applicants with disabilities are academically successful within the mainstream CAO system and, in many cases, would secure places without recourse to DARE.

At the same time, reduced-points offers under DARE remain both significant and clearly targeted. The 2,393 reduced-points offers made in 2025 resulted in 1,758 acceptances, representing a clearly identifiable cohort for whom disability continues to result in demonstrable educational impact. The strong concentration of these acceptances at NFQ Level 8 — 1,661 acceptances, accounting for 94% of all reduced-points DARE acceptances — reinforces the continued relevance of DARE for a smaller, but critical, subgroup of applicants.

HEAR Offers and Acceptances for 2025: Intersectional Approaches to Student Attainment

A similar headline pattern is observed within HEAR, though its interpretation differs materially from DARE owing to the intersectional socio-cultural and economic profile present within the cohort, as reflected in HEAR's multi-indicator assessment model.

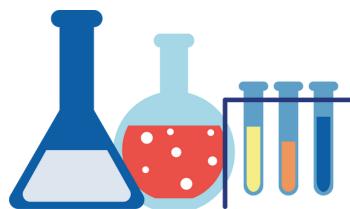
In 2025, a total of 3,484 HEAR offers were made across all NFQ levels. Of these offers, 2,340 (67%) were made above the CAO points thresholds for those courses, while 1,144 (33%) were made on a reduced-points basis. These offers resulted in 1,886 net acceptances, comprising 985 above-the-points acceptances (52%) and 901 reduced-points acceptances (48%).

At NFQ Level 8, which accounts for the majority of HEAR entry, 2,073 offers were made, split almost evenly between 1,058 above-the-points offers (51%) and 1,015 reduced-points offers (49%). These offers translated into 1,671 net acceptances, of which 828 (50%) were above the standard points threshold and 843 (50%) were made on a reduced-points basis.

This balanced profile of offers and acceptances illustrates the ongoing and structural nature of socioeconomic disadvantage addressed by HEAR. Where academic performance often exists alongside systemic barriers that consistently and negatively influence educational outcomes.

Applicants under both schemes may receive multiple offers across levels of study, typically one at NFQ Levels 6/7 and another at NFQ Level 8. In 2025, 8,711 of 14,409 total DARE and HEAR offers (61%) were made at Level 8, with the remaining 39% distributed across Levels 6 and 7. This pattern underscores the availability of flexible progression pathways within the Irish higher education system.

While DARE and HEAR may display superficially similar offers profiles in terms of above-the-points outcomes, the underlying cohorts and policy objectives remain distinct. Disability-related educational impact and socioeconomic disadvantage require different assessment lenses, supports and policy responses. The ongoing review of eligibility criteria must therefore remain scheme-specific, evidence-led, and sensitive to the longitudinal development of both routes.



Our Future

This report has been produced on the basis of admissions and application data for the DARE and HEAR schemes in 2025. While focused on the 2025 admissions cycle, the report also contributes to a robust longitudinal evidence base that reflects the development and impact of both schemes since 2009. The continual evolution of DARE and HEAR, undertaken by the participating higher education institutions, marks a period of significant and productive advancement. Alongside the implementation of new HEAR processes and strengthened collaboration with external bodies such as SUSI, Tusla and the Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS). The commencement of the DARE Review represents an essential step in ensuring that both schemes remain aligned with contemporary access needs and are subject to regular, evidence-informed evaluation.

These developments are mirrored by wider sectoral progress, particularly within the evolving access policy landscape. Ongoing work under the National Access Plan 2022-2028 - including the current midpoint assessment, the associated evaluation processes, and preparatory planning for the next access plan cycle - together with the implementation of the Second National Access Data Plan, published in November 2025, provides a strategic framework for system alignment and enhanced coordination across the sector.

These initiatives, alongside the broader policy processes currently underway, contribute to improved data governance, strengthened system coherence, and more effective access interventions across higher education. Continued refinement of the DARE and HEAR schemes will remain a central priority for the Irish Universities Association and the participating institutions, as part of the broader agenda to advance equity of access.

To learn more about the individuals and stories behind these policies, readers are invited to explore the **Generation Access campaign** at:

<https://www.iua.ie/generation-access/>



For any media or policy queries please feel free to reach out to the IUA Access Team.

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