



Press Release – Thursday 09 September 2021

Psychological Society of Ireland calls for review of criteria for Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) Scheme

- Psychological Society of Ireland considers it an unnecessary restrictive practice that Consultant Psychiatrists and Psychiatric Registrars are the only professionals eligible to verify a mental health difficulty under current DARE criteria.
- Calls for appropriately qualified Chartered Psychologists to be able to verify the presence and impact of a mental health condition.
- Irish Universities Association urged to commit to a review and to reform the restrictive practices currently in operation regarding the validation of the impact of mental health conditions on young people.

The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI), the learned and professional body for psychology in the Republic of Ireland, wishes to express its concern about the restrictive practices currently in operation by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) regarding the validation of the impact of mental health conditions on young people.

The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) is a third level alternative admissions scheme, administered by the IUA for school leavers whose disabilities (including mental health difficulties) have had a negative impact on their second level education. DARE offers reduced points places to school leavers who, as a result of having a disability, have experienced additional educational challenges in second level education.

The current DARE criteria for entry via the mental health condition route specifies that the only professional eligible to verify a mental health difficulty is a Consultant Psychiatrist or Psychiatric Registrar.

The PSI is of the view that this is an unnecessary restrictive practice and that there is a need for a change in this specification to allow appropriately qualified Chartered Psychologists to also verify the presence and impact of a mental health condition. The PSI would argue that there is no justification for the exclusion of highly qualified Chartered Psychologists from verifying the impact of mental health on young people's education.

Psychologists with Chartered Member status of the PSI must adhere to stringent ethical and competency guidelines set by the Society, have a minimum standard of training and experience, and have a requirement to continuously maintain and develop their skills. Extensive training in the assessment and treatment of mental health conditions forms a core part of professional training programmes in psychology and, therefore, is a skillset and competency which is common to both psychology and psychiatry.

A young person may have attended an appropriately qualified psychologist for assessment and/or support for their mental health condition. With the current process, the young person will be forced to also attend with a psychiatrist that they are unfamiliar with and incur additional costs to the family. This creates a situation of inequity of access for the young person/family.

The PSI has formally written to the Irish Universities Association that governs the DARE scheme requesting engagement in the hope that the eligibility criteria would be changed. Whilst the IUA recognised the important work of Chartered Psychologists, the Association unfortunately outlined that psychiatrists are the only qualified professionals who can diagnose mental health as a medical condition for the purposes of the DARE scheme. The PSI sees this as an excessively narrow and medicalised view of mental health.

In addition, the PSI considers this as not being consistent with the core value of equity in the government's *Sharing the Vision* policy, which outlines that equity is 'access to services characterised by inclusiveness, fairness and non-discrimination'.

The PSI wishes to highlight the unjustified inequity of the current operationalisation of the DARE scheme for whom the aim is to reduce barriers to accessing education, but in the area of mental health, in fact does the opposite. The PSI has advocated with government to seek their support in making these required changes; however, the position of government is that the operationalisation of the scheme is the remit of the IUA.

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the mental health of many of our young people and in this context, it is more important than ever that this situation is remedied.

Young people who have experienced mental health difficulties should have the right to have the impact of this validated and verified by an appropriately qualified psychologist.

PSI Past President Mark Smyth states: "The DARE scheme is about increasing accessibility to higher education for those young people who have been impacted by a variety of difficulties. In its current guise, with regard to recognition of the impact of mental health difficulties on young people, it is an anathema to the idea of improving accessibility and there is no justification for the restrictive practices the scheme is trying to defend. Increasing access has to be a reality for young people who have struggled with their mental health, not another unnecessary hurdle for them to navigate - they've been through enough."

ENDS.

For further information, or to arrange an interview, please contact:

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Note to Editor

- See the full *PSI Statement on the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme and Mental Health* [here](#).
- The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI), with circa 3,900 members, is the professional body for psychology and psychologists in Ireland.
- The PSI is committed to maintaining high standards of practice in psychology and also to exploring new and innovative ways of furthering psychology as an applied science.