

Disabled Students Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2024/25



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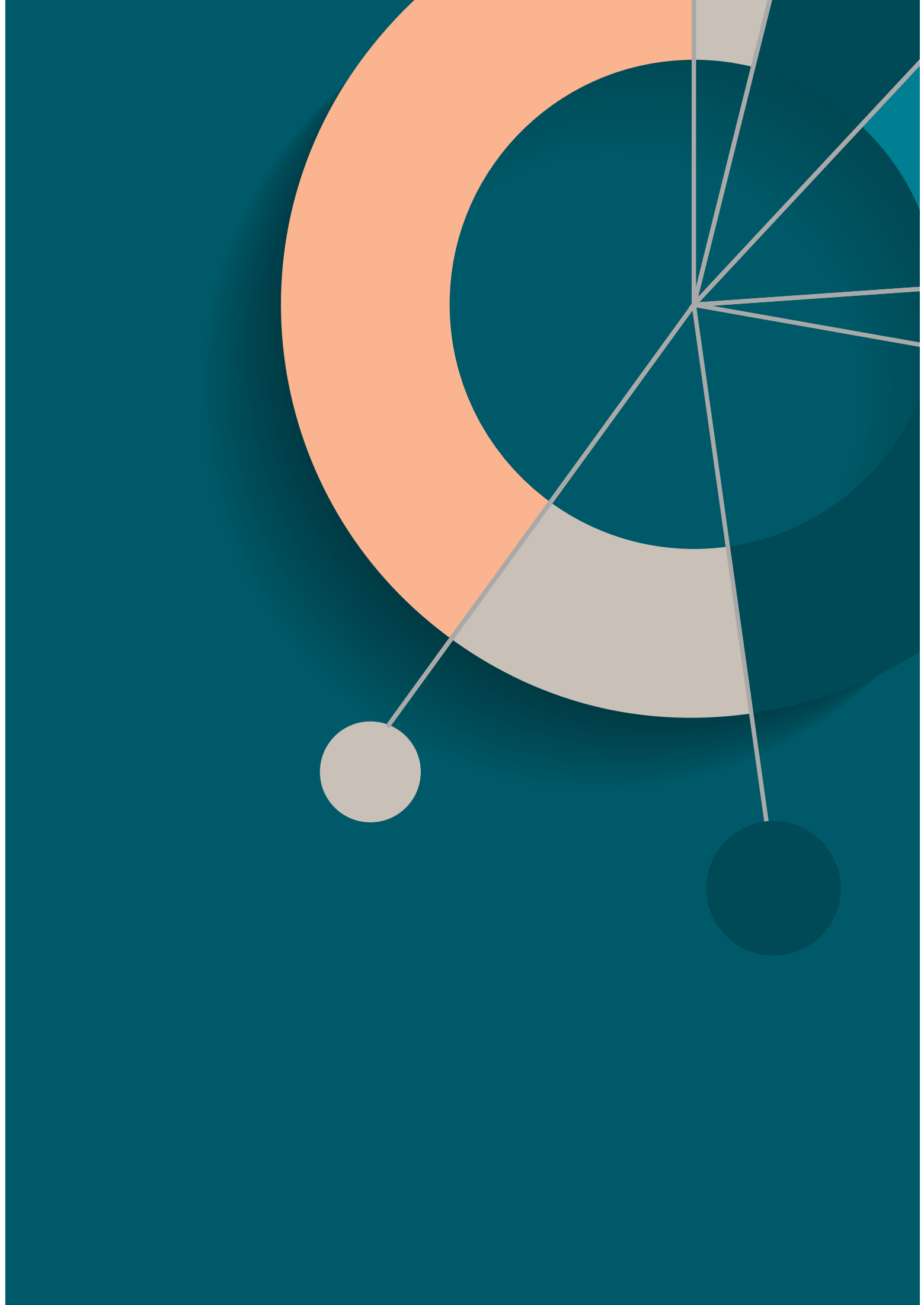
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Note on Terminology

In this publication, the terms “students with disabilities” and “disabled students” are used interchangeably. AHEAD recognises that different terminology is prevalent and culturally dominant in different regions and spaces, and we respect the right of individuals and communities to self-determine.

The term ‘disabled people’ is recognised by many within the disability rights movement in Europe to align with the social and human rights model of disability, as it is considered to imply that people with an impairment are disabled by barriers in the environment and society as opposed to their disability. However, we also recognise that others prefer the term “persons with disabilities” to indicate that they are first and foremost human beings and are therefore entitled to enjoy human rights. This also reflects the language used in the UNCRPD. Finally, we recognise that some people do not identify as being disabled.

The interchanging language in this publication is intended to be inclusive and respectful of all.

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Introduction

AHEAD is an independent, non-profit organisation that works with and for disabled people to help shape inclusive and empowering environments across Irish tertiary education and employment. In pursuance of our mission, our research and policy team carry out a broad range of research projects, which enable us to draw on an up to date and credible evidence base and policy relevant knowledge and statistics which inform our engagement with key stakeholders and pertinent actors from the Higher Education (HE) sector. Our annual Participation Rate Reports (such as this publication) are central to this work as they provide a reliable and valid overview of the number of disabled students, and percentage of the student body that this cohort represent that are registered with Disability Support Services (DSS) across publicly funded Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Ireland. Through our engagement with, and membership of, many advisory boards, sub-committees and steering groups, we frequently utilise the statistics that emanate from these Reports to instigate positive outcomes and solution-focused interventions for disabled people to access and progress through the Irish HE sector.

AHEAD's ethos and activities are underpinned by a rights-based, social model of disability approach (Oliver, 1994, p. 21), and buttressed by relevant human rights mechanisms and legislation. Our current *Strategic Plan* (AHEAD, 2024a) includes a firm commitment to promote equity of access and engagement in tertiary education and the labour market by employing the principles of the UN CRPD, among a range of other national and international rights instruments. In this way, we aim to empower disabled students as rights holders who can access HE as equitably as their non-disabled peers, rather than position them as passive students in receipt of support due to the impact of their disability.

Instead, disabled students can be active agents in their own education, enjoying equity of access and clear opportunities to succeed and attain employability capital, thus fostering pathways into rewarding careers, as equitably as their non-disabled peers. The current *Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education* and its predecessors, colloquially known National Access Plans, have helped reduce many of the barriers that have traditionally inhibited disabled people from accessing and engaging with Higher Education (HE), (HEA, 2022).

However, this Report suggests that the success of such policy has unintentionally advanced a pedagogical landscape in which disability support services (DSS), who routinely offer reactive adaptations to support disabled students, are now encountering significant challenges in accommodating increasing numbers of disabled students. As such, while AHEAD welcomes the continued growth in participation among disabled students in higher education, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the challenges faced by disabled students and DSS staff in navigating a support system that arguably requires review and reform. Such reform is necessary in light of the continued diversification of the student population, significant annual growth in the number of disabled students accessing higher education, in place of the 'traditional' Irish student profile, (Patricia McCarthy et al., 2018).

AHEAD's annual *Participation Rate* reports are the only complete institutionally verified analyses of student engagement/registration with DSS in the Irish HE sector. Our data is regularly cited in national reports and academic literature and also informs much of AHEAD's work pertaining to disability and HE in the educational policy landscape. For example, the persistent under-representation of disabled students engaged in postgraduate study, identified through longitudinal analysis of the datasets that underpin these reports, prompted the establishment of [the HEA-funded LaunchPAD project](#), in partnership with the National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee. We also employ much of the data from these Reports to provide credible, up to date evidence base and policy relevant rationale for policy submission recommendations and conference presentations.

AHEAD have been long-term advocates of the implementation of Universal Design in Irish HE and played a key-role, as Lead National Collaborator in the development of [ALTITUDE – the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education](#) – the development of which was recommended in a previous report in this series. The development of the Charter in participating HEIs was made possible by the HEA through the PATH 4 Phase 1 funding stream. By seeking to place inclusion at the heart of the design of Irish Tertiary Education institutions, the continued diversification of the student body can be responded to prior to entry, thus reducing withdrawal and promoting retention, progression and student success for all. The empirical evidence that emerges from these Reports helps foster a sense of urgency regarding the need for the adoption and implementation of the Charter within the sector, (ALTITUDE_Project, 2024).

Ireland now has the highest rate of participation in Higher Education (HE) in Europe, (Carroll et al., 2022). This is arguably a corollary of the State's transition to a knowledge-based economy in which a tertiary education qualification is more important than ever for one to participate and develop a career in the contemporary Irish world of work. Indeed, this sentiment has been echoed in a number of State policy document (Department of Education and Skills, 2016; Higher Education Strategy Group, 2011), with *Funding the Future: Investing in Knowledge and Skill's-Ireland's Competitive Advantage* explicitly postulating that Ireland's defining asset and international competitive advantage is rooted in the academic talent and attainment of our citizens, (Department of Further and Higher Education, 2022, p. 11).

However, despite high numbers of Irish people now having a tertiary level qualification, with Census data highlighting that over 6 out of every 10 Irish people within the age range of 35 to 44 having attained a third-level qualification (CSO, 2022), the participation gap between disabled and non-disabled young people engaging with HE remains one of the widest in Europe, (Carroll et al., 2022). While this is an unwelcome and surprising statistic, considering the annual increases recorded by these reports alongside longitudinal HEA data (HEA, 2025c), it should be recognised that Irish HE must evolve in a number of ways if we are to respond in a meaningful manner to this participation gap.

This Report illustrates some very welcome statistical trends, including another significant increase in the number of students who are disclosing disability and registering for supports. However, it also reveals a sector that is significantly struggling to accommodate its disabled students, with ratios of Disability and Learning Support Staff to student approaching unmanageable levels. It contains important qualitative data that suggests that some support staff members are struggling to navigate the current system of retrospective adaptations and the related *Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) Guidelines* (HEA, 2025b), which are argued to be rooted in medical model dogma and not aligned with the UN CRPD or the social model of disability it espouses.

As such, as Irish HE strives to become inclusive through the evolution of effective policy and funding streams to promote equity for all students, fundamental change to pedagogy and institutional policy is necessary to sustainably embed inclusion into the fabric of the HE sector. Factors that can drive this change include the following:

1. the implementation and adoption of inclusive pedagogical frameworks,
2. the provision appropriate assistive technologies,
3. changes to the system of disability supports and re-imagining inclusivity as a cross-functional responsibility and obligation.

The alternative is likely to be support staff burn out, role creep, (Brennan et al., 2025) and student frustration due to the reported inefficacy of some of the prescribed supports that are regularly recommended, but not implemented in the teaching and learning space, (AHEAD, 2023a).

This iteration of our Participation Rate research for the academic year 2024/25 is again made possible by the consistent support and core funding of the Higher Education Authority (HEA). We welcome their continuous commitment to promote equity of opportunity for underrepresented cohorts in the Irish HE sector, (HEA, 2019, 2022). The vast majority of HEIs who submitted data for this Report are also in receipt of HEA funding, and AHEAD recognises and conveys gratitude for the huge time and effort afforded by participating Disability Support Service (DSS) staff members in responding to the distributed survey which assists us in completing this crucial research.

Research Methodology

AHEAD distributed a detailed survey to the disability/access offices of 23 higher education¹ institutions in the Republic of Ireland in late May 2024, seeking statistics on the engagement of disabled students with support services for the academic year 2024/25. The survey included a section that sought consent from each respondent to collate and disseminate the data as per normative research practice. For the purpose of this Report, the term Higher Education Institution (HEI) is defined as those with whom the Higher Education Authority (HEA) works under statute or who are in receipt of core public funding, with the exception of National College of Ireland, Marino Institute of Education and The Royal College of Surgeons Ireland². A small number of responding HEIs are still in the process of merging data from multiple campuses (formerly Institutes of Technology (IT)) into single Technological Universities (TU) databases under the auspices of the Technological Universities Act 2018.

All but one of the contacted HEIs returned a completed survey for this iteration of what is now an annually published Report. To this end, the overarching dataset is informed by data from 22 HEIs, which enables a robust analysis of a broad range of quantitative data regarding disability category, fields of study, exam accommodations and student profile/status (i.e. postgraduate, undergraduate, new entrant, mature student, international student etc.). While the survey data is primarily quantitative in nature, the concluding section is a qualitative exploration of issues and areas related to some selected policy developments and/or transition of discursive practices in the HE/Disability space that occurred during the academic year 2024/25.

This section of the report, Question 13, is entitled “On the Ground” and is informed by data from respondents who submitted answers to two qualitative sub questions (one of which included a Likert Scale). In this Report for the academic year 2024/25, we asked respondents to comment on any potential change that needs to be implemented into disability support process to improve outcomes for disabled students and promote equity and equality for this populace as they engage with HE. Question B asked respondents to rate how well the concept of “inclusion is everybody’s business”, (DFHERIS, 2023; P McCarthy et al., 2018) is embedded in their HEI’s policy and practices.

1 A number of former Institutes of Technology (now Technological Universities) submitted their data separately (further discussed in this Section of the Report) using their prior Institute of Technology status.

2 Despite Marino Institute of Education, National College of Ireland and the Royal College of Surgeons Ireland not receiving core HEA funding, students enrolled in these HEIs can apply for SUSI (Free Fees Funding) grants via the HEA.

The survey employed for collating data is developed in partnership with DSS members from participating institutions, through annual, direct dialogue with support staff who frequently suggest amendments to the survey's structure and format. This assists us to better capture and understand the frontline realities of disability support provision and implementation in the contemporary HE space. This partnership approach with DSS members is crucial and also helps foster a collaborative perspective to research design for our Reports. For the academic year explored in this Report (2024/25), the structure and format of our survey was unchanged from AHEAD's preceding Participation Rate Report, (AHEAD, 2025a).

It is important to note that while the HEA also publish annual data that explores the participation rate of disabled students in HE, there are significant differences in the methodologies used in both reports. While this (and prior) Report is informed by data from our annual survey which is completed by a representative of the Disability Support Offices of responding HEIs, the HEA employ data elicited from the Equal Access Survey to underpin their analysis. The Equal Access Survey³ is disseminated to all new-entrant undergraduate students upon registration, with students invited to voluntarily submit a survey response for the purpose of analysis, oversight and monitoring through research. There is frequently a significant disparity between the HEA and AHEAD findings, since the former measures self-reported disability status of new entrants as part of the equal access survey, while the latter highlights the percentage of the student body registered with their HEI's DSS. However, AHEAD believes that dual datasets can serve to enrich the depth of understanding in the sector, enabling comparison and an inquiry into the self-disclosure of disability in HE.

All qualitative data was anonymised, and collected data is stored, retained and destroyed in line with AHEAD's research policy and good research practice. To this end, responding DSS members were assigned an identifier for the analysis of qualitative data. It should be noted that all respondents have consented to take part in this Report and the research has conducted in line with AHEAD's research policy, which subsumes practices pertaining to the retention and destruction of research data.

Participating Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

As discussed, all but one of the HEIs who were requested to submit a survey responded with institutional data to inform this Report. The following institutions submitted a completed survey:

3 <https://www.ncirl.ie/Portals/0/Admissions/2020/HEA-Equal-Access-Higher-Education-for-All.pdf?ver=2020-07-08-113537-673>

Participating Higher Education Institutions (HEIs):



Atlantic Technological University (ATU)



Dublin City University (DCU)



Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT)



Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT)



Marino Institute of Education (MIE)



Mary Immaculate College (MIC)



Maynooth University (MU)



Munster Technological University (MTU)



National College of Art and Design (NCAD)



National College of Ireland (NCI)



Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI)



South-East Technological University (SETU)



Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin)



Technological University Shannon (TUS) -
Athlone Campus Only



Trinity College Dublin (TCD)



University College Cork (UCC)



University College Dublin (UCD)



University of Galway (GAL)



University of Limerick (UL)

Limitations in Comparison with National Datasets

In this research, comparisons are made between data collected for this report, and data published by the HEA on two specific and important areas relevant to this analysis:

- Fields of study of the general student population
- Disabled new entrant enrolment rates

This report also collects and publishes data on the percentage of disabled students registered with services that are in receipt of supports via the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).

When interpreting any comparisons made in the report between the datasets, it is important to understand that the data collection methodologies differ. Although the vast majority of publicly funded institutions are included in all of the relevant datasets, there are minor differences in some cases. When interpreting the comparisons, it is useful to be aware of the differences in which institutions are included. The key differences to be aware of when interpreting comparison data for 2024/25 are:

- All institutions included in the AHEAD data set directly mirror those included on the SRS with two exceptions:
 - Marino Institute of Education (MIE) are included in the AHEAD dataset but are not included in the HEA SRS dataset.
 - In 2024/25, the AHEAD dataset only includes TUS data from the Athlone Campus, with other campuses unable to respond on this occasion for operational reasons.
- All of the institutions in both the AHEAD dataset and the HEA SRS dataset are eligible for the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD). However, it is useful to note when interpreting findings related to the FSD that there are five institutions who are FSD eligible who are not included in either the AHEAD dataset or the HEA SRS dataset. They are Carlow College, King's Inns, the Law Society, St Nicholas Montessori College, and St Patrick's College, Pontifical University of Maynooth.

It is also useful to note that AHEAD's dataset includes all students registered with the disability support services of the responding institutions, including a small number of students on courses not included in HEI SRS returns, for example students registered on PATH Phase 2 programmes.

Because of these minor differences in the institutions included in/methodology behind each dataset, comparisons presented in this report should be interpreted as strongly indicative rather than as exact like-for-like comparisons.

Findings

Participation Rates of Students Registered with Disability Support Services

This section of the Report unpacks the data collated from all responding HEIs for the academic year 2024/25. Drawing from the responding surveys (from all but one of the publicly funded HEIs), the data demonstrates that there were 25,025 disabled students registered with their institution's DSS across all responding HEIs for the academic year 2024/25, representative of 8.7% of all students enrolled in participating institutions (n=288,119). Despite the absence of data from one HEI, this sustains the annual increases in disabled students accessing HE that has been demonstrated in preceding Reports, both numerical and more importantly as a percentage of the full student body, (AHEAD, 2023b, 2024b, 2025a).

One of the aims of iterative research is to collate annual data sets that can be compared and contrasted, thus facilitating a robust, longitudinal and broad overview of trends, patterns and trajectories. For the academic year 2023/24, 8% (n=22,511) of the full student population had disclosed at least one disability and registered with their institution's DSS. This indicates that the percentage of students registered with Disability Support Services has continued on an ascending trajectory, with the data illustrating an 8.8% increase in the percentage of students registering with their HEI's DSS when compared with 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a).

A more precise analysis of the data from individual HEIs enables an exploration of the range of percentages of disabled students registered with their HEI's DSS across all responding institutions. It should also be noted here that it is the participation rate (percentage of total population registered with services) that is deemed to be the most relevant indicator, as opposed to numerical data, considering that the total number of students enrolled in each HEI differs significantly. The percentage of students engaging with DSS ranges from 3.8% (n=234) recorded by the National College of Ireland, to 14.4% (n=216) reported by Saint Angela's Campus, which is now part of Atlantic Technological University (formerly St Angela's College). The next highest participation rates were recorded by Trinity College Dublin (12.6%, n=2860) and Marino Institute of Education, (12.5%, n=175). Access to HE and the rate of registration with support services is a complex topic that is often rooted within a nexus of factors (e.g. accommodation, transport etc.), many of which are beyond the scope of this Report. To this end, this brief analysis of the range of students registered with DSS from responding HEIs is not intended as a critique of some nor as an indicator of good practice in others.

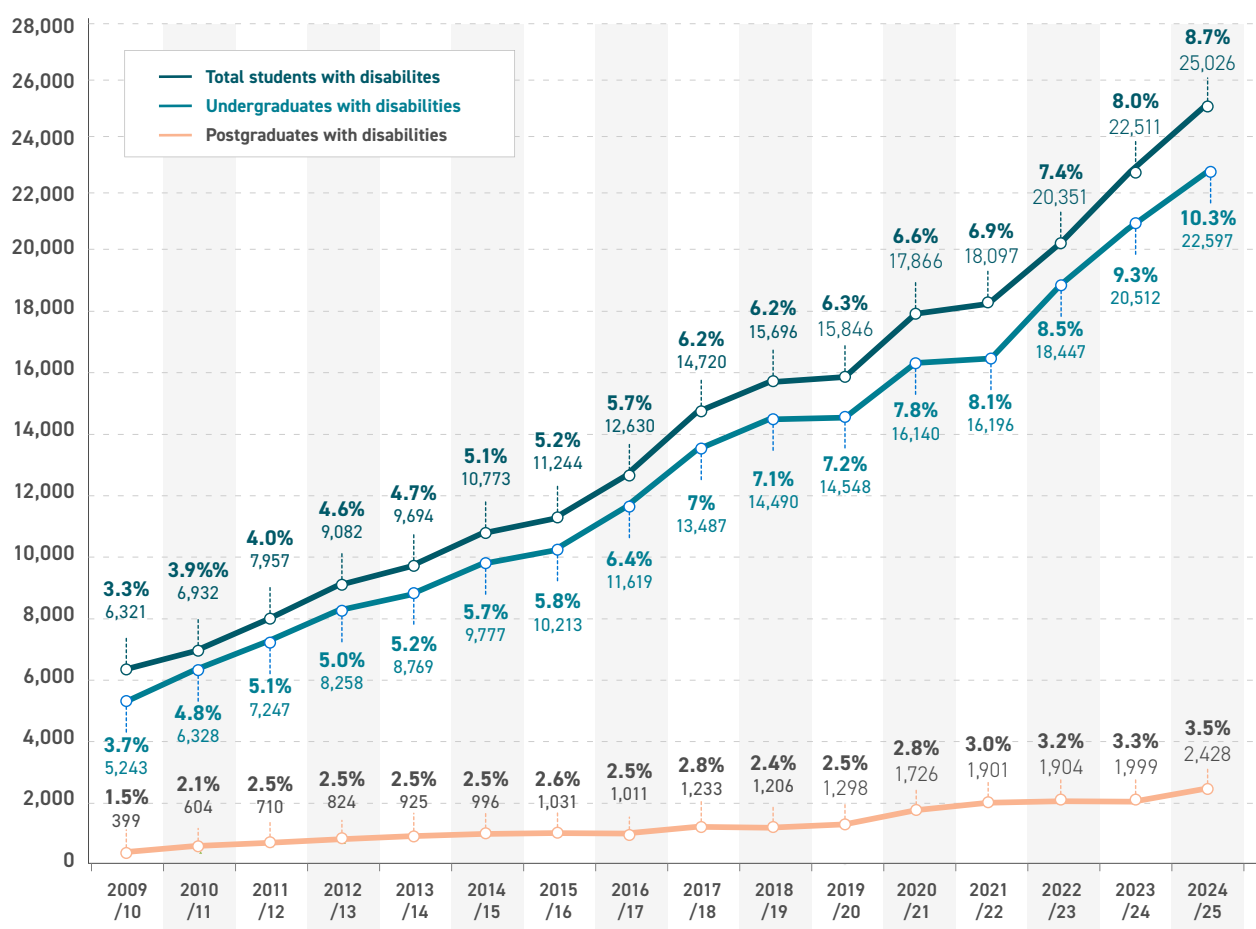


Figure 1. Number of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education and the percentage of the Total Student Population they Represent, 2009/10 to 2024/25.

Figure 1 illustrates the increasing numbers, and percentage of the student population they represent, of students registered with their HEI's DSS between the academic years 2009/10 and 2024/25. An analysis of longitudinal AHEAD data from previous Participation Rate reports indicates that there has been a 416% increase in the number of students registered for supports since 2008/09 (the year in which AHEAD Participation Rate reports became annual), (AHEAD, 2025a). These statistics have arguably been driven by successful policy mechanisms, for example the current *Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education* (HEA, 2022) and associated funding streams and activities, as well as the considerable efforts of Access professionals in the sector.

Notwithstanding this, AHEAD welcomes these developments with caution, given that previous reports and research have consistently highlighted the pressures faced by support staff, many of whom remain overburdened and under-resourced while navigating challenging funding and policy environments, institutional barriers, and continued exponential increase in students registering with their HEI's DSS, (AHEAD, 2024b, 2025a). Moreover, previous AHEAD research has highlighted an element of frustration among disabled students when engaging with their HEI's DSS, (AHEAD, 2023a). It is essential that policy commitments and ambitions are aligned with adequate funding and a willingness to explore changes to pedagogical practices, discourse and appropriate support for under-served populations. The alternative, which is potentially already being made manifest in the HE landscape is signals of student dissatisfaction (AHEAD, 2023a), which can hinder student progression and completion (Kilpatrick et al., 2017).

The ambition of the pre-discussed National Access Plan must be matched with synonymous and tangible investment to foster a sector that offers more than just equity of access. Sustainable disability support mechanisms are also required, if the sector is to realise its commitment to accommodating a diverse student body, post access, as per a number of policy instruments that stipulate that the student population should reflect the diversity of contemporary Irish society, (HEA, 2023c; Higher Education Strategy Group, 2011).

Put succinctly, innovative and effective policy that have been employed to foster pathways *into* HE must be accompanied by practices and policy that advance equity of opportunity to progress *through* HE, (Government_of_Ireland, 2025) if pre-discussed commitments are to evolve into meaningful change and better outcomes for disabled HE students.

Undergraduate and Postgraduate Participation

This section of the Report marks a more precise disaggregation of the data pertaining to the percentage of undergraduate and postgraduate students who have registered with their institution's DSS. In a competitive labour market, educational capital, employment prospects, salary levels and graduate outcomes are intrinsically linked to level of qualification.

Postgraduate study is an obvious enabler of high-income employment for all students. However, considering the accepted intersection of disability and poverty across the broad range of academic literature, and the barriers that disabled people frequently encounter as they navigate the labour market (Cullinan, 2017; Cullinan et al., 2015; Indecon, 2021), postgraduate study can be an important enabler of employability capital for disabled students in this space, (Department of Education and Skills, 2016). To this end, it is imperative that equity of opportunity for disabled students to engage with postgraduate study is promoted and encouraged within Irish HE. When the participation rate statistics are unpacked and delineated by postgraduate and undergraduate participation, our annual Reports have identified that despite the exponential overall increase in disabled students engaging with HE year-on-year, postgraduate participation has not, despite modest year-on-year rises in the rate of participation, enjoyed the same increases as those seen at undergraduate level.

Participating institutions reported that 22,597 undergraduate students were registered with DSS in 2024/25. This is representative of 10.3% of all undergraduate students enrolled in responding HEIs and 90.3% of all students registered with support services. This figure reflects an 11.3% increase in the rate of participation for disabled undergraduate students in relation to 2023/24 data, when the rate of participation for disabled students was recorded as 9.3%, (n=20,512), (AHEAD, 2025a). Pertaining to postgraduate students, the data from responding institutions highlighted that 3.5% (n=2,428) of the total number of postgraduate students enrolled in responding HEIs were registered with their DSS, which represents 9.7% of all students with disabilities. This is indicative of an 4.9% increase in the rate of participation relative to the 2023/24 data, (Ibid.).

Full-Time and Part-Time Participation Rates

As per prior Participation Rate research reports, the data collated from responding institutions included an inquiry into the percentage of disabled students engaging with full and part-time study.

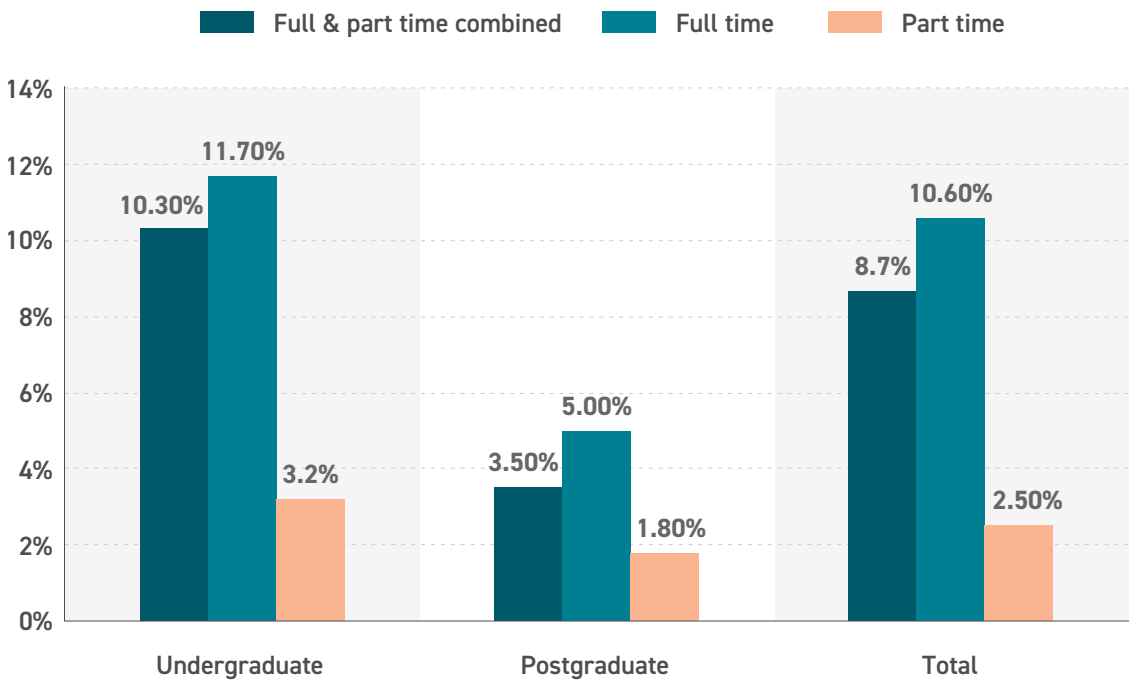


Figure 2. Percentage of students with disabilities in full-time and part-time education as a percentage of the total student body 2024/25

Figure 2 represents a more nuanced disaggregation of the research data, which is now examined using the twin lenses of postgraduate and undergraduate status. This demonstrates that 11.7% (n=21,456) of all full-time undergraduate students are registered with disability support services, with 3.2% (n=1,141) of all part-time undergraduates registered with supports. Moreover, 5% (n=1,843) of full-time postgraduates and 1.8% (n=585) of part-time postgraduates were reported to be registered with their HEI's DSS for the academic year 2024/25.

The data collated from responding HEIs further illustrates that for the academic year 2024/25, there were 23,299 full-time students registered with disability supports across all responding HEIs, representative of 10.6% of all full-time students enrolled in responding HEIs (n=219,983). When compared with 2023/24 datasets, this represents a 19.1% increase in the rate of full-time participation for disabled students. Pertaining to part-time study, the data elicited from responding surveys demonstrates that there were 1726 part-time students registered with their institution's DSS, representative of 2.5% of all part-time students enrolled across responding HEIs. In relation to 2023/24 data, this represents a significant 38.9% increase in the percentage of students engaging with disability support services in their institution, (AHEAD, 2025a). Part-time study can assist in fostering pathways for disabled people into HE, and AHEAD acknowledge and welcome these statistics. The under-representation of disabled students engaging with part-time study has been highlighted in a number of prior Participation Rate Reports, (AHEAD, 2023b, 2024b, 2025a).

While there have been some significant progress in facilitating equity of opportunity to part-time study, with the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) and Student Assistant Fund (SAF) both being expanded to facilitate part time students, the introduction of SUSI funding to enable disabled students to access both fees and maintenance grant funding support for *all* part time courses would represent a meaningful commitment to realising equity of access for disabled students to all levels of education, a direct obligation that is alluded to in Article 24.2 of the UN CRPD, (UN, 2006). Full inclusion, as alluded to by the Convention, is synonymous with high-quality education opportunities that are available to disabled people “on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they (disabled people) live”, (Ibid.)⁴.

Currently, SUSI funding is allocated to eligible students on courses and in HEIs that have been ‘approved’ for SUSI funding. Furthermore, courses are only SUSI approved if the course is considered to “lead to a major education award in line with the National Framework of Qualifications”⁵. Depending on their course and individual circumstances, students on SUSI approved courses can apply for support with the payment of course fees, and the provision of a maintenance grant to support living costs while pursuing study. Currently, no online courses are designated as SUSI approved, and only a relatively small selection of part-time courses are approved, although this is improving.

4 Article 24.2 (b) <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/article-24-education>

5 <https://www.susi.ie/eligibility-criteria/approved-courses/undergraduate-students-approved-institutions---part-time-courses/>

The Mid-term Progress Review of the National Access Plan (2022-2028) highlights the welcome development that there are now over 100 Part-time courses that are SUSI approved, representative of a 61% increase in relation to the immediately preceding academic year, 2023/24 (62 part-time courses could be funded for the 23/24 academic year), (HEA, 2026b, p. 20). As such, part-time SUSI funding has been approved at the following HEIs and Institutes of Technology:

- **Atlantic Technological University**
 - ATU Galway
 - ATU Letterkenny
 - ATU Mayo
- **Munster Technological University Cork**
- **South-East Technological University**
 - Waterford Campus
 - Carlow Campus
- **TU Dublin**
 - Blanchardstown Campus
 - Dublin City Campus
 - Tallaght Campus
- **Technological University Shannon**
 - Athlone Campus
 - Limerick Campus
- **University of Galway**
- **Dundalk Institute of Technology**

However, students studying in approved part-time courses in these institutions are only eligible to apply for SUSI support for the coverage of course fees, unlike their full-time peers who can also apply for maintenance grant support.

To this end, despite progress in widening SUSI funding for some part-time courses in a number of HEIs, we would recommend that all part-time courses in publicly funded institutions leading to a major award are SUSI approved for both 'Free Fees' funding and maintenance grant. Furthermore, we would also recommend widening access to SUSI's Free Fees funding streams to students engaging with online courses leading to a major award.

The opportunity to access fully funded and supported part-time study, and online study, would be a key step forward in widening participation for some disabled people who intend on accessing HE, considering flexible modes such as part-time, online and blended are reported to be preferred by a significant number of disabled students due to the impact of disability, (AHEAD, 2023a).

The funding of education challenges linked to the lack of SUSI maintenance grant access for these modes is exacerbated for disabled students by the accepted intersection of poverty and disability in contemporary Ireland (IHREC & ESRI, 2025; Indecon, 2021). The intersection of limited funding support and the socioeconomic status of many disabled can perpetuate added disadvantage for some disabled students. To retain the status quo with limited SUSI approval and support for flexible modes, arguably restricts prospective disabled students from accessing and engaging with the course and HEI of their choice.

New Entrant Undergraduates with Disabilities.

The survey distributed to participating HEIs defines new entrants as a student entering a full-time undergraduate programme (year 1) for the first time. The survey data for the academic year 2024/25 stipulates that 12.3% (n=6,676) of all new entrants across all participating institutions (n=54,397) were registered with disability supports in their HEI. This represents 26.7% of all students registered with DSS across responding HEIs (n=25,025). In comparison with 2023/24 data, which indicated that 10% (n=6060) of new entrants were accessing supports, there has been a 23% increase in the rate of participation of new entrant undergraduate students who are registered with their institution's DSS. The continued increase of new entrant students registering for disability supports (our Report for the academic year 23/24 posited a 28% increase when compared with 22/23, (AHEAD, 2025a)) is likely another indicator of the efficacy of access policy and targeted pathways for disabled people into HE. For example, the percentage of students accessing HE through the DARE programme has increased by 47.3% in the last four academic years⁶, (HEA, 2025c). It should be noted that while one HEI was unable to contribute data for this Report, it is the percentage values (participation rate) that are important for comparison and year-on-year- benchmarking.

6 <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures-report/>

DARE

This current Report, which encompasses survey data for the academic year 2024/25 and employs year-on-year benchmarking, is just the second iteration of this research to include data regarding the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) Scheme, with our 23/24 Report being the inaugural Report to do so, (AHEAD, 2025a). The DARE programme is currently the third most used entry route into HE, second only to the traditional route that is dependent on the student's Leaving Certificate points alone, and the Direct Entry Route, (HEA, 2025c).

For the academic year 2024/25, the HEA have reported that 8.1% of all students accessing HE availed of this programme in 23/24, (HEA, 2025c). When compared with 23/24 HEA data which reported that 7.4% of all undergraduate entries availed of DARE, (HEA, 2025a), this is demonstrative of a 9.5% increase in the number of student accessing their HE course through this entry route. As discussed, the percentage of students availing of the DARE programme has demonstrated a 47.3% increase in just 4 academic years. DARE is an essential Entry Route for some disabled students and is a key instrument in the promotion of equity of access to HE for disabled students.

The Irish Universities Association (IUA) have recently commenced a systematic review of the DARE scheme. The over-arching remit of this review is to explore if DARE remains fit for purpose, in its current form, for the contemporary disabled young person seeking to access HE. In its current format, students are required to submit medical verification or evidence of disability, a Supplementary Information Form and Educational Impact Assessment when applying to the scheme. The CAO website advises students to complete these documents with a parent or guardian with input also required from second-level staff⁷ for the Educational Impact Assessment. In essence, DARE is still a strictly points based system, with minimum entry requirements retained by some participating institutions dependent on course type and HEI. The number of reduced points places offered through DARE can vary every year and is dependent on a number of factors, which include:

- The overall number of places on courses.
- The number of reserved DARE places on courses.
- The number of DARE eligible applicants competing for these reserved places.

7 <https://www2.cao.ie/downloads/documents/2024/DARE2024.pdf>

The terms and conditions of DARE clearly state that students who avail of the programme must register with DSS in their HEI. The consequences for not doing so can include the student's application or offer being revoked, (IUA, 2023). Students who identify and disclose a sensory or physical disability are prioritised due to the perennial and long-term under-representation of these cohorts in Irish HE. It should also be noted that the On the Ground section of our Report for the academic year 2023/24 was informed by qualitative data from survey respondents who reported on their experiences and opinions of working within the parameters of the DARE programme and examines the enrolment, or lack thereof, of DARE students with their institution's DSS, (AHEAD, 2025a).

The data collated for this Report from responding institutions includes an analysis of the number of new entrant students who availed of the DARE programme when accessing their HEI, which is then further disaggregated by those who required reduced points (DARE-Below Points) and those that availed of the programme but did not require a CAO points reduction (On or above points). As DARE is an access route into HE, all DARE students recorded in this Report are New Entrant Undergraduates (however, it is acknowledged that DARE applicants may retain this status for the duration of their undergraduate studies). For the academic year 24/25, responding institutions reported that there were 4,653 DARE applicants in total, representative of 18.6% of all students registered with their HEI's DSS. Drawing from data collated from all responding HEIs for this question (4 surveys omitted data from this question) this represented 46.2% of all new entrant, undergraduate students who registered with their institution's DSS.

For the academic year 2024/25, 12% (n=3,003) of all students registered with their institution's DSS were DARE/on or above points students. As such, this cohort of students had applied through the DARE programme but were awarded their place without the need for the reduced points accommodation that is central to the scheme. This is representative of a 16.1% decrease in the percentage of students who accessed their studies in this manner in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a). Furthermore, 6.6% (n=1650) of all students registered with disability support services entered HE availed of reduced points as part of their status as a DARE applicant. This is representative of 35% of all DARE applicants for the academic year 2024/25. When compared with data from our Participation Rate research for 23/24, it is possible to draw inferences and look for increases and decreases in the number of DARE applicants as percentage of all students registered with DSS, demarcated by those who achieved the requisite CAO points for their chosen course and those that availed of the Reduced Points intervention, (AHEAD, 2025a). However, the statistics are drawn from just two academic years, either of which could be an outlier as indeed could both. Therefore, seeking trends and patterns will require continued monitoring of DARE data from future surveys, with the long-term objective of establishing longitudinal data sets. Notwithstanding this, it is still a useful exercise to compare the data for the academic year 2023/24 alongside that of 2024/25.

DARE increase/decrease	2023/24	2024/25
DARE Merit (% of all students engaging with DSS)	14.3%	12% (n=3,003)
DARE Reduced points (% of all students engaging with DSS)	9.8%	6.6% (n=1,650)

The increase in the use of the DARE programme in fostering pathways for disabled is cautiously welcomed by AHEAD and we look forward to using this empirical evidence to inform the review process facilitated by the IUA who oversee the DARE Scheme. However, our pre-discussed concerns predicated upon the tendency of policy to an over-emphasise access to the detriment of progression are still retained. An early important finding that can be elicited from the data pertaining to DARE collated in both research Reports is that the number of students who did not require reduced points to enter their chosen course (n=3003) was almost double the number of students who required the CAO point threshold reduction intervention (n=1650). Therefore, the question arises: Is the DARE programme in its current format, reaching the students who most require this intervention?

AHEAD look forward to engaging with key stakeholders and actors pertaining to the DARE review as we seek to contribute to the development of a fair and robust system that is responsive to the needs of disabled young people who wish to access and engage with HE. The DARE programme was initially established to remove some of the barriers that can inhibit disabled students from accessing HE, (IUA, 2026). It is intended to address the functional impact of disability experienced by the student as they progress through their education. It has been argued that the current structure and format of DARE requires updating and review in order to address the evolving landscape of disability in education, and this was explored and analysed in our 23/24 Report⁸, (AHEAD, 2025a). It is crucial that the review that is currently in progress (with contribution from AHEAD and a range of other stakeholders) reinforces these original values, thus benefitting the intended cohorts. AHEAD maintain that a fit for purpose DARE programme can play an essential role in promoting equity of access to HE for disabled people.

Disclosure Rates for New Entrants-HEA Data Comparison.

While AHEAD's annual Participation Rate Reports are informed by a survey distributed to all publicly funded higher education institutions (HEI), the HEA also collate and publish annual data regarding disabled student new entrant enrolments, (HEA, 2025c). However, the HEA employ an alternative research methodology and collate their data from new entrant students using the Equal Access Survey (EAS), which asks students to voluntarily self-disclose disability, with this data being retained by the HEA on the Student Record System (SRS), in order to track progression, retention and/or lack thereof. The EAS is distributed to all undergraduate new entrants and the response rate for 2024/25 was 78.3%, (HEA, 2025c).

According to HEA data, 20.9%⁹ of responding students disclosed at least one disability when submitting their EAS, (HEA, 2025c). In the AHEAD dataset, 12.3% (n=6,676) of students registered with DSS were reported to be in the new entrant undergraduate cohort (n=54,397).

8 On The Ground Section of the 23/24 Report (see in text citation).

9 For the purposes of this publication, AHEAD draw on the figure of 20.9%, which is the number of new entrants who disclosed a disability in the Equal Access Survey (EAS) as a percentage of total EAS respondents, as presented in the [HEA's Key Facts and Figures dashboard in 2024/25](#). It should be noted that the proportion of new entrants with a disability is calculated in the National Access Plan as the number of new entrants who disclosed a disability in the EAS as a percentage of the number of all new entrants. In 2024/25, the proportion of new entrants with a disability reported in the [Mid-term Progress Review of the National Access Plan](#) (2026) was 16.3%.

Despite differing underlying datasets employed by AHEAD (12.3%) and the HEA (20.9%), there is a significant difference between both sets of findings. While it is accepted that the alternative underlying datasets (see Limitations section in Methodology) may perpetuate some discrepancies, inferences can be drawn that suggest that the marked difference in both AHEAD and HEA statistics is indicative of a sizeable number of disabled students who have not formally disclosed their disability to their HEI's DSS despite doing so in the Equal Access Survey.

As discussed, AHEAD's data has been collated from a survey distributed to a representative of each publicly funded HEI, thus our statistics are drawn from all students who have disclosed at least one disability and registered with their HEI's DSS. This facilitates a robust analysis of accommodations, the ratio of support staff to student and a range of other useful, policy relevant inquiries. However, it is accepted that there is a significant cohort of students who have disclosed a disability (in their EAS) but do not register with their HEI's DSS and therefore are not receipt of any accommodations or disability support services as they negotiate HE. While AHEAD recommend that disabled students engage with their HEI's DSS and avail of support to foster equity of opportunity, we also recognise that disclosing disability is a personal decision that should be underpinned by autonomy and choice.

Disclosing a disability can be a complex, arduous and challenging endeavour for some students, with AHEAD research reporting a number of barriers that often combine to deter disclosure and registration with disability supports. These include the belief that doing so may be detrimental to their career prospects (Eccles et al., 2018), may engender different treatment from educators (Smith et al., 2021) and fears that disclosing a disability can be detrimental to social engagement within the student body, (AHEAD, 2023a; Lyman et al., 2016; Meeks et al., 2021). Disclosure has been alluded to be key to retention, progression, student success and "comfort" in the academic literature, (Sapir & Banai, 2024; Smith et al., 2021, p. 1). The need to present with often costly diagnostic documentation has been reported to be a real and persistent barrier for some (AHEAD, 2025a) considering the intersection of poverty and disability in contemporary Ireland, (IHREC & ESRI, 2025; Indecon, 2021)

New Registrations

New registrations are students who register with DSS in their HEI for the first time. While the majority who register do so in their introductory year of study, others do not do so until the ensuing years of their course's duration. For the academic year 2024/25, there were 8200 new registrations with DSS across all responding institutions, representative of 36.4% of all students registered with their institution's DSS (figure adjusted due to one HEI not providing data for this question, n=22,501). Of this cohort, the data demonstrates that 2229 students were not in their first year of study, representative of 27.2% of all new registrations and 9.9% of all students registered with disability support service across all participating HEIs that contributed data for this question (n=22,501).

Due to changes in how the data for this question was collated, year-on-year analysis using data from previous iterations of AHEAD reports is not possible.

Mature Students:

Current HEA research stipulates that 36.3% of the student population across all HEA funded institutions identify as mature students, (HEA, 2025c). The data collated for this Report from responding HEIs indicates that 6.3% (n=1370)¹⁰ of all mature students accessing responding HEIs were registered with their institution's DSS. This is representative of 10.5% (n=22618) of all mature students reported by all responding institutions and 5.8% of all students registered with DSS in their HEI. Three HEIs, despite contributing a survey, could not acquire the data pertaining to mature or international student statistics. The numbers have been adjusted to reflect this, and therefore the percentages retain their validity for benchmarking and comparison.

In relation to 23/24 data, this is illustrative of a 14.5% increase in the rate of participation of mature students engaged with disability support services, (AHEAD, 2025a).

10 Statistics adjusted due to data not provided for this question by 3 HEIs to attain an accurate percentage.

International Students

Across all participating institutions, the data indicates that there were 2,027 international students who disclosed at least one disability and engaged with disability support services for the academic year 2024/25. This is representative of 4.3% of all international students enrolled in responding HEIs (n=47,523) and 8.1% of all students with disabilities (n=22,365¹¹). When compared with statistics published in AHEAD's *Participation Rates Report* for the preceding academic year (2023/24), year-on-year benchmarking indicates that percentage of international students registered with DSS increased by 29.3%, (AHEAD, 2025a). Much like the Mature Students section, 2 HEIs could not contribute data regarding international students. Again, the figures have been adjusted for consistency, accuracy and benchmarking.

Apprenticeships:

AHEAD are long-term members of the National Apprenticeship Alliance, Access and Inclusion Subcommittee. Current SOLAS data from the *National Survey of Apprentices 2024-25* postulates that disabled apprentices represent just 5% of all apprentices (n=28,434), (Generation_Apprenticeship, 2025). This represents significant progression in relation to previous data which stipulated that just 2.7% of apprentices had disclosed a disability (DFHERIS, 2021), and is illustrative of a 78.6% increase in the rate of participation for disabled apprentices between the years of 2021 and 2025.

The obligation to support disabled apprentices requires input between the student, the HEI (for the purpose of this research), the Education and Training Board, and the employer. To this end, AHEAD and Generation Apprenticeship collaboratively launched a Tip Sheet¹² for employers working with disabled apprentices, accompanied by a poster for the workplace in May 2026. The Tip Sheet includes simple steps that can be incorporated into work practice, alongside key resources and a fact sheet pertaining to the benefits of promoting a workplace that promotes diversity through inclusive practices. It also represents another example of AHEAD research underpinning pivotal and novel activities within and across educational sectors.

11 Adjusted to account for data gaps—2 HEIs did not provide data for this survey question.

12 <https://apprenticeship.ie/news-events/news/being-disability-inclusive-in-the-workplace-guidance-for-apprenticeship-employers>

11 HEI's submitted data concerning the number of apprentices accessing their HEI to inform this Report. This demonstrated that there was a total 646 Craft Apprentices registered with their institution's DSS, representative of 8.2% of all Craft Apprentices (n=7889). In relation to 23/24 data, this is demonstrative of a 22.2% (n=136) increase in the rate of participation of disabled apprentices for the academic year 2024/25, (AHEAD, 2025a). Pertaining to consortium led apprenticeship, survey respondents reported that there were 2001 students/learners enrolled in participating HEIs, of which 5.8% (n=117) were engaging with DSS. This represents a 34.9% increase in relation to 23/24 data, (Ibid.).

Students Registered with DSS Not in Receipt of the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD)

The Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD), (HEA, 2025b), which is managed by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on behalf of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), has long been a cornerstone of funding individualised disability supports in higher education and is widely acknowledged as a key tool for HEIs in providing appropriate supports and meeting associated legal obligations.

However, while the FSD supports institutions to comply with a number of international (UNCRPD, SDGs) and national rights instruments (Public Sector Duty, Disability Act (2005), Equal Status Act) which pertain to equity of education opportunity, there are still cohorts of disabled students who are precluded from accessing support provided through it. In response to this, recent reports have included data regarding disabled students who are registered with services but whom institutions do not or cannot access the FSD to support them.

To be eligible for support under the FSD, a student on an approved course must:¹³

- have a verifiable disability in one or more of the categories included in FSD Guidelines, (HEA, 2025b).
- meet specific nationality and residency criteria.
- be a participant on a full-time, or part-time (Republic of Ireland only), course.
- have a verified need for specific supports to enable participation on their chosen course.

13 <https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/fund-for-students-with-disabilities/>

AHEAD understand from previous research that registration for supports services is often challenging for students, while it is well documented that the rigid obligation that is placed on students and their families to attain diagnostic documentation in order to be eligible for funded support frequently inhibits many students from availing of the Fund. Inhibitors can include the cost of diagnosis and the change in required documentation to access support between second level and HE, (AHEAD, 2025a). For example, school based assessments are accepted as valid documentation to access support for some conditions in second level, however, the *FSD Guidelines* explicitly state that the same documentation is not sufficient to avail of FSD funding for HE, (HEA, 2025b, p. 14).

The data for the academic year 2024/25 indicates that 12% (n=3002) of students registered with participating institutions' DSS do not receive financial assistance from the FSD, which equates to an 8.1% (n=496) increase relative to our 2023/24 Report, (AHEAD, 2025a). A more rigorous overview of the data reflects the wide range in the percentage of students who are not eligible to access the FSD but are registered with DSS when all responding HEI data is unpacked.

While some HEIs report that all students that are registered for supports can access the Fund, data from responding HEIs illustrates that in some institutions, over 25% of disabled students registered with DSS are precluded from accessing the FSD funding stream. As such, the empirical evidence that informs this Report suggests that the FSD is not underpinned by consistent standards and uniformity of application, thus leaving disabled students from certain HEIs at a distinct disadvantage. Qualitative data also indicates that some HEIs do not support disabled students who do not have the medical evidence required to access the FSD, which was demonstrated in our Report for the academic year 23/24, (AHEAD, 2025a).

The outcome of this is an arena in which some DSS members use the medical evidence requirements of the FSD to inform their support registration criteria, while others, interpreting their legal obligations more broadly, will allow students to for a narrower set of low/no-cost supports using a less restrictive range of evidence such as a GP letter.

To further unpack this issue, participating DSS members had the opportunity to add qualitative, brief quotes to highlight some of the challenges that are embedded in the current system of funding accommodations. Respondents were offered the opportunity to submit supplementary quantitative data to enrich the data for this question.

38.8%

of students who were registered for supports for the academic year 2024/25 reported a Specific Learning Difficulty. This was the most common disability category recorded.

Numbers are increasing due to the evidence of disability being provided, particularly the DARE scheme accepting 'section D' forms from schools which is not a diagnosis. FSD criteria must change in light of this and funding must increase. (DSS. 17).

Many of these students who are not currently supported either have a diagnosis confirmed by a GP or do not meet residency or nationality requirements. Additionally, students undertaking an Access course are often not funded during this year. However, once they progress to undergraduate study, their funding status may change. (DSS. 3).

Ineligible for FSD due to residency criteria, nationality criteria, or evidence of disability (usually provided by GP only for a mental health condition). (DSS. 22).

The data also implies that the FSD is not underpinned by consistent standards and uniformity of application, thus leaving disabled students from certain HEIs at a distinct disadvantage. The challenges that are routinely encountered by HEIs in their endeavour to provide funded supports for disabled students could be addressed to some degree by the implementation of UDL informed pedagogical practices in the teaching and learning space, (Capp, 2017; Healy et al., 2023).

UDL has the potential to alleviate some of the more pressing issues that emanate from the year-on-year exponential increases in the number of disabled students accessing HE in the last 15 years. It can help reduce the burden on support services by proactively addressing diversity and inclusion at the point of course design. A number of HEIs across are currently in the process of adopting and implementing the [ALITUTUDE](#) Charter (ALTITUDE_Project, 2024), which was produced through a collaboration of six national agencies (including AHEAD), 15 HEIs and 6 ETBI. The aim of the Charter is to instigate the embedding of a UD approach across all aspects of institutional practice in Irish tertiary education. If UDL is to become normative practice in Irish HE, the arguably unsustainable approach to disability support provision currently implemented (Fovet, 2024; Healy et al., 2023) by overburdened and under-resourced DSS (AHEAD, 2024b) can evolve, thus enabling DSS to target their expertise and time where they are most needed.

Nature of Disability

AHEAD's Participation Reports include all disability categories within the *Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) Guidelines*, (HEA, 2025b). As such, this allows for a robust year-on-year benchmarking approach from which we can explore trends and patterns through the lens of annual iterations using standardised cohort indicators. However, AHEAD Participation Rate Reports now also include an Other category for disabled students who have at least one disability that does not fit neatly into FSD Categories. We also include Intellectual Disability, which are not a distinct category within the *FSD Guidelines*, (HEA, 2025b), with the objective of reflecting evolving national policy and the development of programmes for students with intellectual disabilities through the PATH 4, Phase 2 funding stream¹⁴. As such, the categories of disability employed to underpin this Report are as follows:

- Autism
- Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Neurological Condition
- Physical Disability
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing
- Blind/Visually Impaired
- Specific Learning Difficulty
- Mental Health Condition
- Significant Ongoing Illness
- Speech, Language and Communication Disorder
- DCD - Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia
- Intellectual Disability
- Other

It should also be noted that this Report records the incidence of disability reported by students through their registration/interaction with their HEI's DSS. Incidence of disability includes categories of disability that were recorded by DSS in this survey as either primary or secondary (and additional) disabilities. This method is used to ensure that the incidence of various disabilities is accurately captured when students report more than one.

¹⁴ <https://inhef.ie/path-4-phase-2-course-provision-for-students-with-intellectual-disabilities/>

As such, Figure 3 (below) illustrates the breakdown of students registered with their HEI's DSS by disability category (primary and additional). As discussed, identical categories of disability to those which are eligible for the FSD are used, with the additions of Other and Intellectual Disability categories. It should also be noted that our survey for the academic year 24/25 now includes Speech and Language Communication Disorder as a standalone disability category in alignment with those employed by the *FSD Guidelines*, (HEA, 2025b). Our Report for the academic year 23/24 and those preceding used a combined disability category Neurological/Speech and Language. This has been updated, alongside Autism/Aspergers (now Autism) to reflect FSD terminology in this Report.

The data elicited from all participating HEIs demonstrates that 20.1% (n=5,023) of all disabled students disclosed more than one disability when registered with disability support services during the academic year 2024/25. This is representative of a 2.9% increase in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a).

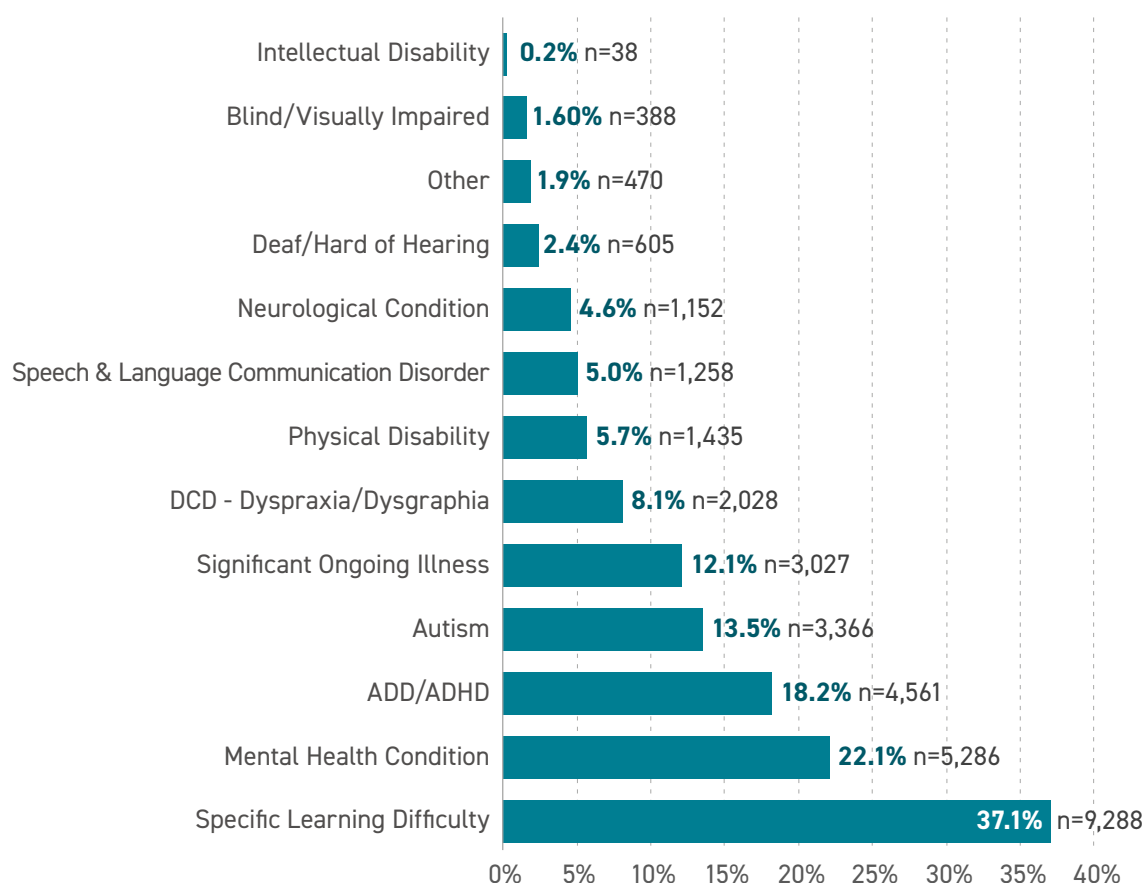


Figure 3. Breakdown of total students (postgraduate and undergraduate) registered with disability support services by category of disability, 2024/25.

Figure 3 demonstrates that Specific Learning Difficulty (37.1%, n=9288) was again the most common disability category that was reported by students who were registered with DSS for the academic year 2024/25. This was followed by Mental Health Condition (22.1%, n=5,286), ADD/ADHD (18.2%, n=4561), Autism (13.5%, n=3366), Significant Ongoing Illness (12.1%, n=3027), DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia (8.1%, n=2028), Physical Disability (6%, n=1,435), Speech and Language Communication Disorder (5%, n=1258), Neurological Condition (4.6%, n=1,152), Deaf/Hard of Hearing (2.4%, n=605), Other (1.9%, n=470), Blind/Visually Impaired (1.6%, n=388) and Intellectual Disability (0.2%, n=38).

While the percentage and order of disability categories that have been disclosed to DSS illustrated in Figure 3 are consistent with prior AHEAD Reports, (AHEAD, 2023b, 2024b), it should be noted that sensory disabilities (Deaf/Hard of Hearing and Blind/Visually Impaired) remain stubbornly under-represented in comparison with other categories of disability. There have been some minor policy endeavours in response to this, for example sensory disabilities, alongside physical disabilities are recognised by the DARE programme as being perennially under-represented in HE and have therefore been allocated as priority groups by the IUA (who oversee the scheme). However, this evidence suggests that more policy interventions are required if diversity of disability in HE is to reflect that of Irish society, as per commitments alluded to in current policy mechanisms, including *The Systems Performance Framework 2022-28* (HEA, 2023c), and the current *National Access Plan* (HEA, 2022).

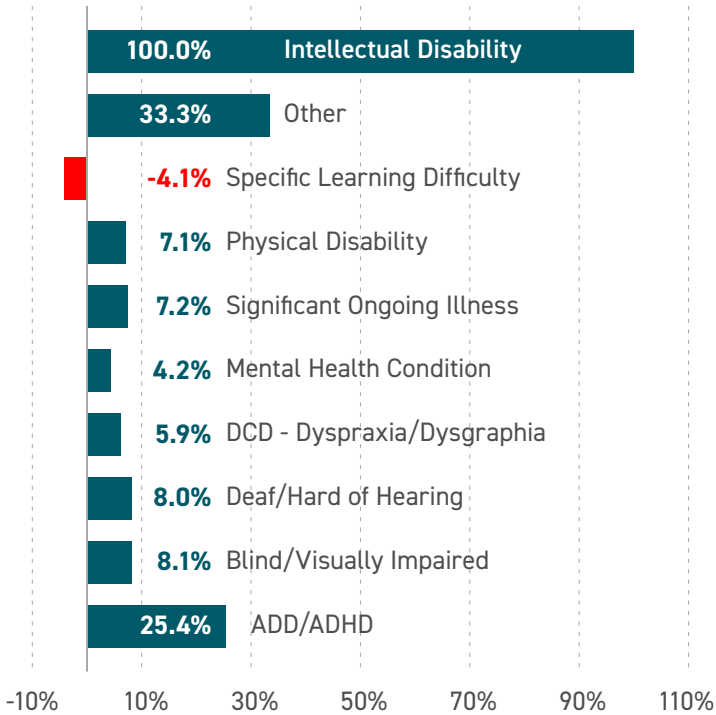


Figure 4. Year-on-Year Change in the Rate of Participation of Students Engaging with DSS, by Disability Category, (23/24 and 24/25).

Figure 4 is a graphical illustration that represents the year-on-year change in the percentage of students (participation rate) from each disability category engaging with their institution's DSS, relative to our 23/24 Report, (AHEAD, 2025a). The statistics are disaggregated by category of disability and include both postgraduate and undergraduate students. However, the disability categories Speech and Language Communication Disorder and Neurological Condition both excluded from the graph and analysis as they were included in our 23/24 Report as on standalone category (Speech and Language/Communication Disorder, therefore there is no data for a credible comparison, (Ibid.). Notwithstanding this, the graph demonstrates that all but two disability categories showed an increase in the rate of participation when compared with 23/24 data, (Ibid.). Some of the more notable percentage differences include ADD/ADHD (25.4% increase), Autism (14.4% increase), Deaf/Hard of Hearing (8% increase), Blind/Visually Impaired (8.1% increase), Physical Disability (7.1% increase). The exponential increases in the categories of disability Other (33.3% increase) and Intellectual Disability (100% increase) are obviously welcome but may be a corollary of these cohorts being small, thus minor numerical increases can inculcate large percentage increases.

Furthermore, the only disability category that was reported to have decreased in the rate of participation was Specific Learning Difficulty (4.1% decrease).

New Entrant Undergraduate Disability Breakdown

This section of the Report explores the new entrant undergraduate cohort and disaggregates this dataset by disability category for the academic year 2024/25. It analyses the cohort of students who are engaging with the first year of their undergraduate studies, (n=6676).

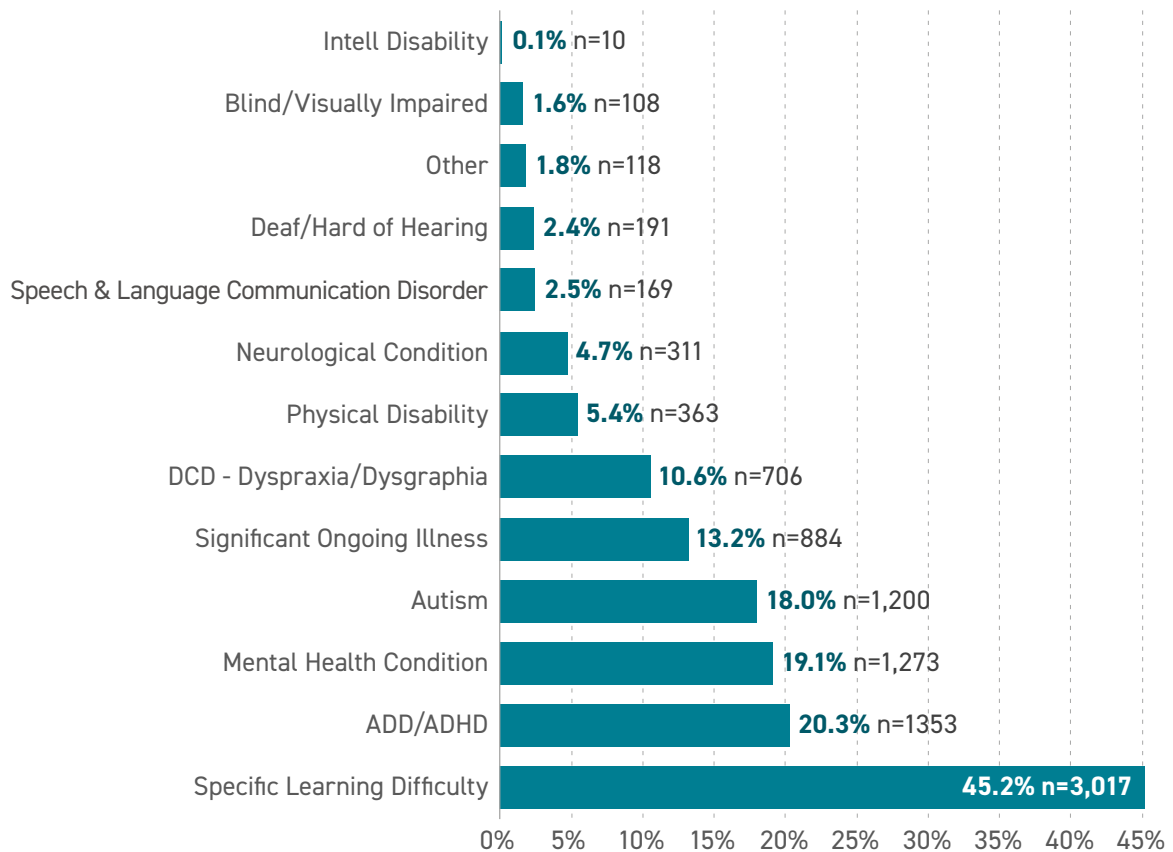


Figure 5. Breakdown of new entrant students registered with disability support services by category of disability for the academic year 2024/25.

Figure 5 represents the percentage of new entrant undergraduate students registered with DSS disaggregated by students who have disclosed each disability when engaging with their institution's DSS. As such, it is the incidence of disability among those registered with their HEI's DSS that is to be examined and some students with additional disabilities may be counted more than once.

A precise analysis of data for the new entrant cohort who were registered with DSS for the academic year 2024/25 demonstrates that 45.2% (n=3017) students disclosed a Specific Learning Difficulty, 20.3% (n=1353) disclosed ADD/ADHD, and 19% (n=1273) disclosing a Mental Health Condition. 18% (n=1200) disclosed Autism, 13% (n=884), Significant Ongoing Illness, 10.6% (n=706) DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia, 5.4% (n=363) disclosing a Physical Disability. 4.7% (n=311) identified with the Neurological Condition category, 2.5% (n=169) disclosed Speech and Language Communication Disorder, 2.4% (n=191) Deaf/Hard of Hearing. 1.8% (n=118) of this cohort identified with the Other category, and 1.6% (n=108) identified as Blind/Visually Impaired. Intellectual Disability was reported by 0.1% (n=10) of all new entrant students engaged with DSS from responding institutions.

Undergraduate Disability Breakdown.

From the data collated from all participating HEIs, it was recorded that there were 22,597 undergraduate students registered with their institutions' DSS for the academic year 2024/25. This is representative of 90.3% of all students registered with DSS (n=25,025) and 10.3% of all enrolled undergraduate students. When benchmarked against *AHEAD's Participation Rate Report* findings for the preceding academic year (2023/24), this represents a 10.8% increase in the rate of participation for disabled undergraduate students in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a). 16.27% (n=3676) of this cohort reported more than one disability.

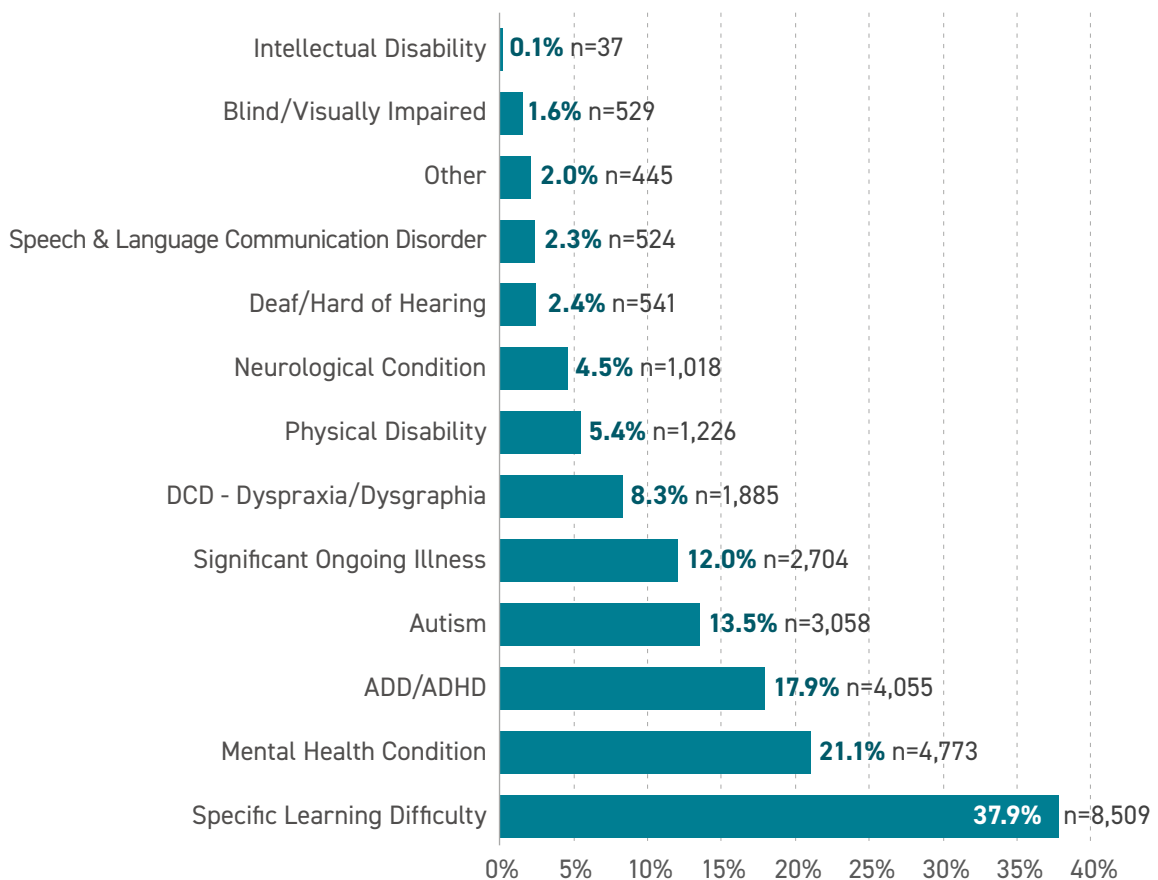


Figure 6. Breakdown of undergraduate students registered with DSS by category of disability 2024/25.

Figure 6 illustrates that the three categories of disability that were disclosed by the highest percentage of undergraduate students were Significant Learning Difficulty (37.9%, n=8,509), Mental Health Condition (21.1%, n=4,773) and ADD/ ADHD (17.9%, n=4055). The three categories of disability disclosed to DSS by the lowest percentage of undergraduate students were: Intellectual Disability (0.1%, n=37), Blind/Visually Impaired (1.5%, n=529) and Other (2%, n=445). These statistics are similar to our 2022/23 and 2023/24 *Reports*, with some minor changes in the order (ascending and descending), (AHEAD, 2024b, 2025a). As discussed, the Speech and Language Communication Disorder and Neurological Condition categories are recorded separately in the data set for the academic year 2024/25, as opposed to an amalgamation of the two (Neurological/Speech and Language), which informed prior AHEAD Reports, (AHEAD, 2023b, 2024b). Therefore, any comparison with data for the academic year 23/24 is not feasible for this Report.

A complete overview of the incidence of disability among undergraduate students registered with DSS is completed by the following statistics: Autism (13.5%, n=3058), Significant Ongoing Illness (125, n=2704), DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia (8.3%, n=1885), Physical Disability (5.4%, n=226), Neurological Condition (4.5%, n=108), and finally, Speech and Language Communication Disorder (2.3%, n=524).

Postgraduate Disability Breakdown.

This section of the Report examines the number and percentage of postgraduate students engaged with DSS as reported by all responding institutions, which is then disaggregated by disability category for the academic year 2024/25. The data elicited from the surveys indicated a modest increase in the percentage of postgraduate students registered with supports in comparison with the data from 2023/24, (AHEAD, 2025a).

In 2023/24, there were 2007 postgraduate students registered with DSS, which translates into a participation rate of 3.3% for this cohort, (Ibid.). The data collated for this Report (academic year 24/25) indicates that there were 2428 students from this cohort registered with their institution's DSS, illustrative of 3.5% of all postgraduate students and 9.7% of all students registered with DSS. This is representative of a 6.1% (n=421) increase in the number of postgraduate students engaging with their institution's DSS and a 4.9% rise in the rate of participation for this cohort in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a). Furthermore, 19.4% (n= 472) of all postgraduate students registered with their HEI's DSS reported more than one disability.

As noted in a number of previous Participation Rate Reports, despite exponential and perennial increases in the full rate of participation (i.e. undergraduate and postgraduate levels), postgraduate participation has not followed this trend in the same manner. Despite modest increases recorded year-on-year, disabled students remain stubbornly under-represented at postgraduate level across responding institutions, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2024b, 2025a).

Figure 7 is representative of a more precise examination of the postgraduate population who are registered with DSS, which is again disaggregated by disability category.

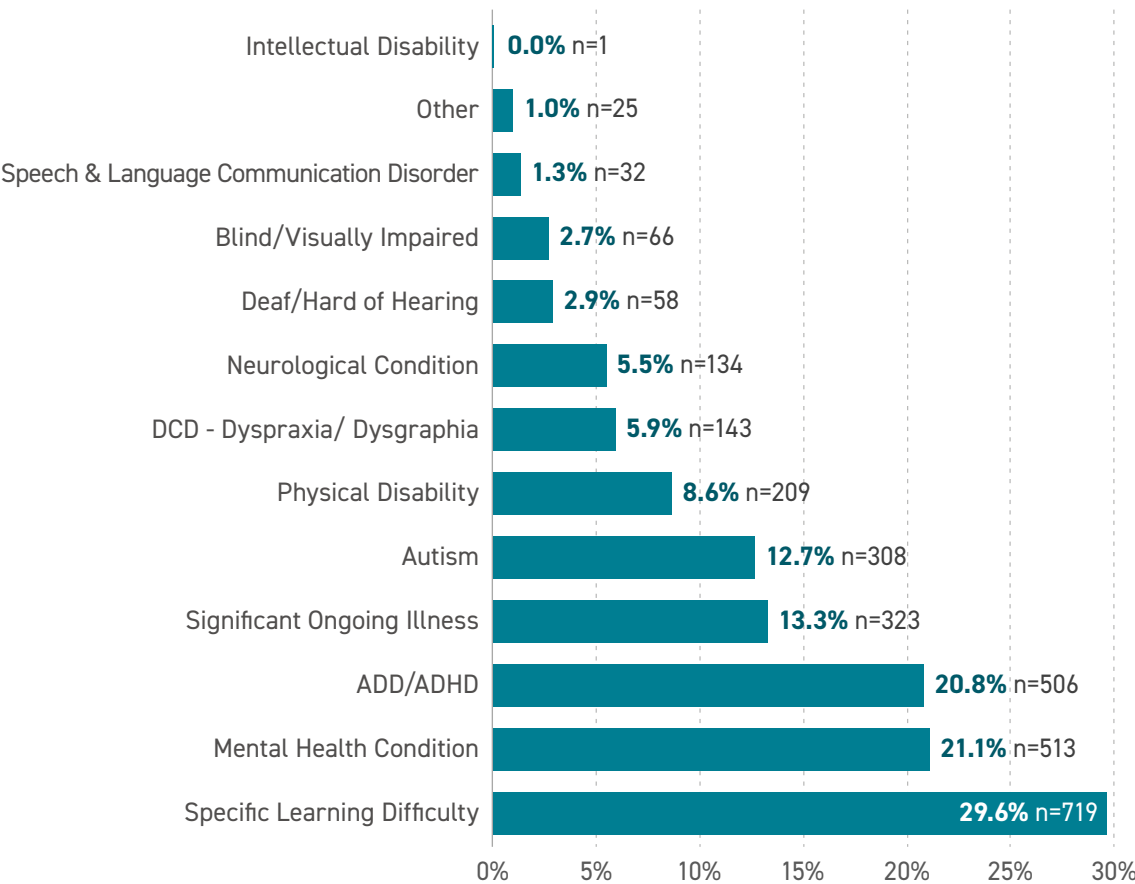


Figure 7. Breakdown of postgraduate students registered with DSS by category of disability 2024/25.

Figure 7 illustrates the prevalence of each disability category across all postgraduate students registered with disability supports in their HEI. An overview of the prevalence of disability categories, according to the 2024/25 dataset demonstrates that the three categories with the highest rates of participation are: Specific Learning Difficulty (29.6%, n=719), Mental Health Condition (21.1%, n=513) and ADD/ADHD (24.8%, n=506). It should be noted that Specific Learning Difficulty and Mental Health Condition have been the two disability categories with the highest rate of participation at undergraduate and postgraduate levels for the preceding our iterations of this Report, (AHEAD, 2021a, 2023b, 2024b, 2025a).

The categories of disability with the lowest rate of participation were reported by responding HEIs to be Intellectual Disability (0.04%, n=1), Other (1%, n=25) and Speech and Language Communication Disorder (1.3%, n=32). The remaining categories and the percentage of postgraduate students that have disclosed this disability (or disabilities) when accessing disability supports were: Significant Ongoing Illness (13.25%, n=323), Autism (12.69%, n=308), Physical Disability (8.6%, n=209), DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia (5.9%, n=243), Neurological Condition (5.5%, n=134), Deaf/Hard of Hearing 2.89%, n=58) and Blind/Visually Impaired (2.7%, n=66).

As noted in this section, prior *AHEAD Participation Rate reports* have continuously captured a year-on-year under-representation of disability at postgraduate level across responding HEIs, (AHEAD, 2018, 2019, 2021b, 2023b, 2024b, 2025a). This under-representation is highlighted when one considers that 3.5% of all postgraduate students registered with disability support services in their institution in 2024/25, in comparison to 10.3% (n=22,597) of undergraduate students.

Despite this being a core recommendation in a number of prior AHEAD reports, alongside our continuous engagement with key actors and stakeholders in the policy landscape pertaining to this issue (for example AHEAD sit on a range of Steering Groups, Advisory Committees and regularly include the lack postgraduate participation for disabled students in relevant policy submissions), the rate of participation is growing at a slower rate than their undergraduate peers.

The perennial under-representation at postgraduate level prompted AHEAD, in collaboration with NDPAC (National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee) to form LaunchPAD¹⁵, which is funded by the HEA. The LaunchPAD Partnership aims to:

15 PAD is an acronym for Postgraduate, Academia and Disability.

- Foster a Sense of Belonging by Establishing the NDPAC / AHEAD Partnership and Community
- Influence Policy Development by Amplifying the Lived Experience of the Diverse Voices in the Community
- Sustain the Community to Make a Lasting Impact Through Advocacy and Influence in HE Decision-Making

Activities during the academic year 2024/25 by NDPAC include hosting events for the disabled postgraduate community, dissemination of work/research and activities at the relevant conferences and the publication of a research publication called *Voices in the Community*, drawn from narratives and experiences of this cohort.

Postgraduate study is linked to stronger graduate outcomes (HEA, 2026a), thus enabling disabled people to engage in a knowledge-based labour market in an equitable manner as their non-disabled peers. To this end, there should be solution-focused strategies, interventions and funding streams, echoing those that have been successful in generating access to undergraduate study for disabled people (for example DARE and PATH), with a focus on increasing the participation rate for disabled students in postgraduate study. This would help counter the disability/poverty intersection that is accepted in Ireland across the broad range of academic literature and research, (Cullinan et al., 2015; EDF, 2023; European, 2020; Indecon, 2021) and help promote full inclusion, at all levels in HE (as per the current iteration of the *National Access Plan*, (HEA, 2022).

Ireland currently has one of the most educated societies in Europe, with Current Census data explicating that 63% of Irish people within the age range of 35 to 44 year olds have attained a third-level qualification, which is 21% higher than the EU-27 average for the same age grouping, (CSO, 2022). This is a likely outcome of a contemporary Irish labour market that now values a tertiary education qualification more than ever before, (Department of Education and Skills, 2016; Higher Education Strategy Group, 2011).

To this end, tertiary education is now arguably becoming more important if one is to access and participate in the labour-market in a meaningful, equitable manner, (HEA, 2023a). This has debatably placed a greater emphasis on postgraduate study in a labour market underpinned by frenetic competition.

Fields of Study

As a point of departure, the Report now examines the participation rate of disabled students in the various fields of study. According to the responding institutions, the total number of students with disabilities registered with disability supports for the academic year 2024/25 was 25,025, or 8.7% of all students enrolled in participating HEIs. The fields of study categories that inform this Report replicate those employed by the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)¹⁶. Our previous participation rate reports use this standard as does the HEA, which facilitates a robust comparison between both data sets.

Please note that the set of institutions included in the underlying AHEAD and HEA datasets have minor differences (see Limitations section in Methodology), so the comparative findings in this section should be interpreted as strongly indicative rather than as exact like-for-like comparisons.

¹⁶ [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=International_Standard_Classification_of_Education_\(ISCED\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=International_Standard_Classification_of_Education_(ISCED))

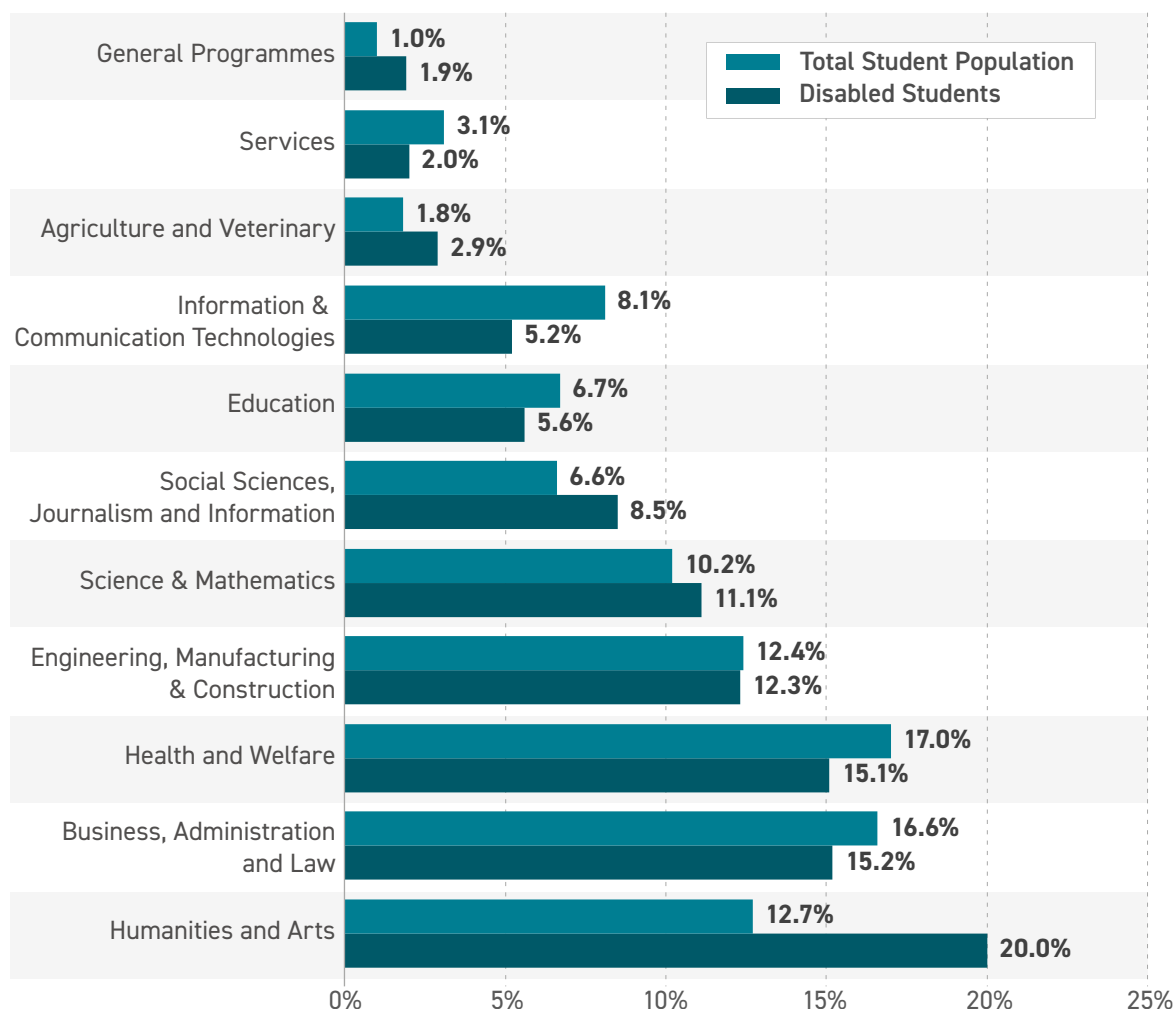


Figure 8. Participation Rates in each Field of Study. Percentage of Disabled Students in Comparison with the Total Student Body, 2024/25.

Figure 8 illustrates that the three fields of study that were reported to have the highest rate of participation for disabled students were Arts and Humanities (20%, n=5017), Business, Administration and Law (15.2%, n=3,812) and Health and Welfare (15.1%, n=3,788). The three fields with the lowest rate of participation for this cohort were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (1.9%, n=472), Services (2%, n=507) and Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary (2.9%, n=737). The participation rate of students registered with their institution's DSS was calculated for the remaining fields of study. In ascending order (and excluded the three fields with both the highest and lowest rates of participation for students engaged with DSS) these were reported as the following: Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (12.3%, n=3084), Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics (11.1%, n=2779), Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (8.5%, n=2122), Education (5.6%, n=1415) and Information and Communication Technologies (5.2%, n=1312).

Arts and Humanities is routinely the field of study with the highest rate of participation for students registered with their HEI's DSS. By comparing the data from our Report for the academic year 23/24 (AHEAD, 2025a), increases and decreases in the rate of participation of disabled students engaged with each field of study can be disaggregated. In order of the fields of study with the highest percentage of students registered with DSS, they have been calculated as follows:

Field of Study	% increase/decrease
Humanities and Arts	5% decrease
Business, Administration and Law	6% decrease
Health and Welfare	10% increase
Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction	4% increase
Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics	3% decrease
Social Sciences, Journalism and Information	12% decrease
Education	4% increase
Information and Communication Technologies	4% increase
Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary	1% increase
Services	7% decrease
General Programmes	219% increase*

Fig 9. Increases and Decreases in the rate of participation of disabled students engaged with each field of study (ISCED).

**The exponential increase in the percentage of disabled students engaging with General Programmes is arguably linked to the introduction of PATH 4 (Phase 2). This funding stream has led to a significant increase [in the number of courses available](#) to students who have disclosed an Intellectual Disability. However, it should be noted that the PATH 4 phase two funding model allows for the appropriate support infrastructure to be put in place for participating students using dedicated funding, and in many HEIs, this is coordinated directly within the course rather than by the DSS. In these cases, students may not appear in the AHEAD dataset as they may not be registered with the DSS.*

Figure 9 illustrates the rate of participation of students registered with DSS studying in each field of study compared to the percentage of the total student population doing so. As such, we are seeking over and under-representations of disabled students in each when compared to the total population. While Arts and Humanities is still the field of study with the greatest difference in the participation rate of disabled students when compared to the total student body (20% compared to 12.7% of the total student population), other notable disparities include Business, Administration and Law (16.2% of students registered with DSS compared with 20.4% of the total student body), Health and Welfare (15.2% of students registered with DSS compared with 16.6% of the total student body), Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (8.5% of students registered with DSS compared to 6.6% of all students) and Information and Communication Technologies (5.2% of students registered with DSS in comparison with 8.1% of all students). The fields of study with the lowest difference between the participation rate of disabled students and the total student body were reported to be Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (12.4% of the student body and 12.3% of students registered with DSS) and Education (6.7% of the total student body and 5.6% of disabled students).

Fields of Study Breakdown by Category of Disability

This section of the research now analyses the data from responding institutions by examining each disability category disaggregated by field of study. The survey completed by responding HEIs included data that disaggregated the participation rates of students registered with DSS by fields of study and disability categories. Separate tables of data that represent each disability category are included to facilitate ease of interpretation, considering the complex datasets. The fields of study are again predicated upon the ISCED Classifications¹⁷, which are also employed by the HEA in their research.

¹⁷ [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=International_Standard_Classification_of_Education_\(ISCED\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=International_Standard_Classification_of_Education_(ISCED))

Thus, the tables in this section present an individual breakdown of each disability category by field of study. Each table consists of the participation rates in all fields of study across (i) the total student population (as per HEA data), (ii) the total students with disability population breakdown across all fields of study (as per AHEAD data), (iii) the percentage of students in this disability cohort who are enrolled in each field of study, and (iv) the number of students in this category of disability enrolled across each field of study. There is a brief synopsis of the key points and comparison with 2023/24 data (AHEAD, 2025a) following each data table. The change in categories of disability in FSD Guidelines (HEA, 2025b) for the academic year 24/25 included the Neurological/Speech and Language category being separated into Speech and Language Communication Disorder and Neurological Condition. Both are now being employed as distinct standalone categories; thus this section of the Report includes statistics pertaining to both in this format.

ADD/ADHD

Table 1- Breakdown by field of study for students in the ADD/ADHD category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all disabled students and for the full student population as per HEA data.

19.1% of all Disabled Students are in ADD/ADHD Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total Disabled Students Studying Field	Numbers in ADD/ADHD Category Studying Field	% of Students in ADD/ADHD Category Studying Field	% of Disabled Students Studying Field in ADD/ADHD Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	1.0%	1.9%	57	1.2%	12.1%
Education	6.7%	5.6%	212	4.6%	15.0%
Arts and humanities	13.6%	20.0%	1102	23.7%	22.0%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.6%	8.5%	462	9.9%	21.8%
Business, administration and law	20.9%	15.2%	668	14.4%	17.5%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.2%	11.1%	525	11.3%	18.9%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.1%	5.2%	317	6.8%	24.2%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.4%	12.3%	517	11.1%	16.8%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	97	2.1%	13.2%
Health and welfare	16.6%	15.1%	590	12.7%	15.6%
Services	3.1%	2.0%	99	2.1%	19.5%
Total			4646	100.0%	

- The two fields of study with the highest percentage of students who have disclosed ADD/ADHD when registering with DSS were Arts and Humanities (23.7%, n=1102 and representative of a decrease of 4.8% in relation to 2023/24 data), and Business, Administration and Law (14.4%, n=668, representative of a decrease of 3.4% in relation to 2023/24 data).
- The two fields of study with the lowest rate of participation for this cohort were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.6%, n=19, representative of a 100% decrease in relation to 2023/24 data) and Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary (2.1%, n=97, representative of a 10.5% increase in relation to 23/24 data).

Autism

Table 2- Breakdown by field of study for students in the Autism category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all disabled students and for the full student population as per HEA data.

14.1% of all Disabled Students (DS) are in the Autism Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total DS Studying Field	Numbers in Autism Category Studying Field	% of Students in Autism Category Studying Field	% of DS Studying Field in Autism Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	1.0%	1.9%	35	1.0%	7.4%
Education	6.7%	5.6%	120	3.5%	8.5%
Arts and humanities	13.6%	20.0%	1155	33.3%	23.0%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.6%	8.5%	277	8.0%	13.1%
Business, administration and law	20.9%	15.2%	330	9.5%	8.7%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.2%	11.1%	496	14.3%	17.8%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.1%	5.2%	384	11.1%	29.3%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.4%	12.3%	323	9.3%	10.5%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	50	1.4%	6.8%
Health and welfare	16.6%	15.1%	229	6.6%	6.0%
Services	3.1%	2.0%	66	1.9%	13.0%
Total			3465	100.0%	

- The fields of study with the highest rates of participation for this disability category were Arts and Humanities (33.3%, n=1155, representative of a 5.7% decrease in relation to 23/24 data) and Natural Sciences, Journalism and Information (14.3%, n=408, representative of a 4.2% increase in relation to 23/24 data).
- The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation for this cohort were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (1%, n=35, representative of a 11.1% increase in relation to 23/24 data) and Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary (1.4%, n=50), representative of a 6.7% decrease in relation to 23/24 data).
- Students who disclosed Autism when registering for DSS were significantly under-represented (relative to the total student population) in the following fields of study: Education (3.5% compared to 6.7% of all students), Business Administration and Law (9.5% compared to 20.9% of all students) and Health and Welfare (6.6% compared to 16.6% of all students).
- Students who disclosed Autism when access DSS were over-represented in Information, Communication Technologies (11.1% compared to 8.1% of all students) and Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics (14.3% in comparison with 10.2% of all students).

Blind/Visually Impaired

Table 3 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Blind/Visually Impaired category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all disabled students (DS) and for the student population in general.

1.6% of all DSs are in Blind/Visually Impaired Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total DS Studying Field	Numbers in Blind/Visually Impaired Studying Field	% of Students in Blind/Visually Impaired Category Studying Field	% of DSs Studying Field in Blind/Visually Impaired Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	1.0%	1.9%	3	0.8%	0.6%
Education	6.7%	5.6%	28	7.1%	1.5%
Arts and humanities	13.6%	20.0%	77	19.5%	1.5%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.6%	8.5%	44	11.1%	2.1%
Business, administration and law	20.9%	15.2%	64	16.2%	1.7%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.2%	11.1%	44	11.1%	1.6%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.1%	5.2%	30	7.6%	2.3%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.4%	12.3%	26	6.6%	0.8%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	8	2.0%	1.1%
Health and welfare	16.6%	15.1%	65	16.5%	1.7%
Services	3.1%	2.0%	6	1.5%	1.2%
Total			395	100.0%	

- Participation Rates for sensory disabilities (Blind/Visually Impaired and Deaf/Hard of Hearing) have remained stubbornly low, despite efforts embedded in the DARE programme that have assigned priority status to foster targeted pathways for students from these cohorts to access HE. Blind/Visually Impaired is consistently placed as one of the disability categories that is under-represented in HE. This has been reported in a number of previous Participation Rate Reports, (AHEAD, 2019, 2023b, 2024b, 2025a).
- The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation from the Blind/Visually Impaired cohort were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.8%, n=3, representative of an 11.1% decrease in relation to 23/24 data) and Services (1.5%, n=6 and representative of a 16.7% decrease in the rate of participation in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a).
- The fields of study with the highest rate of participation for this cohort were Arts and Humanities (19.5%, n=77, representative of a 7.1% increase in relation to 23/24 data) and Health and Welfare (16.5%, n=65), and representative of a 1.9% increase in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a).

Deaf/Hard of Hearing

Table 4 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Deaf/Hard of Hearing category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all disabled students (DS) and for the student population in general.

2.5% of all DS are in Deaf/Hard of Hearing Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total DS Studying Field	Numbers in Deaf/Hard of Hearing Category Studying Field	% of Students in Deaf/Hard of Hearing Category Studying Field	% of DS Studying Field in Deaf/Hard of Hearing Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	1.0%	1.9%	10	1.6%	2.1%
Education	6.7%	5.6%	33	5.4%	2.3%
Arts and humanities	13.6%	20.0%	116	18.9%	2.3%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.6%	8.5%	41	6.7%	1.9%
Business, administration and law	20.9%	15.2%	125	20.4%	3.3%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.2%	11.1%	57	9.3%	2.1%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.1%	5.2%	26	4.2%	2.0%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.4%	12.3%	67	10.9%	2.2%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	11	1.8%	1.5%
Health and welfare	16.6%	15.1%	113	18.4%	3.0%
Services	3.1%	2.0%	15	2.4%	3.0%
Total			614	100.0%	

- The fields of study with the highest percentage of students registered as Deaf/ Hard of Hearing were Arts and Humanities (18.9%, n=116), representative of a 4.5% decrease in relation to 23/24 data) and Business, Administration and Law (20.4%, n=125), representative of a decrease of .5% in relation to participation rate data from our 23/24 Report, (AHEAD, 2025a).
- The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation by students from the Deaf/ Hard of Hearing category were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (1.6%, n=10), representative of a 77.8% increase in relation to 23/24 data) and Services (1.8%, n=10), and Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary (1.8%, n=11) and representative of a 28% decrease in the rate of participation in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a).
- Apart from the over-representation in Arts and Humanities that is consistent across all disability categories, no other field of study had a marked over-representation for this cohort.
- Outliers of under-representation include Information, Communication and Technologies (4.2% compared to 8.1% of all students) and Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (10.9% compared with 12.4% of all students).

DCD-Dyspraxia

Table 5 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the DCD-Dyspraxia category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all disabled students (DS) and for the student population in general.

8.5% of all DSs are in DCD - Dyspraxia Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total DS Studying Field	Numbers in DCD - Dyspraxia Studying Field	% of Students in DCD - Dyspraxia Category Studying Field	% of DSs Studying Field in DCD - Dyspraxia Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	1.0%	1.9%	24	1.2%	5.1%
Education	6.7%	5.6%	90	4.4%	6.4%
Arts and humanities	13.6%	20.0%	450	21.8%	9.0%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.6%	8.5%	187	9.1%	8.8%
Business, administration and law	20.9%	15.2%	379	18.4%	9.9%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.2%	11.1%	206	10.0%	7.4%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.1%	5.2%	166	8.0%	12.7%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.4%	12.3%	297	14.4%	9.6%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	53	2.6%	7.2%
Health and welfare	16.6%	15.1%	137	6.6%	3.6%
Services	3.1%	2.0%	74	3.6%	14.6%
Total			2063	100.0%	

- The fields of study with the highest percentage of students from this disability category were Arts and Humanities (21.8%, n=450, representative of an 11.7% increase in relation to 23/24 data) and Business, Administration and Law (18.4%, n=379, representative of a 1.6% decrease in relation to 23/24 data).
- The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation for this disability category were Generic Programmes and Qualification (1.2%, n=24, representative of 500% increase in relation to 23/24 data) and Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary (2.6%, n=53, representative of a 3.7% decrease in relation to 23/24 data), (AHEAD, 2025a).
- Significant under-representations are evident in the following fields of study: Health and Welfare (6.6% compared with 16.6% of all students) and Education (4.4% in comparison with 6.7% of all students).
- Over-representations occur in the following fields of study: Arts and Humanities (21.8% in comparison with 13.6% of all students) and Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (9.1% in comparison with 6.6% of all students).

Mental Health Condition

Table 6 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Mental Health Condition category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all disabled students (DS) and for the student population in general.

22.1% of all DSs are in Mental Health Condition Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total DS Studying Field	Numbers in Mental Health Condition Category Studying Field	% of Students in Mental Health Condition Category Studying Field	% of DSs Studying Field in Mental Health Condition Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	1.0%	1.9%	57	1.1%	12.1%
Education	6.7%	5.6%	261	4.9%	18.4%
Arts and humanities	13.6%	20.0%	1353	25.3%	27.0%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.6%	8.5%	614	11.5%	28.9%
Business, administration and law	20.9%	15.2%	709	13.2%	18.6%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.2%	11.1%	719	13.4%	25.9%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.1%	5.2%	232	4.3%	17.7%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.4%	12.3%	337	6.3%	10.9%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	126	2.4%	17.1%
Health and welfare	16.6%	15.1%	869	16.2%	22.9%
Services	3.1%	2.0%	74	1.4%	14.6%
Total			5351	100.0%	

- The fields of study with the highest rate of participation for this disability category were Arts and Humanities (25.3%, n=1353, representative of a 1.6% decrease in relation to 23/24 data and Health and Welfare (16.2%, n=869, representative of a 9.5% increase in relation to 23/24 data).
- The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation were Services (1.4%, n=74, representative of a 40% increase in relation to 23/24 data) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (1.1%, n=57, representative of a 10% increase in relation to 23/24 data), (AHEAD, 2025a).
- Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Engineering, manufacturing and construction (6.3% in comparison with 12.4% of all students) and Business, administration and law (13.2% in comparison with 20.9% of all students).
- Significant over-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Social sciences, journalism and information (11.5% in comparison with 6.6% of all students) and Arts and Humanities (25.3% in comparison with 13.6% of all students).

Neurological Condition

Table 7 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Neurological Condition category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all disabled students (DS) and for the student population in general.

4.6% of all SWDs are in Neurological Condition	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Neurological Condition	% of Students in Neurological Condition Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Neurological Condition Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	1.0%	1.9%	12	1.0%	2.5%
Education	6.7%	5.6%	68	5.8%	4.8%
Arts and humanities	12.7%	20.0%	241	20.6%	4.8%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.6%	8.5%	108	9.2%	5.1%
Business, administration and law	20.9%	15.2%	195	16.7%	5.1%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.2%	11.1%	141	12.1%	5.1%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.1%	5.2%	61	5.2%	4.6%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.4%	12.3%	118	10.1%	3.8%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	19	1.6%	2.6%
Health and welfare	16.6%	15.1%	184	15.7%	4.9%
Services	3.1%	2.0%	23	2.0%	4.5%
Total			1170	100.0%	

- The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Arts and Humanities (20.6%, n=241) and Business, Administration and Law (16.7%, n=195).
- The fields of study with the lowest rates of participation for this cohort were Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary (1.6%, n=19) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (1%, n=12).
- Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (5.2% in comparison with 8.1% of all students) and Business, Administration and Law (16.7% in comparison with 20.9% of all students).
- Significant over-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Arts and Humanities (20.6% in comparison with 13.6% of all students) and Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (9.2% in comparison with 6.6% of all students).

Significant On-going Illness

Table 8 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Significant On-going Illness category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all disabled students (DS) and for the student population in general.

12.1% of all DSs are in Significant Ongoing Illness Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total DS Studying Field	Numbers in Significant Ongoing Illness Category Studying Field	% of Students in Significant Ongoing Illness Category Studying Field	% of DSs Studying Field in Significant Ongoing Illness Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	1.0%	1.9%	29	0.9%	6.1%
Education	6.7%	5.6%	228	7.5%	16.1%
Arts and humanities	13.6%	20.0%	576	18.8%	11.5%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.6%	8.5%	231	7.6%	10.9%
Business, administration and law	20.9%	15.2%	470	15.4%	12.3%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.2%	11.1%	393	12.9%	14.1%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.1%	5.2%	139	4.5%	10.6%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.4%	12.3%	264	8.6%	8.6%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	73	2.4%	9.9%
Health and welfare	16.6%	15.1%	583	19.1%	15.4%
Services	3.1%	2.0%	70	2.3%	13.8%
Total			3056	100.0%	

- The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Arts and Humanities (18.8%, n=576), representative of a 2.6% decrease in relation to 23/24 data) and Health and Welfare (19.1%, n=583, representative of a 11.7% increase in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a).
- The fields of study with the lowest rates of participation for this cohort were Services (2.3%, n=70, representative of a 43.8% increase in relation to 23/24 data) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.9%, n=29, representative of an 80% increase in relation to 23/24 data), (Ibid.).
- Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Business, administration and law (15.4% in comparison with 20.9% of all students) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (4.5% percent in comparison with 8.1% of all students).
- A significant over-representations for this cohort was identified in the field of study of Arts and Humanities (18.8% in comparison with 13.6% of all students). All other fields of study were generally equally represented according to the data collated from responding HEIs.

Speech and Language Communication Disorder

Table 9 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Speech and Language Communication Disorder category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all disabled students (DS) and for the student population in general.

5.0% of all SWDs are in Speech and Language Communication Disorder	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Speech and Language Communication Disorder Studying Field	% of Students in Speech and Language Communication Disorder Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Speech and Language Communication Disorder Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	1.0%	1.9%	0	0.0%	0.0%
Education	6.7%	5.6%	62	9.5%	4.4%
Arts and humanities	12.7%	20.0%	111	16.9%	2.2%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.6%	8.5%	54	8.2%	2.5%
Business, administration and law	20.9%	15.2%	112	17.1%	2.9%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.2%	11.1%	57	8.7%	2.1%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.1%	5.2%	45	6.9%	3.4%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.4%	12.3%	81	12.4%	2.6%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	15	2.3%	2.0%
Health and welfare	16.6%	15.1%	80	12.2%	2.1%
Services	3.1%	2.0%	38	5.8%	7.5%
Total			655	100.0%	

- The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Business, Administration and Law (17.1%, n=112) and Arts and Humanities (16.9%, n=111).
- The fields of study with the lowest rates of participation for this cohort were Services (2.3%, n=15) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0%, n=0).
- Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Health and Welfare (12.2% in comparison with 16.6% of all students) and Business, Administration and Law (17.1% in comparison with 20.9% of all students).
- Significant over-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Arts and Humanities (16.9% in comparison with 13.6% of all students) and Health and Welfare (12.2% in comparison with 16.6% of all students).

Physical Disability

Table 10 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Physical Disability category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all disabled students with disabilities (DS) and for the student population in general.

6.0% of all DSs are in Physical Disability Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total DS Studying Field	Numbers in Physical Disability Studying Field	% of Students in Physical Disability Category Studying Field	% of DSs Studying Field in Physical Disability Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	1.0%	1.9%	16	1.1%	3.4%
Education	6.7%	5.6%	92	6.4%	6.5%
Arts and humanities	13.6%	20.0%	299	20.8%	6.0%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.6%	8.5%	136	9.5%	6.4%
Business, administration and law	20.9%	15.2%	241	16.7%	6.3%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.2%	11.1%	130	9.0%	4.7%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.1%	5.2%	51	3.5%	3.9%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.4%	12.3%	95	6.6%	3.1%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	36	2.5%	4.9%
Health and welfare	16.6%	15.1%	316	22.0%	8.3%
Services	3.1%	2.0%	27	1.9%	5.3%
Total			1439	100.0%	

- The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Arts and Humanities (20.8%, n=299, representative of a 1.1% decrease in relation to 23/24 data and Health and Welfare (22%, n=316, representative of a 17% decrease in relation to 23/24 data), (AHEAD, 2025a).
- The fields of study with the lowest rates of participation for this cohort were Services (1.9%, n=27, representative of a 58.3% increase in relation to 23/24 data) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (1.1%, n=16, representative of a 10% increase in relation to 23/24 data), (Ibid.).
- Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Engineering, manufacturing and construction (6.6% in comparison with 12.4% of all students) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (3.5% in comparison with 8.1% of all students).
- Significant over-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Arts and Humanities (20.8% in comparison with 13.6% of all students) and Health and Welfare (22% in comparison with 16.6% of all students).

Specific Learning Difficulty

Table 11 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Specific Learning Difficulty Category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all disabled students (DS) and for the student population in general.

38.8% of all DSs are in Specific Learning Difficulty Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total DS Studying Field	Numbers in Specific Learning Difficulty Category Studying Field	% of Students in Specific Learning Difficulty Category Studying Field	% of DSs Studying Field in Specific Learning Difficulty Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	1.0%	1.9%	98	1.0%	20.8%
Education	6.7%	5.6%	721	7.5%	51.0%
Arts and humanities	13.6%	20.0%	1387	14.3%	27.6%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.6%	8.5%	777	8.0%	36.6%
Business, administration and law	20.9%	15.2%	1576	16.3%	41.3%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.2%	11.1%	781	8.1%	28.1%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.1%	5.2%	361	3.7%	27.5%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.4%	12.3%	1928	19.9%	62.5%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	390	4.0%	52.9%
Health and welfare	16.6%	15.1%	1320	13.6%	34.8%
Services	3.1%	2.0%	334	3.5%	65.9%
Total			9673	100.0%	

- The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Business, administration and law (16.3%, n=1576, representative of a 6.3% decrease in relation to 23/24 data) and Engineering, manufacturing and construction (19.9%, n=1928, representative of a 13.1% increase in relation to 23/24 data), (AHEAD, 2025a).
- The fields of study with the lowest rates of participation for this cohort were Services (3.5%, n=334, representative of a 7.9% decrease in relation to 23/24 data) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (1%, n=98, representative of an 150% increase in relation to 23/24 data), (Ibid.).
- Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Business, administration and law (16.3% in comparison with 20.9% of all students) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (3.7% in comparison with 8.1% of all students).
- Significant over-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Engineering, manufacturing and construction (19.9% in comparison with 12.4% of all students) and Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary (4% in comparison with 1.8% of all students).
- This cohort comprises of 38.8% (n=9673) of all disabled students accessing disability support services in HE for the academic year 24/25. It has been routinely reported to represent the category of disability with the highest participation rate in a number of prior AHEAD Reports, (AHEAD, 2023b, 2024b, 2025a). As such, the data pertaining to this category is relatively consistent with the all-student population regarding fields of study. The data demonstrates that students who disclose a Specific Learning Difficulty are likely to be engaged with fields of study in a similar manner to the all-student cohort.

Intellectual Disability

Table 12 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Intellectual Disability category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all disabled students (DS) and for the student population in general.

0.2% of all DSs are in Intell Dis Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total DS Studying Field	Numbers in ID Studying Field	% of Students in ID Category Studying Field	% of DSs Studying Field in ID Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	1.0%	1.9%	13	34.2%	2.8%
Education	6.7%	5.6%	3	7.9%	0.0%
Arts and humanities	13.6%	20.0%	7	18.4%	0.0%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.6%	8.5%	0	0.0%	0.0%
Business, administration and law	20.9%	15.2%	5	13.2%	0.0%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.2%	11.1%	2	5.3%	0.0%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.1%	5.2%	0	0.0%	0.0%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.4%	12.3%	2	5.3%	0.0%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	1	2.6%	0.0%
Health and welfare	16.6%	15.1%	4	10.5%	0.0%
Services	3.1%	2.0%	1	2.6%	0.0%
Total			38	100.0%	

- The fields of study with the highest rate of participation for this cohort were Arts and Humanities (18.4%, n=7, representative of a 26.4% decrease in relation to 23/24 data), and Generic Programmes and qualifications, (34.2%, n=13, this field of study had no students who disclosed an Intellectual Disability in our Report for the academic year 23/24), (AHEAD, 2025a).
- Despite this disability category not being eligible for the FSD (HEA, 2025b), AHEAD employ this lens to reflect evolving national policy and the development of programmes for students with intellectual disabilities through PATH 4 Phase 2. This pilot project commenced in 2023 and AHEAD understand that the original end date of 2026 has been extended to 2028. Currently, there are 11 HEIs who have been granted dedicated funding from the PATH 4, Phase 2 funding stream to pilot initiatives at 11 institutions¹⁸ with courses that include General Learning and Personal Development Certificates, Skills for Independent Living and Vocational and Personal Development Programmes. As many of the courses for students who declare an intellectual disability are in pilot phase, there is arguably little value in seeking trends and patterns at this stage, however the cohort has increased from 20 students for the academic year 2023/24 (AHEAD, 2025a) to 38 in the current academic year, 2024/25, representative of a 90% increase in the participation rate of this cohort.
- It is important to note that many of the PATH 4 programmes are below the Level 6 QQI threshold and therefore do not meet the criteria for students to avail of the FSD, but the PATH 4 funding model allows for the appropriate support infrastructure to be put in place for participating students using dedicated funding. In many HEIs, these supports are coordinated and arranged directly by the course, rather than by the DSS. In these cases, students may not appear in the AHEAD dataset as they may not be registered with the DSS.

18 <https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/path/>

Other

Table 13 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Other category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all disabled students (DS) and for the student population in general.

2.0% of all DSs are in Other Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total DS Studying Field	Numbers in Other Studying Field	% of Students in Other Category Studying Field	% of DSs Studying Field in Other Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	1.0%	1.9%	11	2.6%	2.3%
Education	6.7%	5.6%	21	5.0%	1.5%
Arts and humanities	13.6%	20.0%	72	17.3%	1.4%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.6%	8.5%	20	4.8%	0.9%
Business, administration and law	20.9%	15.2%	53	12.7%	1.4%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.2%	11.1%	34	8.2%	1.2%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.1%	5.2%	23	5.5%	1.8%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.4%	12.3%	76	18.2%	2.5%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	29	7.0%	3.9%
Health and welfare	16.6%	15.1%	64	15.3%	1.7%
Services	3.1%	2.0%	14	3.4%	2.8%
Total			417	100.0%	

- The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (18.2%, n=76, representative of a 42.2% increase in relation to 23/24 data) and Arts and Humanities (17.3%, n=72, representative of a 22.7% increase in relation to 23/24 data), (AHEAD, 2025a).
- The fields of study with the lowest rates of participation for this cohort were Services, (3.4%, n=14, representative of a 20.9% decrease in relation to 23/24 data) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (2.6%, n=11, this field of study had no students who had disclosed Other in AHEAD's 23/24 Report), (Ibid.).
- The Other category of disability encapsulates disabilities that cannot be located within the boundaries of eligible categories in current FSD Guidelines, (HEA, 2025b). This category of disability has routinely been identified as that with the lowest participation rate in these Reports, (AHEAD, 2023b, 2024b, 2025a). This is arguably an expected outcome considering the scope of Other as a disability category. Notwithstanding this, the participation rate of this cohort increased by 36.7% in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a).

20%

**Arts and Humanities is
the field of the study with
the highest number of
disabled students across
participating institutions**

Examination Accommodations

This section of the Report now unpacks the research data pertaining to the implementation of exam accommodations, as opposed to general disability support provision that is implemented throughout the academic year. The exam is pivotal to student success and progression and an important indicator in determining student progression, (Wessel et al., 2009) and influencing sense of identity, (Nieminen, 2025). For disabled students, research evidence suggests that the status, structure and format of the exam can be a notable disadvantage for some disabled students, (O'Neill, 2017). The exam has been alluded to as an anxiety-inducing experience for many of this cohort, (Tai et al., 2022). Challenges discussed by Tai and her colleagues pertain to assessment design, the examination process in general (with a particular emphasis on summative, end of term, memory-based exams) and institutional policies and practices, (Ibid.). This format of assessment is employed across the majority of fields of study in Irish HE institutions, (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2016).

In November 2023, AHEAD published a Report entitled *Changing Landscapes*, which was an analysis of the narratives and experiences of disabled students as they returned to on-campus learning following a period colloquially termed “lockdown learning” as a result of the COVID 19 epidemic, (AHEAD, 2023a). The findings that emanated from the Report, which was underpinned by a mixed methodology approach that included 9 interviews with disabled students and over 150 surveys, have frequently been employed in further AHEAD research and within the HE policy landscape when advocating for agility and flexibility in the teaching and learning space. Despite the challenges that were perpetuated by “lockdown learning”, for many disabled students, some of the interventions and adjustments that were implemented to accommodate *all* students had a positive effect on their experience of HE and of assessment in particular.

Changing Landscapes included qualitative data from a number of students who reported achieving significantly higher grades than in previous years, with many reporting that they prospered, relatively speaking, within this enforced paradigm shift, (Ibid.). Unwittingly, the crisis of the pandemic prompted HEIs to accommodate and introduce novel learning initiatives, which in assessment often translated into offering choice and alternatives to the traditional framework of summative, memory-based exams, (IUA, 2021; QQI, 2020).

Notwithstanding this, the post lockdown teaching and learning space quickly returned to a reliance on timed, in-person examinations as the dominant mode of assessment. However, a key takeaway from lockdown learning was that it demonstrated that HEIs were, and are, capable of accommodating students in the general teaching and learning space and in implementing more novel and inclusive modes of assessment, (AHEAD, 2023a).

Currently, the recommendation and implementation of exam accommodations represents Irish HE's efforts to engender equitable opportunities for disabled students to engage with the end of term examination process and demonstrate their knowledge and capabilities in an equal manner as their non-disabled peers, (Nieminen, 2022, 2025). However, the efficacy of prescribed adjustments is currently under the microscope, with some academics elucidating that accommodations can inadvertently exclude and stigmatise disabled students during assessment (Ibid.), and are often perceived as ableist and perpetuate othering, (Bartolo et al., 2023). Some of these exclusionary practices include prolonged periods isolated in empty exam halls (added time has been identified as the most common accommodations in a number of AHEAD reports, (AHEAD, 2018, 2019, 2025a)) and alternative venues that are visible to other students, (Nieminen, 2022).

Moreover, accommodations, do not always perpetuate equitable academic outcomes, with some studies postulating that they “rarely show statistically significant effects on academic success” (Römhild & Holleder, 2023, p. 133). Nieminen takes this further by arguing that the focus on accommodations, as opposed to inclusive assessment practices can reflect ableism and construct disability as an individual deficit, akin to the medical model of disability that has ostensibly been supplanted by a social model approach as per the UN CRPD, (Nieminen, 2022; Römhild & Holleder, 2023).

To this end, the exam has retained its status as “the most single powerful influence on learning in formal courses”, (Taras, 2008, p. 3), and despite the QQI postulating in 2021 that was already growing interest in providing more choice in how students are taught and assessed (QQI, 2021), there is little evidence to suggest that HE will transition away, anytime soon, from offering retrospective accommodations as opposed to implemented inclusive and authentic assessment structures at point of course design, as per a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach. The arrival of Generative AI and the assessment security fears which are associated with it, have arguably further amplified the dominance of exams as the primary mode of assessment in higher education

A pedagogical shift that engenders greater variety and choice in assessment represents a recognition that all students should have an opportunity to demonstrate their learning in different ways. Universal Design for Learning is underpinned by this concept and this approach can be beneficial for all students. It has also been postulated as a pedagogical model that can be cost effective for HEI's, (Fovet, 2024) and key to responding to the diversification of the contemporary HE student body, (Healy et al., 2023). For Fovet, UDL can also help institutions and their support service to develop more sustainable accessible practices and significantly reduce the pressure on over-burdened supports services, thus enabling them to use their skills and time where they are most needed. This is of particular relevance in Irish HE when one considers the increasing ratios of students to support staff that will be discussed in the "Inside Services" section of this Report.

Considering the number of disabled students accessing HE in Ireland looks set to continue on its ascending trajectory, it is now the time for urgent, solution-focussed discussion among stakeholders and key actors from the sector to address over-burdened, often under-resourced DSS, (AHEAD, 2025a). The current system of disability support provision requires review and reform, in order to develop more sustainable models of support, and efforts to spread responsibility for inclusion across our institutions are necessary.

A recently published Irish paper, authored by access professionals from HEIs who routinely submit annual data for this and prior reports, posited that many Access Staff are initially motivated by a strong commitment to Social Justice and/or personal or familial life experience of disability. However, it also highlights the risk of staff burnout, role creep and the lack of a distinctive and recognised career path for those who desire to work in access and disability support provision, (Brennan et al., 2025). One could argue that under-pressure, overburdened services, alongside funding streams that are often challenging to navigate can exacerbate the emotional strain that highlighted by Brennan and her colleagues, (Ibid.).

To this end, although the continued diversification of the student body amplifies the urgent need to develop and implement flexible, agile and responsive assessment frameworks, prescribed and often reactive accommodations are frequently the favoured mode of promoting equity of opportunity for disabled students to compete in the assessment space. This is despite academic literature that stipulates that end of term, memory based summative assessment has been identified a locus of disadvantage for disabled students (O'Neill, 2017) and as an element of the teaching and learning space that frequently informs many disabled students' decisions to withdraw from HE, (Duncan et al., 2025). It has been further specified that many of these withdrawals are often a direct outcome of the anxiety that is induced by this mode of assessment, (Ibid.).

For the academic year 2024/25, responding institutions reported that 89.3% (n=22,347) of students registered with their HEI's DSS (n=25,025) were recommended and availed of exam accommodations for the academic year 2024/25, representative of a 1.1% decrease in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a).

Examination Accommodations by Category of Disability

This section of the Report is a more precise analysis of the delivery of exam accommodations to students registered with their institution's DSS, disaggregated by primary disability only¹⁹. Our Reports for 2023/34 and 2022/23 employed primary and additional disabilities when collating data (AHEAD, 2024b, 2025a), thus there is limited value in benchmarking these figures with prior Reports, considering the differing underlying data sets. Additional disability data was removed from this section in the survey in response to feedback from institutions about the significant challenges in gathering it.

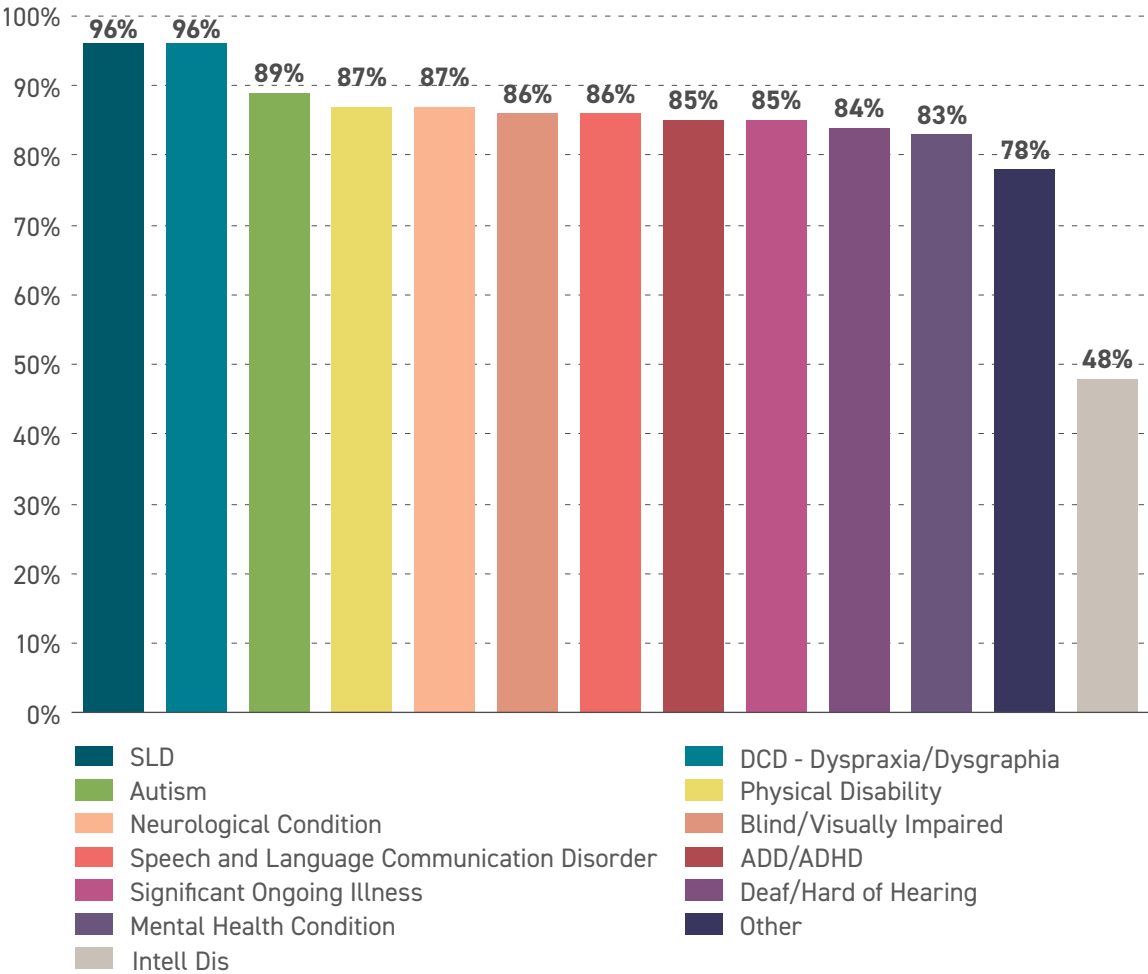


Figure 10. Breakdown of Recommended Exam Accommodations by Primary Disability Category 2024/25

¹⁹ As discussed in Methodology section of this Report, responding HEIs assist AHEAD in designing the survey used to gather data for our annual Reports. Following discussion prior to research design, primary disability (as opposed to primary and additional used throughout this Report) as recorded by DSS is used to interrogate the data for Exam Accommodations.

96%

**Specific Learning Difficulty
was the category of disability
with the highest percentage
of students (n=7,386) who
reported they were in receipt
of Exam Accommodations**

As illustrated in Figure 10, the data collated from all responding HEIs shows that the categories of disability with the highest percentage of students that were recommended at least one exam accommodation were Specific Learning Difficulty (96%, n=7386) and DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia (96%, n=1309). In descending order, Autism, (89%, n=2665), Physical Disability (87%, n=1435) Neurological Condition (87%, n=767) and Blind/Visually Impaired (86%, n=273) were the other categories of disability with the highest percentage of students who were recommended exam accommodations for the academic year 2024/25.

The categories of disability with the lowest percentage of students recommended exam accommodations were Intellectual Disability (39%, n=15), Other (78%, n=174), Mental Health Condition (83%, n=2929) and Deaf/Hard of Hearing (84%, n=439). The remaining categories of disability (primary) who were approved exam accommodations, were calculated in ascending order, thusly: Significant Ongoing Illness (85%, n=2012), ADD/ADHD (85%, n=3078), Speech and Language Communication Disorder (86%, n=276) and Blind/Visually Impaired (86%, n=273).

Examination Accommodations by Type

The survey distributed to participating HEIs included a section that asked respondents to provide data pertaining to the type of exam accommodations that were approved for students registered with support services in their respective institutions. The following accommodations were included in the survey: Extra Time, Alternative Venue, Use of Assistive Technologies- software or hardware (e.g., scanning pen, text to speech software, Grammarly etc.), Use of a Computer with General Software, Human Reader-Invigilator to help read paper, Human Scribe, Enlarged Print Paper, Use of Sticker of Tip Sheet to refer examiners to marking guidelines for students with Specific Learning Difficulty or who are Deaf or hard of hearing, Rest breaks, Paper in braille or electronic format or Other/Bespoke Request.

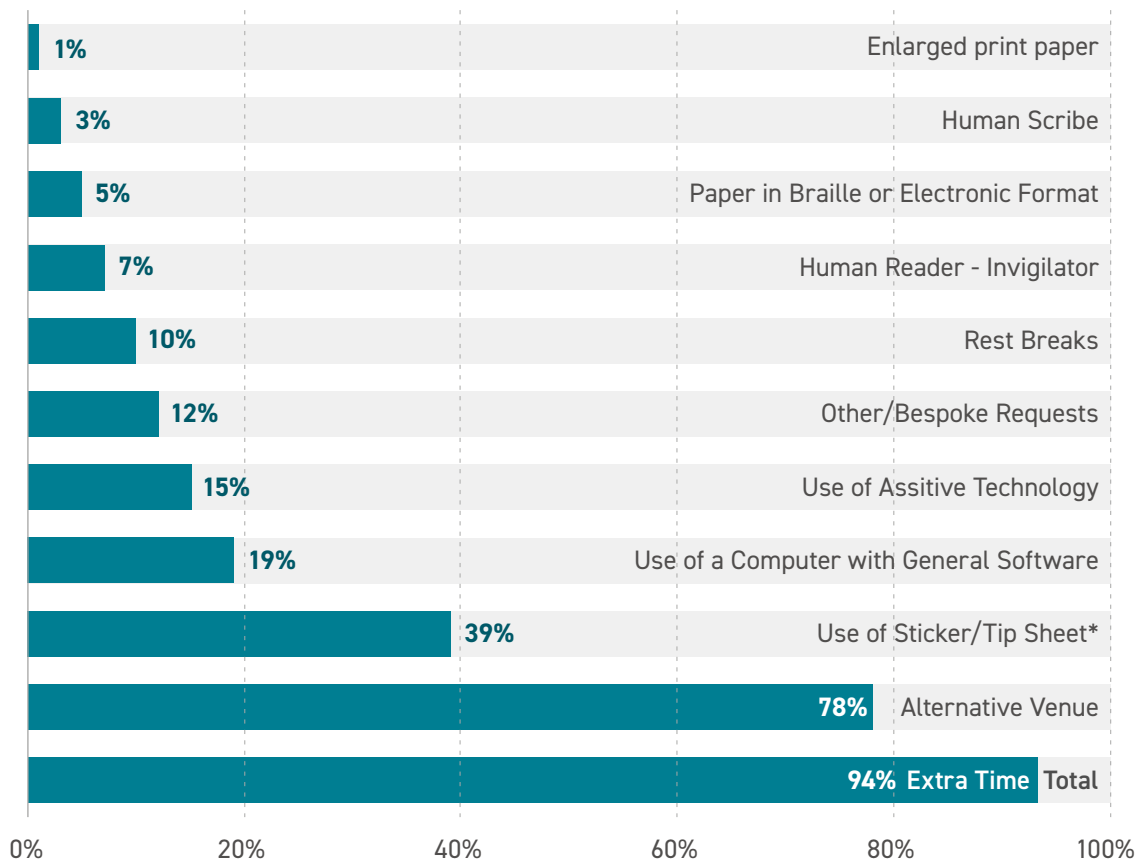


Figure 11. Breakdown of recommended accommodations by Accommodation Type 2024/25. (As a % of all disabled students in receipt of accommodations).

**Use of Sticker/Tip Sheet refers to examiners using marking guidelines for students with a Specific Learning Difficulty or who are Deaf or hard of hearing.*

Figure 11 is a graphic disaggregation of the data that was collated from responding HEIs concerning the types of accommodations provided/recommended to students who were recommended accommodations for assessment. Percentages of students for each accommodation are calculated as a percentage of students registered with their HEI's DSS in receipt of at least one accommodation, (n=22,347). In line with previous Participation Rate Reports, Extra time (94%, n=21005) was again reported as the most prevalent exam accommodation recommended by DSS across all responding HEIs.

78% (n=17,446) of students in receipt of exam accommodations were recommended an alternative venue (for example a room with reduced noise) in which they could sit their exams. Participating institutions further indicated that: 39% (n=8716) of disabled students recommended exam accommodations were approved the use of a sticker or tip sheet to refer examiners to marking guidelines for students with a specific learning difficulty. 19% (n=4196) were recommended the use a computer with general software. 15% (n=3292) were recommended the use of Assistive Technology during their exam. 12% (n=1,922) requested and were recommended bespoke accommodations for their exams. 10% (n=2169) had rest breaks during exam time. 7% (n=1,644) were recommended a human reader (assistance in reading the exam paper). 5% (n=1,044) engaged with their exam using paper in Braille or electronic format. 3% (n=601) were recommended the use of a human scribe. 1% (n=165) used enlarged print paper during their exams.

Bespoke accommodations were recommended and implemented for 125 students in their exams, representing a 33% increase in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a). This is an encouraging increase as it suggests that DSS members are looking beyond the traditionally prescribed accommodations in an effort to offer meaningful support to disabled students during the exam period. It could also be argued that this is an outcome of DSS staff now being aware that “meaningful support” cannot be bound by the narrow set of prescribed accommodations that are invariably offered to students, as evidenced in prior AHEAD Participation Rate Reports, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2023b, 2024b, 2025a). The survey distributed to responding HEIs included a section in which the nature of bespoke/other accommodations could be submitted. For the academic year 2024/25, these included:

- Food & Drink.
- Green Answer Paper.
- Green Exam Paper.
- Use of a Service Dog.
- Medical Device.
- Printed MCQs.
- Written Instructions.
- Colour Blindness, Diabetes, Epilepsy, Mental Health, Mobility Difficulty, Narcolepsy, Seizure, Cystic Fibrosis Awareness.
- Large Table.
- Whiteboard in Exams.
- Low Distraction Booth.
- Access to a notepad.

- Headphones to reduce Noise.
- Heat Packs.
- Adjustable Chairs and Tables.
- ISL Interpreter During Exam.
- Use of phone to monitor blood sugar level.
- Personal Assistants.
- Use of fidget toys.
- ADHD clocks (non-ticking).
- Announcements to be given in handwriting.

An analysis of previous Reports illustrates that the number and type of bespoke accommodations are increasing year-on-year, demonstrating a move towards assessment accommodations that are more agile and responsive to the needs of disabled students. As such, DSS staff are now supporting students to engage with end of term exams in more novel ways than prior academic years, (AHEAD, 2019, 2021b, 2025a). The innovation and willingness to provide equity of opportunity for students with bespoke needs is welcomed, considering that some disabled students will require “niche” supports, even if choice and UDL principles are inserted into the fabric and structure of HEI assessment practice.

Moreover, JP Burke argues in his seminal work *The Right to Higher Education: Beyond Widening Participation* that access work involves “thinking outside the box” in order to “level the playing field” for underserved cohorts in HE, (Burke, 2013, p. 42), However, it should be noted here, that as discussed in this Report, AHEAD estimate that there is a significant number of disabled students who do not disclose disability and are therefore sitting exams with no accommodations. This further highlights the need for HEIs to foster inclusive assessment modes with varying means of enabling students to equitably demonstrate their knowledge of course content and learning outcomes. Considering the status of the exam as an important focal point in determining student success, alongside academic literature that identifies the exam process as a key factor in determining the progression rates of disabled students, (Duncan et al., 2025), it is essential that robust, agile and flexible assessment frameworks are implemented into the structure of assessment.

Inside Services

This section of the Report focuses on the number of support staff in responding institutions and the ratio of support staff members to student registered with their institution's DSS for the academic year 2024/25. Previous iterations of this Report have indicated that the exponential increase in students registering with their HEI's DSS since the academic year 2011/12 has not been matched by a tantamount increase in the number of support staff members employed in institutions from across the sector, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2023b, 2024b, 2025a). These annual increases, while being welcomed by AHEAD are done so with caution due to the increased workload on DSS. Moreover, these increases show no signs of abating, with more and more students from traditionally under-represented cohorts currently availing of pathways into HE, (IUA, 2026). This was examined in our Report for the academic year 2023/24 (AHEAD, 2025a). Our findings were consistent with an Irish study that postulated that DSS members are often inhibited from providing appropriate disability support due to difficulties engaging with rigid funding streams, significant administrative burden, the increased complexity of disability needs they are encountering and the emotional labour expended due to heavy workloads, (Brennan et al., 2025). In May of 2025, the Department responded by announcing an 18% increase in FSD funding, bringing the total FSD allocation to €10.54 million prior to the academic year 2024/25, (HEA, 2026b, p. 21).

Drawing from the data submitted by responding institutions, the number of staff members employed by responding institutions with responsibility for providing support to disabled students was calculated and then used to establish the number of students per staff member²⁰. By disaggregating the data submitted by responding institutions, we were able to calculate the number of students per Support Staff Member. Our definition of 'Support Staff Member' combines both Learning Support Staff and Disability Support Staff Member, which are also recorded individually.

²⁰ Methodology: Responses were delivered as a decimal number where one full time (5 days a week) staff member = 1, and part-time staff members were included as a pro rata fraction of 1. For example, a college with one full time staff member working 5 days a week and one part time staff member working 2 days a week would report 1.4 staff members. Where staff members had shared responsibility over students with disabilities as well as other student groups, they were asked to estimate how much of their remit was dedicated to students with disabilities.

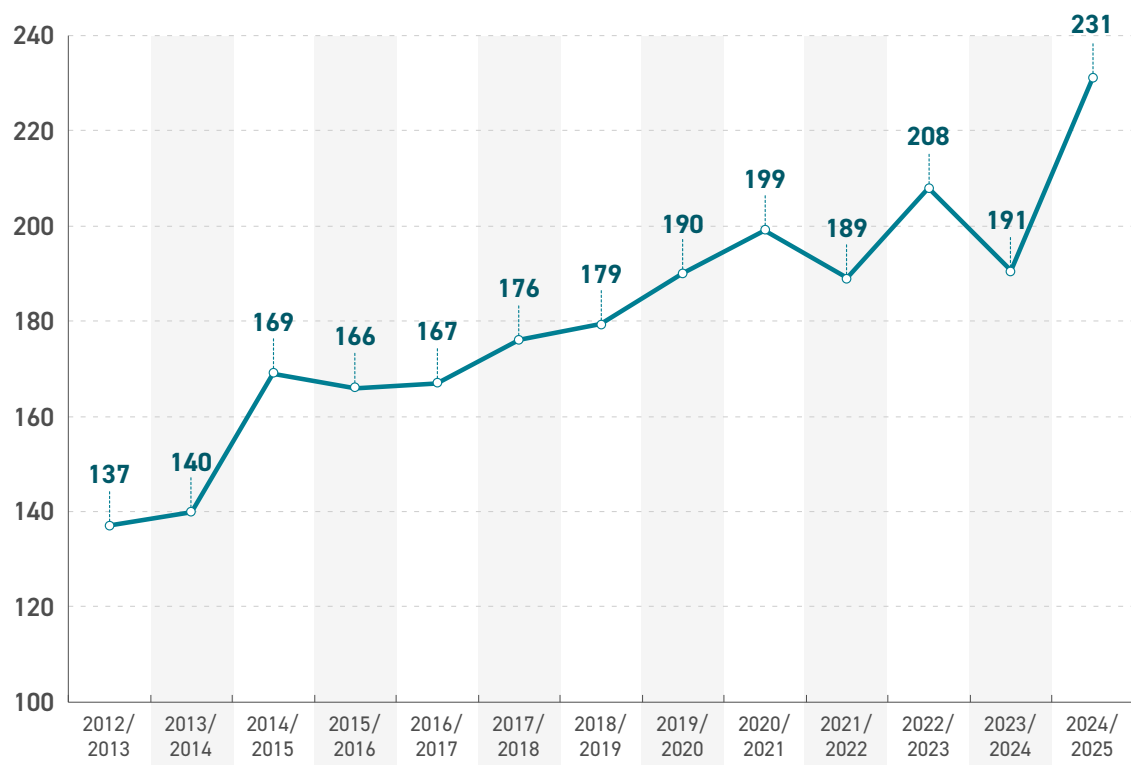


Figure 12. Students Registered with DSS Per Disability Support Staff Member 2012/13 -2024/25.

The number of disabled students per Disability Support Staff member is arguably one of the most relevant statistics that emanate from AHEAD reports, in particular due the scope and objectives of this Report. The high number of students registered with their HEI's DSS per disability support staff can arguably overload staff and inhibit them from utilising their skills where they are most needed. Figure 12 indicates that for the academic year 2024/25, there were 231 students per DSS member, representative of a 20.9% (n=40) increase in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a). Moreover, a longitudinal analysis of year-on-year data over time from AHEAD research illustrates a 69% increase (n=94) since the academic year 2012/13, (AHEAD, 2014), when AHEAD began collecting this data. In this timeframe the number of students registered with disability support services overall has increased by 176%.

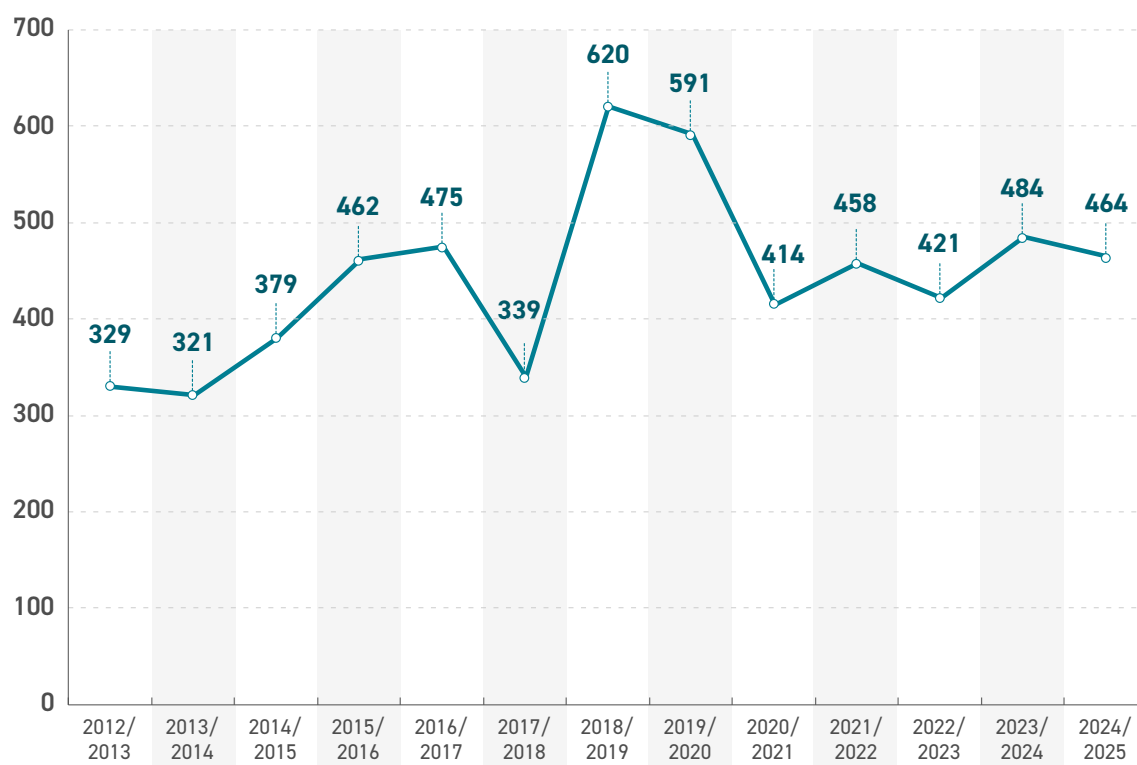


Figure 13. Students per Learning Support Staff Members for the academic years 2011/12 to 2024/2025

Figure 13 illustrates that there were 464 disabled students for every Learning Support Staff member across all participating HEIs in the academic year 2024/25. This equates to a 4% decrease (n=20) in comparison with 2023/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a) and represents an increase of 41% increase (n=135) since the academic year 2012/13.

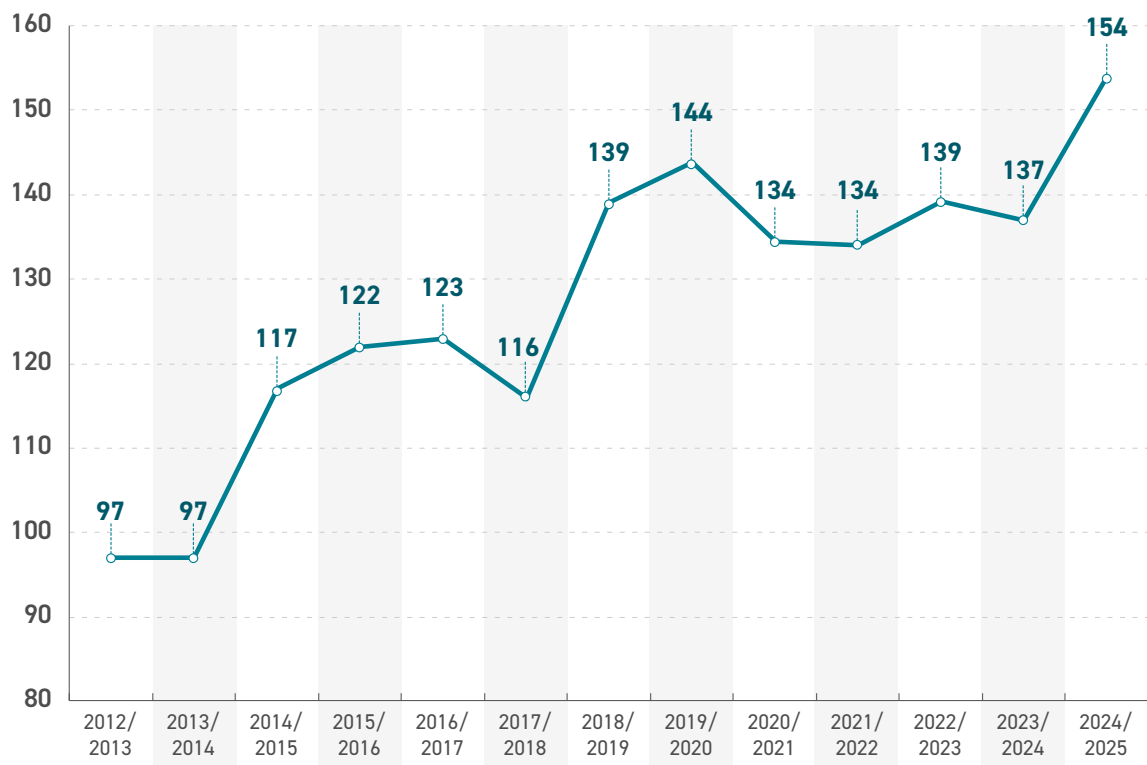


Figure 14. Students per Support Staff Member (Total)-2012/13 to 2024/25

Figure 14 represents a combination of Learning Support Staff and Disability Staff per student engaged with support services across all participating HEIs. The graph demonstrates that there were 154 students per support staff member for the academic year 2024/25. This is indicative of a 12.4% increase (n=17) in relation to 2023/24 data (AHEAD, 2025a), and demonstrative of a 59% (n=57) increase since the academic year of 2012/13 when AHEAD first collected this data. It is also noteworthy that this is the third largest year on year increase in this ratio since AHEAD began recording this data in 12/13, (AHEAD, 2014).

On the Ground-Opinions of Disability Support Staff

While AHEAD's Participation Rate Reports are primarily predicated upon quantitative data, the final question in the survey is qualitative. In this way, this section of the Report enables DSS members to opine on crucial facets of their work in an anonymous capacity. This fosters an overview of the realities of policy and support frameworks in action from those who provide frontline services. These voices are crucial to policy development, yet are often absent from any analysis of disability supports, (Brennan et al., 2025). This question asks responding HEIs to articulate their opinions on any key changes to policy/practice, Departmental commitments and any other relevant trends/changes that impacts upon their work for the year being analysed, in this case the academic year of 2024/25.

For this section of the Report, we requested that respondents comment on any potential change that needs to be implemented into the disability support provision process in order to improve outcomes for disabled students and foment equity and equality in HE. We subsequently asked respondents to rate how well the concept of "inclusion is everybody's business" (DFHERIS, 2023; P McCarthy et al., 2018) is embedded in their HEI's policy and practices and to add further comment. Both are included verbatim below:

Sub Question A:

A. In your opinion, how does the system need to evolve to respond to the challenge of rising numbers of students with disabilities accessing HE?

Sub Question B:

B. The ALTITUDE Charter seeks to promote an 'inclusion is everyone's business' approach. In your opinion, on a scale of 1 to 5, how well is this concept embedded in your institution's policy and practices? Please Comment.

The Likert Scale used for sub-question B is scaled from 1 to 5, using the following rubric:

1. Not at all embedded.
2. Not well embedded.
3. Somewhat embedded.
4. Well embedded.
5. Very well embedded.

Sub-Question A:

A. In your opinion, how does the system need to evolve to respond to the challenge of rising numbers of students with disabilities accessing HE?

Unfortunately, 4 HEIs did not respond to this section of the Report, however, there is still adequate data to draw credible inferences from that which we did collate from frontline support staff for both questions. Sub-Question A is underpinned by the exponential increase in disabled students registering with services year-on-year as reported in AHEAD research (AHEAD, 2025a) and the challenges perpetuated by students presenting to support services with more complex needs, (Brennan et al., 2025).

The figures from the Inside Services section of this Report reinforce the urgent need to employ more support staff in line with the increasing numbers of students engaging with disability support services year-on-year. Increasing numbers of students obviously increases the workload of support staff, who without corresponding staffing increases, are arguably inhibited from using their expertise where it is most needed.

Adequately staffed disability support services with streamlined processes for requesting and implementing reasonable accommodations are essential to putting supports in place for the rising number of students with disabilities. (Ind. 3).

The growing awareness of the potential of UDL to reduce accommodations (or the retrofitting of disability support), thus helping foster a more sustainable support system was alluded to several times by responding disability support staff.

Universal Design and mainstreamed inclusive practice are the only sustainable ways to manage this. The DARE scheme needs to be reviewed as it is being abused by those who are well resourced and receiving somewhat questionable diagnoses. (Ind. 1).

Adopt a more universal design approach across institutions. Universal Design needs to be inherent at module design level to reduce the 'retrofitting' of supports – therefore, university-wide inclusion of universal design in all aspects of university life is required. (Ind. 3).

A number of respondents explicitly mentioned the ALTITUDE Charter and how it has the potential to evolve how we support disabled students in HE. By considering inclusivity at the point of module and assessment design, and in a range of other professional and administrative services across the institution, individualised accommodations can be reduced:

UDL and the AHEAD ALTITUDE Charter should create huge enhancements for the sector too. (Ind. 10).

Another commonality across the data was the need for additional FSD funding. This is despite the Department increasing the FSD by 18% following Budget 25, (HEA, 2026b). It is difficult to evaluate if this rise to FSD funding is sufficient to ease some of the burden on DSS members or provide more financial resources to accommodate students who require expensive adaptations, for example ISL, taxis etc. However, a number of respondents claimed that the FSD funding stream was still not sufficient to support all students during the 24/25 academic year, in particular those with complex disabilities who require expensive accommodations:

The funding provided by FSD is not sufficient to support all the students, the costs of PA and Taxis has increased dramatically over the last few years however FSD has not. There appears to be ample funding allocated to MH, SAF etc., yet the FSD isn't giving us enough as a grant and year on year we have to spend time applying for contingency. (Ind. 17).

The HEA need to increase their FSD allocation to meet the needs of the rising numbers but also the complexity of the cases. (Ind. 16).

For students with high support needs that require external professional support (e.g. ISL interpreters or personal assistants), the supports are not always available or affordable via the FSD, which can negatively impact on the student's capacity to fully engage with their studies in the same manner as their non-disabled peers. Furthermore, these students become at risk of failing components of their programme, which can have obvious ramifications on progression and retention rates.

Many of the issues discussed by participating HEIs were similar to those highlighted by Brennan and her colleagues, (Brennan et al., 2025). A whole of campus approach to inclusion, as opposed to inclusion being the sole responsibility (and obligation) of the HEI's DSS was mentioned several times in the qualitative data. Many participants alluded to resistance from some academic staff regarding the implementation of accommodations in the teaching and learning space. It was also noted by some respondents that annual increases in the number of disabled students accessing HE is often articulated as a "wonderful" thing.

However, unless inclusion is fully understood as a whole of campus endeavour, with academic staff allowing recommended accommodations to be appropriately translated into the lecture hall, the current system of disability support will not adequately support disabled students, and the existing problems will likely persist or perhaps be magnified. It is essential that stakeholders and key actors respond to the perennial increases in students registering with DSS with inclusive practices and initiatives that can help facilitate progress and student success for this cohort.

Inclusion needs to be fully understood. Inclusion seems to only be skin deep in many HEI's. Everyone talks about how wonderful it is to have high numbers, but then do nothing to include students with Disabilities. Academic staff blatantly refuse to provide accommodations for students at times, some stating that x accommodation is not fair to other students. Time, effort and money needs to be put into HEI's to provide students with services and physical spaces to have on campuses. Realistically there is no challenge of having many students with disabilities on campus, the challenge is getting staff to accommodate them. (Ind. 18).

Rising numbers and inadequate staffing is always a problem and academic staff reluctant to change teaching methods. (Ind. 12).

Some respondents highlighted the misalignment between the criteria required to be eligible for DARE (IUA, 2025) and the FSD, (HEA, 2025b). Much of this critique pertained to the rigid prerequisite placed upon students to provide specific diagnostic documentation in order to avail of DARE and/or the FSD. As such, some students who accessed HE through the DARE programme were deemed ineligible for FSD funding which was said to inhibit some students from availing of essential supports in HE, many of which they could access at second level, (AHEAD, 2023a).

In some cases, documentation for DARE and the FSD does not align, as a result some students may qualify for DARE but be ineligible for FSD supports. Due to the lack of alignment, students may be unable to access essential supports at third level. Similar issues arise with students who submit GP letters but lack the necessary specialist reports required by FSD. (Ind. 19).

With numbers of DARE-eligible students inevitably increasing, I believe that services need to focus on maximising the resources available while continuing to advocate for increased and secure resourcing. I believe that students should be prioritised more consistently based on the complexity of need/functional impact and those with highest need should have consistent access to individualised, high intensity supports and interventions. Any work to increase collaboration across departments and across universities is also worthwhile to share knowledge, standardise practice and avoid duplication. (Ind. 20).

The system needs to accept evidence beyond the strict FSD parameters, accept the professional judgement of DSS, need to fund significant literacy difficulty as its accepted via DARE, HEIs need to be obliged to give some/all of RGAM (Access Allocation) to DSS/Access. (Ind. 14).

The empirical evidence elicited from respondents for this question suggests that the current model of support is now arguably in danger of becoming outdated and unfit for the current HE landscape, (Fovet, 2024; Healy et al., 2023). It is driven by medical model rhetoric and out-dated individual deficiency discourse, as opposed to the social model of disability espoused to by the UN CRPD, (UN, 2006).

To this end, one could postulate that a complete review of the FSD framework, support staffing/resourcing models and the responsibilities for disability support provision is required to respond to the rapidly and continuously rising numbers of disabled students accessing HE. Indeed, some respondents highlighted the increasing risks to both students and staff of continuing within the same funding and operational models of disability support provision.

The current system was designed to prioritise the processing of incoming students and assumed that only a small number of students would require ongoing support from disability staff e.g. Students with HI/VI, physical disability. The landscape has now shifted as higher volumes of students enter university having received a high level of support at second level. These include students registering under categories such as autism, mental health and ADHD and under multiple categories. Disability services are challenged with meeting the needs of returning students with ongoing support requirements, supporting those that require intense transition-based supports and processing large volume of applications from new entrants. Staff are struggling to meet these competing demands, resources are overstretched, the gaps are widening and risk is increasing. So, it's not simply a case of managing the rising numbers of applicants it is also being able to deliver high quality and equitable service provision at the time that it is needed. (Ind.7).

The data collated from respondents amplifies the need for stakeholders to commence evidence-based discussion predicated upon a paradigm shift in how Irish HE accommodates disability. The number and scope of the challenges alluded to by some respondents, suggests that the current system of disability support provision now arguably requires a complete, evidence-based overhaul.

Inclusion is a whole of campus responsibility; all staff have a role to play in supporting disabled students. It is here that the ALTITUDE Charter (the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education) can play an integral role in promoting this mindset.

Sub Question B

B. The ALTITUDE Charter seeks to promote an ‘inclusion is everyone’s business’ approach. In your opinion, on a scale of 1 to 5, how well is this concept embedded in your institution’s policy and practices? Please Comment.

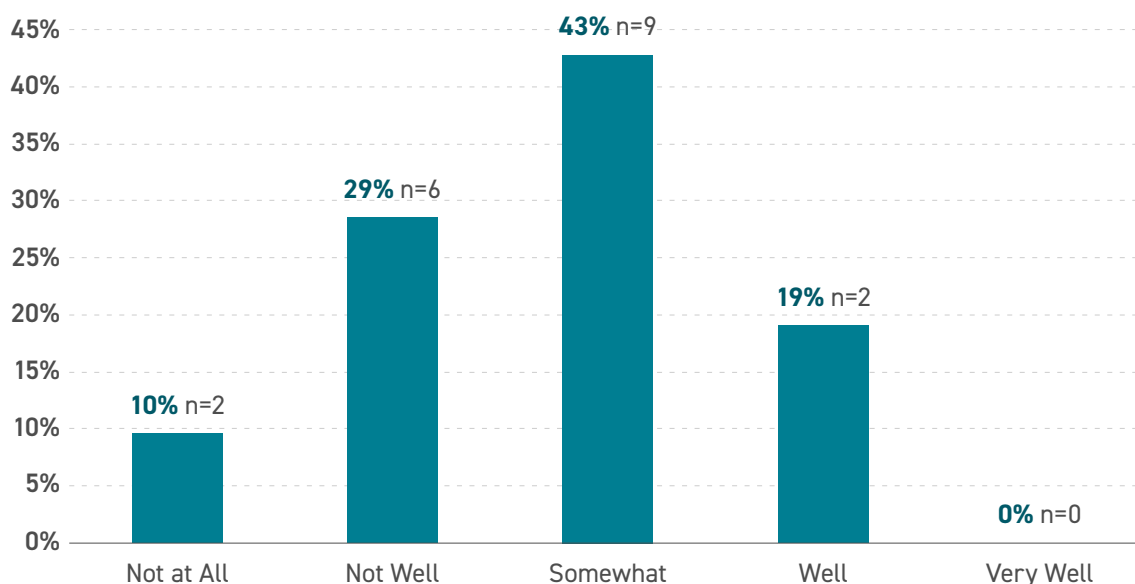


Figure 15. Sub-Question B: How Well Embedded is Inclusion is Everyone’s Business in Your HEI

The second question of this section of the report asked respondents to rate and comment on how well embedded the concept of inclusion is everyone’s business is in their HEI. Figure 15 is representative of the opinions of respondents (n=21) to this sub question. When answering this question 0%, (n=0) of respondents claimed that the concept of “inclusion is everyone’s business” is “very well” embedded throughout their campus, 19% (n=4) of respondents stated that it is “well” embedded, 43% (n=9) answered it is somewhat embedded, with 29% (n=6) citing it is “not well” embedded and 10% (n=2) posited that it is “not at all” embedded in their HEI. The ALTITUDE Charter has been adopted by 7 publicly funded HEIs at time of writing, with a number of others expressing interest in adopting the Charter²¹ in the future.

21 <https://www.ahead.ie/altitude-institutions>

Inclusion must be a cross-campus responsibility, as opposed to the sole responsibility of DSS members only, and this is a fundamental driver of the Charter. ALTITUDE is not simply a UDL (Universal Design for Learning) initiative focussed on teaching and learning. Instead, it also encapsulates the broader embedding of UD, highlighting the importance of accessible buildings and grounds, a digital environment designed for all, and accessible supports.

ALTITUDE represents a potential landmark moment for tertiary education in Ireland, signalling real intent to place human diversity at the heart of module/course design and delivery. However, at the time of publication, only 7 publicly funded HEIs have adopted the Charter and begun its implementation.

The majority of respondents articulated that while their HEI had implemented *some changes, inclusion as a joint responsibility of all campus staff*, as opposed to being considered largely the responsibility of access and disability support staff, was still at the early stages of development. Some respondents expressed real frustration that more progress had not been made.

There is a perception that a student with a disability is the sole responsibility of the Disability Support Service, rather than identification that it is a whole of campus responsibility to support the student, who happens to have a disability. Supporting all students with all manner of disabilities/difficulties is the responsibility of the University as a whole and this approach has to be led and supported from the top down. (Ind. 13).

There is a failure to acknowledge the joint responsibility of all units and departments within HEIs for inclusion. Policies do not go far enough to progress this from theory to practise. (Ind. 7).

A number of other respondents reported good practices pertaining to inclusion in their HEI. Some respondents articulated that their HEI had commenced implementing inclusive practices but were still experiencing resistance from some campus departments and/or programmes.

Generally, the concept is becoming more embedded over time, but 'inclusion' is a higher priority in some areas and a lower one in others. (Ind. 4).

Good practice across campuses such as inclusive teaching workshops, accessibility initiatives and staff training but these are not fully embedded in every programme. Excellent support in most departments but requires more work with some departments/programmes. (Ind. 19).

Other respondents reported that implementing and normalising inclusion as a cross-campus collective endeavour was relatively advanced in their HEI, there was still room for improvement, highlighting that these efforts were likely going to be a long-term project, which is understandable as it a radical change in how diverse learners are accommodated in contemporary Irish HE.

Our university is well progressed in this area but there is always room for improvement. Academic autonomy is our biggest challenge in this area. (Ind. 1).

The University has made significant progress towards embedding an 'inclusion is everyone's business' approach through commitments made under its Strategic Plans 2020-25 and 2025-2030, and through its Universal Design and Accessibility Policy, Action Plan and high-level Working Group. Through the PATH 4, Phase 1 project, it partnered in the development of the ALTITUDE Charter and has committed to adopting the ALTITUDE Charter as a reaffirmation of the commitments noted above. (Ind. 3).

It could be argued that the current supports framework is rooted in medical model discourse considering the centrality of medical evidence and verification. Our Report for 23/24 discussed this in detail, in particular students who were precluded from accessing FSD funding as they could not attain medical verification due to expense or waiting list in public health services, (AHEAD, 2025a). A radical paradigm shift is now needed as some staff still retain outdated ideas and linking accommodations to unfair advantages.

Unfortunately, there are still many staff and even other students who are not interested in inclusivity, and I suspect are of the opinion that Higher Education is not for people who need additional support. I still hear outdated ideas of "giving unfair advantages" to disabled students and worries about facing complaints from other students. There are complaints and grievances also about the poor allocation of resources needed to implement reasonable accommodations. While proper investment and recognition is needed here, I do wonder how much of this negativity is an excuse to cover a lack of will and commitment, or a belief that it is "not my business". (Ind. 20).

Another respondent postulated that if inclusion is to become everyone's business in their HEI, it may be necessary to implement mandatory disability awareness training for all staff.

Suggestion from the Disability Service is to implement mandatory awareness training and more understanding of the importance of UDL particularly in the area of assessment/disability. (Ind. 19).

One could argue that the current National Access Plan, PATH funding streams and annual increases in students applying to use the DARE scheme have combined to foster improved pathways to HE for disabled students, as evidenced by the increasing numbers of students engaging with DSS across publicly funded HEIs, (AHEAD, 2025a; HEA, 2025c). However, it is crucial greater access to HE for this cohort is supplemented by systems, strategies and policy that seek to increase student success for these cohorts as they engage in HE.

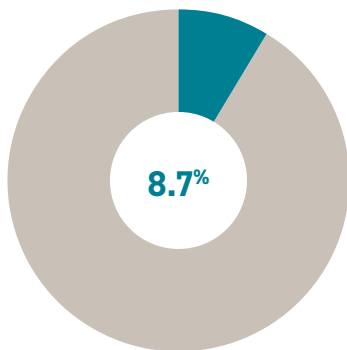
The current National Access Plan is the first to include participation and student success in its remit and title: *Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education*, (HEA, 2022). This marks an important point of departure from focussing exclusively on access and placing a greater emphasis on providing interventions and accommodations for this cohort to progress through their studies. ALTITUDE fits this bill perfectly as it seeks to embed a universal design approach, ensuring disabled students and other diverse cohorts can successfully participate and succeed in HE.

Moreover, shifting from the current system of heavy reliance on individualised disability support provision which is often informed by medical model rationale will help align Irish HEIs with the social model of disability that underpins the UN CRPD. The *Mid-Term Review of the National Access Plan* reinforces the value of implementing the Charter across the sector by including its adoption as a key recommendation for HEIs to “to further embed whole of institution Universal Design approaches”, (HEA, 2026b, p. 45). AHEAD welcome this recommendation and action by the Department as an acknowledgement of the Charter's role in promoting equity of opportunity for disabled students to complete their studies.

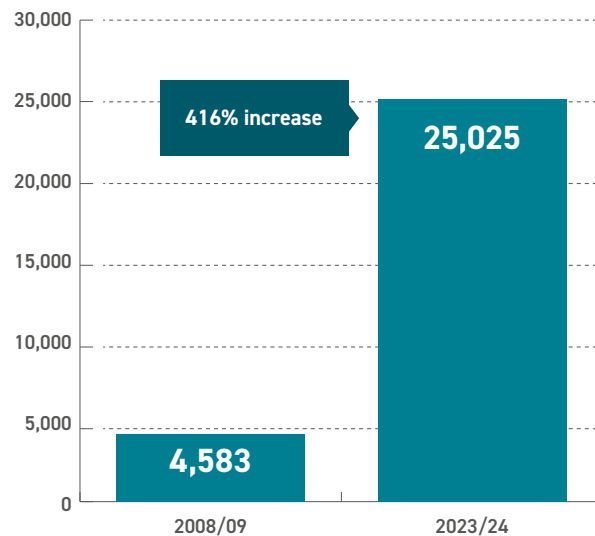
Summary

This Report now concludes with as synopsis of the key statistics from the data collated from all responding institutions for the academic year 2024/25.

Percentage of the student population in higher education registered with disability support services.



Rise in number of students with disabilities registering for support in the last 16 years

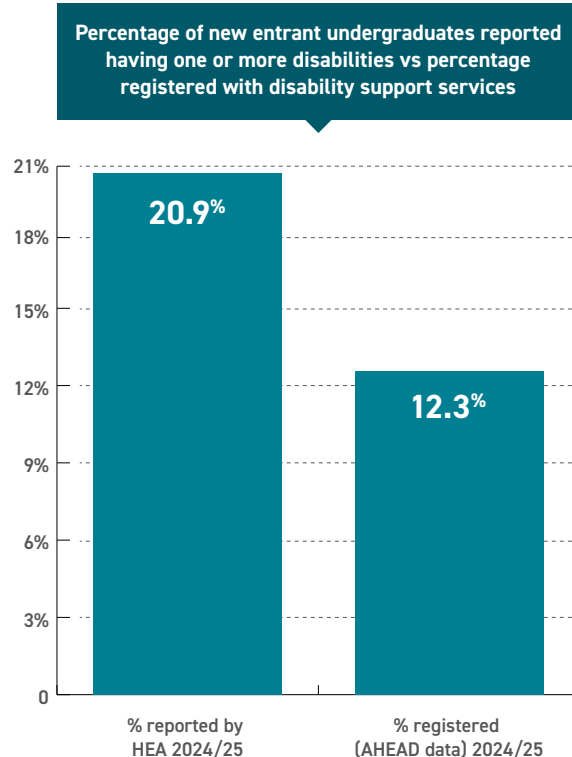


- **8.7% (n=25,025) of all students enrolled across responding HEIs were registered with disability support services in 2024/25.** 25,025 students were registered with support services in their HEI, representative of 8.7% of the total student body (n= 288,119). All but one publicly funded Irish HEIs contributed to the research, enabling a robust and credible overview of the rate of participation of disabled students with their institution's disability support services. This figure is illustrative of an 8.9% increase (n=2506) in the rate of participation in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a).
- **416% rise in number of students with disabilities registering for support in the last 16 years.** An analysis of historical AHEAD data demonstrates that there has been a 416% increase (n=20172) in the number of students with disabilities accessing their institution's DSS since the academic year 2008/09 (the inaugural annual report published by AHEAD), (AHEAD, 2009).

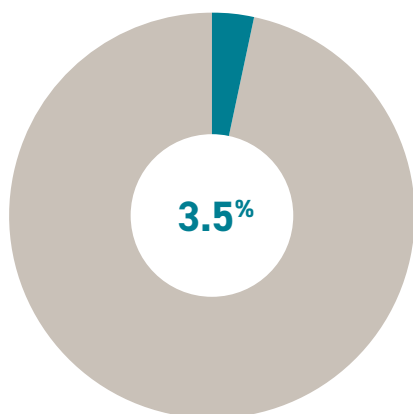
- **A significant percentage of new entrant students have a disability but do not disclose and register for support.**

In 2024/25, data from the HEA Equal Access Survey (EAS) explicates that 20.9% of the new entrant undergraduate population who responded have disclosed at least one disability through the EAS, (HEA, 2025c). The data from this Report demonstrates that 12.3% (n=6,676) of all new entrants across all participating institutions (n=54,397) were registered with disability supports in their HEI. The significant difference between the figures (i.e. HEA EAS respondent and AHEAD data), suggests that there is

a sizeable number of new entrant undergraduate students who have disclosed a disability using the Equal Access Survey but are not registered with their institution's disability support services. AHEAD acknowledge that disclosure is a complex issue, with our own research and other findings from across the broad range of academic literature indicating that some of the barriers or factors that informed non-disclosure include a desire for independence, fears about career prospects, the cost of medical evidence required for registration, stigma, and a lack of awareness among students pertaining to third-level support provision and implementation, (AHEAD, 2023a; Bartolo et al., 2023; Meeks et al., 2018).



Participation rate of postgraduate students with disabilities remains low, at 3.5% of the total postgraduate cohort



— **Postgraduate participation rate rising steadily, but disabled students remain significantly underrepresented in postgraduate study.** The participation rate of postgraduate students registered with disability support services remained stubbornly low at 3.5% (n=2428), despite the rate increasing by 4.9% when compared with 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a). The trend of a persistently a low postgraduate participation rate, when compared with an undergraduate participation rate of the 10.3% (n=20,512) is a consistent finding in previous AHEAD reports, (AHEAD, 2019, 2021b, 2023b, 2024b).

With Ireland having the highest rate of participation in HE in Europe (Carroll et al., 2022), a PG qualification increases the need for employability capital.

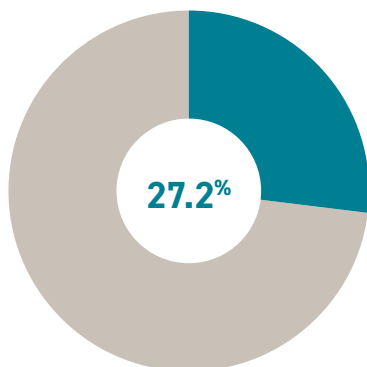
— **Almost 1 in 8 students registered with services not eligible for the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).** Responding HEIs reported that 12% (n=3,002) of students registered for supports were not eligible for any funding from

More than 1 in 8 students (12%) registered with services not eligible for the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD)



the FSD to contribute to financing of support and/or accommodations. This is representative of an 8.1% increase in the rate of non eligible students when compared with data from our Report for the year 24/25, (AHEAD, 2025a). A closer look at the data shows a significant range in the percentages of students registered with disability support services who are not eligible to be supported by the FSD, (HEA, 2023b). The. data suggests that some institutions align their criteria for support service registration with the strict medical evidence requirements of the FSD, while others allow some support to be provided for students who cannot provide this level of evidence.

A third (n=2,229) of new registrations with disability support services were not in their first year of study.



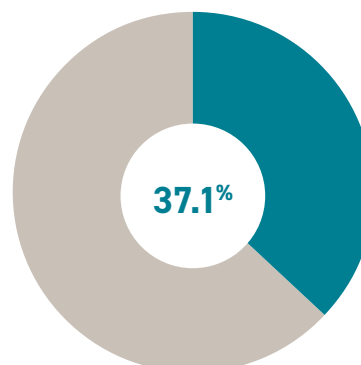
— **27.2% of new registrations with disability support services were not in their first year of study.** For the academic year 2024/25, there were 8200 new registrations with DSS across all responding institutions, representative of 36.4% of all students registered with their institution's DSS (figure adjusted due to one HEI not providing data for this question, n=22,501). Of this cohort, the data demonstrates that 2,229 students who newly registered were not in their first year of study, representative of 27.2% of all new registrations and 9.9% of all students registered with disability

support services across all participating HEIs that contributed data for this question (n=22,501). Research suggests that some of the factors that discourage students from disclosing disability in their inaugural year of study include late diagnoses of disability (Hart & Healy, 2018), stigma (Bartolo et al., 2023), a desire for independence and the high cost of obtaining medical verification of disability (IGC, 2025; McCoy et al., 2025), which is deemed necessary by some HEIs in order to register for support.

— **Specific Learning Difficulties remains the most common category of disability.**

As has been the case over a number of Participation Rate research reports (AHEAD, 2021b, 2023b, 2024b, 2025a), Specific Learning Difficulty was again the disability category which most disabled students disclosed when registering with disability support services. For the academic year 2024/25, it was reported as a primary or secondary disability by 37.1% (n=9,288) of all students registered with their HEI's disability support services. This was followed by Mental Health Condition (22.1%, n=5286), ADD/ADHD (18.2%, n=4561), Autism (13.5%, n=3366), Significant Ongoing Illness (12.1%, n=3027), DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia (8.1%, n=2028), Physical Disability (5.7%, n=1,435), Speech and Language Communication Disorder (5%, n=1258), Neurological Condition (4.6%, n=1,152), Deaf/Hard of Hearing (2.4%, n=607) and Blind/Visually Impaired (1.6%, n=388). All percentages are calculated as a portion of the total students registered with disability supports cohort. The category "Other" was disclosed by 1.9% (n=470) of all students registered. There were 38 students who disclosed an intellectual disability reported across all responding HEIs, representing 0.2% of all students registered with their HEI's DSS.

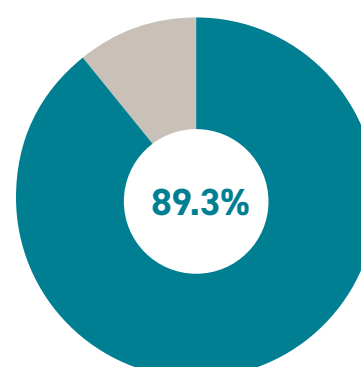
The most commonly reported disability category of students were those in the Specific Learning Difficulty category, at 37.1%

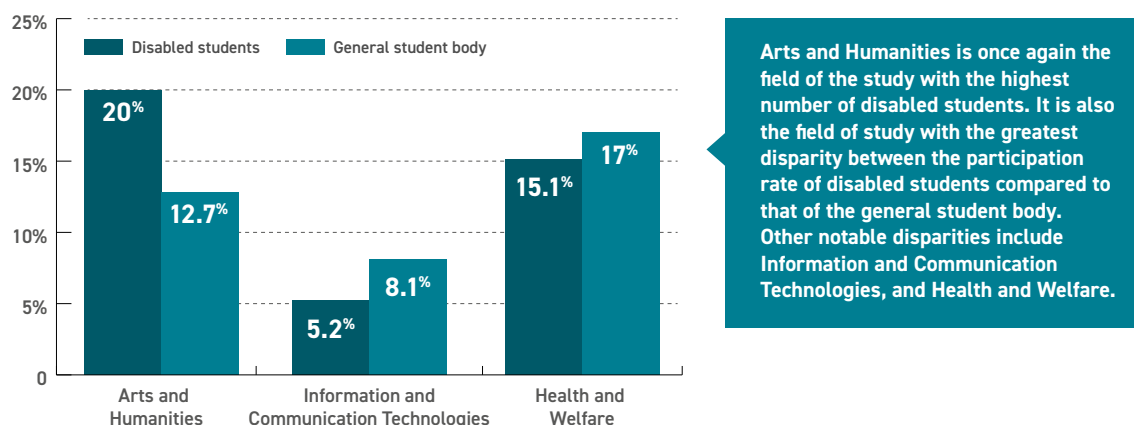


— **Vast majority of students registered with their HEI's DSS were recommended exam accommodations as part of their needs assessment.**

Responding HEIs stipulated that 89.3% (n=22347) of students registered with their HEI's DSS (n=25025) were recommended and availed of exam accommodations for the academic year 2024/25, representative of a 1.1% decrease in the rate in relation to 23/24 data (90.3%, n=20,327), (AHEAD, 2025a).

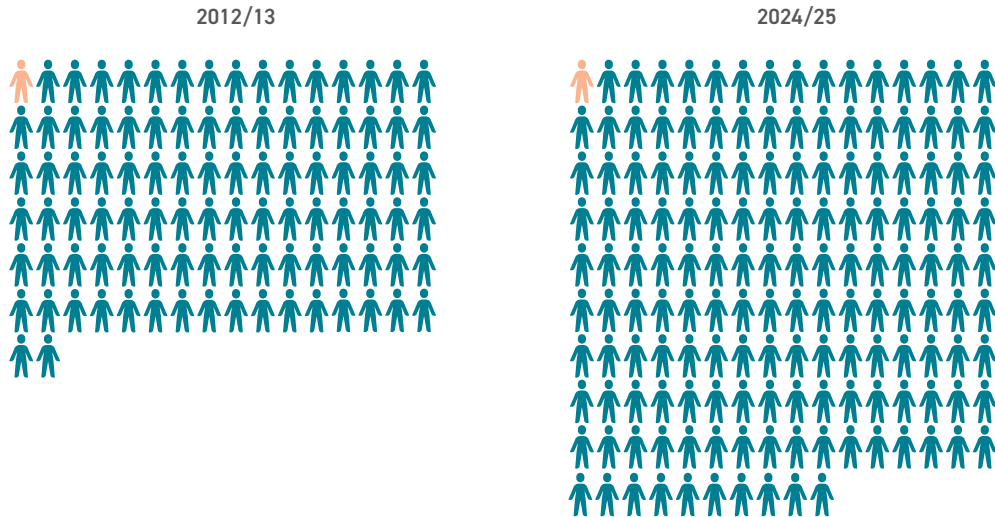
89.3% of students with disabilities were recommended one or more exam accommodations in 2024/25





- **Disabled students were significantly more likely to be enrolled on a course in the field of Arts and Humanities.** Arts and Humanities was again the field of study with the highest representation of disabled students (20%, n=5017), despite being representative of a 5% decrease in the rate in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a). Furthermore, it is also the field of study with the greatest disparity between the participation rate of disabled students (20%) compared to that of the general student population (12.7%-from data collated by the HEA). Other notable disparities include Information and Communication Technologies (5.2% of students registered with DSS in comparison with 8.1% of all students) and Health and Welfare (15.1% of students registered with their HEI's DSS in comparison with 17% of all students). The majority of fields of study did not show any significant over or under representations of disabled students.

In 2012/13 there was 97 students per support staff member. In 2024/25 there were 154 students with disabilities per support staff member.



- The rising ratios of students per DSS member that has been reported in a number of prior Reports recommenced following the slight decreases reported in 23/24 data. Drawing from the data submitted by responding institutions, we were able to calculate the number of students per Support Staff member for the academic year 2024/25. An analysis of this data indicates that there were 154 students per Support Staff member (Figure 14), indicative of a 12.4% increase (n=17) in relation to 2023/24 data, (AHEAD, 2025a). This is representative of an 59% increase (n=57) since the academic year 2012/13, (AHEAD, 2014). Within this timeframe, the number of students registered with disability support services has increased by 176% across responding HEIs.

- **A number of those who responded to the qualitative section of this Report stipulated that the FSD funding stream was not sufficient to support all students during the 24/25 academic year.** Despite year-on-year incremental increases to the Fund, which combined to increase FSD allocation to €9.54 million in 2025, with a further 10% committed for 2026 (HEA, 2026b), a number of respondents postulated that the Fund had not kept pace with the rising demand and increasing number of disabled students who are registering with DSS across publicly funded HEIs. This is of particular relevance when one considers the exponential 416% increase in disabled students registering for support (since 2008/09) recorded in this Report. Moreover, some respondents alluded to an increase in the complexity (Fossey et al., 2017) of need of students presenting for support, a claim that has been supported by findings of the *Mid Term Review of the National Access Plan*, (HEA, 2026b, p. 22).
- **19% (n=4) of respondents postulated that the concept of “inclusion is everyone’s business” is “well embedded” in their HEI.** Those remaining stipulated that this concept “somewhat embedded” (43%, n=9), “not well embedded” (29%, n=6) or “not at all embedded” (10%, n=2). Furthermore, the data from this section of the Report (On the Ground) illustrated that no responding DSS members were of the opinion that this concept was “very well embedded” in their institution. A number of respondents also articulated that fostering inclusion and equity of opportunity for disabled students was considered to be the sole obligation of DSS in their HEI, as opposed to being a cross-campus responsibility of all staff and Departments. Some respondents discussed experiencing resistance from academic staff, who were perceived to be impeding the implementation of recommended accommodations in the teaching and learning space.

Primary Recommendations

This section of our *Participation Rate Reports* typically draws from this research report and its findings, stakeholder and key actors' activities (i.e. new policy publication/implementation etc.), any relevant academic literature regarding disability and HE, and any collaborations that AHEAD took part in during the academic year being analysed (2024/25) and shortly thereafter. Recommendations are supplemented by clear actions which AHEAD propose are required to implement our recommendations, a suggested timescale in which they should be completed and finally, the relevant stakeholders whose objectives, purposes and remit are aligned with the scope of these actions.

This enables AHEAD to monitor the progression or lack thereof, of our primary recommendations, some of which have been mentioned in previous iterations of our annual Participation Rate reports. Moreover, these recommendations can be transferred into our work in the policy landscape, in our engagement with a range of Policy Steering Groups, Advisory Groups etc.

Recommendation	The forthcoming Disability Demonstration Project should incorporate a review of the models of disability support provision in FET and HE, including the associated support staffing and funding streams, to ensure effective support provision is maintained as numbers of disabled students rise.
Action	Disability support systems in tertiary education are in danger of ceasing to function. As one staff member in this research put it, “staff are struggling..., resources are overstretched, the gaps are widening and risk is increasing.” The qualitative data collated for this Report included a number of calls from responding DSS members to review the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD), while others reinforced academic literature that has postulated that the current system of support is unsustainable, (Fovet, 2024; Healy et al., 2023). This is supported by data on the exponential 416% increase in the number of disabled students registering with DSS since 2008/09, and the increasing ratio of students to support staff, both of which are key findings that emanated from this Report. The forthcoming Disability Demonstration Project being initiated by DFHERIS, will seek to “inform development of a policy framework on the design and implementation of a more flexible, responsive, tailored model in HE”, including consideration of “the range and level of supports for students with disabilities”²². While published information about this project is scant, it is AHEAD’s understanding that as it stands, there is no intention for this project to consider the efficacy of the support funding streams/models such as Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD), or the staffing levels/approaches across support services in FET and HE. It is AHEAD’s position that the goals of the Demonstration Project cannot be achieved without explicitly reviewing the funding and staffing models, and that this would be a huge opportunity missed to understand and address very significant issues in a system that requires urgent reform.
Time Scale	Short-Term
Stakeholders	DFHERIS

²² <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2025-05-29a.1957>

Recommendation	Utilising a change management approach, national stakeholders led by DFHERIS should collaborate to develop national/ institutional structures and incentives which develop a ‘whole of system’ approach to embedding Universal Design (UD) in Tertiary Education.
Action	The Mid-Term Review of the National Access Plan “recognises Universal Design as the foundation of our response to increasing diversity in the higher education system” and notes the progress made by HEIs “in progressing toward whole-of-institution approaches to Universal Design implementation”, (HEA, 2026b, p. 5). However, the data highlighted in this report concerning the rapidly diversifying population and the growing risk and challenge HEIs face in meeting the increasingly complex needs of this cohort, highlights the need to make more rapid and systemic progress on the implementation of UD. ALTITUDE – The National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education – has been adopted by approximately half of all publicly funded tertiary education institutions (HEIs and ETBs combined) since adoption became available in 2025, acting as a key vehicle to embed UD more concretely in institutional systems and processes. AHEAD continues to recommend that HEIs and ETBs who have not yet adopted the Charter and begun to implement it do so with urgency. However, what is becoming clear is that leadership at the national level is required to support greater alignment across HEIs, and to explore how national systems must evolve to align with the institutional direction of travel – in particular to ensure UD is sufficiently incentivised, monitored and rewarded within national systems of funding, quality and governance. In short, the ‘whole of institution’ approach in HEIs and ETBs, needs to be matched and aligned with a ‘whole of system’ approach at national level. AHEAD, in collaboration with the ALTITUDE Activation Group, have already begun to establish the ALTITUDE Community, bringing institutional stakeholders from across FET and HE together to share practice on embedding a UD approach, and to seek greater alignment across HEIs and ETBs. However, AHEAD recommends that DFHERIS consider convening a national stakeholder group dedicated to developing and progressing a long-term vision for how UD is more firmly embedded in national systems of funding, quality and governance.
Time Scale	Med-Term
Stakeholders	DFHERIS, QQI, HEA, HEIs, IUA, ETBI, ETBs, AHEAD, CEUD

Recommendation	Introduce greater flexibility to national funded PhD models and add criteria to ensure HEIs award more funded PhD opportunities to disabled scholars, in order to increase representation in postgraduate study.
Action	This report (and many prior iterations) shows that while disabled student participation in postgraduate study is rising, they remain significantly underrepresented at this level in comparison to undergraduate level. This report highlights that just 3.5% of all postgraduates are registered with their HEI's Disability Support Service, in comparison to 10.3% of undergraduates. One tangible area where barriers are evident is access to postdoctoral study, explored in recent research by AHEAD and the National Disabled Postgraduates Advisory Committee. In particular, the rigidity of the rules of national funded PhD programmes which require them to be both full-time, and a maximum of four years in length, was found to pose significant challenges for disabled student engagement/completion, (AHEAD, 2025b). As Research Ireland are in the process of designing and transitioning into a new model of PhD funding with greater responsibilities devolved to HEIs, a huge opportunity exists to ensure new structures incentivise disabled student participation and provide equitable conditions for them to thrive. AHEAD recommends Research Ireland consider within the model devised: — permitting pro-rata part-time awards on a Full-Time-Equivalent basis as a standard option for all students to apply for. — creating disability-adjusted full-time maintenance stipends, allowing for full annual stipend awards but with completion over a longer period due to the assessed impact of disability. — catering for students to move from standard four-year lengths to part-time or disability-adjusted stipends based on changing circumstances/diagnosis mid cycle. — introducing funding conditions for HEIs regarding student entitlements to the above and equity reporting on what access cohorts are securing stipends in within institutions. These measures or similar, would uphold the rights of all students to participate equitably in postgraduate study and create conditions for them to thrive.
Time Scale	Short Term
Stakeholders	Research Ireland

Recommendation	Provide greater SUSI funding support for students to access flexible learning modes such as online and part-time study, in order to address the underrepresentation of disabled students in these modes.
Action	Previous AHEAD research discussed earlier in this report has shown that engagement in part-time study, and other flexible modes such as online study, are pre-requisites for access to higher education for some disabled students due to the impact of disability. Despite this, disabled students are significantly less well represented in the part-time student population (2.5%) than the full-time population (10.6%). This is likely to relate to the well-evidenced links between poverty and living with a disability in Ireland discussed earlier in the report, and the fact that SUSI provides only fees related support to part-time students, and no support at all for students on fully online courses. AHEAD recommends that DFHERIS examine the cost of widening SUSI maintenance grant access to students on part-time and fully online programmes in Budget 2028, in order to uphold the right of all individuals to equitably access higher education, regardless of their ability to engage in full time or in-person study.
Time Scale	Med -Term
Stakeholders	DFHERIS

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Appendices

Appendix 1- Number of Disabled Students Engaging in each responding HEIs DSS for the academic year 2024/25

Institution Name	Total Disabled students registered with DSS	Disabled Students as a % of Total Institution Population
ATU (Galway/Mayo)	1034	12%
ATU (Sligo Campus)	595	4%
ATU (St Angela's Campus)	216	14.4%
ATU (Donegal Campus)	557	10.5%
DCU	1143	7.4%
DkIT	407	7.6%
DLIADT	283	11.5%
MIC	342	7%
MIE	175	12.5%
MTU	1655	9.4%
MU	1140	8.7%
NCAD	188	12.1%
NCI	234	2.6%
University of Galway	1807	9.1%
RCSI	254	3.8%
SETU (Carlow / Waterford Campus)	464	5.5%
TCD	2860	12.6%
TU Dublin	2253	8.1%
TUS (Athlone Campus)	499	7.6%
UCC	2524	9.3%
UCD	3301	9.6%
UL	1316	6.7%
WIT (SETU)	909	9.2%

Appendix 2 – Fields of Study

The Fields of Study are listed as per the international standard classification of education (ISCED). The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is a framework for assembling, compiling and analysing cross-nationally comparable statistics on education. ISCED is a member of the United Nations International Family of Economic and Social Classifications and is the reference classification for organizing education programmes and related qualifications by levels and fields of education. [The ISCED is viewable here.](#)

Disability Category

The disabilities that fall under the categories used in this Report are drawn from those employed in the current FSD Guidelines, (HEA 2025b).. However, AHEAD routinely compliment the categories of disability that which are eligible for the FSD with a category we label as “Other” to accommodate students who have disclosed at least one disability not included in these Guidelines, (Ibid.), and a category for “Intellectual Disability”.

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