

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

Summary and
Recommendations



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Recommendations**

22.2%

**Irish population currently
self-identify as disabled**

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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.

Introduction

This document provides a summary of the key findings and recommendations from AHEAD's latest iteration of annual research: *Disabled Students Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2024/25*. The Report is available in its entirety on the AHEAD website (www.AHEAD.ie). All but one of the 23 publicly HEIs contacted to submit a survey responded to this call for institutional data. However, it should be noted that some Technological Universities submitted their surveys under the auspices of their former Institute of Technology status. This is primarily due to the complexities of merging data across institutions.

The aim of this Report is to empower students as rights holders, assist, represent and advocate for the realisation of their rights and enhance the experiences and narratives of disabled students as they access and engage with Higher Education. We also hope that the Report can be used as an effective tool by DSS as they work to embed inclusivity, equity of access and opportunity for disabled students in their institutions.

Some of the core findings that emanate from these reports advance a better understanding of the disability narrative in HE. The data enables AHEAD to:

- Calculate the percentage of the student body that are registered with disability supports in their institution (and across all participating HEIs).
- Compare the participation rates of disabled students at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Compare this data with previous reports.
- Further disaggregate the data through the dual lenses of disability category and field of study.
- Explore the process of examinations and associated accommodations that are intended to promote equity of opportunity for disabled students.
- Carry out year on year, continued analysis of the number of students per Support Staff member in HE.

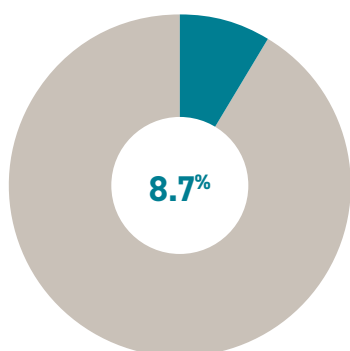
- Use data from prior reports for year-on-year benchmarking and comparison.
- Recommend solution focussed interventions through the identification of barriers and contribute to a more equitable tertiary education sector for disabled students through the meaningful expression of the student voice.
- Conduct a qualitative exploration of DSS's perceptions regarding the need to provide medical evidence of disability prior to accessing support services and the efficacy of implemented supports, post recommendation.
- Recommend solution focussed interventions through the identification of barriers and contribute to a more equitable tertiary education sector for disabled students through the meaningful expression of the student voice and the perspectives and working environment of DSS.

Following a detailed analysis and reporting of the data from responding institutions, we now present a summary of the key findings and primary recommendations for the academic year 2024/25:

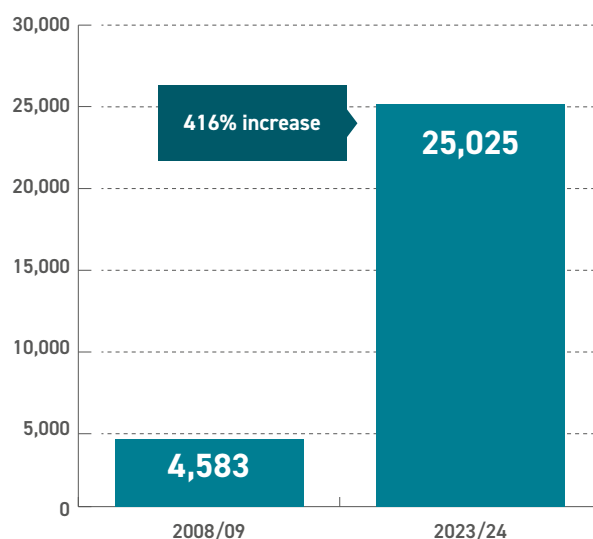
Summary of Findings

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

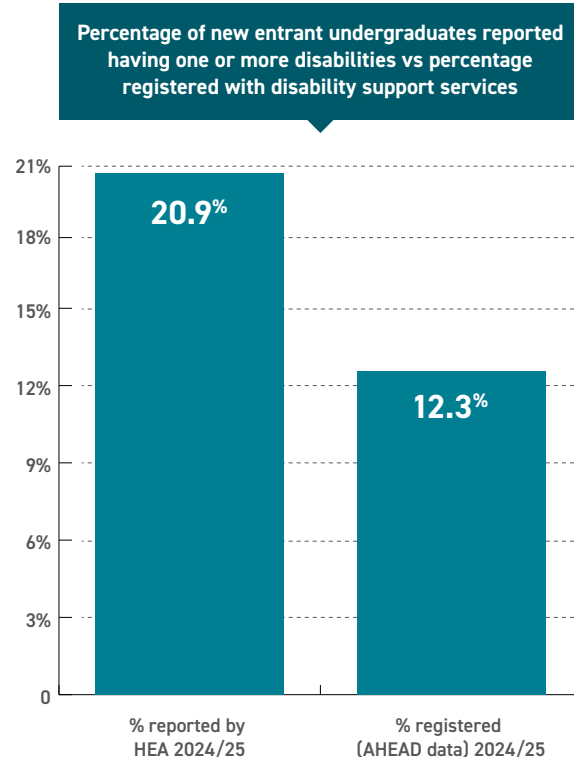


- **8.7% (n=25,025) of all students enrolled across responding HEIs were registered with disability support services in 2024/25.** 25,025 students were registered with support services in their HEI, representative of 8.7% of the total student body (n= 288,119). All but one publicly funded Irish HEIs 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).

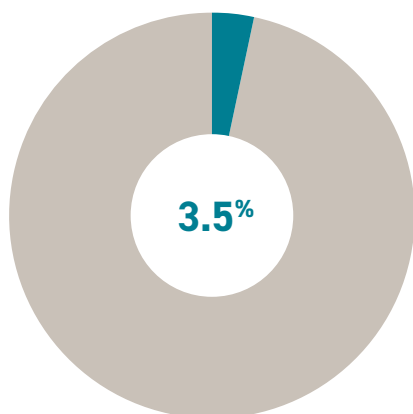
- **A significant percentage of new entrant students have a disability but do not disclose and register for support.**

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.

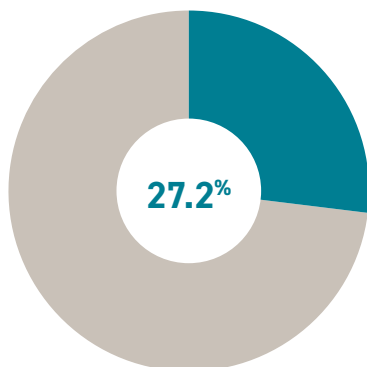
— **Almost 1 in 8 students registered with services not eligible for the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).** Responding HEIs reported

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



that 12% (n=3,002) of students registered for supports were not eligible for any funding from 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

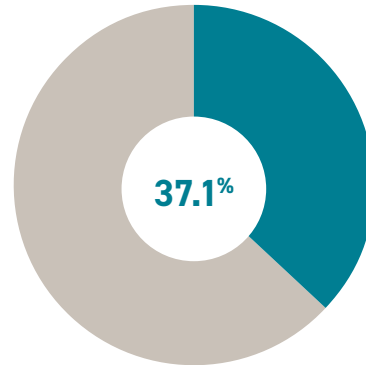
across all participating HEIs that contributed data for this question (n=22,501). Research suggests that some of the factors that discourage students from disclosing disability in their inaugural year of study include late diagnoses of disability (Hart & Healy, 2018), stigma (Bartolo et al., 2023), a 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.

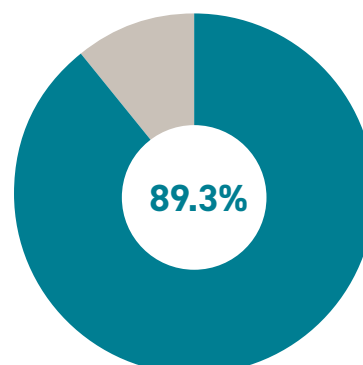
The most commonly reported disability category of students were those in the Specific Learning Difficulty category, at 37.1%

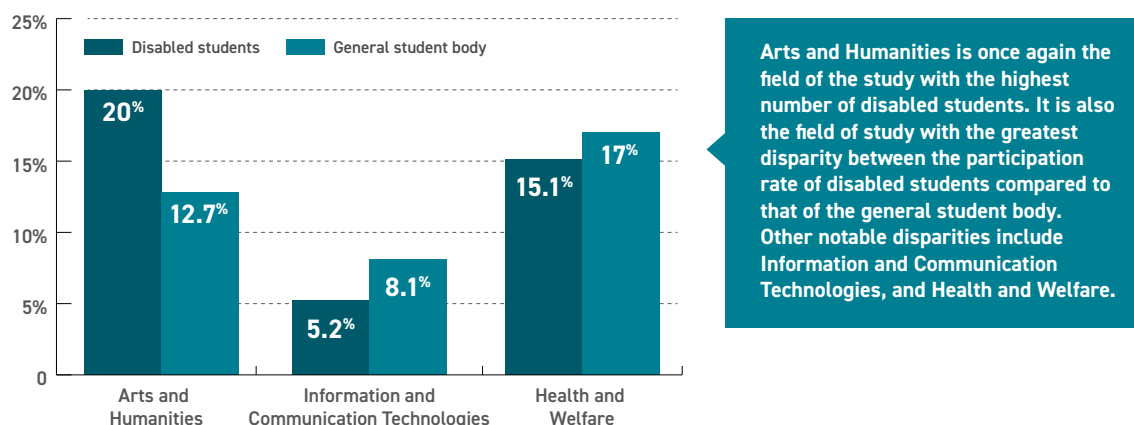


— **Vast majority of students registered with their HEI's DSS were recommended exam accommodations as part of their needs assessment.**

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).

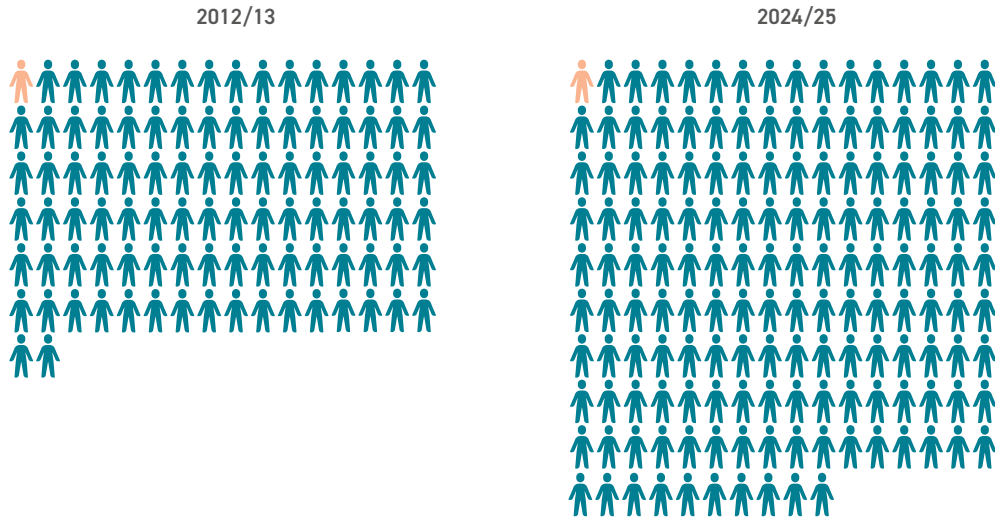
89.3% of students with disabilities were recommended one or more exam accommodations in 2024/25





- **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.

20%

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

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”¹. 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

¹ <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. <u>ALTITUDE – The National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education – has been adopted</u> 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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