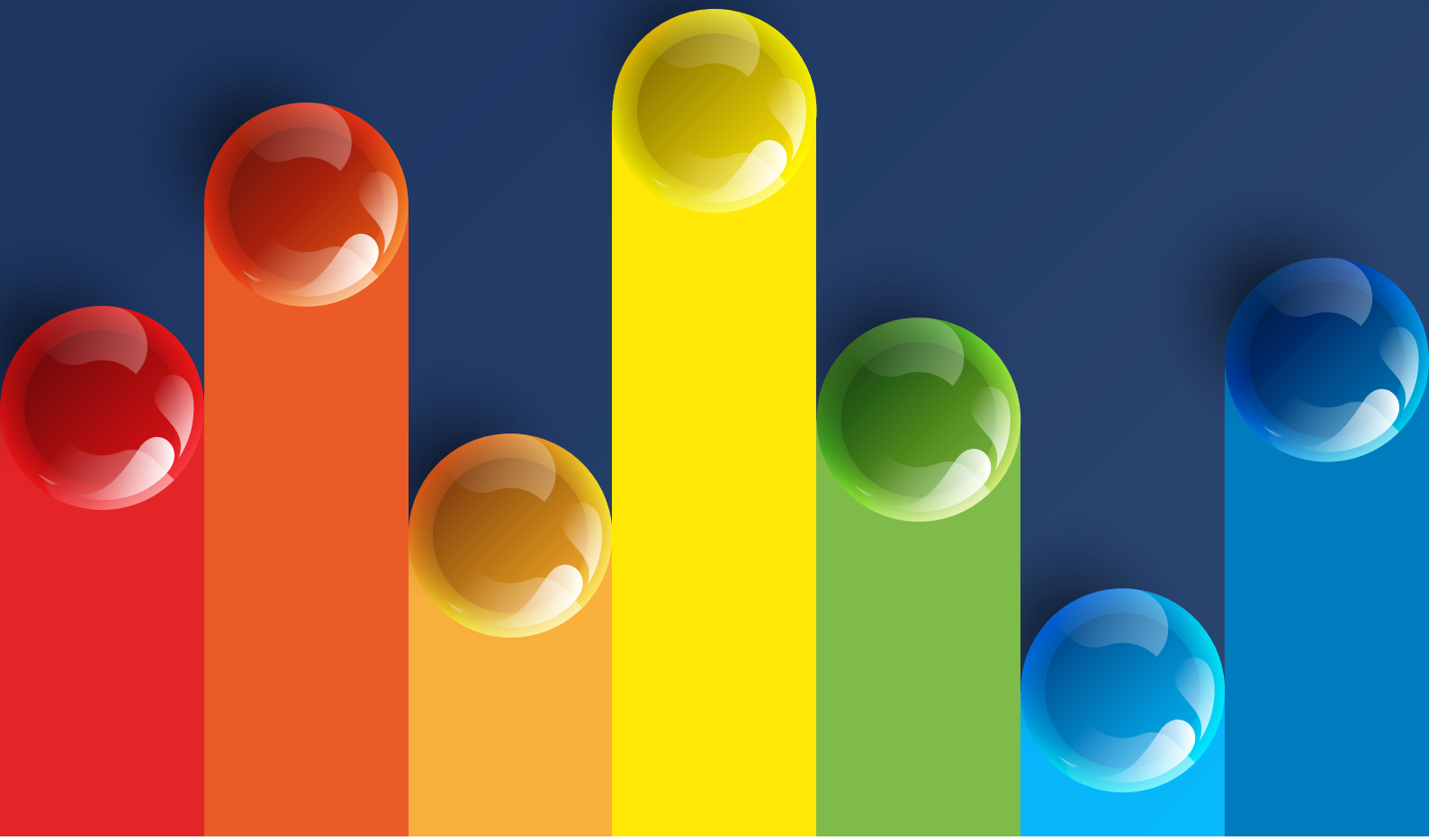
Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2021/22



ahead

creating inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities

ISBN No: 978-1-916836-01-3

Research: Dr Richard Healy and Dara Ryder

Published by:
AHEAD Educational Press
East Hall
UCD
Carysfort Avenue
Blackrock
Co. Dublin

Tel: (01) 7164396
Email:

Oct 2023

AHEAD's core work in the higher education sector is supported by the Higher Education Authority (HEA)

HEA | HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY

ahead
creating inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities

Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2021/22

Note on Using Interchanging Language

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-determinate.

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.

Contents

Introduction

AHEAD is an independent, non-profit organisation that strives to create inclusive environments and equity of opportunity for disabled students and graduates in both the Irish tertiary education sector and labour market. In working towards our mission, our research and policy team carry out a broad range of research reports, enabling us to draw on an up to date and credible evidence base in our engagement with key stakeholders and pertinent actors. Our annual Participation Rate Reports are central to this work as they provide a reliable overview of the engagement of disabled students with Higher Education (HE) disability support services in Ireland. Through our engagement with, and membership of, many advisory boards, sub-committees and steering groups, we use this, and other research data to stimulate positive outcomes and interventions for disabled people in education and the labour market.

Our ethos and strategy are underpinned by a rights-based, social model of disability, underpinned by relevant human rights mechanisms and legislation. The *AHEAD Strategy* (AHEAD, 2019a) is reinforced by a strong commitment to promote equity of access and engagement in tertiary education and the labour market by employing the principals of the UN CRPD and Sustainable Development Goals, among a range of other national and international rights instruments. In this manner, we aim to empower disabled students and graduates to realise their rights, by embedding equity of access and opportunity into normative practices and the culture of HE in Ireland.

Our annual *Participation Rate* reports are the only institutionally verified public statistics from the Higher Education (HE) sector in Ireland on engagement with support services and are regularly used in academic literature and our own policy objectives at national and institutional level. The data collected through these reports assists us in helping students with disabilities thrive in HE, through the identification of barriers, enablers and practices, many of which frequently determine whether a student progresses through or withdraws from HE, (Meeks et al., 2018). Through our regular analysis of the data from this and other research projects carried out through each academic year, AHEAD employ robust and credible empirical evidence to evaluate whether students with disabilities are experiencing disadvantage as they engage with HE. By examining the capabilities, culture and practices employed by HEA funded HEIs, one can holistically explore the HE environment, examining how disabled students progress, achieve success and enjoy well-being.

This iteration of our Participation Rate research for the academic year 2021/22 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, 2022b, 2023d) . AHEAD's work helps advance one of the HEA's primary objectives, which is to foster and sustain a student body that reflects the diversity of Irish society, (Ibid.). Their support is crucial in helping us in achieving our objectives of promoting an accessible HE landscape, embedded with equity of opportunity for students with disabilities.

The vast majority of HEIs who submitted data to inform this Report are also in receipt of HEA funding, and AHEAD recognise the huge time and effort of Disability Support Staff (DSS) in responding to the distributed survey. Importantly, when disabled students/students with disabilities are alluded to in this Report, it is the cohort of students who are registered with disability support services who are being referred to. AHEAD acknowledge that there are many disabled students who are not in receipt of supports and do not disclose or register for supports. The potential factors that precipitate this are discussed in the Report, drawing from data regarding disclosure from *Changing Landscapes* (AHEAD, 2023), recently published research informed by the narratives of disabled students upon their return to post-lockdown learning.

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.

273%

rise in the number of disabled students in HE over the last 13 years

— Conduct a brief qualitative exploration of support service oversight and accountability, informed by data collected from responding Disability Support Staff (DSS).

— 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.

Our research for the academic year 2020/21 illustrated that the participation rate of disabled students in HE had increased by 268% in the preceding 13 years, with disabled students accounting for 6.6% of the total student body, (AHEAD, 2022). The HEA also published data showing an increased participation rate of disabled students in HE. In fact, their research, which is informed by a different research methodology to this research, stipulates that 17.8% of the student body have anonymously declared at least one disability, (HEA, 2022a). The *Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education*, colloquially referred to as the National Access Plan, is an important driver of increased participation and inclusion of disabled students.

The *National Access Plan* is underpinned by a national commitment to remove barriers and promote pathways for traditionally under-represented cohorts in HE, (HEA, 2022b). It has likely played a role in the exponential increase in disabled students accessing HE. To this end, it could be argued that disabled students are now experiencing greater ease of engagement at point of access to HE. However, alongside further AHEAD research (AHEAD, 2020b, 2021a, 2023), this Report will help better understand the narratives and experiences of students with disabilities as they engage with HE, post access. It is crucial that the welcome increase in this cohort accessing HE elicits a change in the culture and practices of HEIs, fostering an environment in which disabled students can enjoy equity of experience and progress through their studies in an equitable manner.

If this is to occur, HE must become more inclusive, flexible and accessible for disabled students. Moreover, this must be consistently embedded in the culture of HE, as opposed to being framed within policy and practices that are aimed at access to HE only. HE is a key route into stable employment, in what has become an increasingly work-centric society, (Department of Further and Higher Education, 2022; Government_of_Ireland, 2022; Patrick, 2012). Ireland's economy is currently referred to as "knowledge based" by the OECD, who point to the importance of education as an incentive to prosper in an environment dominated by technology, digitalisation and climate change, (OECD, 2023). As the State strives to recover in a post pandemic landscape, our own government identifies the critical role of the HE sector in "ensuring high quality performance and outcomes, and supporting a pipeline of highly skilled graduates", (Department of Further and Higher Education, 2022, p. 2). It is within this space that the student population in general has witnessed continued growth. According to the HEA, total enrolments in HE have increased by 17.3% between 2014/15 and 2020/21 – up from approximately 209,000 to approximately 246,000.[1]

The exponential increases in both the general student population and the disability cohort did not occur in a vacuum and are arguably generated by a combination of factors. The numbers of people engaging with tertiary education can reflect societal change and the status and performance of the economy. *The National Strategy on Higher Education to 2030* (Higher Education Strategy Group, 2011) was published in recognition of the changing demographics of Irish society, combined with the changing needs of the Irish economy and labour market. This comprehensive overview of the needs for HE in Ireland to transform in line with these societal changes was demonstrative of the urgency of the sector to meet the "many social, economic and cultural challenges that face (Ireland) over the coming decade", (p. 4).

From this perspective, AHEAD's annual *Participation Rate Reports* are key research led interventions that can help monitor policy outcomes. National policies/strategies to provide funding to (e.g.: *Funding the Future* and PATH funding streams) and create pathways for (e.g.: *The National Access Plan* and DARE) under-represented groups, have been published and implemented. This Report provides independent contextual data of the efficacy of these state interventions and the performance of the sector in implementing their key actions and guidelines to promote equity of access and participation for disabled students.

1 https://hea.ie/statistics/

Research Methodology

The Participation Report for the academic year 2021/22 marks a point of departure in methodology from our previous reports that examined the numbers of disabled students engaging with HE support services in Ireland. This is primarily related to changes in the format and additional disability sections that were added to the annual survey, following dialogue with Disability Support Staff (DSS) in the HE sector (described further below).

This enables a more accurate and nuanced overview of disability category and fields of study, key elements of Participation Rate reports.

Much like our 2020/21 inquiry, and any preceding reports, a survey was distributed to all Disability Support Offices of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Republic of Ireland in May 2022. All but one invited institution responded, and all are listed below. Many of the responding HEIs are currently in the process of merging from Institutes of Technology (IT) to Technological Universities (TU) under the auspices of the Technological Universities Act 2018.

Some former ITs have submitted their data separately as they engage in the process of merging their data collection systems. For the purpose of this research, participating institutions are those with whom the Higher Education Authority (HEA) works under statute or provide core public funding to. The National College of Ireland, although funded by the Department of Education and Skills, is also included due to its large student population and the fact that the institution offers courses at NFQ levels that are identical to other participating HEIs. To this end, the National College of Ireland was deemed too significant to omit from our analysis.

It is important to note that while the HEA also publish annual participation rate reports predicated upon the disability cohort, there are significant differences in the methodologies used in both reports. While this Report is informed by data from our annual survey which is completed by Disability Support Offices of responding HEIs, the HEA employ the Equal Access Survey[2] to collect the data for their analysis. The Equal Access Survey is disseminated to all first-year undergraduate students at registration, with students invited to voluntarily submit a survey for the purpose of analysis, oversight and monitoring. There is frequently a significant disparity between the HEA and AHEAD findings, however having dual datasets can serve to enrich the findings, enabling comparison and an inquiry into disclosure of disability and registration for supports.

The survey that we distribute enables us to explore a range of pertinent and important elements that we have deemed to be relevant to the educational agenda of disabled students. It is also important to highlight that our survey is developed in tandem with DSS. It is from this continuous engagement with support staff that a number of changes have been included into the structure and format of the 2021/22 survey, in response to a number of limitations that had been identified in the previously used survey.

Preceding reports employed primary disability as the principal identifier for students. Additional disabilities were not factored into our analysis of these reports. This is arguably the most significant and substantial change to the survey, which has fostered considerable and meaningful change in both the collation of the data and the format of the research analysis. By including additional disability in our overall analysis of our data, this report will now record the incidence of each disability category. With disability category (alongside field of study) being one of the two primary lenses used to disaggregate the data in the analysis, this change will also give a more nuanced overview of a range of other research inquiries.

It has been recognised that by only using primary disability in prior reports, the findings were limited and potentially lacked accuracy concerning the incidence of various disability types, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022). In 2020/21 for example, 19.2% of students registered with disability supports disclosed additional disabilities, (AHEAD, 2021b). By only using primary disability to examine the research data, much of this disability breakdown data was overlooked in this report. This change is a direct response to this shortcoming and will advance more extensive and precise findings. Reported disabilities will not be delineated as primary or additional, rather it is the incidence of disability as opposed to its status as primary or additional that will be recorded and examined, although both are gathered to ensure rigour within the dataset.

2 https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/07/Equal-Access-to-Higher-Education-for-all_2021.pdf

There are further changes to the questions pertaining to exam accommodations. The relevant question has been updated to reflect the changes to current trends in needs assessments and reasonable accommodation provision. A number of new accommodations have been added to advance a more in-depth examination of exam accommodations that have been approved for students by DSS. With surveys being the instrument employed to gather the data, the findings are quantitative in the vast majority of cases. However, the final question asks respondents to evaluate the implementation of supports recommended within needs assessments and to discuss if HEIs monitor the impact of their supports. To prompt meaningful insight, this data will be anonymised and will add a brief qualitative segment to the report's findings.

With all but one of the HEIs who were requested to submit a survey responding, the following HEIs submitted a completed survey: (It should be noted that some Technological Universities submitted their surveys under the auspices of their former IT status. As this change is currently in progress, and to facilitate significant data mergers for some staff, we accepted some surveys in this format. For example, ATU submitted three different surveys: Sligo, Galway and Letterkenny).

Participating Higher Education Institutions:[3]

23 surveys were received from responding HEIs to inform this Report, with 1 Technological University unable to submit a survey (consisting of 2 former ITs). Unfortunately, this may have a minor impact on the calculation of the total number of students registered with supports in HE, in particular when one considers that all HEIs responded to the 2020/21 survey. However, as the majority of our quantitative analysis is evaluated using percentiles of the total cohort, our examination retains its significant accuracy and validity. It is the percentages that are indicative of change, as opposed to the numerical data for the majority of this Report.

3 Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) and Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) could not respond to the survey due to the difficulty in collating accurate data following the merger of both as Technological University Shannon.

Universities/Technological University:

- Dublin City University (DCU)
- Marino Institute of Education (MIE)
- Mary Immaculate College (MIC)
- Maynooth University (MU)
- National College of Art and Design (NCAD)
- National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG)
- Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI)
- St. Angela's College, Sligo (St. Ang.)
- Technical University Dublin (TuD)
- Trinity College Dublin (TCD)
- University College Cork (UCC)
- University College Dublin (UCD)
- University of Limerick (UL)

IT/Other:

- Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT)
- Cork Institute of Technology (CIT)
- Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT)
- Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkKIT)
- Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT)
- Institute of Technology Carlow (ITC)
- Institute of Technology Sligo (ITS)
- Institute of Technology, Tralee (ITTRA)
- Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT)
- National College of Ireland (NCI)
- Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT)

Findings

As discussed, the format, data and findings in this report mark a point of departure from previous AHEAD *Participation Rate Reports,* (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022) and will facilitate a more thorough examination of the incidence of disability in Irish HE. As has been discussed in the methodology, we have included additional disabilities in the 2021/22 iteration of our Participation Rate research for the first time. This enables a more robust and nuanced inquiry of the number of students who identify in different disability categories. Prior AHEAD research used primary disability as the sole identifier of students, (Ibid.). As such, our inquiries were an exploration of the number of students registered with supports filtered by primary disability. While this was a useful examination of disability in HE, the inclusion of additional disabilities helps propagate a more accurate overview of the rate of participation broken down by disability category across HE.

To this end, it is the incidence of the different disabilities that is important, however the percentage of students registered with support services who disclosed each disability is also recorded and illustrated in this Report. When one considers that 21.6% of undergraduate students with disabilities who are registered with supports state that they identify with more than one disability category, it is crucial to present this more accurate overview of the rate of participation for different disability categories across HE.

While the inclusion of additional disabilities will enhance our findings, this approach does preclude year on year benchmarking and comparison regarding the disability breakdown in this Report. Therefore, where disaggregation by disability is analysed, it is primarily data emanating from the 23 surveys received from responding DSS in the 21/22 dataset that will inform the findings. As any relevant data from preceding AHEAD research is demarcated by primary disability only, the comparison between data sets of previous reports, a key element of our typical research design and format, will not elicit any level of meaningful data or findings.

It is important to reiterate that only data on students registered with support services is included in this Report. AHEAD are aware that many disabled students do not register with supports for a number of reasons and this will be discussed in this Report, underpinned by HEA data and further AHEAD research, (AHEAD, 2023). This is a recognised potential limitation to this Report; however, this methodology enables us to explore the efficacy and oversight of supports, accommodations and service provision. All are key factors in the disability narrative in HE. This Report offers an alternative frame of reference to the HEA exploration of disability underpinned by the Equal Access Survey which does not require the student to be registered with support services in their HEI. Furthermore, having two similar datasets which were collated using different methodologies also provides a more complete overview of disability in Irish HE.

The timing of this Report is also of considerable importance; it is the first Participation Rate report following COVID-19 lockdowns, an era which prompted many changes in how students learned and navigated their studies in HE. Recent AHEAD research that examined the post lockdown landscape captured the myriad of changing preferences posited by students with disabilities following two years of lockdown learning. Their lockdown learning experiences have led to swiftly changing preferences, for example blended learning is now the most preferred and perceived to be the most accessible mode of learning for this cohort, (AHEAD, 2023).

It is within this space of changing preferences and the pre-discussed increase in the number of disabled students engaging with HE that we conduct this research. As such, while many of the findings that are examined in this Report are predicated upon rates of participation and fields of study, other inquires that are included examine needs assessments, exam accommodations, the ratio of support staff to students and disclosure. To this end, the Report is a holistic overview of participation rates for disabled students and the efficacy of established strategies and actions to minimise any barriers that inhibit equity of opportunity for disabled students.

Participation Rates of Students with Disabilities

This analysis commences with an overview of the rate of participation of students with disabilities in HE for the academic year 2021/22. From the 23 responding surveys, the data illustrates that 18,097 students were registered with supports in their HEI, representative of 6.9% of the total student body (n=261,902) in those institutions. In 2020/21, 6.6% (n=17,866) of the student body were registered with support services. As such, the increase in the percentage of disabled students registered with supports in HE continued its ascending trajectory. A more rigorous inquiry illustrates that the general student body in responding institutions decreased by 2.8% (n=7,586) when compared with 2020/21 (n=269,488). This is partly an outcome of one relatively large TU being unable to submit data for this Report (in 2020/21 this TU accounted for 14,811 students in total). Despite this, the number of students registered with supports in responding institutions in 2021/22 (n=18,097) has sustained continued growth in relation to the 2020/21 Report (n=17,866), (AHEAD, 2022).

2020/21's Participation Rate Report demonstrated that 6.6% of the student body were registered with supports, while the preceding years reflected that 6.4% (2019/20) and 6.2% (2018/19 and 2017/18) were similarly registered with disability supports in their HEI, (AHEAD, 2018, 2019b, 2021b, 2022). To this end, the 6.9% recorded by responding HEIs in this Report maintains the perennial increase. It represents a 4.5% (n=231) increase relative to the percentage reported in 2020/21, (AHEAD, 2022). It is interesting to note that both the percentage rate and number of students registered with supports increased, despite the afore mentioned decrease in the total number of students enrolled in HE. Notwithstanding this, it is the percentage rate as opposed to numerical data which is indicative of best practice when analysing the data collected from responding HEIs.

A more comprehensive analysis of the data drawing from individual HEIs illustrates the range in the percentage of students with disabilities registered with supports across all responding institutions. The percentage range is reported to be between 3.4% (n=332, formerly Institute of technology Carlow and now part of South East Technological University) and 11.7% (recorded at both the National College of Art and Design (n=152) and Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (n=283)). It is important to note that levels of participation/registration with services are determined by multiple factors and these statistics are not intended as a critique. Trinity College Dublin (10.3%, n=2061) and Saint Angela's College Sligo (10.1%, n=134) also reported high levels of participation for disabled students. A breakdown of all HEIs, participation rates and numerical data is included as Appendix 1.

A meta-analysis of our historical data reflects a 273% increase in the number of students registered with support services since AHEAD began producing the *Participation Rate Report annually for the academic year 2008/09* (AHEAD, 2009)[4]. This substantial increase at point of entry is illustrated in Figure 1. The continued examination of the data in this Report will explore if this welcome data pertaining to accessible pathways to HE is sustained in the learning narratives of students, as they negotiate potential barriers and enablers as they progress through their studies.

4 Prior AHEAD Participation Reports were conducted incrementally prior to 2008/09

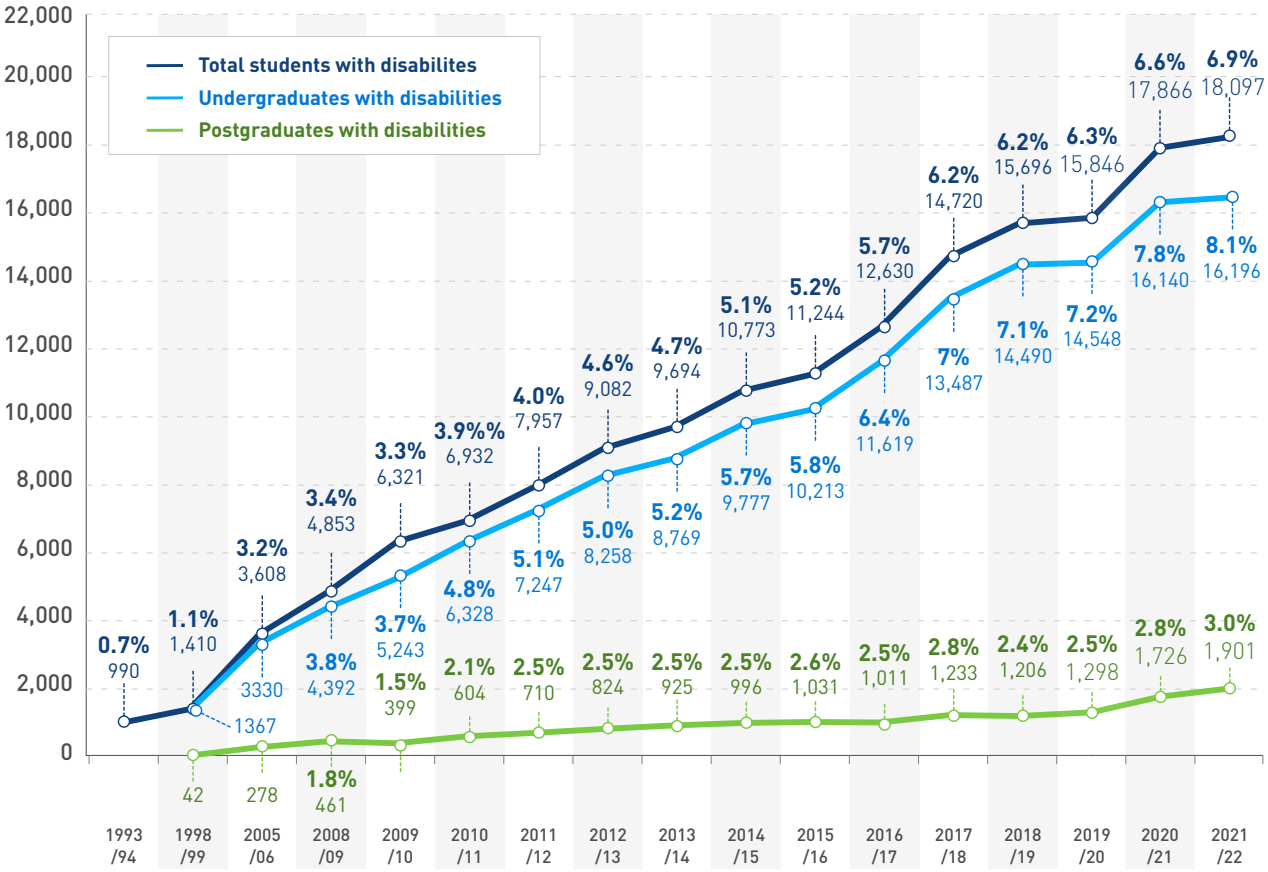


Figure 1. Number of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education (and the % of the Total Student Population they represent), 2021/22

Undergraduate and Postgraduate Participation

This section of the Report explores the rate of participation disaggregated by undergraduate and postgraduate study. An annual increase in both cohorts was identified in the 2020/21 Report, which is again recorded for the academic year 2021/22. However, despite both retaining increases, postgraduate participation remains persistently low in comparison with undergraduate participation. This is particularly relevant to graduate outcomes, which are evidently improved by a postgraduate qualification, (HEA, 2023c).

The data collected from the 23 responding HEIs demonstrated that 16,196 undergraduate students are registered with disability supports in 2021/22. This is representative of 8.1% of all undergraduate students enrolled with responding HEIs and 89.5% of all students registered with support services. This figure reflects a 4.6% increase in the rate of participation for disabled undergraduate students in relation to 2020/21 when the rate of participation for disabled students was recorded as 7.8%, (n=16,140), (AHEAD, 2022). Pertaining to postgraduate students, the data from responding institutions highlighted that 3% (n=1901) of the total number of postgraduate students enrolled in responding HEIs were registered with their DSS, which represents 10.5% of all students with disabilities. This is indicative of an 8.7% rise in the rate of participation relative to the 2020/21 data (Ibid.).

The perpetual under representation of disabled students at postgraduate level is a key factor that can potentially inhibit labour market participation for disabled graduates. This has been highlighted in a number of Participation Rate reports (AHEAD, 2021a, 2022). Alongside the added cost of living for people with disabilities which is well documented within the existing body of academic literature in Ireland (John Cullinan et al., 2015; Indecon, 2022), the transition to the labour market following graduation can be a complex issue for the disabled cohort. Postgraduate qualifications are an obvious driver of meaningful employment capital, therefore access to postgraduate study for students with disabilities requires should be examined to identify the causes of persistent under-representation, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022).

Further qualitative research is required to fully explore this perennial under-representation. AHEAD have recently began collaborating with NDPAC (National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee) to further unpack this issue and support the development of inclusive environments for disabled graduates who wish to pursue postgraduate study.

Full-Time and Part-Time Participation Rates:

The survey distributed to participating institutions included an inquiry into the percentage of disabled students engaging with full or part-time study. This data indicated that 8.4% (n=17,168) of the total number of full time students (n=205,550) were registered with support services. Disabled students enrolled with part time courses accounted for 1.6% (n=930) of all students enrolled with part time courses (n=57,436).

18,097

students with disabilities registered with support services for the academic year 2021/22

66%

rise in the last 10 years

In our 2020/21 Report, 8.3% (n=17,080) of all full-time students were registered with disability supports. Therefore, this illustrates that there has been a 1% increase in the rate of participation of full time disabled students year on year, (AHEAD, 2022). Regarding part time students with disabilities, the 2020/21 report recorded that this cohort made up 1.2% of all students studying part time. A comparison with the current data set illustrates a significant 32% increase in the rate of participation of disabled students studying part time.

Although there is an increase in the participation rates of students with disabilities engaging with both part and full time courses, the significant increase in the part time participation rate requires further analysis. It may be an unintended outcome of the impact of COVID 19 on HE. AHEAD research during the pandemic demonstrated that both students and HEIs became more comfortable and competent with blended learning practices. This teaching mode is now considered the most preferable and accessible mode of learning, in comparison with fully on-campus learning and online learning, (AHEAD, 2023). With many part time courses being underpinned by an element of blended learning, this may have played a role in the significant increase in part time study for disabled students.

However, students with disabilities are still significantly under-represented in part time courses in HE. With the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) and Student Assistant Fund (SAF) both available for part time students, the introduction of SUSI funding to enable disabled students to access funding for part time study would likely promote this mode of study for the disability cohort. This is arguably a significant barrier for disabled students when one considers the accepted intersection of poverty and disability in contemporary Ireland, (J. Cullinan et al., 2015; Nolan & Gleeson, 2017).

Further AHEAD research also suggests that part time study would be a viable alternative for students who identify with certain disability categories and have found the workload, structure and format of courses to be difficult to engage with, (AHEAD, 2020b, 2021a). The continuous under-representation of students with disabilities engaging with part time study has been alluded to in a number of previous AHEAD reports, (AHEAD, 2020a, 2021b, 2022). However, while we can speculate on the reasons for this, the barriers that preclude part time study for disabled students are beyond the scope of this qualitative report. With part time study being potentially more suitable for some of this cohort given the impact of their disability, the barriers to accessing this mode of study should be explored by stakeholders. Figure 2 illustrates the under-representation of disabled students in part time HE courses. The graphic further disaggregates the data by postgraduate and undergraduate status.

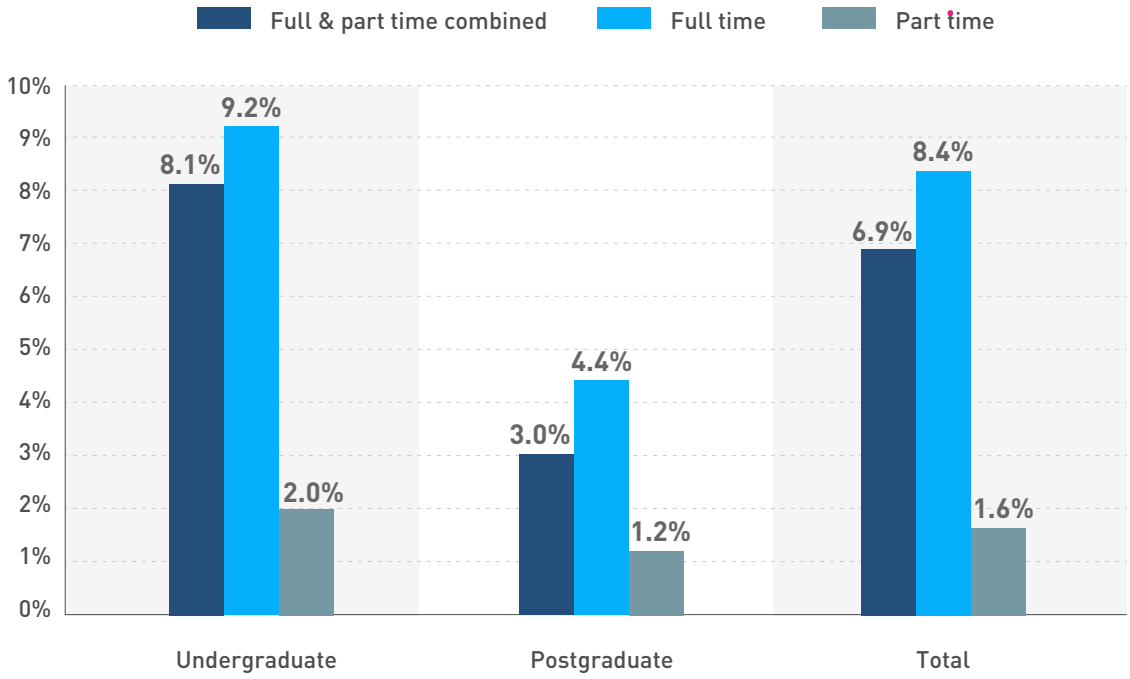


Figure 2. Percentage of students with disabilities in full-time and part-time education as a percentage of the total student population 2021/22.

A further disaggregation by postgraduate and undergraduate study demonstrates that 9.2% (n=15,588) of all full-time undergraduate students are registered with disability support services, with only 2% (n=608) of all part time undergraduates registered with supports. Moreover, 4.4% (n=1,580) of full time postgraduates and 1.2% (n=322) of part-time postgraduates were reported to be registered with disability support services.

New Entrant Undergraduates with Disabilities.

For the purposes of this Report, new entrants are defined as students entering HEA funded institutions in the first year of an undergraduate course, as per the AHEAD survey distributed to responding HEIs. The survey data for the academic year 2021/22 stipulates that 7.2% (n=4,359) of new entrants across all responding HEIs (n=60,855) were registered with DSS in their institution. Last year's Participation Rate Report for the academic year 2020/21 indicated that 7.5% (n=4324) of the total number of New Entrant Undergraduate students (n=57,397) were registered with the DSS in their institution, (AHEAD, 2022). This is representative of a 4% decrease in the rate of participation of new entrant undergraduate students who are registered with supports.

Disclosure Rates for New Entrants-HEA Data Comparison.

As previously discussed, when students with disabilities/disabled students are alluded to in this Report, it is the cohort of students who are registered with their HEI's support service (or Access Office) that is being referred to. As the methodology that underpins this Report uses data that is collated from surveys that have been distributed to participating HEI's DSS, the research data emanates only from students who have disclosed at least one disability to their institution's support services. This facilitates a robust analysis of accommodations, the ratio of support staff to student and a range of other inquiries. However, it is accepted that there are a number of disabled students accessing HE who have chosen not to disclose or are unable to register with their HEI's disability support services. As previously discussed, the HEA accumulate their annual participation rate datasets by employing an alternative methodology. The HEA's data is collated by anonymous, voluntary self-disclosure through the Equal Access Survey (EAS).

An examination of disclosure (or lack of) is made possible by comparing both HEA and AHEAD data sets. The EAS is distributed to all undergraduate new entrants and is estimated that the sample of students who submit their data is "almost 3 in 4" of the total new entrant undergraduate cohort.[5] The HEA consistently report a substantially higher percentage of students reporting at least one disability when compared with AHEAD research. Separate AHEAD research postulates that many disabled students decline to formally disclose to support services as they believe their disability status will limit their career opportunities, impact on their engagement and interaction with other students, or due to the frequently high cost of acquiring medical evidence to verify disability to support services, (AHEAD, 2023). To this end, it is potentially the anonymity and the absence of a medical verification requirement, coupled with a desire to be independent, that advances a 'safe space' for disclosure through the EAS, which therefore attributes a higher percentage of disabled students.

The significant disparity that is evident between both statistics suggests that a sizeable cohort of disabled students do not disclose or engage with their Disability/ Access Office. Therefore, it is likely that many have declined the opportunity to avail of accommodations for learning and assessment. It should be noted when interpreting this disparity that the underlying datasets/methodologies are not the same and some discrepancies potentially exist between them. According to HEA data, 17.8% of responding students disclosed at least one disability when they submitted their EAS, (HEA, 2022a). In the AHEAD dataset, 7.2% (n=4,359) of students registered with supports were reported to be in the new entrant undergraduate cohort (n=60,855), according to the surveys from respondents.

New Registrations

New registrations are students who register with support services in their HEI for the first time. While the majority who register do so in their inaugural academic year, others often do not until after their first year of study. This section of the survey contained a comment section which enabled responding support staff to submit short snippets of qualitative data alongside their quantitative input. A number of comments illustrated that the return to on-campus examinations in some HEIs had prompted an increase in students seeking exam accommodations, which required students to register with supports, despite not doing so in their initial year/years.

5 https://hea.ie/2022/10/03/hea-statistics-newsletter-quarter-3-2022/

In 2021/22, there were 4,359 new registrations with disability services recorded across all responding HEIs, representative of 24.1% of all students registered with DSS (n=18,097). 1,570 of these students were not in their first year of study. This equates to 8.7% of all students registered with supports and 26% of all new registrations. Much like disclosure, there are a number of factors that are likely linked to students not registering for supports in their initial year of study. Many are potentially linked, considering that the hesitancy in disclosing is likely underpinned by the same rationale as those who do not disclose whatsoever. 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), and the high cost of obtaining medical verification, which is frequently a necessary prerequisite for students who want to engage with their HEI's DSS, (Smith et al., 2021). The potential of verification cost being a barrier is magnified when one considers the accepted poverty intersection for disabled people, (EDF, 2020; Watson et al., 2015). Across this existing body of research, it has been claimed that people with disabilities are twice as likely to be living in poverty, (Government_of_Ireland, 2015). Again, the nuances and underpinnings of disclosure are not within the scope of this Report, however with the numbers of disabled students accessing HE in ascendence every year (AHEAD, 2022; Healy et al., forthcoming), there needs to be a commitment to making support services more visible, accessible and less costly to engage with. Disabled students need to be able to feel confident about the efficacy of engaging with supports, and using these supports should be accessible to all students who require support services.

Mature Students

According to the latest HEA data that examines the makeup of HE population, 7% of the student body are mature students, (HEA, 2023a). According to the data from responding institutions, there were 1280 mature students registered with disability supports across all surveys received. This represents 7.1% of all disabled students, (n=18,097) and 3% of all mature students (n=38,663).

International Students

Across responding institutions, it was reported that 4.8% (n=868) of all students registered with supports were international students, indicative of 2% of all international students (n=34,763) enrolled across participating HEIs. When compared with the data collated in the 2020/21 report, this data highlights that the percentage of international students registered with disability supports has increased from 3.7%, (AHEAD, 2022). This is representative of a 29.7% increase in the rate of participation for this cohort.

Apprenticeships

The 2021/22 Report is the first participation rate research that attempts to analyse the number, or rate of participation, of disabled students who have engaged with apprenticeships in HEIs. Currently, the literature records that just 2.7% of all apprenticeships in Ireland have at least one disability, (DFHERIS, 2021).

9 of 23 responding HEIs reported any data pertaining to apprenticeships. These HEIs recorded that there were 3724 craft apprenticeships in 2021/22, of which 5.6% (n=208) were registered with services. Pertaining to other apprenticeships, survey respondents reported that there were 853 students in this cohort, of which 2.3% (n=20) were registered with supports.

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

Another new addition to the calculations for this Report for 2021/22 was the introduction of an overview of the numbers of students in receipt of supports, but whom are not being funded by the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD). Some of the reasons for a student not being funded are the cost of medical verification (Smith et al., 2021), which can preclude some students from accumulating the required paperwork, and potentially other bespoke accommodations that are not covered by the FSD.

The 23 responding HEIs reported that 11.4% (n=2062) of students registered for supports were not in receipt of any funding from the FSD to help provide support services. A closer look at the data shows a huge range in the percentage of students registered with disability support services who are not FSD eligible, ranging from no students in some institutions, to over 27% of students registered with services in one institution. While the potential reasons for this non-funding are beyond the scope of this Report, it certainly warrants further analysis, considering the nexus of international and national equality legislation and obligations that are linked to the provision of the relevant supports for disabled students. It is important that all disabled students who require support have the opportunity to receive it, and this data suggests that some institutions only provide support to FSD eligible students only. Greater consistency of support can be encouraged by ensuring that all students who are registered with services in their institution have opportunity to be supported by the Fund for Students with Disabilities, through a relaxation of the eligibility rules.

Nature of Disability

The disability categories that have been used in our previous participation rate surveys and reports are identical to those employed by the HEA in their *Funds for Students with Disabilities (FSD) Guidelines,* (HEA, 2021). This replication enables benchmarking and helps sustain accuracy and standardisation across data sets. Notwithstanding this, our reports also employ the category "Other" to include students who do not identify with any of these indicators. Some students with disabilities do not identify with the precise definitions used by the HEA, and in enabling students to choose "Other", it is still possible to capture this cohort.

The data elicited from responding surveys demonstrated that 18.4% (n=3,327) of disabled students identified with additional (more than one) disabilities. Figure 3 represents the breakdown of students registered with support services by category of disability (primary and additional disability). It includes both postgraduate and undergraduate students and some students are represented more than once, dependent on whether they are included in the cohort with more than one disability (n=3,327).

39.8%

of students who were registered for supports for the academic year 2021/22 reported a Specific Learning Difficulty. This was the most common disability category recorded.

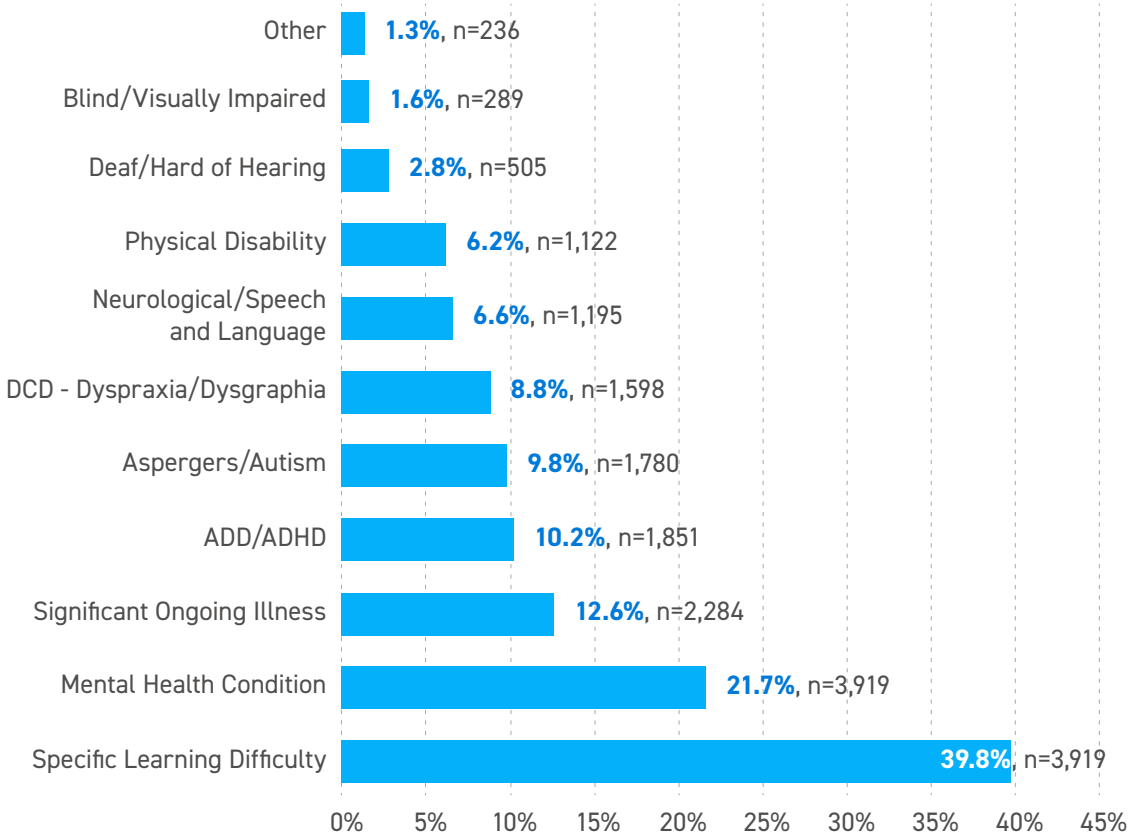


Figure 3. Breakdown of total students registered with disability support services by category of disability 2021/22.

The most common disability category that was reported (including primary and additional disabilities) by students who were registered for supports for the academic year 2021/22 was Specific Learning Difficulty (39.8%, n=7204). This was followed by Mental Health Condition (21.7%, n=3919), Significant Ongoing Illness (12.6%, n=2284), ADD/ADHD (10.2%, n=1851), Aspergers/Autism (9.8%, n=1640), DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia (8.8%, n=1598), Neurological/Speech and Language (6.6%, n=1195), Physical Disability (6.2%, n=1122), Deaf/Hard of Hearing (2.8%, n=505) and Blind/Visually Impaired (1.6%, n=422). The category "Other" was disclosed by 1.1% (n=236) of all students registered.

It is notable that sensory disabilities continue to be under represented in HE, with Blind/Visually Impaired and Deaf/Hard of Hearing being among the lowest recorded categories of disability as per the 2020/21 report, (AHEAD, 2022). The latest census data from the Central Statistics Office states that "deafness or a serious hearing impairment" was reported by 16.1% of all disabled people, while 8.5% identified "blindness or vision impairment" as their disability category, (CSO, 2016). Although the caveat that sensory disabilities often manifest in later life and therefore this may not be a fully accurate frame of reference for the sample of the population who are attending HE, the notable disparity in the statistics suggest a substantial under-representation of both categories. There should be an analysis into the perennial under-representation of sensory disabilities in HE in Ireland with a targeted, strategic commitment to identifying the barriers that are advancing the low percentage rates. Previous reports have explored the percentage difference in each category when compared with the previous year, however due to the change in methodology, benchmarking the incidence of disability with 2020/21's data pertaining to primary disability category will not produce meaningful data.

New Entrant Disability Breakdown

This section now examines the new entrant undergraduate cohort (n=4,359) by disability category, again recording primary and additional disability. This represents the number of students who registered with support services for the first time.

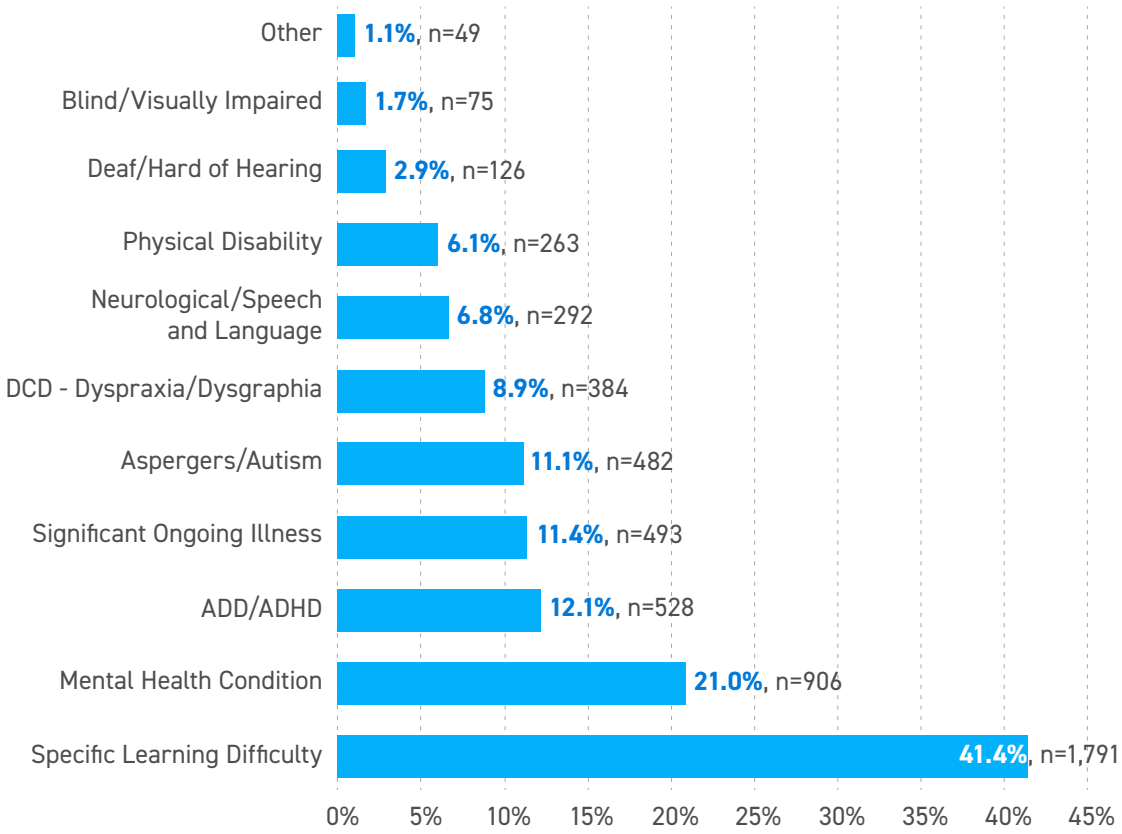


Figure 4. Breakdown of new entrant students registered with disability support services by category of disability 2021/22.

Figure 4. illustrates the percentage of new entrant undergraduates registered with supports who identify with each individual disability category. As this Report now includes additional disabilities, a number of students appear more than once in the survey. For example, Student X is registered for supports, disclosing that she has a Mental Health Condition and his deaf. Therefore, she is counted in both cohorts and represented twice in the graph.

Pertaining to this cohort, 41.4% (n=1791) identified as having a Specific Learning Difficulty, 21% (n=906) identified with the Mental Health Condition category, 12.2% (n=528) identified with the ADD/ADHD category, 14.4% (n=493) identified with the Significant Ongoing Illness category, 11.1% (n=482) identified with the Aspergers/ Autism category, 8.9% (n=384) identified with the DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia category, 6.8% (n=292) identified with the Neurological/Speech and Language category, 6.1% (n=263) with the Physical Disability category, 2.9% (n=126) with the Deaf/Hard of Hearing category, 1.7% (n=75) with the Blind/Visually Impaired category and 1.1% (n=49) with the Other category.

Undergraduate Disability Breakdown

Responding institutions reported that there were 16,196 undergraduate students registered with disability supports for the academic year 2021/22. In 2020/21, the number reported was 16,140, (AHEAD, 2022). As such, numerically the number has remained almost identical, however this is against the backdrop of a 4.2% decrease (from 207,579 in 2020/21 to 199,169 in 2021/22) in the total number of undergraduate students in responding HEIs, when compared with 2020/21 data. To this end, while the number has remained relatively consistent, as a percentage of the full undergraduate population, the rate of participation of undergraduate students registered with supports has increased from 7.8% to 8.1%.

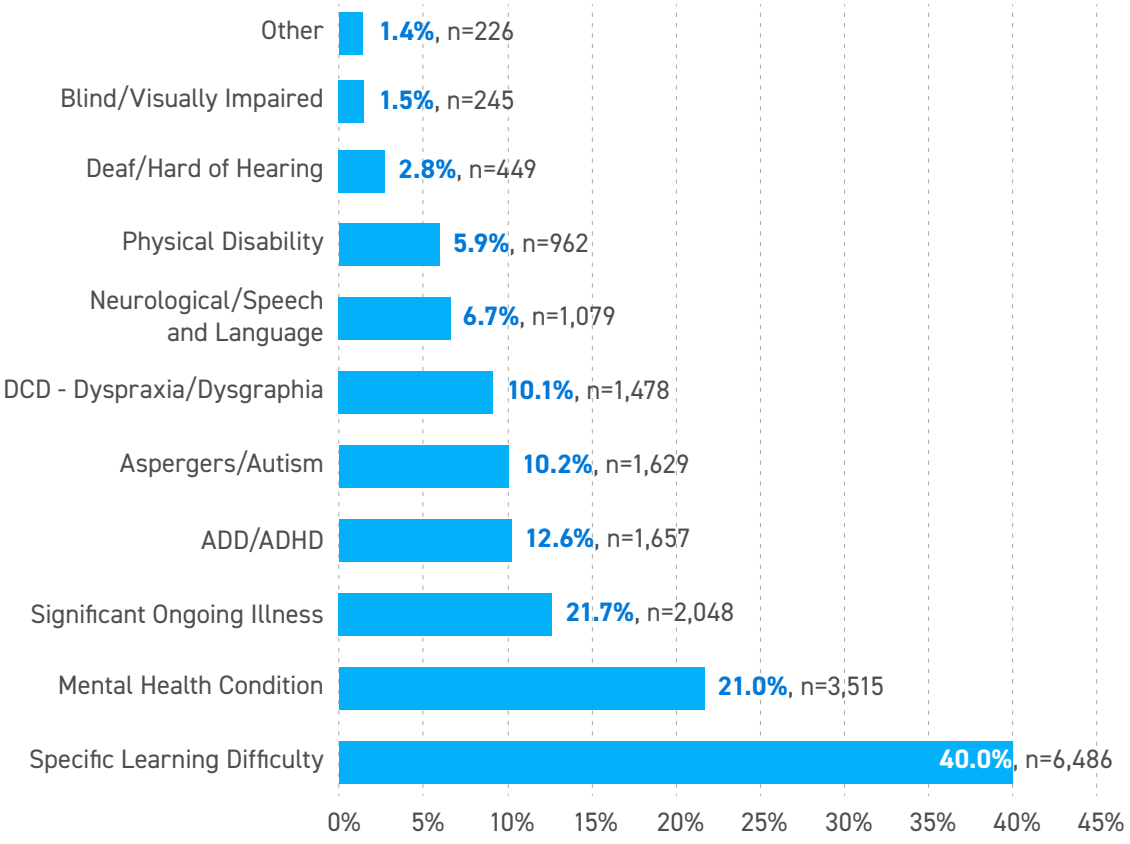


Figure 5. Breakdown of undergraduate students registered with disability support services by category of disability 2021/22

Figure 5 illustrates that of the 16,196 undergraduate students registered with supports, Significant Learning Difficulty (40%, n=6486) and Mental Health Condition (21.7%, n=3515) and Significant Ongoing Illness (12.6%, n=2048) are the three categories with the highest rate of participation.

A full analysis of the prevalence of the primary and additional disability categories within the undergraduate cohort illustrated the following: ADD/ADHD (10.2%, n=1657), Aspergers/Autism (10.1%, n=1629), DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia (9.1%, n=1478), Neurological/Speech and Language (6.7%, n=1079), Physical Disability (5.9%, n=962), Deaf/Hard of Hearing (2.8%, n=449), Blind/Visually Impaired (1.5%, n=245) and Other (1.4%, n=226).

Due to the pre-discussed change in format that underpins this iteration of the Participation Rate research, comparisons with last year's 2020/21 data do not advance any real, meaningful findings. The shortcomings of using Primary Disability as a standalone identifier of each student in this Report has been discussed in the Methodology section.

Postgraduate Disability Breakdown

This section of the Report explores the number and rate of participation rate disaggregated by disability category for the academic year 2021/22. The data elicited from the surveys from responding institutions indicated a marked increase on the percentage of postgraduate students registered with supports in comparison with the data from 2020/21. In 2020/21, the number of postgraduate students registered with support was 1726, or 2.8% of all postgraduates enrolled across participating HEIs. This year's (2021/22) survey respondents reported that 3% (n=1901) of postgraduate students were registered with supports, representative of a 7.1% (n= 202) increase (0.2 percentage points), when compared with the 2020/21 dataset. The use of primary and additional disabilities in this Report is again highlighted here considering 14.9% (n= 278) of postgraduate students registered with supports reported more than one disability. The pivot to this frame of reference enables a more robust analysis of disability throughout this Report. Figure 6 illustrates the prevalence of each disability category across all postgraduate students registered with their HEI's support services.

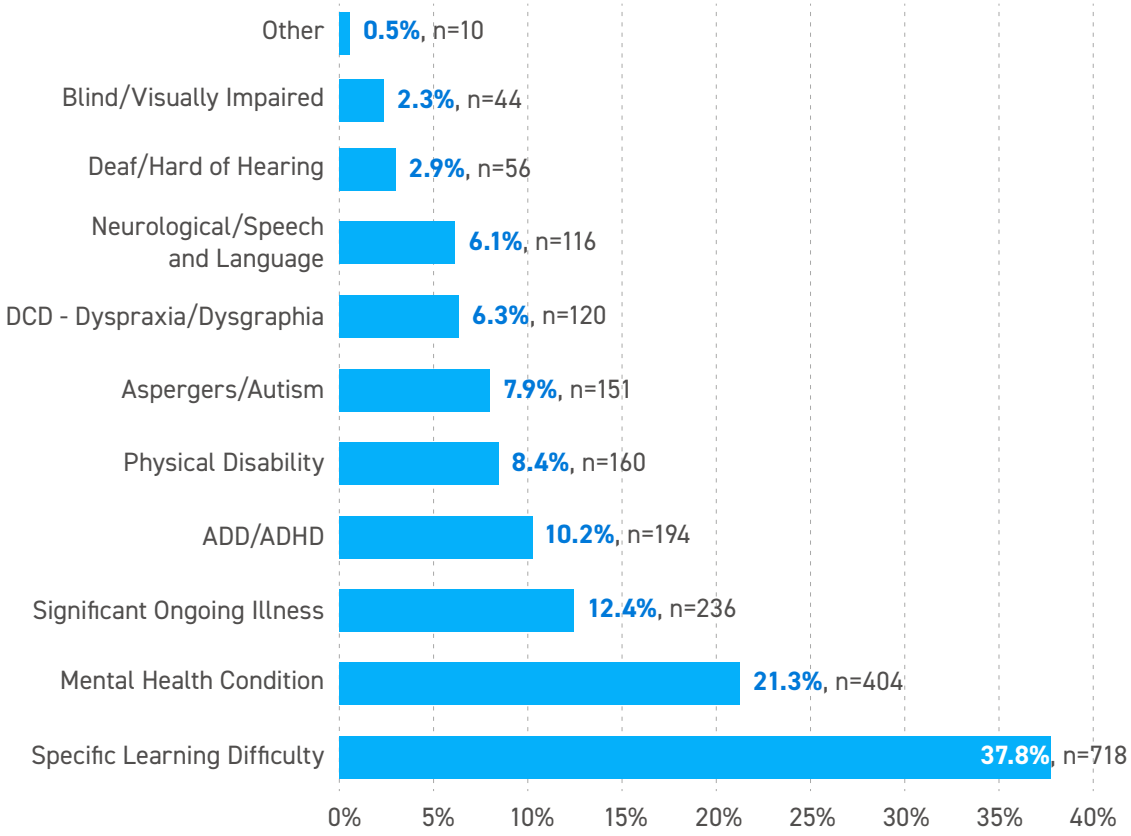


Figure 6. Postgraduate Disability Breakdown (Primary and Additional Disability Combined)

An in-depth examination of the prevalence of the different categories of disability within the postgraduate cohort (primary disability and additional) is represented in Figure 6. The three categories with the highest rate of participation in the postgraduate cohort in the academic year 2021/22 were: Significant Learning Difficulty (37.8%, n=718), Mental Health Condition (21.3%, n= 404) and Significant Ongoing Illness (12.4%, n= 236). The three categories with the lowest representation were Other (0.5%, n= 10), Blind/Visually Impaired (2.3%, n=44) and Deaf/Hard of Hearing (2.9%, n=56). The remaining categories were ADD/ADHD (10.2%, n=194), Physical Disability (8.4%, n=160), Aspergers/Autism (7.9%, n=151), DCD-Dyspraxia (6.3%, n=120) and Neurological/ Speech and Language (6.1%, n=116).

Despite the increase in postgraduate students registered with supports exhibited in this Report, prior AHEAD participation rate reports have continuously captured the under-representation of disability at postgraduate level across participating HEA funded HEIs, (AHEAD, 2018, 2019b, 2021b, 2022). We have previously suggested that there is an urgent response to increasing the number of disabled students at this level of study, (AHEAD, 2022). While innovative national policy and funding streams, for example *The Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success In Higher Education* (HEA, 2022b), alongside PATH (Programme for Access to Higher Education) and the DARE (Disability Access Routes to Education) targeted funding, have been successful intervention that have created pathways to HE for disabled people into tertiary education. However, for those who successfully complete undergraduate study, pathways to postgraduate study are frequently more challenging to negotiate.

Despite the consistent increases to the numbers of disabled students engaged with postgraduate study that has been captured in recent AHEAD reports (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022), 3% of all postgraduate students registered with disability services, as per this Report, is still a substantial under representation. This under-representation is particularly highlighted when one considers that the data collected from responding institutions expounds that 8.1% of undergraduate students are disabled. These statistics suggest that disabled students tend not to progress to postgraduate study as frequently as those with no disability. Obviously postgraduate study is a precursor to better opportunities and pathways into the labour market. A postgraduate qualification is also likely to increase salary levels for those who attain one, (HEA, 2023b). To this end, there should be similar strategies and funding streams, echoing those that have been successful at point of entry to HE, at point of graduation with an onus on increasing the participation rate for disabled students in postgraduate study. This would help counter the disability/poverty intersection that is accepted in Ireland, (EDF, 2020; Indecon, 2022) as discussed in the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Participation section of the Report.

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 2021/22 was 18,097, or 6.9% of the student body. The fields of study that inform this Report are drawn from the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). Our previous participation rate reports use this standard as does the HEA in their reports, enabling accurate comparison between both datasets. Figure 10 illustrates the breakdown of students with disabilities engaging with the different fields of study (drawing from the surveys from responding institutions) compared with the breakdown of the full student body (drawing from HEA data), (HEA, 2022a).

The three fields of study that recorded the highest rate of participation for disabled students were: Arts and Humanities (20.2%, n=3647), Business Administration and Law (16.1%, n=2914) and Health and Welfare (14.2%, n=2568). The three fields with the lowest rate of participation for this cohort were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.3%, n=48), Services 2.3%, (n=419) and Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary (2.9%, n=527). The remaining fields of study were demarcated by rate of participation as follows: Education (5.3%, n=962), Information and Communication Technologies (5.6%, n=1013), Social Sciences, journalism and information (9.4%, n=1710), Engineering, manufacturing and construction (10.9%, n=1967) and Natural Sciences, mathematics and statistics (12.8%, n=2322).

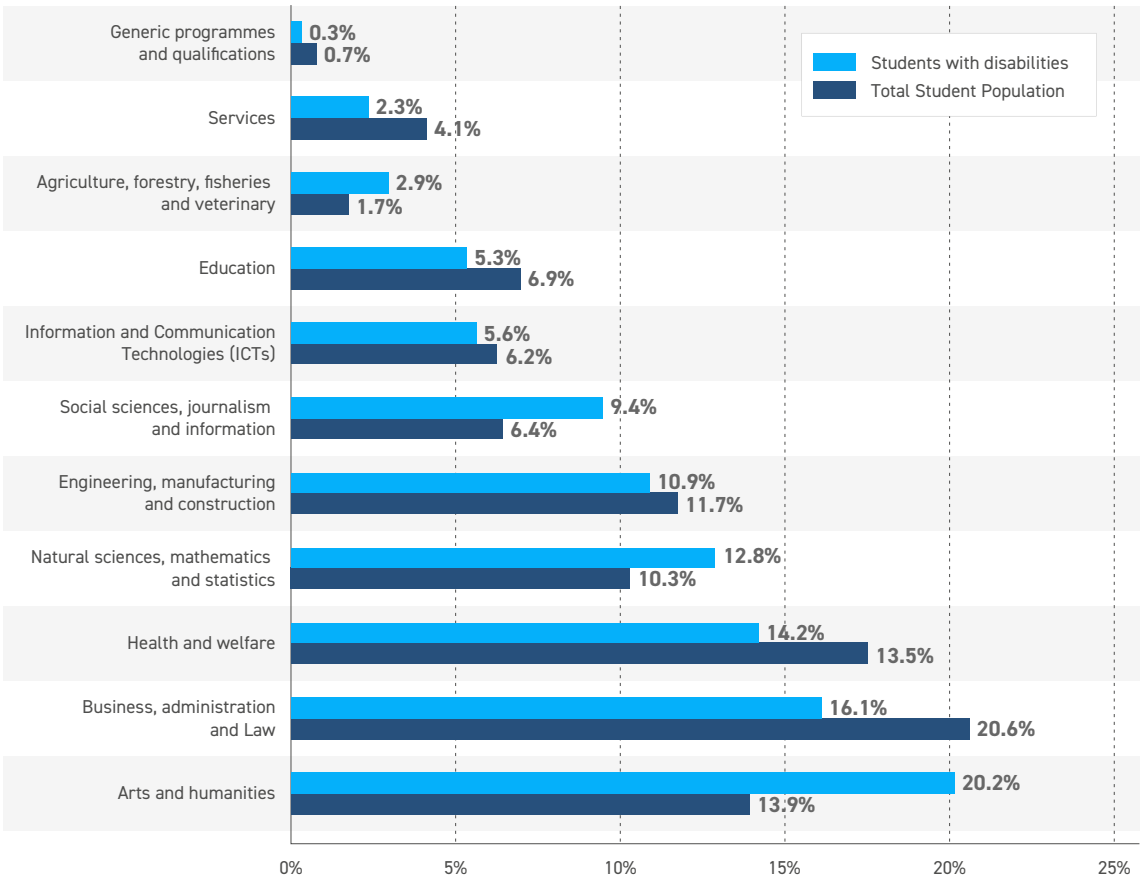


Figure 7. Participation Rates in each Field of Study. Percentage of Disabled Students Compared with Student Body 2021/22

By comparing the data from responding institutions survey with HEA published reports, fields of study that have an over or under-represented of disabled students are highlighted, (HEA, 2022a). Previous AHEAD research has demonstrated that students with disabilities are significantly over-represented in low outcome degrees, in particular Arts and Humanities, which is continuously the field of study with the highest percentage of disabled students engaging with. Arts and Humanities is the field of study with the poorest graduate outcome. After 9 months, only 48.2% of Arts and Humanities graduates were in full time employment, earning an average wage of just over €27 k per annum, (HEA, 2023b).

A detailed overview of the 2021/22 data pertaining to the participation rates of the full student body compared to the disability cohort illustrates a number of important findings. Arts and Humanities is again the field of the study with the highest number of disabled students across participating institutions. This statistic has been replicated in a number of previous participation rate reports, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022). Furthermore, it is also the field of study with the greatest disparity between the participation rate of disabled students (20.2%) compared to that of the general student body (13.9%). Other fields of study with notable disparities in favour of the disability cohort were Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics (12.8% students with disability, 10.3% general student body), Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (9.4%, 6.4%) and Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary (2.9%, 1.7%). All other fields of study demonstrated a higher rate of participation for the general student body populace.

The field of study with highest difference of participation in favour of the general student body was Business, Administration and Law which demonstrated a participation rate of 20.6% regarding the general student body compared to 16.1% of those registered with support services. Other fields of study that followed this trend were Health and Welfare (17.5% of general student body compared with 14.2% of the disability cohort), Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (11.7%, 10.9%), Information and Communications Technologies (6.2%, 5.6%), Education (6.9%, 5.3%), Services (4.1%, 2.3%) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.7%, 0.3%).

Fields of Study with the smallest percentage point difference between the general student body and the students registered with disability supports were Information and Communication Technologies (6.2% of all students compared with 5.6% of students registered with supports), Education (6.9% of all students compared with 5.3% of students registered with supports) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.7% of all students compared 0.3% of those registered with supports).

The fields of study section is usually accompanied by comparison and benchmarking from preceding reports, however, due to the pivot to a methodology that now encapsulates additional disabilities, some aspects of benchmarking and comparison are not included in this Report for this year (2021/22). An analysis of the field of study section is highly relevant as it facilitates an overview of under and over representation across the various different disciplines. As discussed, the graduate outcome data pertaining to the fields of study indicates that courses with an over-representation of disabled students have the poorest graduate outcomes, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022). Considering a number of national policy documents have reiterated the importance of HE to the Irish economy (Department of Further and Higher Education, 2022; Government_of_Ireland, 2022; Higher Education Strategy Group, 2011), in particular pertaining to research, health and climate change, it is crucial that disabled students are represented in fields of study that encompass these high impact careers.

Fields of Study Breakdown by Disability

This section of the research now analyses the data from responding institutions by examining each disability category disaggregated by field of study. By again employing ISCED classifications and cross referencing by the disability categories drawn from HEA research, each category of disability is presented in an individual table, demarcated by each field of study. The percentage of all disabled students enrolled in this field of study, the percentage of all enrolled in this field of study (drawn from HEA data), the number of students who have disclosed this disability to their institution's DSS and are engaged with this field of study and the percentage of students from this disability category engaged with this field of study are all recorded in the tables.

There is a brief synopsis of key points following each data table. Again, any benchmarking or comparison with the data from the 2020/21 report is omitted due to the different underlying data sets die to the inclusion of additional disabilities in this Report. Our Report for 2022/23 will return to the comparison statistics that are usually captured in this, and many other sections of the research.

48.2%

of Arts and Humanities graduates were in full time employment (after 9 months), making it the field of study with the poorest graduate outcome.

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 students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

8.4% of all SWDs are in ADD/ ADHD Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in ADD/ADHD Category Studying Field	% of Students in ADD/ADHD Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in ADD/ADHD Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.7%[6]	0.3%	3	**0.2%**[7]	6.3%
Education	6.9%	5.3%	39	**2.1%**	4.1%
Arts and humanities	13.9%	20.2%	419	**22.6%**	11.5%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.4%	9.5%	209	11.3%	12.2%
Business, administration and law	20.6%	16.1%	275	**14.9%**	9.4%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	12.8%	257	13.9%	11.1%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.2%	5.6%	140	7.6%	13.8%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	11.7%	10.1%	206	11.1%	10.5%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.7%	2.9%	39	**2.1%**	7.4%
Health and welfare	17.5%	14.2%	222	12.0%	8.7%
Services	4.1%	2.3%	42	2.3%	10.1%
Total			1,851	100.0%	

6 HEA total number of students enrolled in each field of study is available here.

7 The highest and lowest participation rates in each table have been marked with green/red backgrounds for ease of reading and interpretation.

— The two fields of study with the highest percentage of students who have identified with the ADD/ADHD disability category are Arts and Humanities (22.6%, n=419) and Business, Administration and Law (14.9%, n=275).

— The two fields of study with the lowest rate for participation for this cohort are Education and Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary (both 2.1%, n=39) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.2%, n=3).

— Students registered for supports and citing ADD/ADHD as either the primary or included in additional disabilities were significantly over-represented in Arts and Humanities. 22.6% of this cohort were enrolled in this field of study, compared with 13.9% of the general student body population. Although this is consistent across all disabled students, the percentage of students who disclose ADD/ADHD was higher than the mean of all disabled students. 22.6%, n=479, compared to 20.2% of all students registered with DSS.

— The majority of other participation rate statistics were relatively consistent with the disabled student cohort. Some notable outliers include: 13.8% of students who disclosed ADD/ADHD as their primary or additional disability category were studying Information and Communication Technologies. This field of study also represented a relatively significant difference between the percentage of this cohort engaging with this field (7.6%), and the percentage of all students doing so (5.6%).

Aspergers/Autism

Table 2- Breakdown by field of study for students in the Asperger's/Autism category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

8.1% of all SWDs are in Aspergers/Autism Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Aspergers/ Autism Category Studying Field	% of Students in Aspergers/ Autism Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Aspergers/ Autism Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.7%	0.3%	3	**0.2%**	6.3%
Education	6.9%	5.3%	37	2.1%	3.8%
Arts and humanities	13.9%	20.2%	552	**31.0%**	15.1%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.4%	9.5%	166	9.3%	9.7%
Business, administration and law	20.6%	16.1%	155	8.7%	5.3%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	12.8%	298	**16.7%**	12.8%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.2%	5.6%	257	14.4%	25.4%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	11.7%	10.1%	172	9.7%	8.8%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.7%	2.9%	22	**1.2%**	4.2%
Health and welfare	17.5%	14.2%	84	4.7%	3.3%
Services	4.1%	2.3%	35	2.0%	8.4%
Total			1,781	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest rates of participation for this disability category were Arts and Humanities (31%, n=552) and Natural Sciences, Journalism and Information (16.7%, n=298).

— The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation for this cohort were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.2%, n=3) and Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary (1.2%, n=22).

— The fields of study with the biggest difference between the participation rate of students who identified with this disability category as either their primary or additional disability and the percentage of all students were Arts and Humanities (31% of students from the Aspergers/Autism cohort, 19.9% of all students) and Health and Welfare (4.7% of this cohort compared with 17.5% of all students and 14.2% of all students registered with supports services). This is demonstrative of a marked under-representation for students who identify with this disability category studying Health and Welfare.

— Business, Administration and Law (8.7% of this cohort compared with 20.6% of the all student populace) is another field of study with a notable under-representation, while Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics demonstrated a significant over-representation with 16.7% of students who have disclosed Aspergers or Autism participating in this field of study compared with 10.3% of all students and 12.8% of all disabled 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 students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

1.3% of all SWDs are in Blind/ Visually Impaired Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Blind/Visually Impaired Studying Field	% of Students in Blind/Visually Impaired Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Blind/ Visually Impaired Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.7%	0.3%	2	**0.7%**	4.2%
Education	6.9%	5.3%	14	4.8%	1.5%
Arts and humanities	13.9%	20.2%	58	**20.1%**	1.6%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.4%	9.5%	23	8.0%	1.3%
Business, administration and law	20.6%	16.1%	57	**19.7%**	2.0%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	12.8%	42	14.5%	1.8%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.2%	5.6%	22	7.6%	2.2%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	11.7%	10.1%	20	6.9%	1.0%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.7%	2.9%	5	**1.7%**	0.9%
Health and welfare	17.5%	14.2%	39	13.5%	1.5%
Services	4.1%	2.3%	7	2.4%	1.7%
Total			289	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation from the Blind/Visually Impaired cohort were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.7%, n=2) and Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary (1.7%, n=5).

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation for this cohort were Arts and Humanities (20.1%, n=58) and Business, Administration and Law (19.75, n=57).

— 11.7% of the student body are enrolled with courses from the Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction field of study. However, only 6.9% of students in this disability category are engaged with this field of study, 1% of students registered with support services in their institution.

— 14.5% of disabled students are studying in the field of Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics, compared with 10.3% of all students, demonstrative of a relatively notable over-representation of students from this category of disability studying this field of study.

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 students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

2.3% of all SWDs are in Deaf/ Hard of Hearing Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Deaf/Hard of Hearing Category Studying Field	% of Students in Deaf/Hard of Hearing Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Deaf/Hard of Hearing Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.7%	0.3%	1	**0.2%**	2.1%
Education	6.9%	5.3%	27	5.3%	2.8%
Arts and humanities	13.9%	20.2%	99	**19.6%**	2.7%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.4%	9.5%	43	8.5%	2.5%
Business, administration and law	20.6%	16.1%	98	**19.4%**	3.4%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	12.8%	61	12.1%	2.6%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.2%	5.6%	25	5.0%	2.5%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	11.7%	10.1%	58	11.5%	3.0%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.7%	2.9%	14	2.8%	2.7%
Health and welfare	17.5%	14.2%	74	14.7%	2.9%
Services	4.1%	2.3%	5	**1.0%**	1.2%
Total			505	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest percentage of students registered as deaf/hard of hearing were Arts and Humanities (19.6%, n=99) and Business, Administration and Law (19.4%, n=98).

— The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation by students from the Deaf/Hard of Hearing category were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.2%, n=1) and Services (1%, n=5).

— The percentage of total students enrolled in the various fields of study are relatively consistent with the percentage of students registered with services who identify with this disability category (apart from Arts and Humanities, which echoes all disability categories with a significant disparity between the participation rates for both cohorts). In this case 19.6% (n=99) of students from the Deaf/Hard of Hearing cohort are enrolled with Arts and Humanities, compared with 13.9% of all students.

— Other disparities include Services (4.1% of all students, compared with 1% (n=5) of students from this category of disability and Education (6.9% of all students compared with 5.3% of students who are registered as Deaf/Hard of Hearing).

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 students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

7.3% of all SWDs are in DCD - Dyspraxia Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in DCD - Dyspraxia Studying Field	% of Students in DCD - Dyspraxia Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in DCD - Dyspraxia Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.7%	0.3%	3	**0.2%**	6.3%
Education	6.9%	5.3%	51	3.2%	5.3%
Arts and humanities	13.9%	20.2%	361	**22.6%**	9.9%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.4%	9.5%	166	10.4%	9.7%
Business, administration and law	20.6%	16.1%	308	**19.3%**	10.6%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	12.8%	188	11.8%	8.1%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.2%	5.6%	130	8.1%	12.9%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	11.7%	10.1%	171	10.7%	8.7%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.7%	2.9%	39	**2.4%**	7.4%
Health and welfare	17.5%	14.2%	122	7.6%	4.8%
Services	4.1%	2.3%	59	3.7%	14.1%
Total			1,598	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest percentage of students from this disability category were Arts and Humanities (22.6%, n=361) and Business, Administration and Law (19.3%, n=308).

— The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation for this disability category were Generic Programmes and Qualification (0.2%, n=3) and Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary (2.4%, n=39).

— 6.4% of all students are enrolled with courses included in the Social Sciences, Journalism and Information field. However, 9.5% of all disabled students are enrolled in this field and 10.4% of all students who identify with the DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia disability category engage with this field of study, demonstrative of a marked over-representation.

— Education is a field of study with a notable under-representation of students from this cohort and students with disabilities in general. 6.9% of all students are enrolled in programmes in the education field of study. However, although 5.3% of all students registered with support services being enrolled in this field, just 3.2% of students who are registered and identify with this disability category engage with Education.

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 students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

17.8% of all SWDs are in Mental Health Condition Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Mental Health Condition Category Studying Field	% of Students in Mental Health Condition Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Mental Health Condition Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.7%	0.3%	19	**0.5%**	39.6%
Education	6.9%	5.3%	158	4.0%	16.4%
Arts and humanities	13.9%	20.2%	1031	**26.2%**	28.3%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.4%	9.5%	507	12.9%	29.7%
Business, administration and law	20.6%	16.1%	480	12.2%	16.5%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	12.8%	571	14.5%	24.6%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.2%	5.6%	201	5.1%	19.9%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	11.7%	10.1%	207	5.3%	10.6%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.7%	2.9%	83	2.1%	15.7%
Health and welfare	17.5%	14.2%	610	**15.5%**	23.8%
Services	4.1%	2.3%	64	**1.6%**	15.3%
Total			3,931	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation for this disability category were Arts and Humanities (26.2%, n=1031) and Health and Welfare (15.5%, n=610).

— The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.5%, n=19) and Services (1.6%, n=64).

— Although Arts and Humanities are over-represented across all disability categories, the difference in those from the all student cohort and the disability cohort is particularly pronounced in the statistics pertaining to Mental Health Condition. 26.2% (n=1031) of students who identify with this disability category are enrolled with courses in the Arts and Humanities, compared to 13.9% of the general student body. another field of study that demonstrates a significant over-representation is Social Sciences, Journalism and Information. 6.4% of all students are enrolled in these courses, compared to 12.9% (n=507) of students from the Mental Health Condition Category.

— 5.3% (n=207) of students who identify with this disability category are enrolled with courses from the Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction field of study, compared with 11.7% of all students, representative of a notable under-representation in this field of study for this cohort.

Neurological/Speech and Language

Table 7 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Neurological/Speech and Language category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

4.9% of all SWDs are in Neurological/Speech and Language Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Neurological/ Speech and Language Studying Field	% of Students in Neurological/ Speech and Language Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Neurological/ Speech and Language Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.7%	0.3%	5	**0.4%**	10.4%
Education	6.9%	5.3%	59	4.9%	6.1%
Arts and humanities	13.9%	20.2%	257	**21.5%**	7.1%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.4%	9.5%	108	9.0%	6.3%
Business, administration and law	20.6%	16.1%	188	**15.7%**	6.5%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	12.8%	156	13.1%	6.7%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.2%	5.6%	55	4.6%	5.4%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	11.7%	10.1%	128	10.7%	6.5%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.7%	2.9%	34	2.8%	6.5%
Health and welfare	17.5%	14.2%	172	14.4%	6.7%
Services	4.1%	2.3%	33	**2.8%**	7.9%
Total			1,195	100.0%	

— The fields of the study with highest rate of participation for this disability cohort were Arts and Humanities (21.5%, n=257) and Business Administration and Law (15.7%, n=188).

— The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation for this disability cohort were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.4%, n=5) and Services (2.8%, n=33).

— The fields of study with notable over-representations for students from this cohort were Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics (13.1% of this cohort, 10.3% of total student population), Social Sciences, Journalism and information (9% of this cohort, 6.4% of all students) and Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary (2.8% of this cohort, 1.7% of all students).[8]

— The fields of study that were demonstrative of under-representations were Education (4.9% of this cohort, 6.9% of all students) and Business, Administration and Law (20.6% of all students, 15.7% of this cohort of students).

8 Arts and Humanities excluded from the over-representation data as it is a field of study that is significantly over-represented for ALL disabled 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 students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

11.3% of all SWDs are in Significant Ongoing Illness Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Significant Ongoing Illness Category Studying Field	% of Students in Significant Ongoing Illness Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Significant Ongoing Illness Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.7%	0.3%	4	**0.2%**	8.3%
Education	6.9%	5.3%	172	7.5%	17.9%
Arts and humanities	13.9%	20.2%	414	**18.1%**	11.4%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.4%	9.5%	203	8.9%	11.9%
Business, administration and law	20.6%	16.1%	394	**17.3%**	13.5%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	12.8%	353	15.5%	15.2%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.2%	5.6%	96	4.2%	9.5%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	11.7%	10.1%	182	8.0%	9.3%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.7%	2.9%	49	2.1%	9.3%
Health and welfare	17.5%	14.2%	376	16.5%	14.7%
Services	4.1%	2.3%	41	1.8%	9.8%
Total			2,284	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Arts and Humanities (18.1%, n=414) and Business, Administration and Law (17.3%, n=394).

— The fields of study with the lowest rates of participation for this cohort were Services (1.8%, n=41) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications 0.2%, n=4).

— Over-representations of students from this disability category were demonstrated in Social Sciences Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics (15.5% of this cohort, 10.3% of all students) and Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (8.9% of this cohort, 6.4% of all students).

Physical Disability

Table 9 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Physical Disability category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

5.1% of all SWDs are in Physical Disability Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Physical Disability Studying Field	% of Students in Physical Disability Category Studying Field
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.7%	0.3%	6	**0.5%**
Education	6.9%	5.3%	73	6.5%
Arts and humanities	13.9%	20.2%	217	**19.3%**
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.4%	9.5%	107	9.5%
Business, administration and law	20.6%	16.1%	185	**16.5%**
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	12.8%	155	13.8%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.2%	5.6%	69	6.1%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	11.7%	10.1%	67	6.0%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.7%	2.9%	39	3.5%
Health and welfare	17.5%	14.2%	179	16.0%
Services	4.1%	2.3%	25	**2.2%**
Total			1,122	100.0%

— The fields of study with the highest rates of participation for the physical disability cohort were Arts and Humanities (19.3%, n=217) and Business, Administration and Law (16.5%, n=185).

— The fields of study wit the lowest rate of participation were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.5%, n=6) and Services 2.2%, n=25).

— The fields of study that demonstrated notable over-representations were Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (9.5% of this cohort, 6.4% of all students) and Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics 13.8% of this cohort, 10.3% of all students).

— Under-representations in fields of study for this disability cohort included Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (6% of this disability cohort, 11.7% of all students) and Services (2.2% of this cohort, 4.1% of all students).

— The remaining fields of study were relatively consistent when the participation rates for this cohort were compared with the those from all students enrolled in these disciplines.

Specific Learning Difficulty

Table 10 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Specific Learning Difficulty Category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

32.8% of all SWDs are in Specific Learning Difficulty Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Specific Learning Difficulty Category Studying Field	% of Students in Specific Learning Difficulty Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Specific Learning Difficulty Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.7%	0.3%	14	**0.2%**	29.2%
Education	6.9%	5.3%	443	6.1%	46.0%
Arts and humanities	13.9%	20.2%	1091	15.1%	29.9%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.4%	9.5%	598	8.3%	35.0%
Business, administration and law	20.6%	16.1%	1300	**18.0%**	44.7%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	12.8%	743	10.3%	32.0%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.2%	5.6%	288	4.0%	28.5%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	11.7%	10.1%	1131	**15.7%**	57.8%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.7%	2.9%	297	4.1%	56.4%
Health and welfare	17.5%	14.2%	1059	14.7%	41.4%
Services	4.1%	2.3%	240	**3.3%**	57.6%
Total			7,204	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Business, Administration and Law (18%, n=1,300) and Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (15.7%, n=1,131).

— The fields of study with the lowest rates of participation for this cohort were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.2%, n=14) and Services (3.3%, n=240).

— The Specific Learning Difficulty Category is the only category of disability that does not include Arts and Humanities as the field of study with the highest rate of participation. Moreover, the over-representation is relatively small (15.1% of this cohort, 13.9% of all students) when compared with all other disability categories.

— There is a significant over-representation of this cohort in the Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary field of study (4.1% of this cohort, 1.7% of all students) and less significantly in Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (8.3% of this cohort and 6.4% of all students).

— Business, Administration and Law (18% of this cohort, 20.6% of all students) and Information and Communication Technologies (4% of this cohort and 6.2% of all students) are two fields of study that exhibit under-representations in the participation rates for this disability category.

— All of the remaining fields of study exhibit similar participation rates for this cohort and the general student population.

Other

Table 11 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Other category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities and for the student population in general.

1.1% of all SWDs are in Other Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Other Studying Field	% of Students in Other Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Other Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.7%	0.3%	6	**2.5%**	12.5%
Education	6.9%	5.3%	9	**3.8%**	0.9%
Arts and humanities	13.9%	20.2%	20	8.5%	0.5%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.4%	9.5%	19	8.1%	1.1%
Business, administration and law	20.6%	16.1%	30	12.7%	1.0%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	12.8%	25	10.6%	1.1%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.2%	5.6%	14	5.9%	1.4%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	11.7%	10.1%	54	**22.9%**	2.8%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.7%	2.9%	12	5.1%	2.3%
Health and welfare	17.5%	14.2%	36	**15.3%**	1.4%
Services	4.1%	2.3%	11	4.7%	2.6%
Total			236	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation for the Other cohort were Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (22.9%, n=54) and Health and Welfare (15.3%, n=36).

— The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation for this cohort were Education (3.8%, n=9) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (2.5%, n=6).

88%

of students who reported DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia were in receipt of exam accommodations, the disability category with the highest percentage

Examination Accommodations

As a point of departure, this section of the research now examines the provision or exam accommodations and supports for disabled students across responding institutions. The format of the traditional, end of term, one off, closed book exam, as the central indicator of a student's progression in HE, is currently being discussed by key stakeholders from the sector. AHEAD research indicates that many students are now beginning to question the equity of this exam format, (AHEAD, 2020b, 2021a, 2023). Many of these conversations are fuelled by the changes to the normative exam format that were synonymous with Covid lockdown learning, some which incorporated choice, open book formats, and more continuous assessment. In our analysis of the narratives and experiences of students who engaged with HE during this period, 89% of research participants stated that they would prefer to have choice in how they are assessed, with 87% postulating that choice of assessment would advance a "fairer" system of evaluating student's understanding of a module, (AHEAD, 2023).

For some students, often those who identified with certain categories of disability, the move away from end of term, memory based exams enabled them to prosper like never before in their studies, and some achieved higher grades that ever before as a result, (AHEAD, 2021a). Research from the IUA also stipulated that just 19% of the entire student body stated end of term exams were their preferred mode of assessment, with the majority citing a preference for more continuous assessment, (IUA, 2021).

Furthermore, QQI, the principal stakeholders pertaining to academic standards and integrity in tertiary education in Ireland have explicated that "The preponderance of the end-of-semester two- to three-hour written examination is under the magnifying glass now", (QQI, 2021, p. 1). However, despite this, and further literature that elucidated that accommodations were often ineffective in providing equity of opportunity for disabled students in exams, (Brett, 2016; Kilpatrick et al., 2017), end of term exams are returning as the dominant mode of measuring academic success, (AHEAD, 2023). Moreover, just 60% of research participants in AHEAD research that analysed post lockdown learning practices were satisfied with the exam supports and accommodations that were recommended by supports staff, (Ibid.).

This section of the research also differentiates from the 2020/21 Participation Rate report in that it now, like the majority of the research includes additional disabilities, while the number of accommodations has been updated to reflect some accommodation that were not included in prior reports, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022). It should be noted that these changes to the format of this Report were developed in conjunction with DSS from responding institutions.

Responding institutions identified a total of 14,499 students who were in receipt of at least 1 exam accommodation, representative of 80.1% of all students registered with supports in their HEI. This is demonstrative of a 5.8% decrease in the rate of participation when compared with 2020/21 data. However, it must be noted that this data (from 2020/21) only encompassed recommended accommodations as opposed to those that were implemented, due to the pre-discussed, enforced changes that were perpetuated by COVID for these exams.

Examination Accommodations by Category of Disability

This section of the research uses primary and additional disability to elicit a more accurate breakdown of examination accommodations by category of disability. Previous reports were informed by primary disability only, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022). Figure 8 illustrates the percentage of students registered with supports who have disclosed each category of disability when engaging with support services.

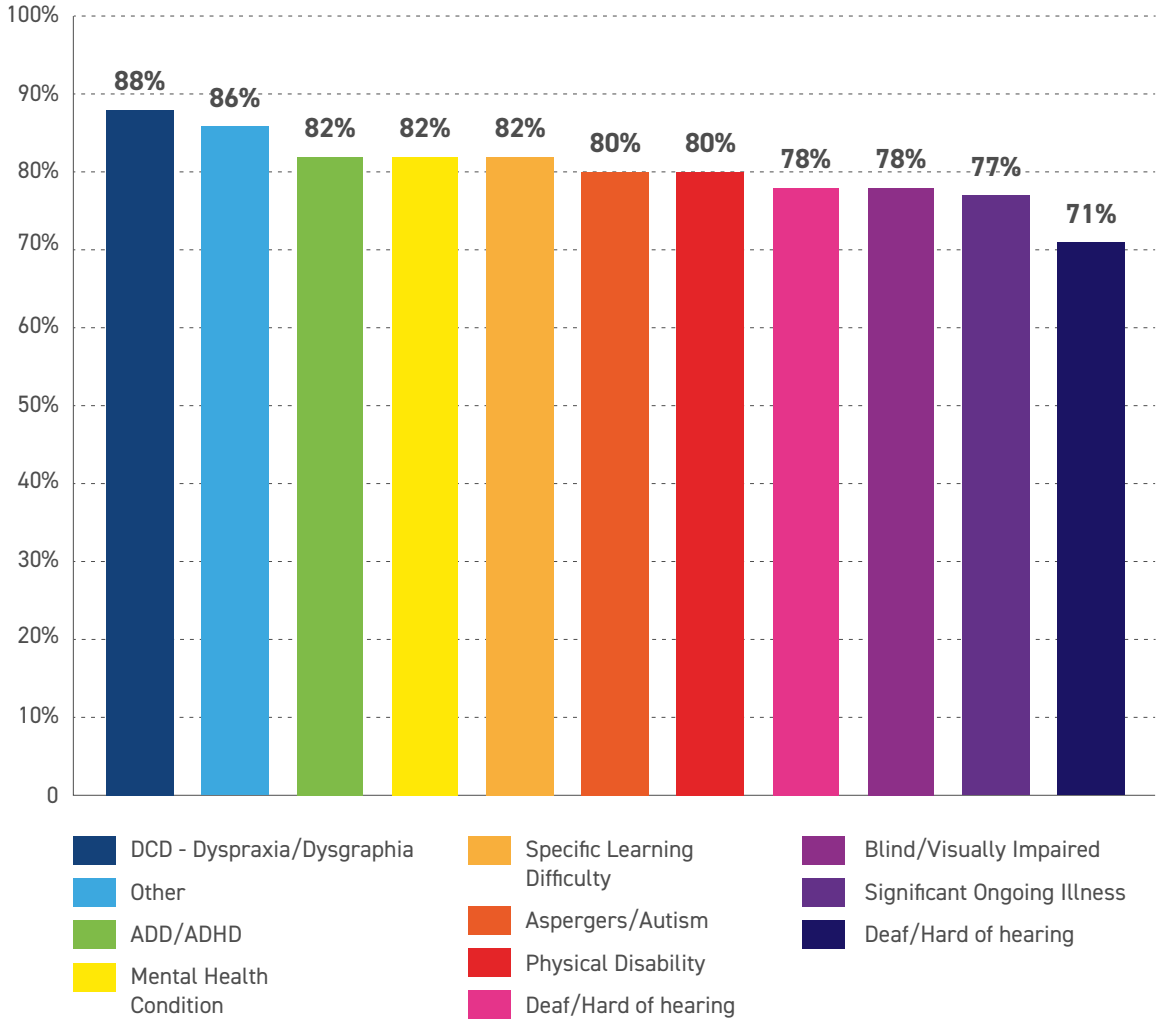


Figure 8. Breakdown of Exam Accommodations recommended by % of Disability Category 2021/22 (Primary and Additional Disabilities)

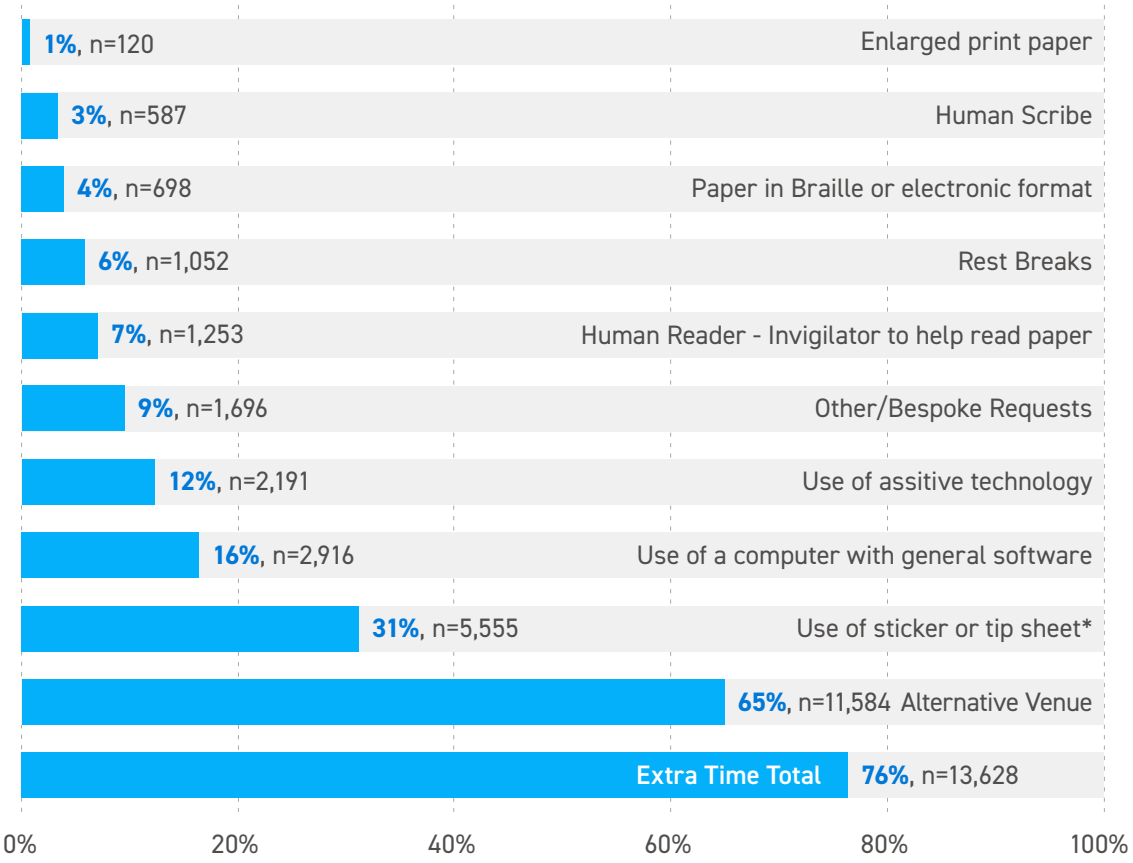
The disability categories with the highest percentage of students in receipt of accommodations were DCD-Dyspraxia, Dysgraphia (88%, n=15,198), Other (86%, n=236) and three categories ant 82%: Specific Learning Difficulty (n=7204), Mental Health Condition (n=3919) and ADD/ADHD (n=1851). The disability categories with the lowest percentage rates of students in receipt of exam accommodations were Deaf/ Hard of Hearing (71%, n=505), Significant Ongoing Illness (78%, n=2284) and Blind Visually Impaired (n=225) and Neurological/Speech and Language (n=1195) both 78% of all students registered with supports on account of these disabilities.

The remaining disability categories included Aspergers/Autism (80%, n=1780) and Physical Disability (80%, n=1122).

Examination Accommodation by Type

Responding institutions were asked to provide data regarding the type of exam accommodations that were approved for students registered with support services in their respective HEI. As discussed, this Report updated the list of accommodations that respondents could choose from when compared with previous reports, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022). This enabled a more accurate overview of examination accommodations, considering an array of 'new' accommodations have now become more frequently approved across responding HEIs. The following list of accommodations were included in the survey distributed to HEIs for the 2021/22 Report: Extra Time (included as one accommodation, as opposed to previous reports when this was further disaggregated by separate, distinct time periods), Alternative Venue (again, included as one accommodation as opposed to including the different variations of alternative venues), 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 requests (name).

The data collected from responding institutions for the report for the academic year 2020/21 was problematic to interpret as the majority of respondents were unable to provide a breakdown of accommodations that were actually implemented. Although most HEI's support services had approved a range of accommodations, the change to the exam format for some students due to COVID meant that many were not implemented. As such, despite the surveys enabling an accurate overview of granted accommodations, the move away from end of year exams frequently negated the need for students to avail of the accommodations for exams that had been approved by DSS for 2020/21.



*Use of sticker or tip sheet to refer examiners to marking guidelines for students with a Specific Learning Difficulty or who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

Figure 9. Breakdown of examination recommended accommodations by students with disabilities in 2021/22.

Figure 9 illustrates the percentage of students who were engaged with supports who were in approved each of the available accommodations. The most common accommodation was the different variations of extra time per hour for the duration of the exam. The variations available were an extra 5 minutes per hour, an extra 10 minutes per hour, an extra 15 minutes per hour, an extra 20 minutes per hour and those who were approved over 20 minutes per hour. Unlike the data collated from the 2020/21 surveys, the data pertaining to how much extra time allocated to students was not collected. Rather, responding surveys had the option of extra time only.

Responding institutions reported that 76% (n=13628) of students registered with support services were allocated extra time for their exams. 65% (n=11584) of this cohort were approved to sit their examinations in an alternative venue, 31% (n=5555) of disabled students were approved the use of a sticker or tip sheet to refer examiners to marking guidelines for students with a specific learning difficulty, 16% (n=2916) of this cohort were reported to be approved the use of a computer with general software, 12% (n=2191) were proved the use of assistive technology, 9% (n=1696) of this cohort were approved bespoke or "other requests" (i.e., those not included in the survey examples), 7% (n=1253) were approved a human reader to assist in reading exam papers, 6% (n=1052) were allocated rest breaks during exams, 4% (n=698) were approved paper in braille or electronic format, 3% (n=587) were accommodated through the use of a human scribe and finally, 1% (n=120) were permitted to use enlarged print paper during their exams.

The advantages of exam accommodations are currently being discussed across a broad range of academic literature. Some accommodations, for example those that allow students with disabilities to sit their exams in alternative venues, frequently magnify exclusion for these students, (Hanafin et al., 2007). Indeed, the efficacy of the exam accommodation in advancing equitable environments for disabled students has been disputed across the existing body of international academic literature, (Brett, 2016; Kilpatrick et al., 2017). As such, despite accommodations often playing a positive role in retention and progression (Kilpatrick et al., 2017), it should be noted that the high percentage of students in receipt of accommodations is arguably not sustainable, a key factor that promotes the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in HE, (Healy et al., forthcoming) and underpins the logic for rethinking assessment. Although UDL will not eliminate the need and use of accommodations, multiple means for demonstrating the student's learning reduces the need for accommodations. Choice of assessment of continuous assessment also reduces this need. Moreover, just 60% of disabled students were satisfied with the exam supports recommended by the DSS in their institutions, (AHEAD, 2023).

Inside Services

This section of the research now examines the number of support staff available to assist disabled students as they navigate their studies through HE. This is elicited from the survey submitted by responding institutions and previous AHEAD participation rate reports have demonstrated a significant under-representation of DSS in responding institutions, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022). This issue becomes particularly important in light of the exponential and continual increase in disabled students engaging with HE over the last 13 years, (AHEAD, 2022), an perennial increase that exhibits no signs of slowing down.

Drawing from the data submitted by responding institutions, we were able to calculate the number of students per support worker[9], including learning support officer, disability support service staff member and disability support staff member (disability and learning support combined). Our calculations demonstrated that there were 458 students per learning support staff member (Figure 14), 189 per disability support staff support service staff member (Figure 13) and 134 disabled students per support staff member (a combination of disability and learning support staff members) for the academic year 2021/22 (Figure 15).

9 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 weekn 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.

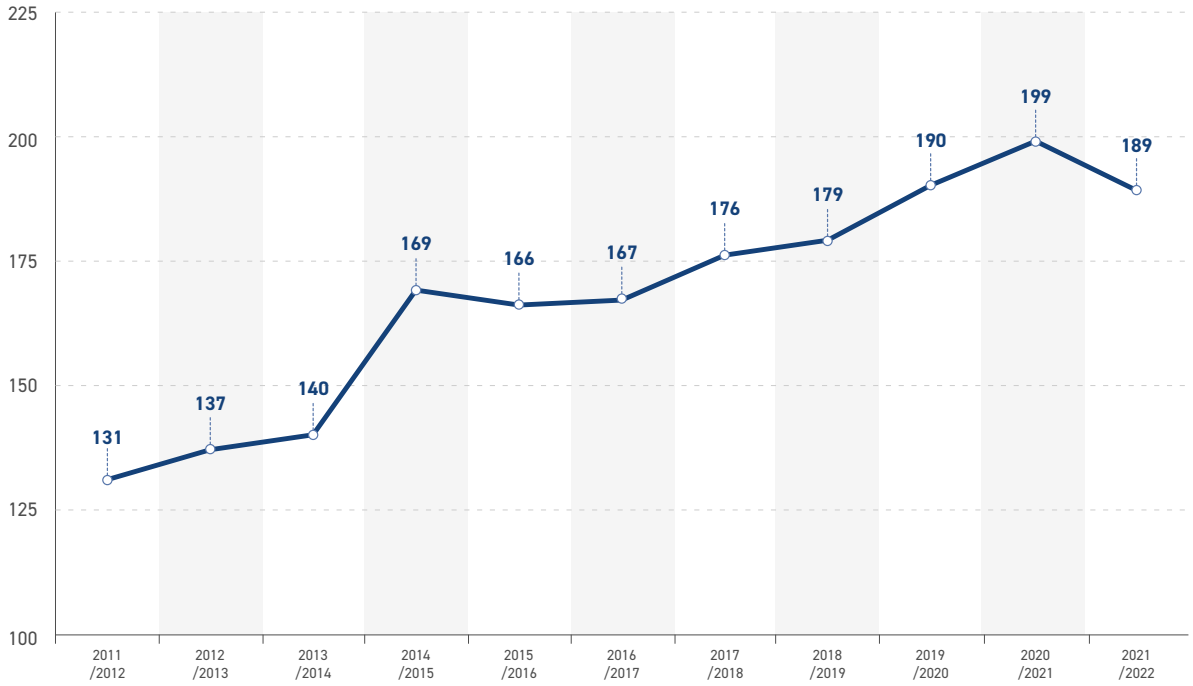


Figure 10. Numbers of Students with Disabilities Per Disability Support Staff Member 2011/12 - 2021/22

Figure 10 illustrates that responding HEIs reported that there were 189 disabled students per DSS members for the academic year 2021/22, representative of a 5% decrease relative to the statistics from 2020/21. From a longer term overview, the number of students per DSS member has increased by 44.3% (n=58) since 2011/12.

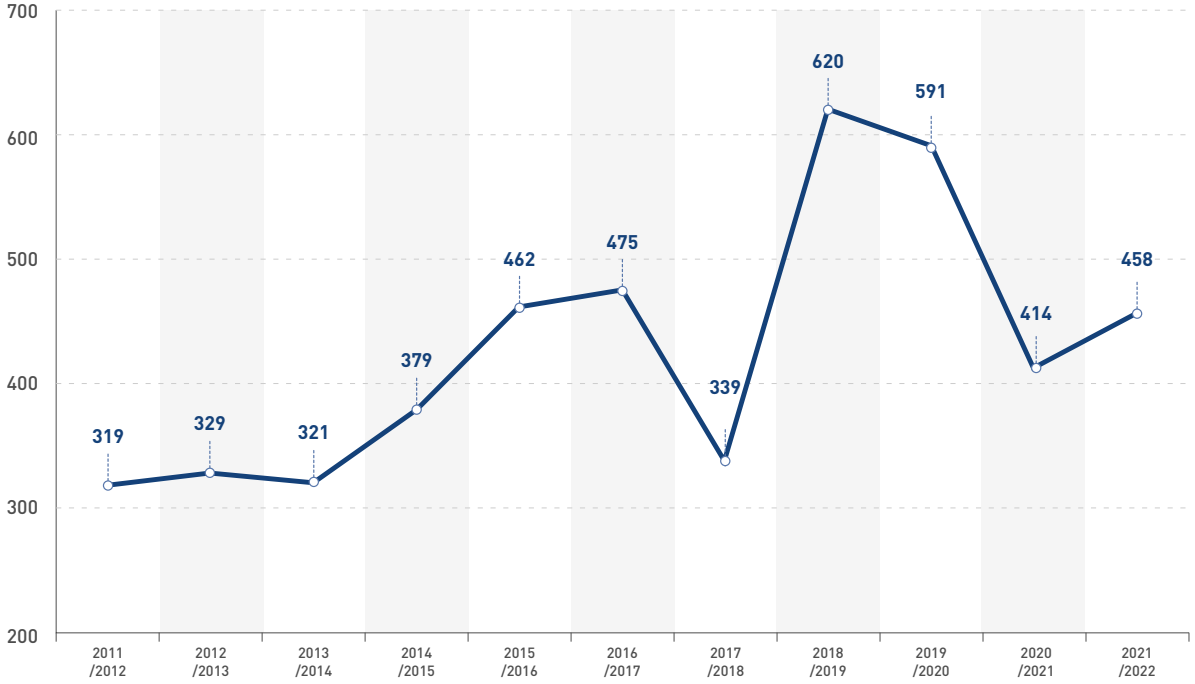


Figure 11. Students per Learning Support Staff Members, 2011/12 to 2021/22

Figure 11 demonstrates the number of students registered with support services per learning support staff members from 2011/12 until 2021/22. Respondents reported that for the academic year 2021/22, there were 458 disabled students per learning support staff member, demonstrative of a 10.6% increase (n=44) when compared with data from 2020/21. Over the longer term, this represented a 43.6% (n=139) increase relative to data from 2011/12.

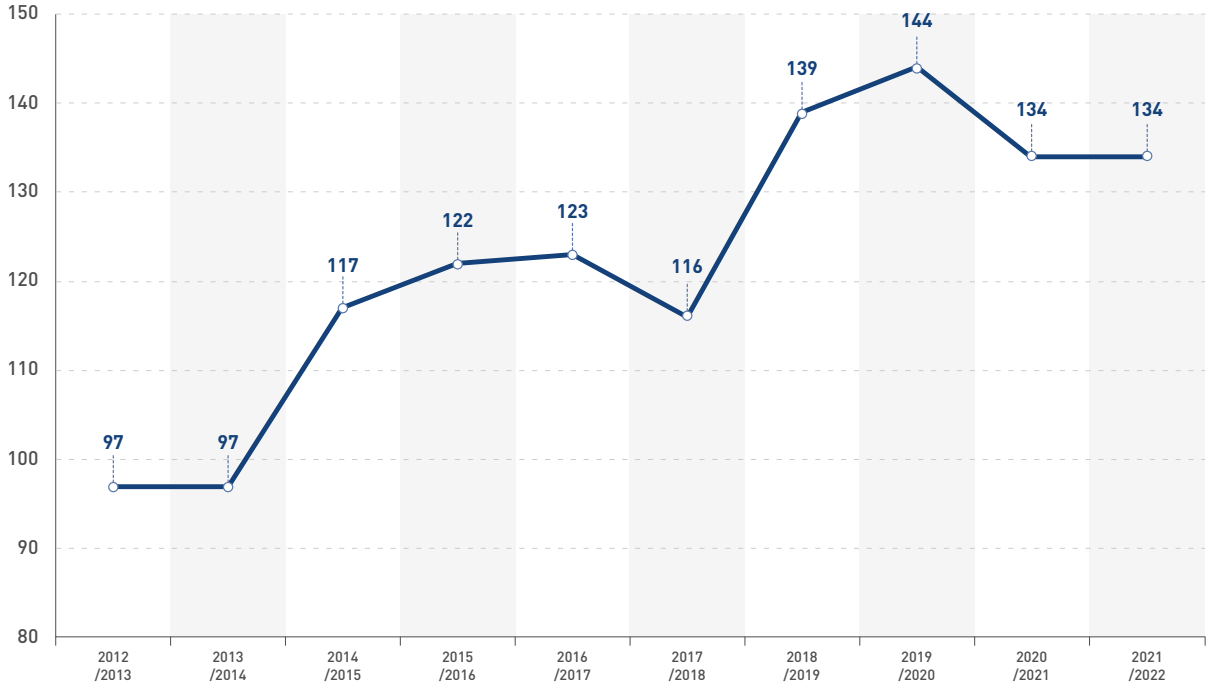


Figure 12. Students per Support Staff Member – Total 2011/12 to 2021/22

Figure 12 shows the number of students with disabilities per support staff member (learning support staff and disability support staff combined). The data elicited from responding HEIs for the academic year 2021/22 demonstrates that the number of students per support staff member has remained the same as 2020/21, 134. This is representative of a 44.1% (n=41) increase since the academic year 2011/12.

Although two of the three graphs indicate an increase in the ratio of support staff to student, and the other remaining constant, all illustrate significantly under-staffed support services across responding HEIs. Understaffing obviously precipitates over-burdened and under-resourced services, which is magnified by the pre-discusses perennially increasing number of disabled students accessing HE. Competent supports have obvious ramifications on the performance of disabled students and also play a role in retention and well-being for this cohort, (Kilpatrick et al., 2017). Under-resourced support services are unlikely to retain the time and ability to oversee cogent assessment of needs and provision of accommodations. This is not a critique of support services, rather it is imperative that stakeholders respond to these statistics with adequate actions. Exam accommodations are crucial for equity of opportunity for disabled opportunities, (O'Neill, 2017; O'Neill & Maguire, 2019). Their very purpose is to empower disabled students to engage with their exams without disadvantage. To this end, they are enshrined in international equality legislative instruments (UN CRPD) and also elements of domestic mechanisms. The Public Sector Duty pertains to Article 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Act (2014). The Duty stipulates that public services should create inclusive environments for all students.

The over-burdening of supports services that has been demonstrated above arguably underpins many of the finding of AHEAD's analysis of the narratives and experiences of disabled students during the pandemic and in the academic year that followed (2021/22), (AHEAD, 2020b, 2021a, 2023). These reports suggested that many students were not satisfied with support services, with many postulating that their exam accommodations were not implemented by academic staff. Others were critical of the non-uniform manner in which accommodations were carried out, (Ibid.). our final report that analysed the post-lockdown environment posited that 40% of students were not satisfied with the exam supports they were recommended, (AHEAD, 2023). The under-resourcing of supports sheds a different light on these findings.

On the Ground-Opinion

Despite these Participation Reports being predominantly quantitative evaluations of disability category, fields of study etc., the final section is informed by qualitative data collated from responding institution's support staff members. The final question of the survey (Q.13) asked responding DSS to comment on two questions of statements. Although previous iterations of the "On the Ground" section always consist of two or three qualitative interactions, the questions are obviously different in every year's survey. The questions are usually informed by the key themes from the prior academic year. It should also be noted that this part of the survey is optional and responding DSS can decline to contribute qualitative data.

The questions included in the 2021/22 Report were (A) Does your institution/ service have a structured approach to evaluate the work/impact of the disability support services? and (B) Does the Disability/access office have any processes in place to monitor the implementation of supports approved/recommended in needs assessments? Both questions ask participating staff to anonymously discuss oversight and accountability concerning the service they and their colleagues provide.

8 institutions did not comment on either question, with the others all engaging with at least one question (A or B). The rationale that underpins the questions is prompted by research we have carried out throughout the year and anecdotal evidence that often emerges from our Student Advisory Group, which we co-facilitate with the USI (Union of Students in Ireland). The performance and efficacy of support services have all been alluded to in current AHEAD research (AHEAD, 2023). With a significant 40% of students registered with supports postulating that they were not "satisfied" with their support services and how their supports were implemented, it was decided that the performance and oversight of supports be explored from the perspectives of responding DSS.

Question A asked if responding DSS members thought that their institution had a structured approach to evaluate the work or impact of support services.

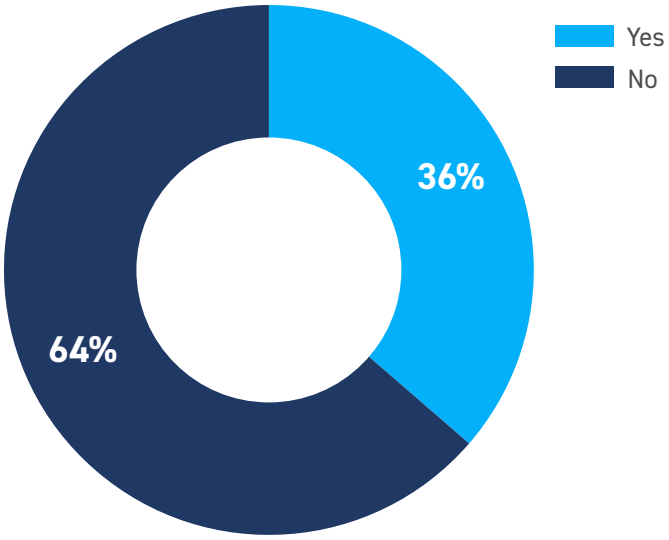


Figure 13. Does your institution/service have a structured approach to evaluate the work/impact of the disability support services.

Fig 13 illustrates that 64% (n=14) answered "no" the question "Does your institution/ service have a structured approach to evaluate the work/impact of the disability support services/", with the remaining 36% (n=8) answering "yes".

Considering that our *Learning from Home* (AHEAD, 2020b, 2021a) and *Changing Landscapes* (AHEAD, 2023) research all demonstrated that a significant percentages of students were not satisfied with how their accommodations were implemented, this data reinforces that structured oversight, evaluation and accountability should be employed by institutions to both improve and standardise the supports available to disabled students.

We were also interested in whether responding institution's DSS had any processes in place to monitor the implementation of supports approved/recommended in needs assessments?

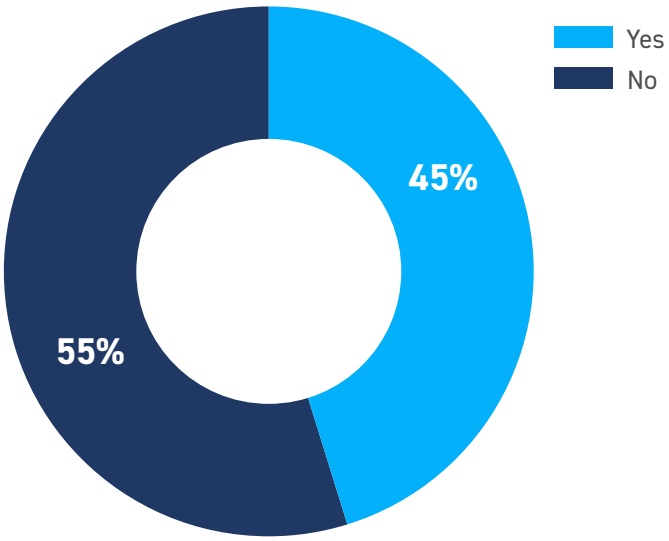


Figure 14. Does the Disability/access office have any processes in place to monitor the implementation of supports approved/recommended in needs assessments?

Figure 14 illustrates that 55% (n=12) of responding institutions answered "no" to question B, with 45% (n=12) responding "yes". Both Figures 16 and 17 potentially indicate a lack of robust and independent oversight of the work of DSS, including the implementation of supports and accommodations approved by DSS. However, with the previous section of this report highlighting over-burdened and poorly resourced support services in many responding institutions, the lack of oversight is potentially one outcome of this under-resourcing. The data that emanates from both qualitative questions epitomises some of the realities facing poorly resourced support services in a landscape of growing demand and need for support services. As part of responding to the under-staffing that is evident in support services, oversight of the implementation and efficacy of accommodations is necessary.

Selected Comments

Question A and B are somewhat related with both pertaining to lack of oversight, additional and robust processes and structured accountability regarding the performance of support services. Some of the answers submitted are mentioned here:

Regarding question 13: respondents submitted the following answers to question 13 A and B. For ease of engagement both questions are reiterated here:

13A: "Does your institution/service have a structured approach to evaluate the work/impact of the disability support services?".

13B: "Does the Disability/access office have any processes in place to monitor the implementation of supports approved/recommended in needs assessments?".

Regarding Q. 13A and B:

> *"Yes. Large data project underway for all Access Groups, including monitoring the progression and completion of students with disability. Now including research into outward movement of these students and career progression. This data does not examine the likely effect of disability support or comparison of students who avail of supports versus those who do not".*

Regarding Question 13B:

> *Yes – "current practice involves DSS staff reaching out to all students registered for disability support at the start and end of each semester to check in with students on their progress, encourage contact with the service if disability supports in place are not meeting their needs".*

Regarding Q13A:

> *"Yes – currently the Access Centre at our HEI evaluates the impact of the Disability Support Service (DSS) in terms of retention and progression for students with disabilities that register for support and access our HEI via the following pathways:*
> - *Students with disabilities that participate on pre-university Foundation Programmes*

- *Students that are HEAR and DARE Eligible*
- *Students that enter via CAO and that register with DSS*
- *Mature students*
- *FET Students*

Data is gathered at programme and college level with regard to progression and retention. Data is also collected on any students progressing to PG level."

"We are also currently evaluating the engagement of students registered with DSS on extracurricular activities in the University. Provisional data has been collected on participation on the ALIVE Certificate and the Employability award programmes".

Regarding Question 13:

"Advisors do closely monitor the impact of supports and needs assessments, but we do not evaluate or report in a structured way".

"There are informal review and monitoring processes in place but these have not yet been formalised. Students communicate with the access and disability office on an ongoing basis and are encouraged to review their LENs as needed".

"The Disability office would link in with students to see how the accommodations provided are working."

"We informally review the service through end of year student surveys and learning support staff reports".

Another responding institution answered with the following:

"While no is the answer to 'B' above, we do monitor exam results and reach out to students after each session to offer further support if required. We also complete a yearly survey."

The final respondent that answered this optional question stated:

> *"On the X Campus, students have access to a copy of their reasonable accommodations which are notified centrally to relevant parties e.g., Exams, Faculty, etc. Students are made aware at needs assessment that if they have difficulty accessing reasonable accommodation, they can contact their Service Provider for further assistance".*

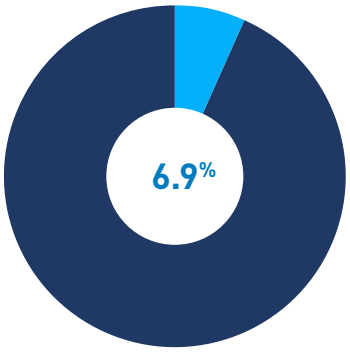
The same respondent:

> *"Students receive surveys once a semester to give feedback on the Disability Support Service supports. The DSS does not have adequate support in terms of a system or a tool to enable us to extract information, data, evaluate etc. At the moment, we are operating manually, which is problematic on many levels, especially given the high numbers of applicants. In the absence of a system, monitoring something like the implementation of supports simply isn't practical or possible. For example, the student is made aware of the supports they are entitled to, but it is up to them to request these supports such as exam supports or engage with learning support for example. As adults they are informed that they need to take charge of requesting their supports and the DSS can support them with this if they wish".*

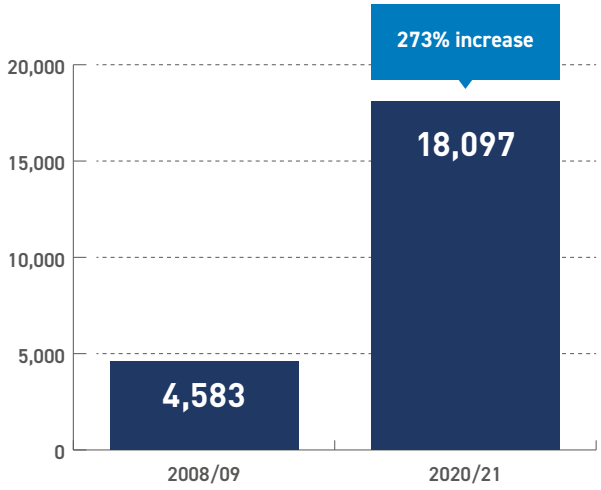
Summary

Following a detailed analysis and reporting of the data from the 23 responding institutions, we here present a summary of the key findings and contributions for the academic year 2021/22:

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



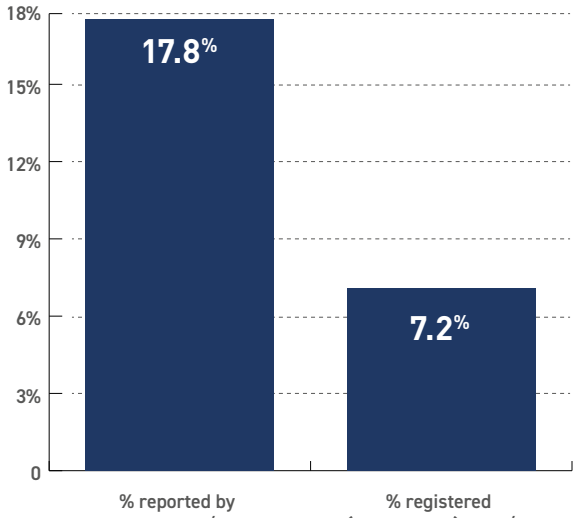
Rise in number of students with disabilities registering for support in the last 13 years



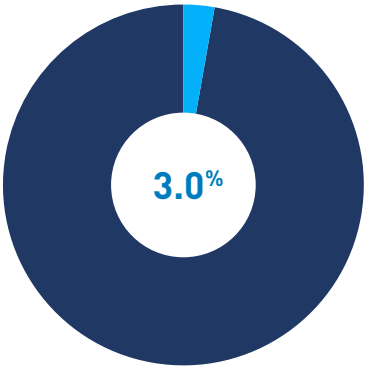
— **273% rise in number of students with disabilities registering for support in the last 13 years.** In the 2021/22 academic year, 18,097 (6.9%) of all students enrolled in HE (n=261,902) were registered with disability support services in their HEI. This is representative of a 4.5% increase in relation to last year's percentage of 6.6% (n=17,866). The 2021/22 data is representative of a 273% (n=18,097) increase in students registered with service since AHEAD began publishing this data annually for the academic year 2008/09 (n=4,583).

— **A significant percentage of new entrant students have a disability but do not disclose and register for support.** In 2021/22, data from the HEA Equal Access Survey explicates that 17.8% of the new entrant undergraduate population who responded have disclosed at least one disability through the survey. The data from this Report demonstrates that just 7.2% of the same cohort have registered with their HEI's support services. The significant disparity between the figures, despite their calculation emanated from two different underlying datasets, suggests that there is a notable number of new entrant undergraduate students who have disclosed a disability using the Equal Access Survey but are not registered with supports. AHEAD acknowledge that disclosure is a complex issue. Our Changing Landscapes research indicated that some of the barriers or factors that informed non-disclosure included fears about career prospects, stigma, and a lack of awareness of support services, (AHEAD, 2023).

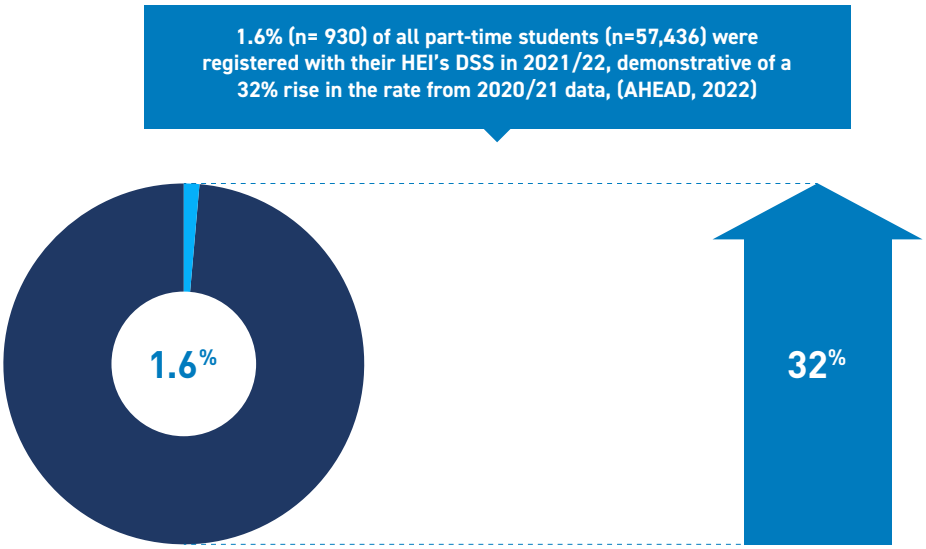
Percentage of new entrant undergraduates reported having one or more disabilities vs percentage registered with disability support services



Participation rate of postgraduate students with disabilities remains low, at 3.0% of the total postgraduate cohort.

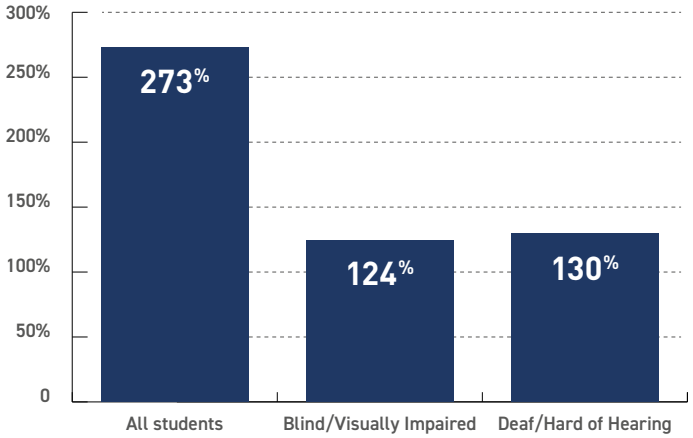


— **Postgraduate participation rate rising steadily, but students with disabilities remain significantly underrepresented in postgraduate study.** The participation rate of postgraduate students registered with disability support services remained low at 3% (n=1,901), despite increasing from 2.8% in 2020/21. The trend of a persistently a low postgraduate participation rate compared to the 8.1% (n=16,196) undergraduate participation rate for disabled students is a consistent finding in previous AHEAD reports, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022).



— **Significant increase in part-time participation rate.** In 2021/22, 8.4% (n=17,168) of full time students were registered with disability supports services, representative of a 1% increase in the rate from 2020/21 data. Responding institutions reported that 1.6% (n= 930) of all part-time students (n=57,436) were registered with their HEI's DSS in 2021/22, demonstrative of a 32% rise in the rate from 2020/21 data, (AHEAD, 2022).

— **Number of students with sensory disabilities growing at significantly slower rate than other disability categories**. As was the case with the 2020/21 report, sensory disabilities (Blind/Visually Impaired, 1.2% of all disabled students, n=289; Deaf/Hard of Hearing, 2.3% of all disabled students, n=505) were again significantly under-represented in comparison to other disability categories. When one considers that the number of disabled students registered with support services has increased by 273% in 13 years, the increase in students with sensory disabilities is substantially less. Numbers in the Blind and Visually Impaired categories have increased by 124% and Deaf/Hard of Hearing by 130% in the same time period.



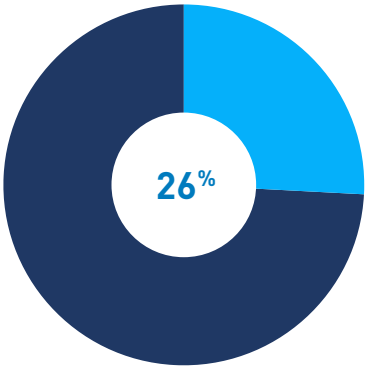
Over the past 13 years, participation rates for students in most other disability categories have increased by 273%. However, the number of students with sensory disabilities growing at significantly slower rate than other categories.

— **Participation rate of students with disabilities on apprenticeships, notably lower than at undergraduate level**. Responding HEIs recorded that there were 3724 students enrolled in craft apprenticeships in 2021/22, of which 5.6% (n=208) were registered with services. Pertaining to other 'new' or 'post 2016' apprenticeships, respondents reported that there were 853 students in this cohort, of which 2.3% (n=20) were registered with supports. Both participation rates are notably lower than that of the undergraduate population (8.1%).

— **More than 1 in 10 students registered with services not eligible for the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD)**. The 23 responding HEIs reported that 11.4% (n=2,062) of students registered for supports were not eligible for any funding from the FSD to help provide support services. A closer look at the data shows a huge range in the percentage of students registered with disability support services who are not FSD eligible, ranging from no students in some institutions, to over 27% of students registered with services in one institution. While the many potential causes for this non-eligibility are beyond the scope of this Report, it certainly warrants further analysis, considering the combination of international and national equality legislation and obligations that are linked to the provision of the relevant supports for disabled students.

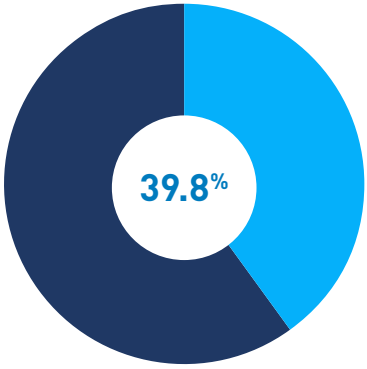
More than 1 in 10 students (11.4%) registered with services not eligible for the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).

More than a quarter (n=1,570) of new registrations with disability support services were not in their first year of study.

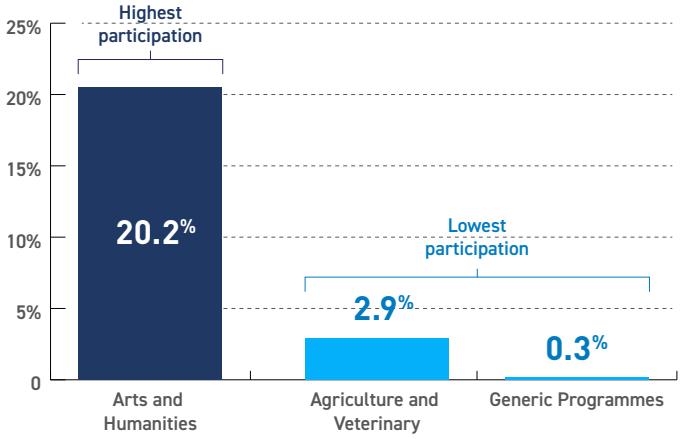


— **Approx. one quarter of new registrations with disability support services were not in their first year of study.** 1,570 of students who registered with support services for the first time, were not in their inaugural year of study. This equates to 8.7% of all students registered with supports and 26% of all new registrations. Much like disclosure, there are a number of factors that are likely linked to students not registering for supports in their initial year of study.

The most commonly reported disability category of students were those in the Specific Learning Difficulty category, at 39.8%



— **Specific Learning Difficulties remain the most common category of disability.** The most common disability category that was reported (including primary and additional disabilities) by students who were registered for supports for the academic year 2021/22 was Specific Learning Difficulty (39.8%, n=7204). This was followed by Mental Health Condition (21.7%, n=3919), Significant Ongoing Illness (12.6%, n=2284), ADD/ADHD (10.2%, n=1851), Aspergers/ Autism (9.8%, n=1640), DCD-Dyspraxia/ Dysgraphia (8.8%, n=1598), Neurological/ Speech and Language (6.6%, n=1195), Physical Disability (6.2%, n=1122), Deaf/ Hard of Hearing (2.8%, n=505) and Blind/Visually Impaired (1.6%, n=422). The category "Other" was disclosed by 1.1% (n=236) of all students registered.



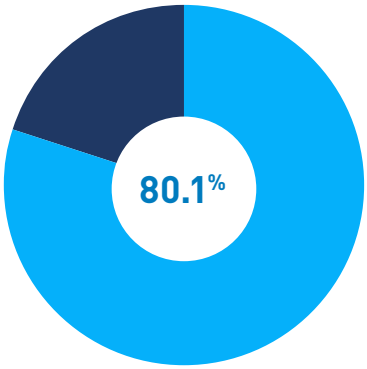
20.2% of students with disabilities were studying courses in Arts & Humanities for the 2021/22 academic year - the highest rate of participation. Agriculture and Veterinary (2.9%) and Generic Programmes (0.1%) were the two fields of study with the lowest percentage.

— **Students with disabilities significantly more likely to be enrolled on a course in the field of Arts and Humanities.** This is once again the field of the study with the highest number of disabled students across participating institutions. This statistic has been replicated in a number of previous participation rate reports, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022). Furthermore, it is also the field of study with the greatest disparity between the participation rate of disabled students (20.2%) compared to that of the general student body (13.9%). Other fields of study with notable disparities in favour of the disability cohort were Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics (12.8% students with disability, 10.3% general student body), Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (9.5%, 6.4%) and Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary (2.9%, 1.7%). All other fields of study demonstrated a higher rate of participation for the general student body populace.

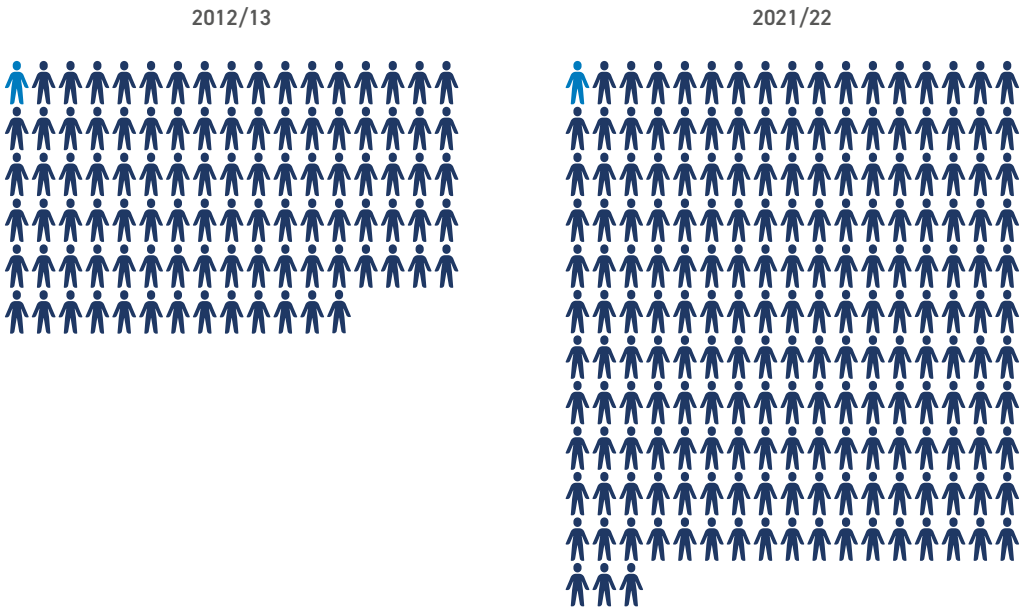
— **Disabled students less likely to be enrolled on a course in the fields of Business, Administration & Law, Health and Welfare amongst others.** The field of study with highest difference of participation in favour of the general student body was Business, Administration and Law which demonstrated a participation rate of 20.6% regarding the general student body compared to 16.1% of those registered with support services. Other fields of study that followed this trend were Health and Welfare (17.5% of general student body compared with 14.2% of the disability cohort), Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (11.7%, 10.1%), Information and Communications Technologies (6.2%, 5.6%), Education (6.9%, 5.3%), Services (4.1%, 2.3%) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.7%, 0.3%).

— **Vast majority of students with disabilities were recommended exam accommodations as part of their needs assessment.** Responding institutions identified a total of 14,499 students who were in receipt of at least 1 exam accommodation, representative of 80.1% of all students registered with supports in their HEI. This is demonstrative of a 5.6% decrease in the rate when compared with 2020/21 data. However, it must be noted that this data (from 2020/21) only encompassed recommended accommodations as opposed to those that were implemented, due to imposed changes that were necessary due to COVID for 2020/21 exams.

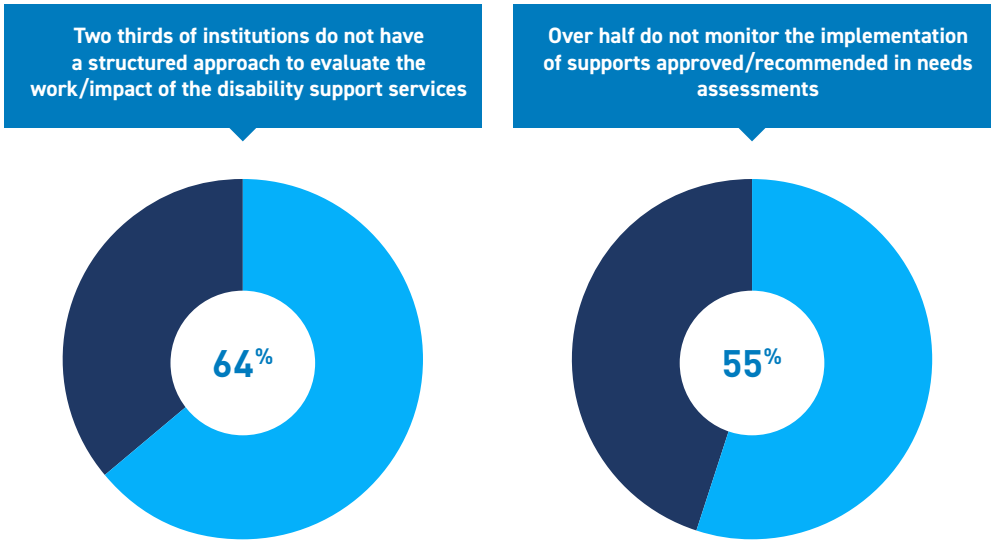
80.1% of students with disabilities were recommended one or more exam accommodations in 2021/22



In 2012/13 there was 97 students per support staff member. In 2021/22, there were 189 students with disabilities per support staff member.



— **Ratios of students to support staff remain steady year on year stalling a long-term rising trend.** Drawing from the data submitted by responding institutions, we were able to calculate the number of students per support worker, including learning support officer, disability support service staff member and disability support staff member (disability and learning support combined). Our calculations demonstrated that there were 458 students per learning support staff member, 189 per disability support staff support service staff member and a total of 134 disabled students per combined support staff member (a combination of disability and learning support staff members) for the academic year 2021/22. Considering the significant number of students who were registered for supports postulating that they were not satisfied with the quality of supports in prior AHEAD research (AHEAD, 2021a, 2023), this suggests that the ratio of support staff to students is effecting the standard of support provision and delivery.



— **Two thirds of institutions do not have a structured approach to evaluate the work/impact of the disability support services, and over half do not monitor the implementation of supports approved/recommended in needs assessments.** Two questions were asked in our survey distributed to participating HEIs, both pertaining to oversight and impact. The questions included in the 2021/22 Report were (A) Does your institution/service have a structured approach to evaluate the work/impact of the disability support services? and (B) Does the Disability/access office have any processes in place to monitor the implementation of supports approved/recommended in needs assessments? Both questions ask participating staff to anonymously discuss oversight and accountability concerning the service they and their colleagues provide. 64% (n=14) answered "no" to question A, with the remaining 36% (n=8) answering "yes". For Question B, 55% (n=12) of responding institutions answered "no", with 45% (n=12) responding "yes".

Recommendations

The recommendations that emanate from this Report are also reflective of our continuous engagement with the student body throughout the year, and a number of research projects we published (or co-published) throughout 2021-23, (AHEAD, 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2023; Healy et al., forthcoming; LINK_Network, 2022). By employing these research projects and reports alongside our role as stakeholders, members of sub-committees, Steering Groups etc. we can support monitoring of international and national rights mechanisms pertaining to disability, employment and tertiary education. These include the UNCRPD, UN Sustainable Development Goals, the Public Sector Duty (as part of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Act, Article 42) and national equality legislation in general.

In this way, it is also our objective, as per our *Strategic Plan* (AHEAD, 2019a), to examine the narratives and experiences of disabled students as they navigate tertiary education (in the case of this research, Higher Education) and discuss common barriers and enablers that help to create inclusive environments in HE and the labour market. Of particular concern in preceding reports has been the low representation of students with sensory disabilities in HE, and of disabled students in general at post graduate level. The low ratio of support staff to students also demands attention, as the quality of individualised support is inextricably linked to this ratio. Despite these and other issues being continually highlighted by our research, it is perhaps unfortunate that many of the recommendations that emerge from the 2021/22 report are similar to those mentioned in 2020/21 and previous reports. This suggests that while progression is frequently evident in many areas discussed in this Report, there is still much to do to create authentic equity in the narratives and experiences of disabled students in HE.

In line with a number of national policy documents and initiatives, including the current *National Access Plan* (HEA, 2022b) and PATH 4, AHEAD recommend that Universal Design (UD) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are promoted, supported and embedded at all levels of Higher Education in Ireland. By implementing UD and UDL, many of the most pressing issues in contemporary HE can be alleviated, (Capp, 2017; Fovet, 2020).

AHEAD is an early pioneer in promoting the UDL framework within contemporary Irish tertiary education. It is explicitly mentioned in AHEAD's *Strategic Plan as a core objective* (AHEAD, 2019a) and the findings of this Report reaffirm the pressing need for UDL as a solution focussed teaching framework that can facilitate an increasingly diverse student body (Healy et al., forthcoming). Moreover, Fovet (2020) argues that systematic UDL implementation reduces pressure on accessibility services, allows the majority of students' needs to be addressed in the classroom itself, and reduces the financial cost of accommodating the various needs of students. UDL's emphasis on inclusivity, flexibility and choice reassert its potential to empower students with disabilities and create inclusive learning environments with equity of opportunity for all students. Some of the aspects of this Report that reinforce the need for a universal design approach include:

— The changing demographics of Irish society and the student body highlight the need for a pedagogical framework that facilitates all students. can foster a learning environment in which all can prosper, including students with disabilities. With AHEAD research demonstrating that even within the disability cohort, students do not learn in a uniform manner, the adoption of UDL in all HEIs should be encouraged, (AHEAD, 2021a). The number of disabled students engaging with supports has increased by 273% in the last 13 years, with this Report illustrating that 6.9% of the current student body are registered with support services.

— Universal design reduces the need for accommodations primarily through the provision of accessible courses/environments and choice. The flexibility it offers means that students with certain needs are not inhibited by rigid structures and inflexible assessment approaches. 80.1% of disabled students from participating HEIs receive exam accommodations organised by support services which this report shows are under resourced and overburdened. The implementation of a UDL approach would arguably reduce the workloads of these services, increase the agency of students and reduce stigma induced by engaging with exam and other accommodations.

— The large numbers of undisclosed students in HE who are not registered for supports is a common theme in our research. Previous reports have identified perceived bias, stigma, a lack of medical evidence required for registration, and fear of isolation as factors for those who choose not to disclose, (AHEAD, 2023). 7.2% of new entrant undergraduates reported having at least one disability in this Report. This is compared to 17.8% of respondents to the HEA Equal Access Survey, also distributed to new entrant undergraduates. Although the underlying datasets are different, it can be safely assumed that this suggests a relatively significant percentage of students choosing not to disclose. A UD approach builds accessibility and choice into the design of courses, general student support services, the physical and digital environments, therefore reaching students who do not disclose and register for disability supports.

.

AHEAD recommend that recently launched 1-year Universal Design Fund (PATH 4, phase 1), be retained and extended to 2028 (the end of the current *Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access in Higher Education),* (HEA, 2022b), with a focus on systemic embedding of UD practice. Moreover, the HEA and DFHEIRS should consider ways to support the implementation of ALTITUDE, the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education, currently being developed by a cross-sectoral project team under the Universal Design Fund. Incentives for institutions to adopt and implement the Charter should be included in criteria for a range of existing and forthcoming funding streams, and embedded in.

Eligibility guidelines for Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) should be reviewed to reduce barriers for students accessing supports. Similarly, HEIs should review their internal criteria for registration for support services to reduce barriers to access. The provision of accommodations to disabled students is a legal obligation under the current Equal Status Act and the FSD remains a key support for institutions in meeting the obligation.

However, this Report stipulates that 11.4% (n=2062) of students registered for supports in responding HEIs were not covered by the FSD. A closer look at the data shows a huge range in the percentage of students registered with disability support services who are not FSD eligible, ranging from no students in some institutions, to over 27% of students registered with services in one institution. This suggests that some institutions only provide support to disabled students who are FSD eligible. The current FSD guidelines should be reviewed and alternative eligibility criteria and model for the allocation of funding be explored. The data pertaining to students whose supports are not financed by the FSD, alongside the significant difference between students registered for supports as new entrant undergraduate students (8.1%) and the 17.8% of the same cohort who disclosed a disability through the HEA's Equal Access Survey, and the 8.7% who did not register with supports in their inaugural year of study, suggest that there are notable barriers to accessing funded supports. This should be addressed in a review of FSD eligibility criteria and through the Strategic Performance Dialogue process between the HEA and institutions. Within the existing body of research, the cost of verifying disability, discomfort felt by students when disclosing and fears regarding stigma are existing, tangible barriers that have been discussed by students, (AHEAD, 2023; Smith et al., 2021). Particular attention should be given to relaxing the strict specific medical evidence requirements for FSD eligibility which are now out of step with requirements for accessing support in post-primary schools. It can be argued that such strict requirements perpetuate the medical model of disability and given the cost of acquiring specific evidence from a consultant, may disadvantage students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The HEA in tandem with Quality and Qualifications Ireland should consider how to promote a more structured approach to the evaluation and quality assurance of disability support services.

The qualitative section of this Report suggests that a majority of responding institutions do not have a structured approach to evaluate the work/impact of the disability support services or have processes in place to monitor the implementation of supports recommended in needs assessments. AHEAD's *Learning from Home Research* (AHEAD, 2020, 2021a) highlighted that one quarter of students with disabilities believed the recommended accommodations approved in their needs assessment report were not fully applied. Others discussed inconsistency in how accommodations were implemented by different educators. AHEAD recommend that institutions ensure adequate evaluation of the work of support services is in place. However, increased self-evaluation and quality assurance is challenging for under-resourced and over-burdened DSS. Despite the 272% increase in disabled students in HE, the corresponding increase in support staff is just 44.3% in the same time period. It is further recommended by AHEAD that institutions are supported to hire more DSS staff in line with the increase in disabled students. Only then, can the lack of oversight of accommodation implementation and impact be addressed.

Sensory disabilities include the Deaf/Hard of Hearing and Blind/Visually Impaired cohorts. Both are among the disability categories with the lowest rate of participation in recent Participation Rate reports. This should be explored by the relevant stakeholders, in the hope of identifying any latent barriers that are keeping these numbers persistently every year. Potential enablers to address this disparity should be examined to increase the participation rates of students with sensory disabilities in HE.

It is notable that sensory disabilities continue to be under represented in HE, with Blind/Visually Impaired and Deaf/Hard of Hearing being among the lowest recorded categories of disability in 2021/22 and also in our 2020/21 report, (AHEAD, 2022). The percentage of the disabled student population in the Blind/Visually Impaired cohort for 2021/22 is 1.3%, while for Deaf/Hard of Hearing it was reported to be 2.3% of all students registered with supports. Census data from the Central Statistics Office states that "deafness or a serious hearing impairment" was reported by 16.1% of all disabled people, while 8.5% identified "blindness or vision impairment" as their disability category, (CSO, 2016). Although there is an underlying caveat that sensory disabilities often manifest in later life and therefore this may not be a fully accurate frame of reference for the sample of the population who are potentially accessing HE, the notable disproportion in the statistics suggest a substantial under-representation of both categories. This issue should be further explored by national stakeholders from secondary and tertiary education, with a targeted approach to identifying and addressing specific barriers that may inhibit this cohort from engaging with HE. The objective should be to foster initiatives and funding streams to respond to the perennial low participation rates for both categories of disability.

11.4%

of students registered for supports in responding institutions are not covered by the FSD

Bibliography

AHEAD. (2009). *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2008/09.* AHEAD Educational Press.

AHEAD. (2018). *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2017/18.* AHEAD Educational Press.

AHEAD. (2019a). *Stategic Plan 2019-2022.* AHEAD Educational Press.

AHEAD. (2019b). *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2018/19.* A. E. Press.

AHEAD. (2020a). *How COVID-19 is Affecting Irish FET Practitioners and their Provision for Students with Disabilities.* AHEAD Educational Press.

AHEAD. (2020b). *Learning from Home During Covid-19: A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities.* AHEAD Educational Press: Dublin.

AHEAD. (2021a). *Learning from Home During Covid-19 2020/21: A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities.* AHEAD Educational Press.

AHEAD. (2021b). *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2019/20. A*HEAD Educational Press: Dublin.

AHEAD. (2022). *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2020/21.* AHEAD Educational Press: Dublin.

AHEAD. (2023). *Changing Landscapes.* AHEAD.

Brett, M. (2016). *Disability and Australian higher education: Policy drivers for increasing participation.* Student equity in Australian higher education: Twenty-five years of a fair chance for all, 87-108.

Capp, M. J. (2017). *The effectiveness of universal design for learning: a meta-analysis of literature between 2013 and 2016.* International Journal of Inclusive Education, 21(8), 791-807. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2017.1325074

CSO. (2016). *Census of Population 2016 – Profile 9 Health, Disability and Carers.* Retrieved 04/03/22 from https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp9hdc/p8hdc/p9d/

Cullinan, J., Lyons, S., & Nolan, B. (2015). *The Economics Of Disability-Insights from Irish research.* Manchester University Press.

Cullinan, J., Lyons, S., & Nolan, B. (2015). *The economics of disability: Insights from Irish research.* Manchester University Press.

Department of Further and Higher Education, R., Innovation and Science. (2022). *Funding the Future: Investing in knowledge and skills: Ireland's Competitive advantage.* G. o. Ireland. https://assets.gov.ie/222798/56d15094-5221-42ba-935a-943970e044e5.pdf

DFHERIS. (2021). *Action Plan for Apprenticeship, 2021 to 2025.* https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/0879f-action-plan-for-apprenticeship-2021-2025/

EDF. (2020). *Poverty and Social Exclusion of Persons with Disabilities: European Human Rights Report Issue 4 - 2020.* E. a. C. P. European Union's Rights.

Fovet, F. (2020). *Universal design for learning as a tool for inclusion in the higher education classroom: Tips for the next decade of implementation.* Education Journal, 9(6), 163-172.

Government_of_Ireland. (2022). *Impact 2030-Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy* https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/224616/5f34f71e-e13e-404b-8685-4113428b3390.pdf#page=null

Government_of_Ireland. (2015). *Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024.* Government_of_Ireland.

Hanafin, J., Shevlin, M., Kenny, M., & Neela, E. M. (2007). *Including young people with disabilities: Assessment challenges in higher education.* Higher Education, 54, 435-448.

Hart, W., & Healy, D. (2018). *'An inside job': An autobiographical account of desistance.* European Journal of Probation, 10(2), 103-119. https://doi.org/10.1177/2066220318783426

HEA. (2021). *Fund for Students with Disabilities. Guidelines for Higher Education Institutions 2021/22.* HEA. https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/10/FSD-Guidelines_2021-22-_Final.pdf

HEA. (2022a). *Key Facts and Figures 2021/22. HEA. Retrieved 01/03/2022 from* https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/

HEA. (2022b). *National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success In Higher Education 2022-2028.* https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/national-access-plan-2022-2028/

HEA. (2023a). *Eurostudent Suvey VIII-Report on the Social and Living Conditions of Higher Education Students in Ireland 2022.* https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2023/04/Eurostudent-8-Final-Report.pdf

HEA. (2023b). *Graduate Outcomes & Disability. HEA.* Retrieved 03/03/23 from https://hea.ie/statistics/graduate-outcomes-data-and-reports/graduate-outcomes-for-access-groups/1-graduate-outcomes-for-graduates-with-a-disability-foreword/

HEA. (2023c). *Graduate Outcomes and Disability.* Retrieved 12/07/2023 from https://hea.ie/statistics/graduate-outcomes-data-and-reports/

HEA. (2023d). *Systems Performance Framework 2032-28. HEA.* https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/04/System_Performance_Framework_2023-2028.pdf

Healy, R., Ryder, D., & Banks, J. (forthcoming). Universal Design for Learning Policy in Tertiary Education in Ireland: Are we Ready to Commit? In L. Dukes & J. Madeus. (Eds.), *Handbook on Higher Education and Disability. Elgar Publishing.*

Higher Education Strategy Group. (2011). *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. Department of Education and Skills.*

Indecon. (2022). *The Cost of Disability in Ireland.* D. o. S. Protection.

IUA. (2021). *Your Education, Your Choice, Your Vision: Results of the Student Campaign run by the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning* (EDTL) project, April – May 2021. IUA.

Kilpatrick, S., Johns, S., Barnes, R., Fischer, S., McLennan, D., & Magnussen, K. (2017). *Exploring the retention and success of students with disability in Australian higher education. International Journal of Inclusive Education,* 21(7), 747-762.

LINK_Network. (2022). *We Can Never Go Back--Exploring the (Dis)Advantages of Distance Learning Modes for Disabled Students.* L. Network. https://www.ahead.ie/link-discussion-paper-distance-learning

Meeks, L. M., Case, B., Stergiopoulos, E., Evans, B. K., & Petersen, K. H. (2021). Structural Barriers to Student Disability Disclosure in US-Allopathic Medical Schools. Journal of Medical Education and Curricular Development, 8, 23821205211018696. https://doi.org/10.1177/23821205211018696

Meeks, L. M., Herzer, K., & Jain, N. R. (2018). Removing barriers and facilitating access: increasing the number of physicians with disabilities. *Academic Medicine, 93(4), 540-543.*

Nolan, C., & Gleeson, C. I. (2017). *The transition to employment: the perspectives of students and graduates with disabilities. S*candinavian Journal of Disability Research, 19(3), 230-244. https://doi.org/10.1080/15017419.2016.1240102

O'Neill, G. (2017). It's not fair! Students and staff views on the equity of the procedures and outcomes of students' choice of assessment methods. *Irish Educational Studies, 36(2), 221-236.* https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2017.1324805

O'Neill, G., & Maguire, T. (2019). Developing assessment and feedback approaches to empower and engage students: A sectoral approach in Ireland. In *Transforming higher education through universal design for learning (pp. 277-294).* Routledge.

OECD. (2023). *OECD Skills Strategy Ireland. OECD.* https://doi.org/doi:https://doi.org/10.1787/d7b8b40b-en

Patrick, R. (2012). Work as the primary'duty'of the responsible citizen: a critique of this work-centric approach. *People, Place & Policy Online, 6(1).*

QQI. (2021). *NEXT STEPS for Teaching and Learning: Moving Forward Together: QQI Insight on Assessment 2021.* QQI. https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/QQI-Insight-on-Assessment.pdf

Smith, S. A., Woodhead, E., & Chin-Newman, C. (2021). Disclosing accommodation needs: exploring experiences of higher education students with disabilities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 25(12), 1358-1374.*

Watson, D., Banks, J., & Lyons, S. (2015). *Educational and Employment Experiences of People with a Disability in Ireland: An Analysis of the National Disability Survey. ESRI.*

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Number of students with disabilities studying within each responding higher education institution

Institution Name	Total Students with Disabilities	Students with Disabilities as a % of Total Institution Population
AIT	NA	NA
MTU	1383	8.5%
DCU	1014	5.7%
DkIT	291	5.3%
DLIADT	283	11.7%
GMIT	668	7%
ITC	332	3.4%
ITS	435	4.1%
ITTRA	NOW MTU	NOW MTU
LIT	NA	NA
LYIT	361	7.5%
MIC	247	5%
MIE	103	8.5%
MU	1080	7.7%
NCAD	152	11.7%
NCI	182	3.7%
NUIG	1416	7%
RCSI	202	4.3%
St Angela's	134	10.1%
TCD	2020	10.3%
TuD	1916	6.8%
UCC	1777	7.3%
UCD	2278	6.9%
UL	1063	5.9%
WIT	719	8%

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.

Generic programmes and qualifications

- Basic programmes and qualifications
- Literacy and numeracy
- Personal skills

Education

- Education not further defined or elsewhere classified
- Education science
- Training for pre-school teachers
- Teacher training without subject specialisation
- Teacher training with subject specialisation
- Inter-disciplinary programmes and qualifications involving education

Inter-disciplinary programmes and qualifications to which the greatest intended learning time is devoted to education.

Disability Category

The disabilities that fall under the categories used in this Report are drawn from HEA data and the DARE (Disability Access Routes to Education) program classifications. Further details can be found here.

AHEAD Educational Press
East Hall
UCD
Carysfort Avenue
Blackrock
Co. Dublin

Tel: (01) 7164396
Email: ahead@ahead.ie

HEA | HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY

ahead
creating inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities

Thank you

AHEAD Educational Press
East Hall UCD
Carysfort Avenue
Blackrock, Co. Dublin

Tel: (01) 7164396
Email: ahead@ahead.ie

Supported by the Higher Education Authority