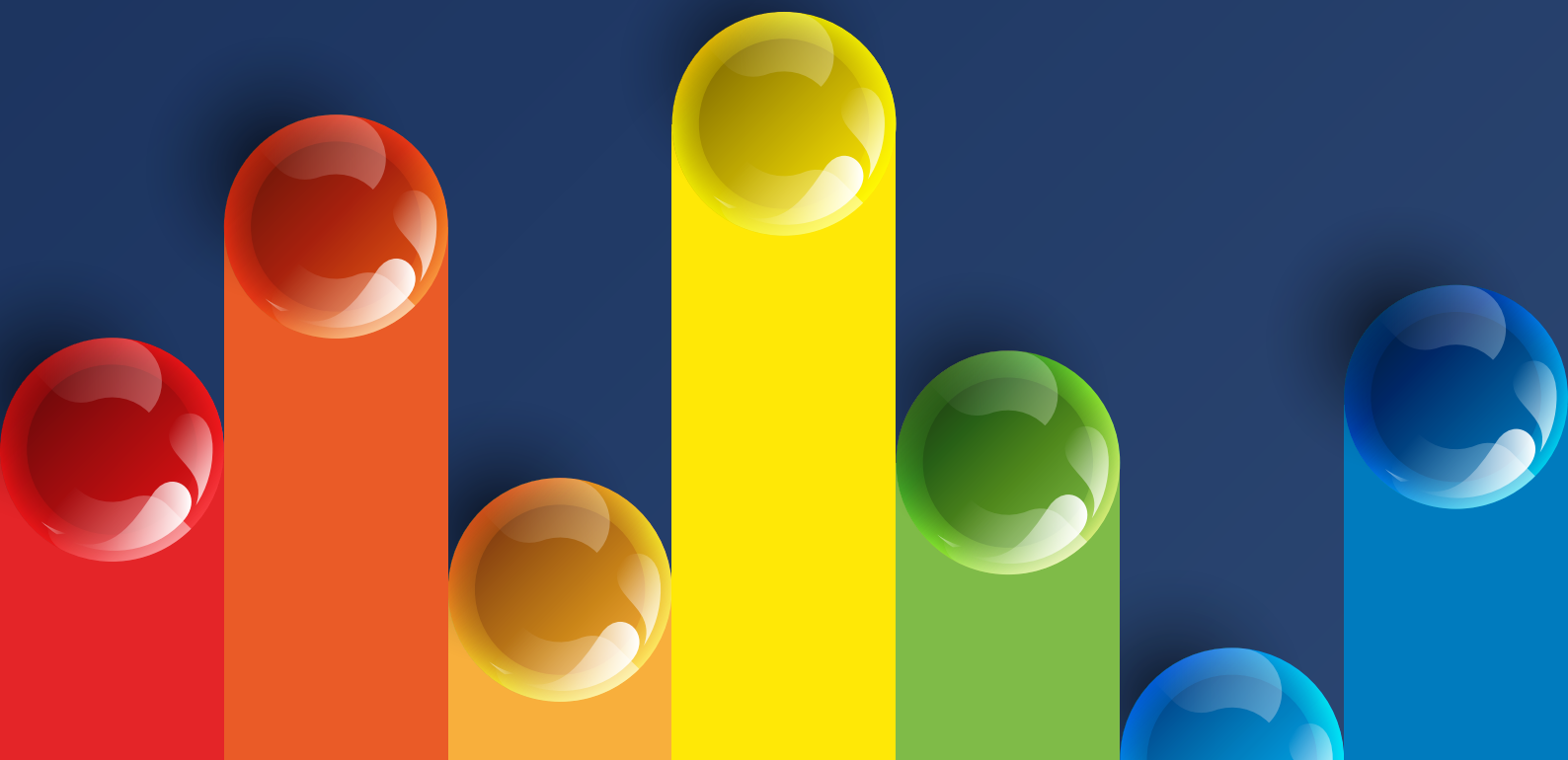


# Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2021/22

## Summary of Findings and Recommendations



 ahead

creating inclusive environments in education  
and employment for people with disabilities

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# Summary

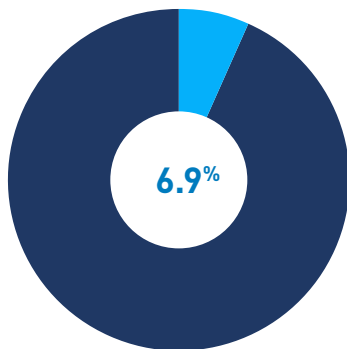
This document provides a summary of the key findings and recommendations from AHEAD's annual research: *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2021/22*. The Report is available in its entirety on the AHEAD website (AHEAD.ie). The data that informs this Report was provided by Disability Support Services (DSS) from 23 (of the 24) Higher Education Institutions that routinely participate. AHEAD would like to thank them for their continued participation and cooperation.

The 2021/22 Report marks a point of departure from our prior Participation Reports. Following engagement and discussion with participating DSS members, a number of changes have been made to our research methodology. To this end, we have implemented the following changes to our research to capture a more in-depth analysis of disability and Higher Education in Ireland:

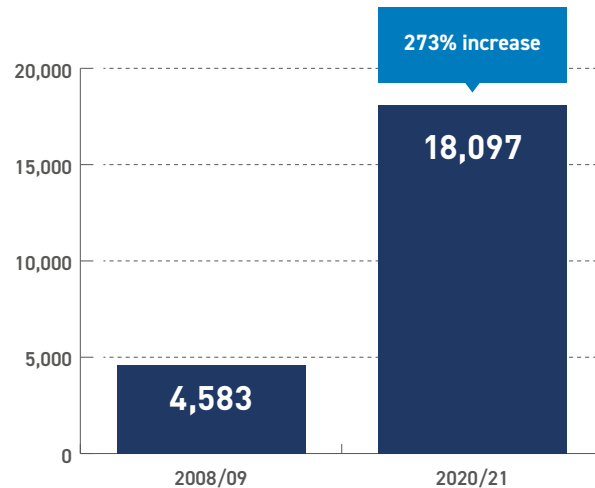
- We now explore additional disabilities (as opposed to using primary disability only) to engender a more accurate disability breakdown of students registered with DSS in their institution.
- The number and percentage of students who are not financially supported by the Fund for Students with Disabilities is now examined.
- Apprentices now registered for support services are now analysed.
- Individual exam accommodations have been updated to include a range of extra accommodations that enable a broader examination of the process.
- The pivot from Institute of Technology to Technological University is now included in almost all cases. However, due to the complexities of merging data, some HEI's chose to provide separate data.

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.

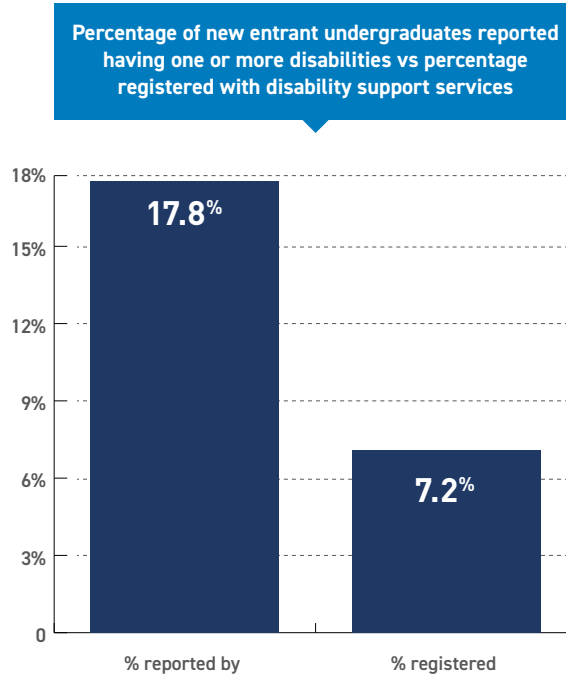


Rise in number of students with disabilities registering for support in the last 13 years



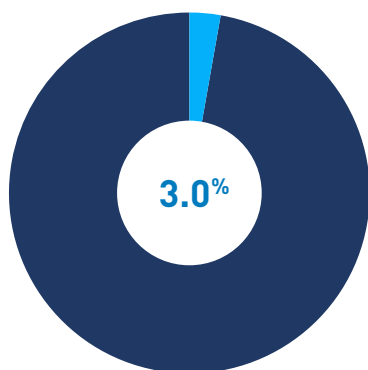
- **273% rise in number of students with disabilities registering for support in the last 13 years.** In the 2021/22 academic year, 18,097 (6.9%) of all students enrolled in HE (n=261,902) were registered with disability support services in their HEI. This is representative of a 4.5% increase in relation 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



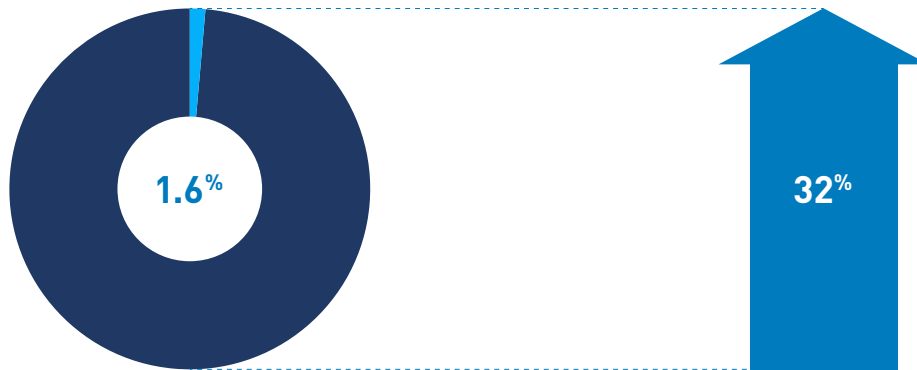
emanated from two different underlying datasets, suggests that there is a notable number of new entrant undergraduate students who have disclosed a disability using the Equal Access Survey but are not registered with supports. AHEAD acknowledge that disclosure is a complex issue. Our Changing Landscapes 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).

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

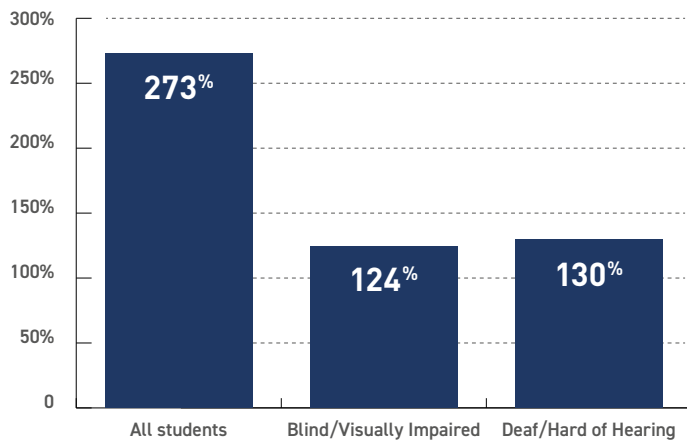


- **Postgraduate participation rate rising steadily, but students with disabilities remain significantly underrepresented in postgraduate study.** The participation rate of postgraduate students registered with disability support services remained low at 3% (n=1,901), despite increasing from 2.8% in 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).

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)



- **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%).

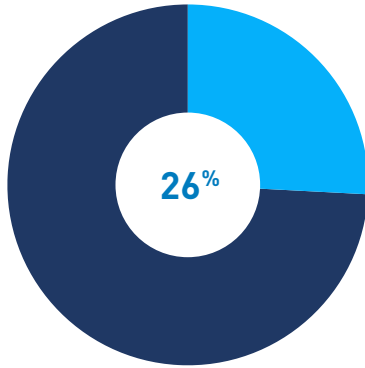
- **More than 1 in 10 students registered with services not eligible for the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).** The 23



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.



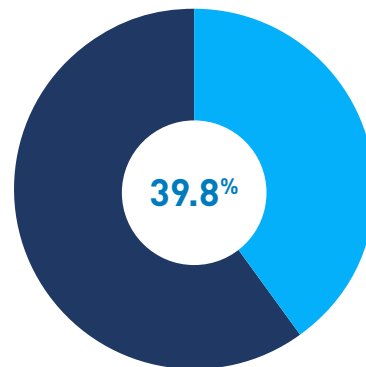
More than a quarter (n=1,570) of new registrations with disability support services were not in their first year of study.

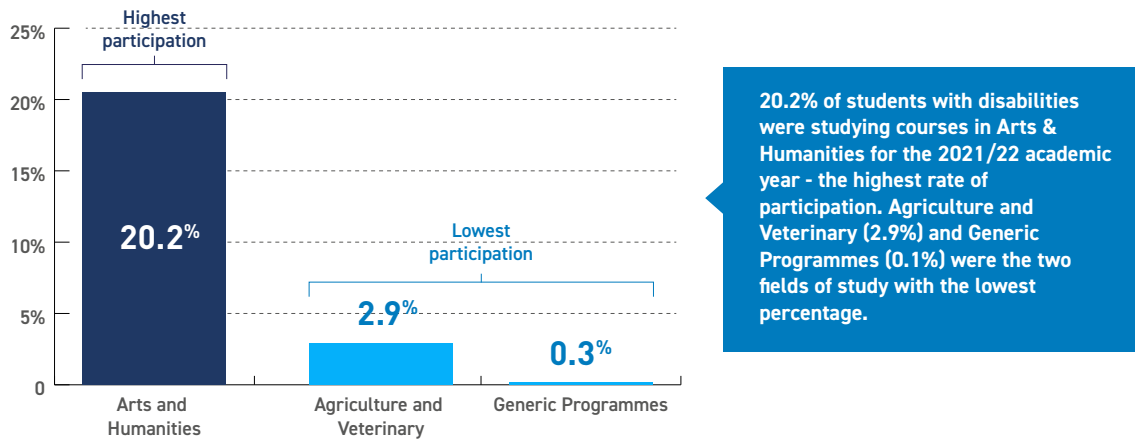


— **Approx. one quarter of new registrations with disability support services were not in their first year of study.** 1,570 of students who registered with support services for the first time, were not in their inaugural year of study. This equates to 8.7% of all students registered with supports and 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.

— **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.

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



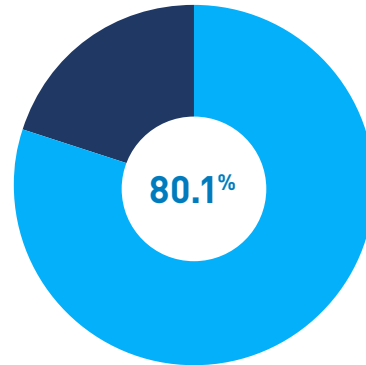


- **Students with disabilities significantly more likely to be enrolled on a course in the field of Arts and Humanities.** This is once again the field of the study with the highest number of disabled students across participating institutions. This statistic has been replicated in a number of previous 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

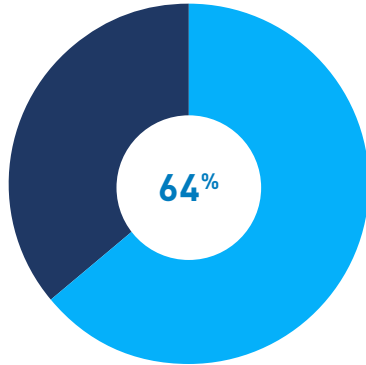


In 2012/13 there was 97 students per support staff member. In 2021/22, there were 189 students with disabilities per support staff member.

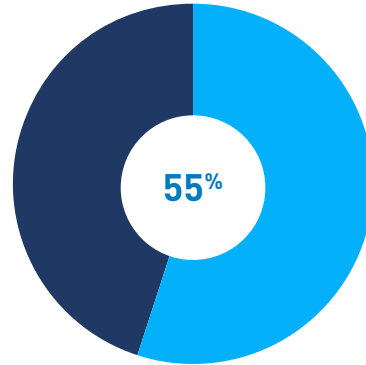


- **Ratios of students to support staff remain steady year on year stalling a long-term rising trend.** Drawing from the data submitted by responding institutions, we were able to calculate the number of students per support worker, including learning support officer, disability support service staff 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



Over half do not monitor the implementation of supports approved/recommended in needs assessments



- **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.

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