



Numbers **of**  
**Students**  
with **Disabilities**  
Studying **in** Higher  
**ED** **U** **Education**  
in **Ireland 20** **13/14**



## Summary of Key Findings

---

In order to ascertain the number of students with disabilities in the Irish higher education system for the academic year 2013/2014 AHEAD surveyed all HEA funded Higher Education Institutions plus one non HEA funded institution (with a large volume of students and thereby considered too significant to omit). A structured questionnaire was sent out and responses were received from 28 institutions. Following data collation and analysis, the following represent the most salient findings emerging from the research process concerning students with disabilities in higher education for the academic year 2013/2014:

- 28 HEI's in Ireland identified a total of **9694** students with disabilities representing **4.7%** of the total student population.
- **2310** of these were new entrants, representing 29% of the disabled undergraduate student population.
- **2185** of these were final year undergraduates, representing 25% of the disabled student population.
- The participation rate of students with disabilities in full time courses (5.4%) is **almost 5 times** the rate in part time courses (1.1%). Only 4% of students with disabilities study part time courses, well below the national average of part time students at 7% and below the national target for participation of part time students in higher education, which is at 17% of the total student population<sup>1</sup>.
- In terms of disability profile, the vast majority of students with disabilities have a specific learning difficulty (**50.9%**). However, this cohort has reduced as a percentage of total students with disabilities, on average 3.2% every year for the last three academic years, when it peaked at 60.5% in 2010/11.
- While the overall numbers of students with disabilities has increased **7%** year on year, a worrying trend among the Deaf/Hearing Impaired cohort has seen the numbers enrolled drop by 6% to 271 and they now make up just 2.8% of the total population of students with disabilities (down from 3.2% last year).
- Responding institutions reported **more than twice as many** Blind/Visually Impaired new entrants In 2013/14 as compared to the previous academic year. A trend identified in last year's report of a decreasing number of new entrants in the Blind/Visually Impaired category appears to have been arrested.
- When compared with the general student population, students with disabilities remain particularly underrepresented in subjects related to 'Health & Welfare' and 'Education Science'. Interestingly a significantly higher percentage of students with disabilities are studying in the fields of 'Humanities & Arts' in comparison to their non-disabled peers.

---

<sup>1</sup> HEA 2008, National plan for Equity of Access to Higher education 2008 - 2013



- **78%** of the disabled student population received an examination accommodation in the academic year 2013/14. Extra time was by far the most common support provided with 72% of students with disabilities receiving extra time in their examinations in 2013/14.
- The responding institutions reported an average of **140** students per disability support staff member and **321** students per learning support staff member. The combined average of 97 students per staff member remains unchanged year on year.
- **60%** of disability/access staff on the ground believe that academic staff are not doing enough to include students with disabilities in their courses through the use of flexible teaching methods in accordance with the principles of Universal Design for Learning.



## Recommendations

---

1. In recognition of the additional cost of disability, the Higher Education Authority together with higher education institutions should consider allowing part-time students to access the same funding for supports granted to full-time students, thus removing a barrier to access.
2. Students with disabilities are hugely under-represented in post graduate courses and those with multiple disabilities are even less likely to progress to that level of study. The Higher Education Authority should consider conducting a study into the progression of students with disabilities to post graduate courses to determine why this is so and what can be done to improve progression rates.
3. The participation of students who are deaf or hearing impaired has decreased year on year while numbers in all other major categories continue to rise. Research is urgently required into the transition of deaf and hearing impaired students from second level to higher education to identify their experience and engagement with education. The HEA could raise this issue with the Department of Education & Skills and the NCSE.
4. This report highlights a reliance on the provision of additional time and alternative locations for students with disabilities in examinations as a means to combat the impact of a student's disability on their performance. The Higher Education Institutions should consider embracing a broader suite of valid assessment instruments and incorporate assessment as an indicator within the periodic review of programmes.