



Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2018/19

Summary Findings and Recommendations



creating inclusive environments in education
and employment for people with disabilities

This booklet shows a summary of the key findings and recommendations of the AHEAD publication 'Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2018/19'. Please see the full report for more detailed findings and the research methodology.

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Summary

AHEAD has identified the following key findings and observations based on the analysis of the data collected from the responding higher education institutions on the participation rates of students with disabilities in higher education for the academic year 2018/19:

- **AN INCREASE, OF OVER 220% (10,843) IN THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES REGISTERING WITH SUPPORT SERVICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE LAST 10 YEARS (AHEAD, 2009).** The academic year 2018/19 marked another year of continued growth in the participation of students with disabilities registered with support services in higher education and there are now 15,696 students with disabilities representing 6.2% of the total student population in the responding institutions. This figure represents a 7% rise in the number of students with disabilities in higher education year on year and is a 223% increase over the last 10 years of AHEAD's research in this area (AHEAD, 2009).
- **AN INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES STUDYING PART-TIME IN HIGHER EDUCATION.** 2018/19 witnessed a 21% increase in the number of students with disabilities studying part time courses compared to the previous year. However, this increase is against the backdrop of an even greater year on year percentage increase in the general part time student population and students with disabilities represent just 1.3% of the total student population studying part time in 2018/19.
- **A DECREASE IN THE NUMBER OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES.** In 2018/19, while there was a 7% (14,490) increase in the number of undergraduate students with disabilities engaging with support services across the responding institutions there was a 2.4% decrease reported in the number of students with disabilities studying at postgraduate level. In 2017/2018 the numbers of postgraduates with disabilities totalled 1,233, representing 2.8% of the total post graduate population and this dropped to 1,206 (2.4%) in 2018/2019. While the actual number of students with disabilities undertaking post graduate studies has increased significantly over the last ten years (AHEAD, 2009), as a percentage of the total post graduate student population they have increased only modestly from 1.8% to 2.4% in that period.

THE NUMBER OF NEW REGISTRATIONS TO SUPPORT SERVICES FROM STUDENTS NOT IN THEIR FIRST YEAR OF STUDY CONTINUES TO RISE.

According to the last five years of AHEAD research, there has been an ongoing increase in the number of new registrations with disability support services of students not in their first year of study (AHEAD, 2019; 2018; 2016; 2014). In 2018/19, new registrations of students with disabilities not in their first year of study was 1,524 compared to 1,301 in 2017/18 and this cohort now represent 28% of all new registrations with support services.

- **INCREASE OF 21% IN THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN THE ASPERGER'S/AUTISM CATEGORY IN 2018/19.** The responding institutions reported 1,055 students in the Asperger's/Autism category registered with their services, representing 6.9% of the total population of students with disabilities in 2018/19, which is a 21% increase in the numbers of students in this category from the previous year, 870 (representing a rate of 5.9%). The numbers in this category have grown enormously in the last ten years from 62 in 2008/09 (AHEAD, 2009) to 1,055 in 2018/19.
- **LOW REPRESENTATION OF STUDENTS WITH SENSORY DISABILITIES IN 2018/19.** The number of students in the Blind/Visually Impaired category registered with HE support services in 2018/19 was 273 and the number in the category of Deaf/Hard of Hearing was 396. In the last ten years, the numbers of students with sensory disabilities has grown at less than half the rate of students with disabilities more generally. While numbers of students with disabilities has grown by 223% in that period, numbers in the Blind/Visually Impaired category have grown 104% and numbers in the Deaf/Hard of Hearing category, just 92%.
- **86% OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN 2018/2019 RECEIVE EXAM ACCOMMODATIONS.** 13,129 students with disabilities in 2018/19 received one or more exam accommodations, representing a 7% (873) increase year on year (12,256 in 2017/18). The numbers of students with disabilities receiving exam accommodations has risen more than 70% in the last five years, up from 7,608 in 2013/14 (AHEAD, 2015).

- **37% INCREASE IN NUMBER OF STUDENTS PER DISABILITY SUPPORT STAFF MEMBER IN LAST 7 YEARS.** Across all 27 responding institutions, there was an average of 179 students registered per disability support staff member in 2018/19. Over 7 years of AHEAD research in this area, the number of students with disabilities per disability support staff member has increased by 37%, up from 131 2011/12 (AHEAD, 2012). The number of students per learning support staff member rose 95% in the same period.
- **OVER TWO THIRDS BELIEVE THEY DO NOT HAVE SUFFICIENT RESOURCES IN THEIR DEPARTMENT TO COLLABORATE ON INCLUSIVE PRACTICES ACROSS THEIR INSTITUTIONS.** 72% of disability support staff did not believe that they had enough resources to collaborate with other departments on inclusive practice on campus.

Recommendations

1. HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIs) SHOULD INCREASE LEVELS OF RESOURCING TO DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES TO ENSURE QUALITY AND SUPPORT A WHOLE COLLEGE APPROACH TO INCLUSION.

To be truly inclusive of students with disabilities and promote the mainstreaming of support to students in line with the goals of the UNCRPD, HEIs must ensure that they have a well-resourced disability support service which is capable of both providing high quality individual reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities, and of working collaboratively with other departments and services to share their expertise and advice. Support services need to be sufficiently resourced and empowered to collaborate and promote more inclusive practice in the mainstream delivery of programmes and services underpinned by the principles of universal design for learning (UDL).

The 37% increase in number of students per disability support staff member in last 7 years reported in this research shows that resourcing in these services has not kept pace with the growing number of students who need support. The opinion and comment collected from disability support staff in the 'on the ground' section of this report indicates that most HEIs are supportive of the disability support service collaborating with other services and departments on projects to promote universal design for learning and other inclusive practices, but that disability support services are lacking the resources to deliver on this element of their remit, which is becoming more important as the numbers of students with disabilities increases.

HEIs should increase levels of resourcing to disability support services and actively encourage collaboration with other departments and services to foster a culture where inclusion is everyone's business. This up-front investment in resourcing services to work on institutional approaches to inclusion will pay future dividends, as more inclusive practice in the mainstream will lead to a reduction in the number of reasonable accommodations required and a better experience for all students.

2. HEIs SHOULD CONSIDER USE OF BROADER SUITE OF ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS AND AN APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT WHICH BUILDS IN FLEXIBILITY AND CHOICE.

This report illustrates the high usage of extra time and alternative venues as exam supports for students with disabilities. With the numbers of students with disabilities continuing to rise, AHEAD believes that continuing to apply ever-increasing numbers of individual exam accommodations is an unsustainable approach and the high use of these accommodations indicates that more flexible assessment instruments, which build in choice for students in how they demonstrate learning outcomes, are required. The principles of universal design for learning, in particular the guidelines on providing multiple means of action and expression, offer institutions a quality, research-based approach to the delivery of this flexibility in assessment – one which will benefit all students.

AHEAD recommends that HEIs take an institutional strategic approach to the promotion and implementation of universal design for learning which includes reviewing and updating policy and the provision of professional development for teaching staff.

3. CROSS SECTOR COLLABORATION ON IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL ACCESS BARRIERS TO THIRD LEVEL FOR STUDENTS WITH SENSORY DISABILITIES.

AHEAD's research on participation has consistently highlighted the low participation rate of students with sensory (visual/auditory) disabilities in higher education. Despite students in this category being a target group in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (HEA, 2015), a recent progress report noted that participation of students who are Blind and Visually Impaired was growing "at the slowest rate" (HEA, 2018). AHEAD's understanding from engaging with students and stakeholders is that many of the educational barriers these students experience occur at primary and secondary levels and so AHEAD recommends that the Department of Education and Skills form a cross sector working group featuring stakeholders in the education system and relevant NGOs to collectively identify the key issues and make recommendations.

4. RESEARCH REQUIRED ON ACCESS BARRIERS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES TO POST-GRADUATE COURSES AND NATIONAL TARGETS SET.

According to An Analysis of Labour Market Earnings for Higher Education Graduates in their Early Careers (HEA, 2019), graduates with a postgraduate qualification earn more annually than those with an undergraduate degree. The continuing trend of significantly lower participation rates (as % of total undergraduate/postgraduate population) of students with disabilities at postgraduate level than at undergraduate level highlighted in this research, indicates that there are barriers to access for this cohort, which in turn impacts on their opportunities to advance their overall earnings and improvement of living conditions. Further research is needed to identify these barriers. AHEAD also recommends that the HEA sets targets within the next National Access Plan for participation for students with disabilities in postgraduate courses to provide the sector with focussed goals to achieve.



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