

Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2020/21

Summary of Findings and Recommendations



creating inclusive environments in education
and employment for people with disabilities

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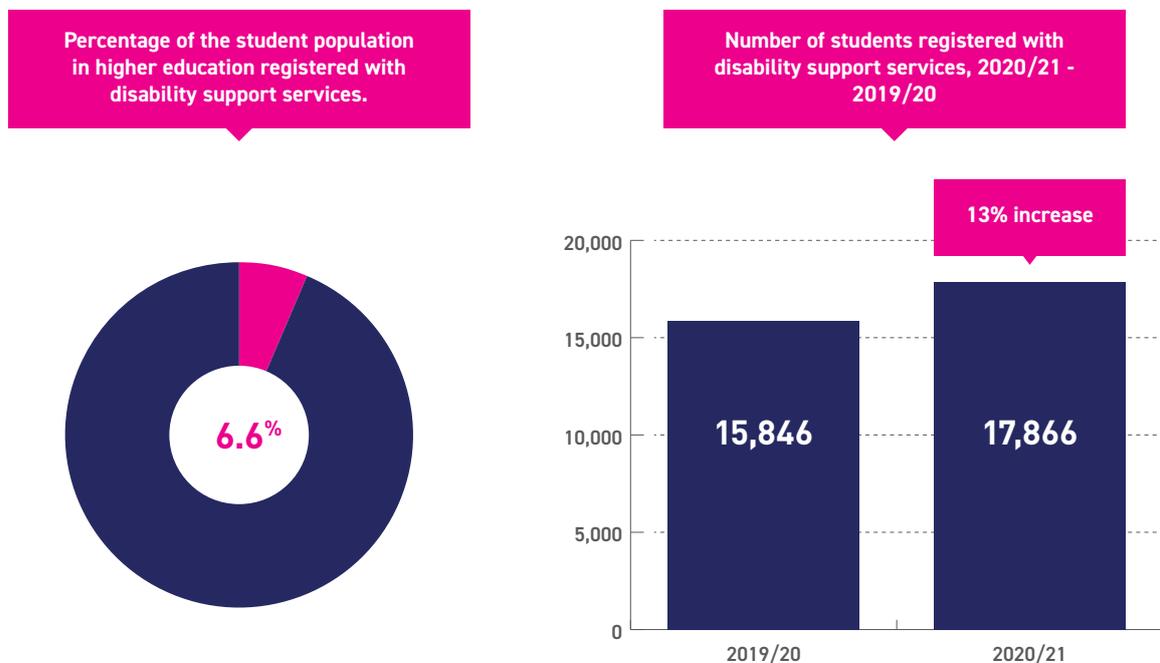
Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2020/21

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Summary

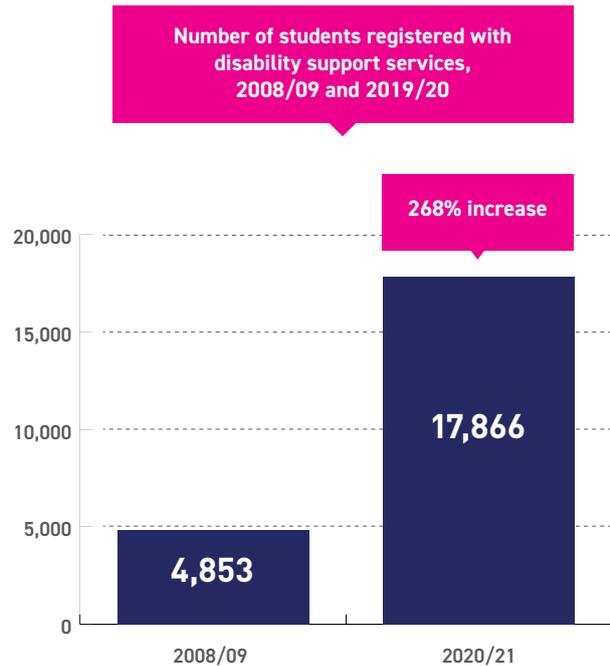
This document provides a summary of the key findings and recommendations of AHEAD's research publication, *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2020/21*. To view the full report visit the ahead website. The data this report was based on was collected from higher education disability support services, and AHEAD would like to thank them for their cooperation and partnership in producing this important research.

6.6% of the student population in higher education is registered with disability support services.



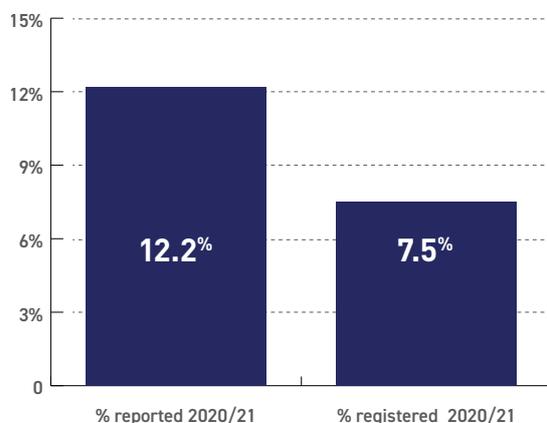
In the 2020/21 academic year, 17,866 students with disabilities were registered with disability support services in higher education, representative of 6.6% of the total student population in the responding institutions (N=269,488). 2020/21 participation data demonstrates a 13% increase in numbers of students with disabilities registered with support services in the responding institutions from 2019/20 (6.3%; n=15,846 of 252,614 students).

- There has been an increase of 268% in the number of students with disabilities registered with disability support services in higher education institutions in the last twelve years (AHEAD, 2009) – from 4,853 in 2008/09 to 17,866 in 2020/21.



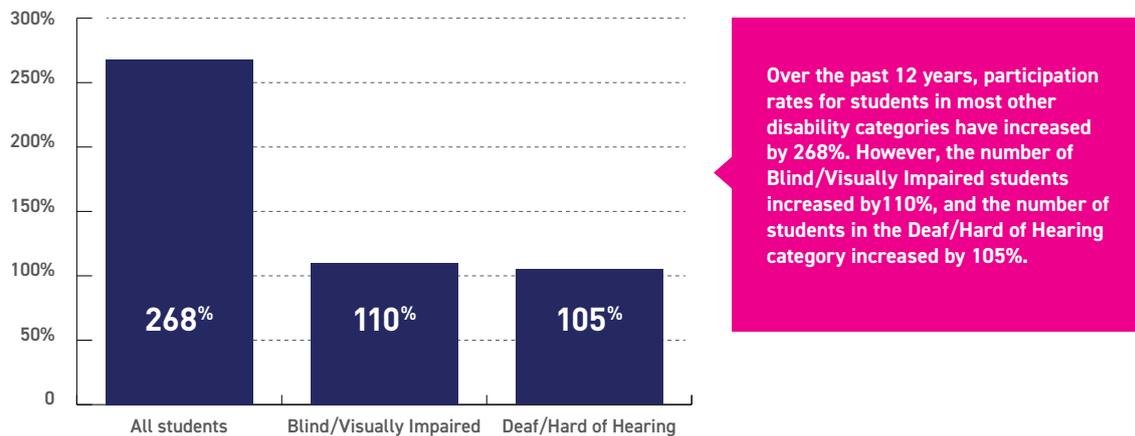
- A significant percentage of new entrant students have a disability but do not disclose and register for support. In 2020/21, 12.2% of new entrant undergraduates reported having one or more disabilities in the HEA Equal Access Survey, but only 7.5% of the new entrant population registered with the disability support services of participating institutions in the AHEAD survey for the same academic year. Although the underlying datasets are not the same, this suggests

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



that a significant number of new entrant students with a disability did not disclose their disability and register for disability supports in their first year in higher education in the period under survey. AHEAD recognises that disclosure of disability is a complex issue and there are likely myriad reasons for non-disclosure that require further investigation, such as no requirements for support, no formal diagnosis of disability required to access supports, a desire for independence, or reasons related to the perceived stigma which may be felt by some individuals engaging with support services.

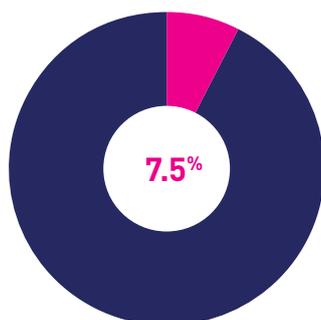
- **The 2020/21 participation rate data highlights that the number of students with sensory disabilities was significantly lower than the other disability categories, sustaining a pattern and trend from the previous year's report, (AHEAD, 2021).** While students in the Deaf/Hard of Hearing category represented 2.4% of the total students in the disability cohort, the participation rate for students in the Blind/Visually Impaired category was 1.6%.



In comparison to the sustained increase in participation rates for students in most other disability categories over the last twelve years (268% in total), these cohorts have witnessed more modest increases in participation rates. In this period, the number of Blind/Visually Impaired students increased from 134 to 282, representative of a 110% increase. Similarly, the number of students in the Deaf/Hard of Hearing category increased from 206 to 422, representative of a 105% increase.

- **The number of new entrant undergraduate students with disabilities registered with support services in responding institutions was 4,324 students, reflecting 7.5% of all new entrants.**

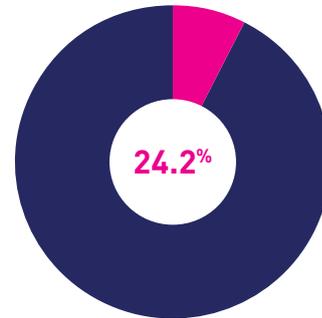
The percentage of new entrant undergraduate students with disabilities registered with support services in 2020/21 was 7.5%



This was an increase of 6.1% on the previous year's numerical data; however, the 7.5% of the total number of new entrant undergraduates was equal with the previous year's percentage. This is due to the pre-discussed increased numbers of participating institutions with relatively large populations.

- **Almost 25% (n=1,048) of new registrations with disability support services were not in their first year of study.** As such, these students had chosen not to disclose their disability in their first year of study. Interestingly, the percentage of new registrations not in their first year of study was up significantly from 20% in 2019/20.

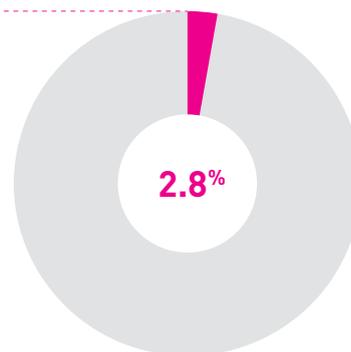
Almost a quarter (n=1,048) of new registrations with disability support services were not in their first year of study.



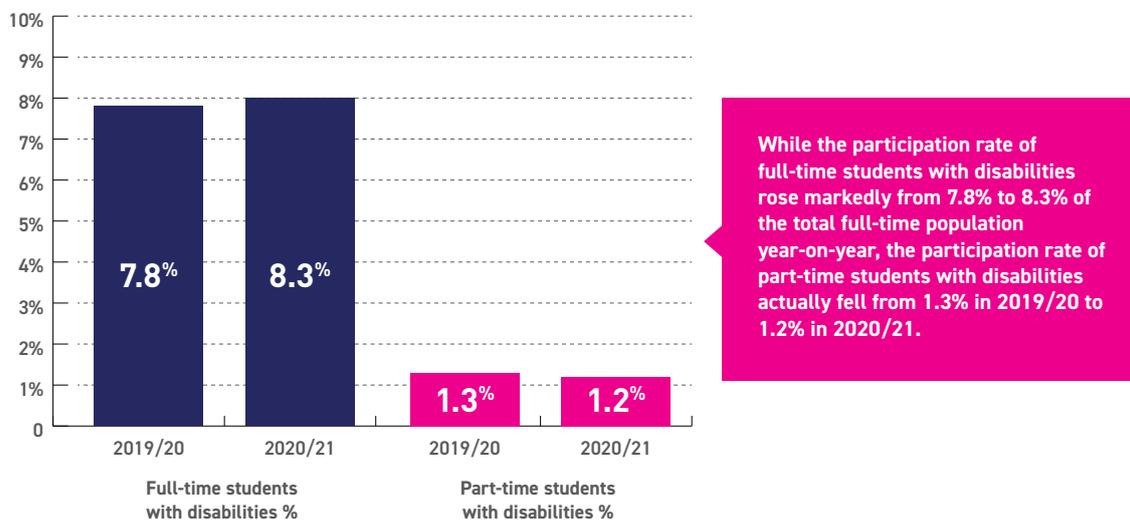
- **There has been a significant rise in numbers of postgraduate students with disabilities registered with support services.** The number of undergraduate students with disabilities registered with support services (n=16,140) increased by 10.9% from the previous year's data, representing 7.8% of undergraduate students with disabilities across all institutions for the 2020/21 academic year. The number of postgraduate students with disabilities registered with disability support services however, increased by 33% (n=428) across all responding institutions. Although this increase is welcome, the participation rate of postgraduate students with disabilities remained low overall, at 2.8% of the total postgraduate cohort. This pattern of persistently low representation at the postgraduate level compared to the undergraduate level is a consistent finding in AHEAD research.

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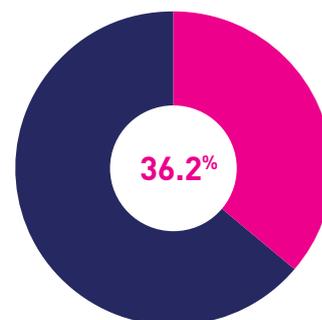


- **The participation rate of students with disabilities in full-time study has risen markedly year-on-year, while part-time participation rate for 2020/21 has decreased slightly.** There were 17,080 full-time students with disabilities, representing 8.3% of the total number of students engaging with full-time programmes. Responding institutions reported that 786 students with disabilities were enrolled in part-time study, representative of 1.2% of all students studying part-time. While the participation rate of full-time students with disabilities rose markedly from 7.8% to 8.3% of the total full-time population year-on-year, the participation rate of part-time students with disabilities actually fell from 1.3% in 2019/20 to 1.2% in 2020/21. This sustains the trend of students with disabilities being persistently under-represented concerning part-time study, (AHEAD, 1994, 2009, 2013, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019b, 2021b).



- **The most commonly reported disability category of students who were registered with the disability support service in their institution were those in the Specific Learning Difficulty category,** at 36.2% (6,484 students) of all students with disabilities. The second and third most commonly reported categories were Mental Health Condition (16.6%, n= 2,974 students), and Significant Ongoing Illness (11.3%, n=2,019 students). The lowest participation rates were in relation to students in the Other category (0.9%, n=156 students), those who were Blind/Visually Impaired (1.6%, n=282 students), or were Deaf/Hard of Hearing (2.4%, n=422 students).

The most commonly reported disability category of students were those in the Specific Learning Difficulty category, at 36.2%

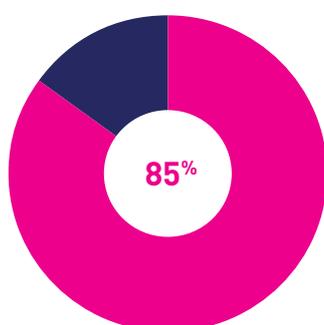


- **As in previous year’s reports, courses in the Arts and Humanities had the highest percentage of students with disabilities enrolled in 2020/21.** This trend has been replicated both in the previous year’s data and the preceding year’s reports (AHEAD, 2021). Responding institutions reported that 21% (3,628 students) of students with disabilities were studying courses in this field for the 2020/21 academic year, which was the highest rate of participation for this cohort by a significant margin. Agriculture and Veterinary (2.9%, 504 students) and Generic Programmes (0.1%, 25 students) were the two fields of study with the lowest percentage of students with disabilities enrolled.



- **85% of students with disabilities were recommended one or more exam accommodations in 2020/21.**

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The data concerning exam accommodations for this academic year was based exclusively on those that were recommended as opposed to actually implemented exam accommodations, since most institutions could not confirm their implementation due to the swift changes in assessment practices precipitated by COVID. The lack of institutional visibility on whether recommended exam accommodations were actually implemented is in itself an interesting finding, which should cause institutions to consider the quality assurance measures

implemented concerning delivery of supports. The percentage of all students with disabilities who were recommended exam accommodations was down slightly from 87% in 2019/20 (AHEAD, 2021).

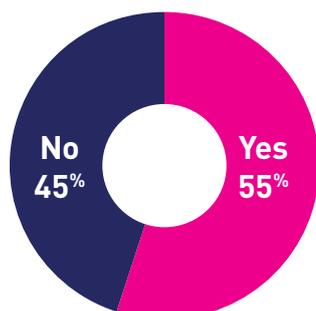
- **There has been a 44% rise in the number of students with disabilities per support staff member in the last 8 years.** Across all 25 responding institutions in 2020/21, there were 414 students with disabilities per learning support staff member and 199 students with disabilities per disability support staff member. Combined, this represented 134 students with disabilities per support staff member. The combined students to support staff figure has risen 45% since 2012/13, when there was 97 students per support staff member. The rising caseload of support staff in these institutions, and the lack of increased resources to meet growing demand has implications for the quality of support provided to students with disabilities and requires urgent attention.

In 2012/13 there was 97 students per support staff member. In 2020/21, there were 134 students with disabilities per support staff member.



- **Only a small majority of disability support services collaborate with the international office in the promotion of international mobility to students with disabilities, and the organisation of supports for participating students, and the majority do not collect data on participation.**

55% of disability support services collaborate with the international office, while 45% do not.



While 55% of disability support services said that this collaboration occurs in their institution, 45% said it did not. Additionally, 60% of support services said they collected no data on the participation of students with disabilities in study abroad programmes, while 40% did collect data on it.

Recommendations

The recommendations below are derived from the findings of this research, and informed by other national and international literature, and AHEAD's knowledge of the higher education sector. AHEAD builds the knowledge base to support our mission through sustained research on inclusion in higher education, monitoring of international best practice, and continuous engagement with students and graduates with disabilities, staff in HEIs and state bodies.

These recommendations are in line with AHEAD's mission to create inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities, and will support the sector to meet its legal obligations set out under equality law. They will also support the state to work towards goals agreed to in international mechanisms concerning equity and inclusion, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the UNCRPD.

AHEAD RECOMMEND THAT THE EMBEDDING OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING (UDL) PRACTICES IS SUPPORTED AT ALL LEVELS OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS, EQUITY AND INCLUSION.

The findings of the report indicate the importance of implementing universal design and UDL practices to advance equity of learning for what is becoming an ever more diverse student body. With its emphasis on diversity, inclusion, flexibility, and choice, UDL is an international, evidence-based approach that can help alleviate some of the most pressing issues in higher education, (Davies et al., 2013). It addresses the growing tension created by an increasingly diverse student population engaging with a traditional 'one size fits all' curriculum (Capp, 2017). 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 overall costs while transforming pedagogy. In this way, UDL provides a clear and effective way to create more inclusive higher education environments in a sustainable fashion. Examples of the findings in this report which support the need for a UDL approach are:

- **Changing demographics** – greater diversity: increase of 268% regarding in students with disabilities engaging with higher education support services in the last twelve years.
- **Significant numbers of undisclosed students:** 12.2% of new entrant undergraduates reported having one or more disabilities in the HEA Equal Access Survey, but only 7.5% of the new entrant population registered with the disability support services of participating institutions in the AHEAD survey for the same academic year. A UDL approach will build more support in design and delivery, reaching undisclosed students with disabilities where traditional support services cannot.
- **Overstretched support services – rising caseloads:** a 44% rise in the number of students with disabilities per support staff member in the last 8 years highlights the rising caseloads of support staff. A UDL approach will spread responsibility for inclusion across the campus, reduce the need for reasonable accommodations, and the associated financial and administrative resources required to plan and implement such accommodations.

- **High numbers recommended exam accommodations:** 85% of students with disabilities were recommended exam accommodations. A UDL approach to assessment will dramatically reduce the number of accommodations required by building more choice of assessment in as standard, reducing the financial and administrative resources required to plan and implement such accommodations.

AHEAD recommends a range of coordinated actions at the national (macro), institutional (meso) and practitioner (micro) levels in order to coherently embed universal design for learning practice in higher education.

- **National (Macro):** AHEAD recommends that the HEA support the collaborative development of a National Charter for Universal Design in Higher Education, to develop shared indicators of success on the application of universal design and UDL in higher education. It is recommended that UDL is included as a specific point of reporting within the next update of the HEA Higher Education System Performance Framework (HEA, 2018) to monitor institutional progress on UDL implementation, and that the HEA build on the important development of the PATH 4 Universal Design Fund by examining ways to sustain this fund beyond 2023.
- **Institutional (Meso):** AHEAD recommends that institutions review and update related policy and strategy to ensure that tangible objectives concerning the implementation of universal design and UDL are included. Institutions can take many other steps to promote UDL practice at the institutional level such as; the strategic facilitation of professional development opportunities in the field; the creation of UD for HE steering groups and communities of practice; the hiring of dedicated staffing reporting direct to senior management on the institutional implementation of UDL; the conducting of accessibility audits; and the promotion of key academic practices associated with UDL such as the facilitation of recorded lectures/the implementation of student choice in assessment.
- **Practitioner Level (Micro):** AHEAD encourages practitioners working right across the higher education to engage in professional development on the application of universal design/UDL, and to use learnings from this CPD to build more flexibility, accessibility, student voice and choice into their practice. Practitioners should consider forming or joining communities of practice on universal design practice to share learning and embed UD in the culture of the institution.

THE OVER-REPRESENTATION REPRESENTATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN FIELDS OF STUDY WITH LOWER GRADUATE OUTCOMES, AND UNDER-REPRESENTATION IN FIELDS WITH HIGHER OUTCOMES SHOULD BE ADDRESSED WITH TARGETED NATIONAL COMMITMENTS, STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

This research highlights that students with disabilities are over-represented in some fields of study with amongst the lowest graduate outcomes, and are under-represented in some fields with some of the highest graduate outcomes. This is particularly evident in the Arts and Humanities area, with almost one in four (21%) students with disabilities participating in courses in this area, in comparison to around 1 in 7 in the general student population (13.8%). According to 2020 data published by the HEA, Arts and Humanities is among the fields of study with the lowest graduate outcomes concerning employment rates and average salary earned upon graduation. Nine months after graduation, graduates of Arts and Humanities programmes had the lowest full-time employment rates of graduates across all fields by some distance (just 39.6%) (<https://hea.ie/statistics/graduate-outcomes-data-and-reports/graduate-outcomes-2020/main-graduate-destination/>), and earned the lowest average salary across all fields by some distance (€27,951) (<https://hea.ie/statistics/graduate-outcomes-data-and-reports/graduate-outcomes-2020/earnings-analysis/>). Conversely, students with disabilities are notably under-represented in some fields of study associated with amongst the highest employment and earnings and outcomes. They include:

- **Education;** of which 83.4% of graduates are in full time employment, earning an average salary of €40,615. Only 5% of students with disabilities are undertaking programmes in this field in comparison to 6.5% of the general student population in the responding institutions.
- **Health and Welfare;** of which 79.4% of graduates are in full time employment, earning an average salary of €36,797. Only 13.9% of students with disabilities are undertaking programmes in this field in comparison to 17.3% of the general student population in the responding institutions.
- **Business, Administration and Law;** of which 69.1% of graduates are in full time employment, earning an average salary of €36,225. Only 17.6% of students with disabilities are undertaking programmes in this field in comparison to 22.3% of the general student population in the responding institutions.

AHEAD acknowledge that the differences in the field of study profile of students with disabilities in comparison to the general student population are likely an outcome of a number of factors, including personal choice. However, data should be closely monitored, with national measures implemented to boost participation in fields of low participation, to ensure that lower graduate outcomes do not reinforce the existing links between poverty and disability, (Indecon, 2022). Measures that would help to address the issues identified include a review of guidance offered to students with disabilities to ensure they are making informed choices at the point of entry, the introduction of targeted funding streams to support participation, such as those currently under PATH 1, and development of targeted outreach programmes by higher education institutions.

AHEAD RECOMMEND THE HEA DEVELOP IMPROVED DATA COLLECTION EFFORTS TO TRACK THE PROGRESSION AND GRADUATE OUTCOMES OF STUDENTS AND GRADUATES WITH DISABILITIES, TO SUPPORT THE SECTOR TO ORIENTATE POLICY TOWARDS EQUITY OF GRADUATE OUTCOMES

AHEAD commend the role of national policy and national access mechanisms, such as the National Access Plan and the introduction of the Disability Access Route to Education, in advancing a significant increase in the participation rate of students with disabilities in higher education in the last decade. However, little is known at a national level about the progression and graduate outcomes of students with disabilities. What data that does exist suggests that higher rates of engagement in higher education are not translating into labour market participation, (Government of Ireland, 2015), with Ireland recording amongst the lowest employment rates of people with disabilities in Europe, at just 32.3% - significantly lower than the EU average of 50.8%, (European Disability Forum, 2020).

Additionally, this research highlights that although year-on-year progress has been made, engagement of people with disabilities in postgraduate study, which is associated with significantly higher graduate earnings and employment rates, remains notably low. [This data is available here](#). Just 2.8% of the total post-graduate population were registered with disability support services, in comparison to 7.8% at under-graduate level, a topic which requires further exploration.

By improving data collection and monitoring systems, perhaps through inclusion in a revised Data Access Plan for higher education, the HEA should track the progression and graduate outcomes of students and graduates with disabilities to support it to orientate policy towards equity of graduate outcomes. In this way, the higher education sector could make a greater contribution to addressing historically low employment rates for people with disabilities, and weakening the consistent links between poverty and disability displayed across Europe (European Disability Forum, 2020).

AHEAD RECOMMENDS NATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ACTION TO MONITOR AND INCREASE PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY

Participation in Erasmus + mobility opportunities is associated with increased employability, and participants report their engagement increased their technical, inter-personal and inter-cultural skills and competences, as well as their self-confidence, ability to achieve goals, and social and cultural openness, (European et al., 2019). Although there is a dearth of data regarding the participation of students with disabilities in international mobility in Ireland, primarily due to the limited oversight and departmental collaboration reported in this research, the available data for participation in Erasmus + collected through self-reporting of disability in a European-wide survey of participants suggests that students with disabilities make up about 4% of all Erasmus participants (1% disability, and 3% health condition). Considering that 12.2% of all new entrant undergraduates in higher education in Ireland self-reported having one or more disabilities in the HEA Equal Access Survey, indications are that participation in Erasmus is comparatively low.

The “On the Ground” section of this research revealed that only 40% of institutions collect data on the participation of students with disabilities in international mobility programmes, which may hamper national and institutional efforts to take an evidence-based approach to developing inclusive mobility practices. Additionally, in only a slight majority of institutions (55%) did the Disability/Access service collaborate with the International Office around targeted promotion of mobility opportunities to students with disabilities, and the organisation of supports for students engaging in mobility. This type of collaborative action is a key recommendation of the Inclusive Mobility Framework, an evidenced based tool developed by the Erasmus funded EPFIME project. [An overview of the framework can be accessed here.](#)

AHEAD recommends a range of coordinated actions at the national (macro), institutional (meso) and practitioner (micro) levels in order to increase participation in mobility opportunities.

- **National (Macro):** AHEAD recommends that the HEA consider actions to improve data collection on the participation of students with disabilities in international mobility, perhaps through a revised Data Access Plan, and the setting of national targets for participation. It is recommended that the HEA and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation, and Science (DFHERIS), examine current policy around inclusive mobility, by utilising the National Agency/Department section of the Inclusive Mobility Framework, an evidenced based tool developed by the Erasmus funded EPFIME project. Additionally, it is recommended that DFHERIS should engage with other government departments to explore unintended structural barriers to the engagement of students with disabilities on mobility opportunities. One example known to AHEAD is that the eligibility for Disability Allowance, and other associated social welfare payments, require 'residency status' for eligibility. This means payments for Disability Allowance are immediately ceased for the duration of study abroad, which is a major barrier to participation.

- **Institutional (Meso):** AHEAD recommends that institutions implement the Inclusive Mobility Framework, an evidenced based tool developed by the Erasmus funded EPFIME project. It is recommended institutions utilise the associated inclusive mobility self-assessment tool and the inclusive mobility guidelines for higher education institutions to support development of an inclusive mobility strategy and associated practices. Tracking data at an institutional level is a vital step to inform the development of an inclusive mobility strategy.

- **Practitioner Level (Micro):** AHEAD encourages practitioners working in HEI disability and international offices to build relationships and engage in collaborative actions to promote mobility and organise supports for students with disabilities who participate. More support and guidance can be found in the aforementioned inclusive mobility guidelines for higher education institutions.

THE HEA AND INSTITUTIONS SHOULD URGENTLY CONSIDER HOW THEY FUND AND QUALITY ASSURE THE PROVISION OF DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES TO ENSURE RECOMMENDED SUPPORTS ARE FULLY IMPLEMENTED

A key finding from this research was that while the responding institutions provided data on the number of students with disabilities who were recommended exam supports in their needs assessments, they were unable to report the number of students who actually received them. This was in part due to the swift move to varying forms of assessment in the wake of the first Covid-19 lockdown, but it raises interesting questions about the oversight and quality assurance practices in place to monitor the provision of supports.

AHEAD's Learning from Home Research (AHEAD, 2020, 2021a) for example, highlighted that a sizeable cohort of students with disabilities were not satisfied that the recommended accommodations contained in their needs assessment report were fully applied.

Additionally, this research highlights the rising caseloads of support staff. A 268% increase in the number of students with disabilities participating in higher education in the last 12 years has not been met with a corresponding increase in disability or learning support staff. In fact, there has been a 44% rise in the number of students with disabilities per support staff member recorded in the last 8 years alone. This increasing strain on the services raises questions about the ability of these services to continue ensuring that quality support is provided in a timely fashion, in line with the legal obligation to provide reasonable accommodations to people with disabilities. To provide a better student experience, promote quality and reduce legal risk, AHEAD recommends:

- **National (Macro):** AHEAD recommends that the HEA consider how the next National Access Plan and HEA Higher Education System Performance Framework (HEA, 2018) can contribute to monitoring quality processes in the provision of support services. Urgent engagement with institutions is necessary to address the staffing levels in Disability Support Services, linking staffing/funding levels to the rising caseloads of these services.
- **Institutional (Meso):** AHEAD recommends that institutions review the procedures they have in place to evaluate and quality-assure the provision of supports, ensuring the student voice is consistently captured and considered in updates to process in the provision of supports. Urgent engagement between institutions and national bodies is necessary to address the staffing levels in Disability Support Services, linking staffing/funding levels to the rising caseloads of these services.

The provision of quality supports advances a relevant contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, in particular pertaining to Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

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