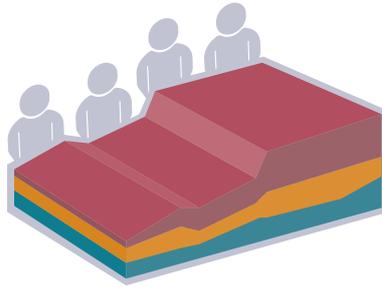


**Numbers of Students
with Disabilities
Studying in Higher
Education in Ireland
2017/18**

 **ahead**

Association for Higher Education Access & Disability



**Numbers of Students with Disabilities
Studying in Higher Education in Ireland 2017/18**

ISBN No: 978-1-9993202-3-2

Researched by Christine Hynes

Edited by Dara Ryder

Published by:

AHEAD Educational Press

East Hall

UCD

Carysfort Avenue

Blackrock

Co. Dublin

Tel: (01) 7164396

Email: ahead@ahead.ie

April 2019

Supported by

HEA | HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY
AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS

Summary



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 2017/18:

AN INCREASE IN THE REPRESENTATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

2017/18 marked another year of continued growth in the participation of students with disabilities in higher education. There are now 14,720 students with disabilities representing 6.2% of the total student population. This figure represents a 17% rise in the number of students with disabilities in higher education year on year and a 62% rise over the last 5 years of AHEAD's research in this area*. 2017/18 is the second consecutive year we have seen a 17% year on year rise in the numbers.



AN UNDER-REPRESENTATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AT POSTGRADUATE LEVEL WHEN COMPARED WITH THEIR PEERS

The participation rate of students with disabilities at undergraduate level (7% of undergraduate population) is two and a half times the rate of postgraduate participation (2.8%). However, the number of students with disabilities participating at postgraduate level (1233, up 22% year on year) grew at a higher rate than the number participating at undergraduate level (13487, up 16% year on year).



PARTICIPATION ON FULL TIME COURSES SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER THAN ON PART TIME COURSES

The participation rate of students with disabilities studying full time (7.3% of the total full time student population) was more than five times the rate of students with disabilities studying part time courses (1.4% of part-time population).

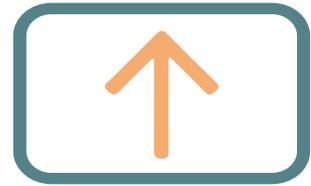


* Please note that ITC and GMIT were unable to provide a response to the 2012/13 survey from which this comparison is made.



INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF NEW ENTRANTS

Our research found that there were 3906 new entrants with disabilities in higher education in 2017/18, representing just over a quarter of the total population of students with disabilities. This is an increase of 11% in the number of new entrants in higher education from the previous year.



LARGE PERCENTAGE INCREASE IN 'OTHER' CATEGORY

There has been a significant increase in the number of new entrants students with disabilities registered under the category of the 'Other' disability. 111 students were registered under the category of Other which represented a more than 150% increase in the number of students in this category year on year.



A QUARTER OF STUDENTS THAT NEWLY REGISTERED WITH THE DISABILITY SERVICES WERE NOT IN THEIR FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE

A quarter of new registrations with disability services across all responding institutions were by students not in their first year of study in 2017/18 (1301), a proportion which has remained relatively static over the last five years of our research (AHEAD 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018). In this five year period, the number in this cohort has increased by 86%.



NUMBERS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION RISING TWICE AS FAST AS OTHER GROUPS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Over the past five years of this research (AHEAD 2018; 2017, 2016, 2015, 2014), the numbers of students in the Mental Health condition category (up 127% to 2,217) has risen at more than twice the rate of total numbers of students with disabilities (up 62% to 14,720).



LOW REPRESENTATION OF STUDENTS WITH SENSORY DISABILITIES

Students with sensory disabilities had the lowest representation across undergraduate and postgraduate levels in comparison to other categories of students with disabilities (Blind/Visually Impaired at 1.8% of total students with disabilities and Deaf/Hard of Hearing at 2.5%). Blind/Visually Impaired, has remained the lowest represented category of students with disabilities in higher education year on year, while students with a Specific Learning Difficulty remained the highest represented category at 38.9% (5,724). Over the past five years of this research (AHEAD 2018; 2017, 2016, 2015, 2014), the numbers of students in the Blind/Visually Impaired category (up 38%) and the Deaf/Hard of Hearing Category (up 28%) have grown at a significantly slower rate than numbers in the general population of students with disabilities (up 62%).



SIGNIFICANTLY MORE LIKELY TO STUDY IN HUMANITIES

Students with disabilities were significantly more likely to study in the field of 'Humanities and Arts' than their peers in the general student population. In 2017/18, 24.7% of students with disabilities were registered as studying in this field in comparison to 15.1% of the total student population.



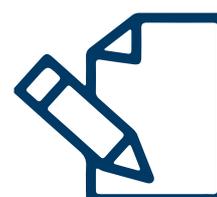
LESS THAN HALF AS LIKELY TO STUDY IN HEALTH AND WELFARE

Students with disabilities were less than half as likely to study in the field of 'Health and Welfare' compared to their peers in the total student population in 2017/18. 7.6% of the population of student with disabilities were studying in this field in comparison to 16.5% of the total population.



MOST STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES RECEIVE EXAM ACCOMMODATIONS

12,256 students with disabilities, representing 83% of all students with disabilities, received one or more exam accommodations in 2017/18. The number of students with disabilities in receipt of one or more exam accommodations increased by 18% from the previous year (10,397).



BIG INCREASE IN NUMBER OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES PER STAFF MEMBER SINCE 2011/2012.

The number of students with disabilities per disability support staff member has increased by 5% (176) year on year. This research has found that over the last six years there has been a 34% increase in the number of students with disabilities per disability support staff member (AHEAD 2013).



MOST SUPPORT STAFF THINK ROLES SHOULD BE PROFESSIONALISED

88% of the disability support staff from the higher education institutions involved in this study agreed that it would be beneficial to professionalise roles within the disability support office at third level.



ALMOST TWO THIRDS OF SUPPORT STAFF SEE PROMOTION OF UDL AS KEY PART OF THEIR ROLE

63% of the disability support staff from the higher education institutions involved in this study said they considered the promotion of UDL (Universal Design for Learning) practices to be a key part of the role of their departments on campus at present, while 26% did not.



Recommendations



Recommendations

- 1.** This research highlights the continuing positive growth in the overall numbers of students with disabilities registering with disability support services in higher education. It reflects how the strategic access policies and supports put in place by governing bodies, including The HEA, have increased the diversity of the student body in higher education significantly over the last number of years. However, the sustained increase in numbers, along with the reported significant rise in the number of students per disability support staff member in the last six years, indicate that institutions need to take a whole college approach to including students with disabilities in order to maintain quality and improve their overall learning experience.

AHEAD recommends that institutions ensure that their disability support units are adequately resourced to continue to provide quality accommodations.

AHEAD also recommends that HEIs implement institutional policies, in line with priority A.3 of the HEA's Strategic plan (HEA, 2018), which encourage a whole college approach to supporting students with disabilities, reducing pressure on specialised disability support services and recognising the role that teaching and learning, examinations, library and other frontline staff have in providing an inclusive educational experience. Such policies should be supported by professional development opportunities for staff members to provide them with the knowledge and skills for them to meet the needs of diverse learners in the higher education system.

- 2.** There is growing concern about the ongoing underrepresentation of students with sensory disabilities, i.e. students who are listed under Deaf/Hard of Hearing or Blind/Visually Impaired categories in higher education reported over the last number of AHEAD's surveys (2018; 2017; 2016; 2015). In consideration that these two categories of students are target groups identified by The HEA



to promote their advancement in education, it is surprising that their participation and growth rate remains comparatively low.

Following the ratification of The UNCRPD in Ireland in 2018, it is imperative that the state ensure that any barriers to access or support for these categories of students with disabilities are examined through further research and consultation with key stakeholders across all levels of education.

- 3.** In light of the governing bodies review of The Fund for Students with Disabilities across Higher Education Institutions (HEA, 2018), it is worthwhile considering the huge year on year increase of new entrants with disabilities being classified under the 'Other' category. Comments contained in returns to this survey suggest many students placed in this category have an intellectual disability and are on specific courses aimed at this cohort. Students on many of these types of courses are currently not supported by the Fund for Students with Disabilities or the Recurring Grant Allocation Model (RGAM), however an increasing number are registering with the disability support services seeking support.

It is recommended that further investigation be carried out by the Higher Education Authority to identify whether a new category of disability would need to be included as part of the Fund for Students with disabilities to cater for this cohort in the provision of supports and review the criteria for students which can be included in the RGAM funding.

- 4.** In the context of the ongoing diversification of the higher education student body, it is imperative that higher education institutions are operating effectively to address their needs and supporting student success in all aspects of their journey. Respondents in this study indicate that there are noted benefits to professionalising the disability officer role in order to benefit the operational supports for students with disabilities. A recent paper (2018) by AHEAD in collaboration with DAWN (Disability Advisors Working Network) outlined the rationale to

professionalise this role in higher education ‘...a new functionality is developing for the Disability Officer... [professionalization] would mean the student a disability would clearly know what to expect, and understand what the Disability Officer and other professionals in higher education can do collaboratively to support their learning experience’ (McCarthy et. al., 2018, p. 14).

AHEAD recommends that key stakeholders collaborate to identify a viable pathway to the professionalisation of this role.



Association for Higher Education Access & Disability

