

The Role of the Disability Officer and the Disability Service in Higher Education in Ireland

A Vision for Future Development

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February 2018



AHEAD would like to thank Ann Heelan, Michael Shevlin, and the DAWN network for their collaboration and contribution to the creation of this document.

ISBN No: 978-0-9954772-7-8

Published by:

AHEAD Educational Press

East Hall

UCD

Carysfort Avenue

Blackrock

Co. Dublin

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Website: www.ahead.ie

Design by Darling

www.hellodarling.ie

February 2018



Table of Contents

Introduction and Background		4
How to Use this Document		8
1. The Disability Service on Campus		10
2. New Challenges	Evolution of Reasonable Accommodations, Inclusive Education & Universal Design for Learning	16
3. Disability Officers	Engagement on Campus	22
4. Disability Officers	Supporting Learning and Teaching	38
5. Other Staff Engaged in Disability Support Services	Educational Support Workers	48
6. The Future Role of the Disability Officer		54
Bibliography		61

Introduction and Background

There is considerable diversity in the population of students in the Irish higher education system, including students from under-represented groups – students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, mature students, members of the travelling community, students with disabilities and international students. This diversity now includes over 11,000 students with disabilities, or 5.2% of the entire student population (AHEAD 2017b, HEA 2017) and it is anticipated by the HEA that this number will continue to increase in the coming years. This exponential increase in diversity in higher education is of itself changing the shape of higher education in Ireland, as the students of today expect to learn in a myriad of ways that are based on state of the art pedagogy and the use of technology to enhance learning.

It is increasingly recognised that **“there is an urgent need, in the light of increased participation of students with disabilities and decreased funding, to provide teaching and learning opportunities in a diversity of modes”** (Doyle, 2016. p.16).

Another driver of change was the introduction of Equality legislation (2000, 2004) which confers a legal obligation on educational institutions to make reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities in their education and examination systems. However it is unsustainable, financially and ethically, to only support students with disabilities in the current model of add-on supports delivered through specialist Disability Support

Services (such as reasonable accommodations) that sit outside the mainstream provision (Doyle, 2016). The current population of students with disabilities within the sector (over 11,000) bring considerable benefits to the higher education system, not least the value of the additional funding from the Ministers fund for Students with Disabilities for the provision of reasonable accommodations, currently around €10 million (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2017). The ever-increasing number of students with disabilities means that there is a growing imperative to explore how institutions can respond to their different needs in an efficient and inclusive way. The National Access Plan 2015-2019 has a clearly stated objective for Higher Education Institutions that **“equity of access policies should be mainstreamed into everyday life of higher education to enhance the quality of the learning experience and the progression outcomes for all students”** (HEA, 2015, p.18).

There is an opportunity now to imagine the future and to consider how higher education can be transformed through innovations in teaching; developing a deeper understanding of diversity; using advances in technology and tapping into the expertise of inclusive practice developed within Disability Support Services. Disability Support Services will share their expertise and years of learning about diversity with other stakeholders within the sector to enrich education for all students in mainstream settings. A social model perspective argues that there is a need to reduce the systemic barriers that obstruct students with

disabilities from **“gaining access to the same academic benefits”** (Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2010, p. 702) as their peers.

This publication recognises that students with disabilities must be included in all aspects of college life, and while this activity is often negotiated by the staff of the Disability/Access Office, supporting these students is not just an activity exclusive to Disability Support Services. It is everyone’s job. The challenge is to recognise that collaboration is required across the whole college, along with the commitment of senior staff. While Disability Services have and will continue to provide an essential and unique service to students with disabilities, essential investment is needed across institutions to upskill all staff, such as staff working in admissions, librarians, academics and those involved with Erasmus initiatives, placement and careers. In order to make this happen the values of inclusion, embedded in Disability Support Services, need to be recognised and promoted across institutions, and the role of Disability Support Officers professionalised. The professionalisation of the role of Disability Support Officer is a step in facilitating their changing role on campus from one of supporting the student to one which also works collaboratively with staff across the campus to create a college that is fully inclusive.

This publication has been developed as a collaboration between AHEAD and DAWN.

AHEAD - The Association for Higher Education Access and Disability - is a centre of expertise on inclusive education, that aims to promote full access to and participation in further and higher education for students with disabilities and to enhance employment prospects on graduation. Further information on AHEAD can be found at www.ahead.ie

DAWN - The Disability Advisors Working Network - is the national organisation for Disability Officers who are primarily responsible for supporting students with disabilities in higher education in Ireland. DAWN provides a forum for the sharing of expertise and the development of knowledge and skills in this area. DAWN works toward the development of professional standards and best practice, with members collaborating on the development of policies and procedures for the inclusion of students with disabilities in Higher Education Institutions. Further information on DAWN can be found at www.dawn.ie

How to use this document

This document is part of a series of publications and an online resource:

- 1 Position Paper** - Inclusive Education: A Road Map for Disability Support in Higher Education in Ireland, published in 2017.
- 2 The Role of the Disability Officer and the Disability Service in Higher Education in Ireland – A Vision for Future Development**, 2018.
- 3 Establishing an Inclusive Learning Environment** - The Role of the Disability Service in Higher Education in Ireland – A Vision for Future Development.
- 4 Online resource/manual** outlining best practices in inclusive learning and the provision of reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities in higher education in Ireland.

The first document sets out a road map for the future of inclusive education in higher education against the backdrop of new demands, changing demographics, and innovations in teaching and learning.

This document - the second in the series - acts as a link between the aforementioned document and the online resource/manual.

In order to achieve a professional Disability Service in higher education with the requisite expertise and knowledge it is time to start a conversation about the complexity of the role involved. The Disability Officer of the future will lead a service that will work within the higher education system as it evolves and adopts inclusive practices. To do this, recognition is needed of the leadership and professional role the Disability Officer must play. This document aims to start that discussion and outline the future role.

The third development is a resource for Disability Officers and disability support staff that will support these initiatives. There is a growing recognition that not only are reasonable accommodations changing, but those that are involved in the process require distinctive knowledge.

Each of these developments seek to support the growth of a high quality service that has a professional role, and ensure a future where students and higher education systems can reach their optimum potential.



THE DISABILITY SERVICE ON CAMPUS

“

Reasonable accommodations are intended to facilitate equality of participation in the education system for these persons and to ensure that they achieve appropriate learning outcomes

”

— Kinsella & Senior, 2008, p. 63

1. The Disability Service on Campus

Student Support Services (SSS) are a collection of facilities and support activities provided to scaffold the learning process for students registered in higher education and incorporate the Disability Support Services (DSS). They are the interface between the college and the student. Students need support in all aspects of education including the academic, emotional and social demands of higher education. Providing this support to students contributes to a higher quality of education for both students and those that engage with them as they progress towards graduation.

The Disability Officer is the recognised practitioner and main driver of the Disability Service, working exclusively to ensure that students with a disability are supported and included on campus. They act not just as a broker of services, a case manager, a planner, a source of information and advocate but they also act as a manager of the service. They are committed to a policy of equal opportunity in education in accordance with the Disability Act 2005, the Equal Status Acts 2000 (as amended) and the Universities Act 1997.

The central core of the Disability Officer function is to ensure that reasonable accommodations are in place as appropriate. Reasonable accommodations are a legal requirement and are designed to take into account the impact of the student's disability in the learning environment to promote student success. Reasonable accommodations are intended to **“facilitate equality of participation in the education**

system for these persons and to ensure that they achieve appropriate learning outcomes” (Kinsella & Senior, 2008, p. 63). Implementing a reasonable accommodation on campus might involve changing procedures, modifying the delivery of a course, providing additional services or altering the physical environment (AHEAD, 2016).

As higher education evolves, changes in the implementation of supports and reasonable accommodations are taking place. These supports have historically been provided on an add-on individual basis but are now becoming more mainstreamed across the campus. Now students with a disability engage with all disciplines and professionals on campus in planning their educational journey, with the Disability Officer playing a central role in liaising with staff across the whole college within this process.

The **“challenge... is to make staff internalise inclusivity as a general guiding ethos rather than something that is tagged on to a disablist curriculum as a reaction to an excluded student”** (Hopkins, 2011, p. 723). This way of working across the whole college is prompting a shift towards a philosophy of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The implementation of inclusive practices as the first line of accessibility, rather than the application of specialist supports, reasonable accommodations, and retroactive strategies to overcome barriers found within traditional teaching and learning methodologies is increasingly seen as the way forward.

In this ever-changing environment, a new functionality is developing for the Disability Officer. This in turn creates the need to articulate what this functionality actually is, and what the roles and responsibilities of a disability support service within an institution entail. There is a strong case for the professionalisation of the Disability Officer and for the case that the Disability Officer will be a recognised professional, engaging with both the students themselves and all others involved in their journey. They are already recognised as a unique resource, advocate and practitioner, critical to the success of students with disabilities in today's higher education system. However, as their remit develops further, it is timely that their role and responsibilities are recognised across higher education in Ireland. Ultimately this would mean the student with 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.

To achieve this goal this publication will:

- point to a clearly identifiable professional role of Disability Officer in the system.
- explain the philosophy that underpins the clear, measurable standards that they strive towards as they anticipate and advocate for reasonable accommodations.
- clearly establish how this philosophy can then be used to guide all other system components.

The vision this publication seeks to promote is one where the Disability Officer is a key position and a critical resource in higher education, as the principles of Universal Design for Learning are adopted as a recognised baseline for supporting students with disabilities on their educational journeys.

2

NEW CHALLENGES



Equity of access policies should be mainstreamed into the everyday life of Higher Education Institutions to enhance the quality of the learning experience and progression outcomes for all students

2. New Challenges

Evolution of Reasonable Accommodations, Inclusive Education & Universal Design for Learning

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) emphasises the need to implement more inclusive and integrated approaches in the National Access Plan 2015-19. Implementing inclusive practices should represent the first line of accessibility rather than the application of specialist supports, reasonable accommodations, and retroactive strategies to overcome barriers found within traditional teaching and learning methodologies. The Fund for Students with Disabilities (ESF-FSD) administered by the HEA, provides for services and reasonable accommodations that complement the delivery of academic support for students with disabilities through the mainstream. The Fund directs institutions to promote an inclusive educational environment that encourages independent learning, and the development of transferable skills (HEA, 2017).

The challenge of providing high quality educational environments where all students are included fully is a complex one and requires that an environment is created that supports inclusion. This requires a multi-tiered approach that involves leadership, teaching and learning, assessment and a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach. UDL refers to the design of curricula, teaching practices, assessment methods, support services and physical environments that can accommodate the ever-increasing diversity of students in higher education. In line with UDL, the introduction of Institutional Performance Compacts for 2014–16 initiatives by the HEA is also committed to achieving equal access to education and increased

participation of students from under-represented groups, through enhanced opportunities and supports (HEA, 2014). Therefore, incorporating the principles of UDL by HE institutions across campus will assist them in meeting a wide diversity of needs and in accommodating the vast majority of students.

With the increase in diversity in the student population, along with the demand for inclusive curricula and the expectations pertaining to resource allocation and quality standards, there is an additional significant change in the system in the role technology now plays in higher education. As technology becomes more affordable, its use has become an integral component of teaching and learning for students and educators alike. Yet when ICT strategies are implemented without sufficient forethought, it can result in tensions and/or become a barrier to learning itself. For example, if adequate consideration is not given to compatibility issues that may arise when using mainstream technologies with Assistive Technologies, the result can impact on the students trying to use those technologies, the educators using technologies as part of their teaching and learning process, and the Disability Service who often must intervene to identify an appropriate solution.

Technology, when used correctly, is of particular significance for students with disabilities as it can enable flexible curriculum development, promote independence, and help all students acquire key skills that are transferable to other educational settings and the workplace (UNESCO, 2011). Furthermore, to succeed in college it is essential that students adapt to the extensive use of e-learning that has become a fundamental component of learning environments in recent decades (Fichten, Asuncion, Barile, Ferraro, & Wolforth, 2009). For some students with disabilities the use of Assistive Technologies in conjunction with mainstream technologies may be essential. Following a Needs Assessment that identifies reasonable accommodations, the Disability Officer, together with the Assistive Technology Facilitator, can play a crucial role in ensuring that students with disabilities acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to use technologies in a manner that best meets their needs.

As technology becomes embedded new tensions can arise between the technological environments versus the technology students need to use. The Disability Officer is increasingly being called upon to propose necessary technologies not just for the individual with a disability, but also for the whole campus environment as it seeks to be inclusive to a wider profile of learners e.g. loop systems for deaf students. When one considers all of the changes taking place, it is evident that this impacts significantly on the role of the Disability Officer. What was once a resource for a small section of the higher education community is now

a valuable asset as education evolves and the principles of inclusive education, together with Universal Design for Learning, are adopted. The Disability Officer's role is evolving from not just that of an expert in inclusive education and reasonable accommodation, but as a leader, a broker and a facilitator managing change and quality, ensuring standards across the system while all the time advocating for students with disabilities.

3

DISABILITY OFFICERS

A photograph of a student walking away from the camera through a brick archway. The student is wearing a dark, quilted jacket and a black bag. The archway is made of red and grey bricks. A large, semi-transparent green circle is overlaid on the center of the image, containing white text.

Ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population

3. Disability Officers and Service

Engagement on Campus

Equality of opportunity in higher education has been a national priority addressed through the work of the Higher Education Authority in Ireland, and significant progress has been made in widening access and participation for students with disabilities through successive National Access Plans.

In December 2015, the new National Access Plan 2015-2019 announced an overarching objective which observed a need to **“ensure that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population”** (HEA, 2015, p. 14). Two objectives identified within this plan speak to increasing the participation of under-represented groups of students such as students with disabilities, and the impact of reduced funding and student financial supports on participation and completion rates. The growth rate in the numbers of students with disabilities in a climate of reduced/static funding is a problem. The solution that is emerging is to build a culture of inclusion across the whole campus and to use a framework of UDL in the design of all new courses and services. In other words, to develop and up-skill what is there already - change the way courses are designed and delivered, the way assessments are carried out, and how transitions to study abroad or work are designed. The Disability Officer is as a pivotal source of knowledge and expertise and is now best positioned to contribute to policies that seek to ensure fairness, equity of access and consistency across campus.

Disability Officers have a wealth of experience in working with thousands of learners across a variety of curricula. They understand first-hand the challenges for the learner and the increasing demands placed on institutions on how best to include a diverse range of students. This expertise and knowledge, together with their unique relationships, qualify them to be adopters of the development of inclusive practices while managing the changes required to ensure value and quality.

As previously outlined, the role of Disability Service staff in higher education centres around the provision of reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities who seek support. However, Disability Service staff increasingly work across the system, not just providing specialist supports to the students who require them, but engaging with the system in enabling a wider cohort of students to manage their learning more independently. In the interests of developing a sustainable strategy and way of working, a Universal Design for Learning approach will be taken, whereby inclusive practices are clearly advised, thought through and implemented.

Increasingly, other students seek the benefits of some of the supports allocated to students with disabilities, as very often what is a reasonable accommodation for one student has been recognised as having a much wider application, for example the availability of lecture notes online. Thus, the role of the Disability Officer is already evolving beyond providing services and accommodations just for students with disabilities.

As the provision of reasonable accommodation moves towards influencing the planning and design of a learning environment where there is less requirement for add-on supports, the Disability Officer needs to be more proactive than reactive. Universal Design for Learning explains this shift.

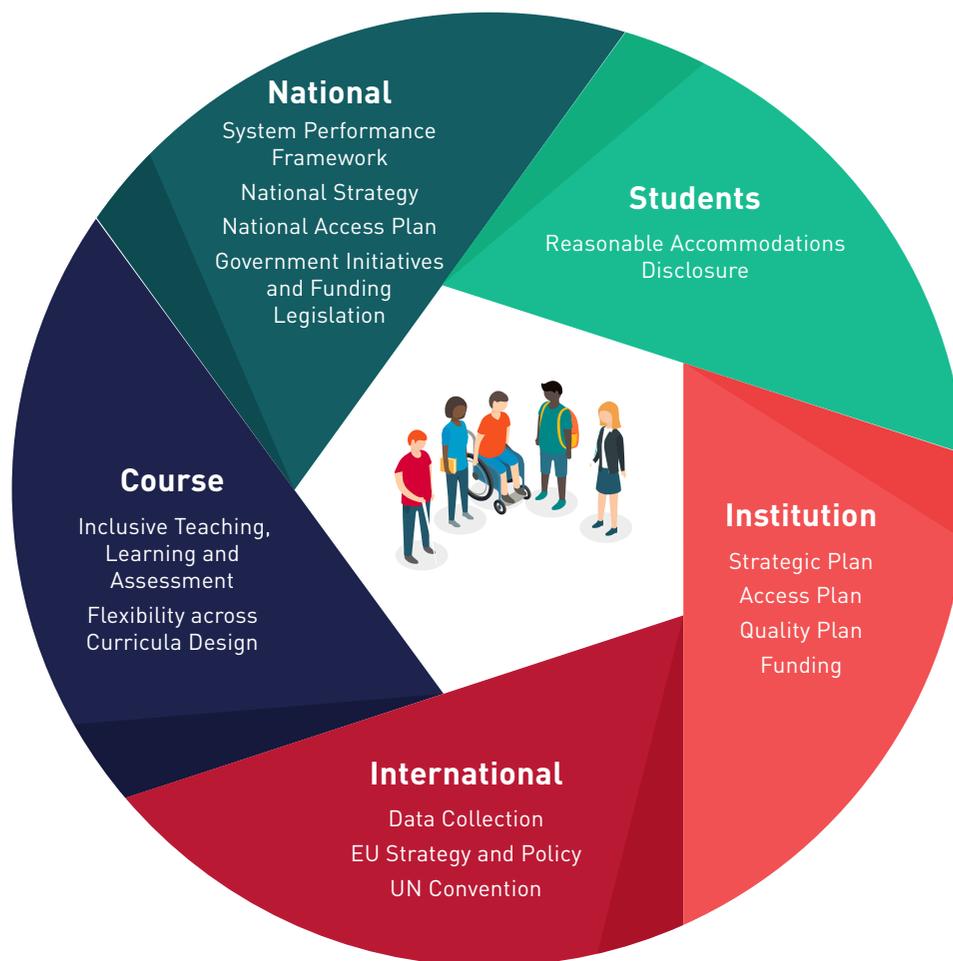


Figure 1: Disability Officers engagement with systems across higher education

The Disability Officer is committed to promoting, encouraging and assisting with the implementation of Universal Design for Learning principles, as the first response to ensuring access to learning programmes within the institution. However, where a college needs to consider all aspects of learning for a diversity of students including those with a disability, a whole college approach is required. Only this will ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to the full range of services and facilities in the institution, while the experience of a greater diversity of students is also improved. To achieve this, the Disability Officer must engage at all levels.

1. Student



There are instances when a student's needs cannot be accommodated through mainstreamed services. Consequently, the provision of individual supports and interventions to facilitate the student's participation is required. These students engage directly with the

Disability Service on campus. Reasonable accommodations are determined by the Disability Service through a Needs Assessment process that considers the nature of the disability, course requirements, and individual differences. Provision of reasonable accommodations are based upon an assessment of need, the overarching tenet of which is person-centred planning (AHEAD, 2012; Ritchie, 2003). It is essential, therefore, that all engaged with students with disabilities adhere to this principle, and recognise the individuality of reasonable accommodations.

◀ **The process of Needs Assessment and the identification of reasonable accommodations are outlined in the online operational manual and resources.**

Disclosure

Disabling societies are not always conducive to facilitating disclosure (Matthews, 2009). Consequently disclosure can be perceived as problematic for students with disabilities. However, it is recognised that disclosure is necessary to ensure supports and reasonable accommodations are provided in a timely and appropriate manner to enable participation within all aspects of the student's educational journey. Disclosure is an integral component of the Needs Assessment process and the Disability Officer plays a crucial function in encouraging students with disabilities to disclose, providing them with a safe environment within which to do so.

◀ **Guidelines on how to assist students in understanding disclosure in college and in the workplace are outlined in the online operational manual.**

2. Course – Engaging with Teaching Staff and Curriculum Development



Reasonable accommodations are often determined and provided in collaboration with academic departments and other administrative units. This partnership approach is central to achieving a more inclusive learning environment and in facilitating individual reasonable accommodations where necessary. Teaching staff can engage with the Disability Officer to ensure that they plan and design their curricula and assessment in line with best practices for inclusion, to minimise the need for add-on support, and to enable as wide a range of students to participate as possible.

◀ **Templates and models of good practices are outlined in the online operational manual and resources.**

3. Institutional Planning and Policy



Institutions are now required to plan to attract, engage and retain an increasing diversity of students. Each institution, together with the Department of Education and Skills and the Higher Education Authority, have made a commitment and set targets as outlined in strategic plans, policies for inclusion and quality standards, and this is further reflected and supported in funding commitments by relevant governing bodies.

While the Disability Officer is focused on ensuring that a student with a disability is reasonably accommodated in their learning, many of the practices of inclusion that are necessary for a few work effectively for many, and as such are attractive to most students. Considering that many of these measures should be planned for, they need to be considered at all stages of planning and policy implementation. Only then can reasonable accommodation move from primarily an add-on approach to a more mainstream alternative.

While attracting and engaging with the more diverse learner may be thought of as an access issue, it cannot be considered as a separate action. If institutions are to create the conditions for all students and staff, including those with disabilities, to succeed, then the practical engagement and involvement of the Disability Officer is central to this objective.

▶ **Institutional policies in inclusive practices and models of good practices are summarised in the online operational manual and resources.**

4. Engagement at a National Level



In recent decades, Ireland has witnessed a proliferation of legislation that is pertinent to the education of students with disabilities. Within this policy and legislation, Ireland has adopted an inclusive position

and the rights of students with disabilities have been increasingly recognised in legislation. Some of the pertinent policy and legislation that has been identified as significant include the Education Act (1998), the Equal Status Act (2000), Equality Act (2004b), the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004a) and the Disability Act (2005). The catalyst for this legislation arises from a desire on the part of the government to uphold the rights of students with disabilities to an education that is appropriate to their needs, and to ensure statutory protection for their rights to such an education. Equality legislation (2000, 2004) identifies that educational establishments are required to:

...make reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities in their education, examination and accreditation systems in order to facilitate equality of participation in the education system for these persons and to ensure that they achieve appropriate learning outcomes (Kinsella & Senior, 2008, p. 53).

The role of the Disability Officer includes ensuring that all pertinent legislation is implemented fully within their institution. While it is true to say that this is a whole institution responsibility, the Disability Officer is often the go-to professional for knowledge on this.

National Strategy – Explicit Targets

Goal 1 of the National Plan for **Equity of Access** to Higher Education 2015-2019 intends to mainstream the delivery of equity of access through the following objectives:

1.1 To mainstream the delivery of equity of access in institutions with the objective being ‘to embed whole of institution approaches to institutional access strategies so that access for under-represented groups is prioritised across all faculties (HEA, 2015, p. 25)

1.2 To address issues that may arise for students from the target groups within mainstream supports and services (HEA, 2015, p. 25).

The HEA has set a target of 8% (currently 6%) of students with disabilities as a percentage of all new entrants to higher education (HEA, 2015). Other target groups will also be increased and therefore inclusive practices will benefit all. Each institution has a strategic plan that provides a framework for the strategic direction over a stated term, which is reviewed annually. Institution access strategies are to be aligned with the objectives and targets as set out in the National Access Plan 2015-2019. This is reported in the Annual Systematic Performance Framework as outlined below and in other measures set out in the National Access Plan.

System Performance Framework - Compact KPIs

Each institution has a performance-based compact with the Higher Education Authority, undertaking how it will contribute to national objectives from the position of its particular mission and strengths.

The compacts have a range of objectives relating to

- increased participation, equality of access and life-long learning.
- excellent teaching and learning and quality of the student.

It incorporates a commitment to growth in student numbers, as well as expanding provision for flexible and blended learning opportunities. The compacts outline how performance is to be measured and how a proportion of funding will, in future years, be contingent on this performance.

All institutions will be required to set out the vision that underpins their portfolio of undergraduate programmes, and how their planned provision is aligned with their mission within the system. Ways in which Institutions might demonstrate the approaches they use to improve their overall performance include:

- benchmarking themselves against relevant peers in other countries.
- clearly linking programmes to defined learning outcomes.
- increasing variety in teaching, learning and assessment.
- CPD for all staff on diversity.

- using student feedback to inform programme planning, content and delivery.
- engaging with industry and other stakeholders.

◀ **Good examples of these engagements are explored in the online manual and resources.**

Funding

The Higher Education Authority allocates funding to Institutions for the provision of services and supports to full-time students with disabilities. The fund is designed to support student participation in their academic programmes and are not disadvantaged because of a disability. Funding is allocated to the institution, not to the student. The institution has full discretion in decisions on the allocation of the fund at local level, and remains responsible for the management of funding throughout the duration of each year.

Overall, there has been a year on year increase in the number of students with disabilities supported with the numbers increasing by 27.3% (n=2,153) from 7,897 students in 2012/13 to 10,050 students in 2014/15 (AHEAD, 2015; 2016).

A review of the funding model in 2016-2017 has been carried out and recommends that the Taskforce responsible for the design,

development and implementation of a new model for allocating funding should refer to this review to allow for improved efficiencies and new developments.

▶ **A new model has been published in 2017 and this will have significant impact on funding and how it is to be allocated going forward. An online operational manual and resources will support the implantation of the model when published. Templates and good examples of funded initiatives will also be shared.**

5. Engagement at International Level



Data on student diversity and student Disability Services on campus – both in relation to the numbers and the experience - is now more important than ever. While there is some research and data available, it

is increasingly recognised that there is much to be gained from sharing best practices across the EU and further afield. European legislation and policies including The Bologna Process also have significant stimulus, and their impact on changes in curriculum and the mobility of students across the EU has an effect on the Disability Service and its operations. As the EU works to standardise and improve the educational experience of all its students, there is an opportunity to share know-how across jurisdictions.

This collaboration across Europe with respect to Disability Services is not new and has been the focus of many European projects in the past, including the LINK network. Erasmus and the mobility of students has also played a role. The review of the role and activities of the Disability Service is not confined to Ireland. In fact similar reviews are currently taking place in other EU countries. Ultimately the aim is that students and staff that engage in any mobility initiative across the EU can come to experience the same high standard of education and experience. Simply put, this means that locally the Disability Officer must be ready to engage with visiting students and to communicate with similar professionals in other countries when Irish students are going abroad on an Erasmus placement.

◀ **The data and the role of Disability Service as it evolves across the EU will be shared in the online resource.**

4

DISABILITY OFFICERS



Inclusive Practices – the
shift from engaging with
a few students to all
students

4. Disability Officers

Supporting Learning and Teaching

The core function of any Higher Education Institution is to teach and enable the learning for all its students. While pedagogical practices and curriculum continually evolve, for most students this is not an issue. However, for a small group of students, accessibility is key to their learning, and while much of the focus has been on enabling the student to engage, increasingly the focus is shifting to include pedagogical practices and curriculum development.

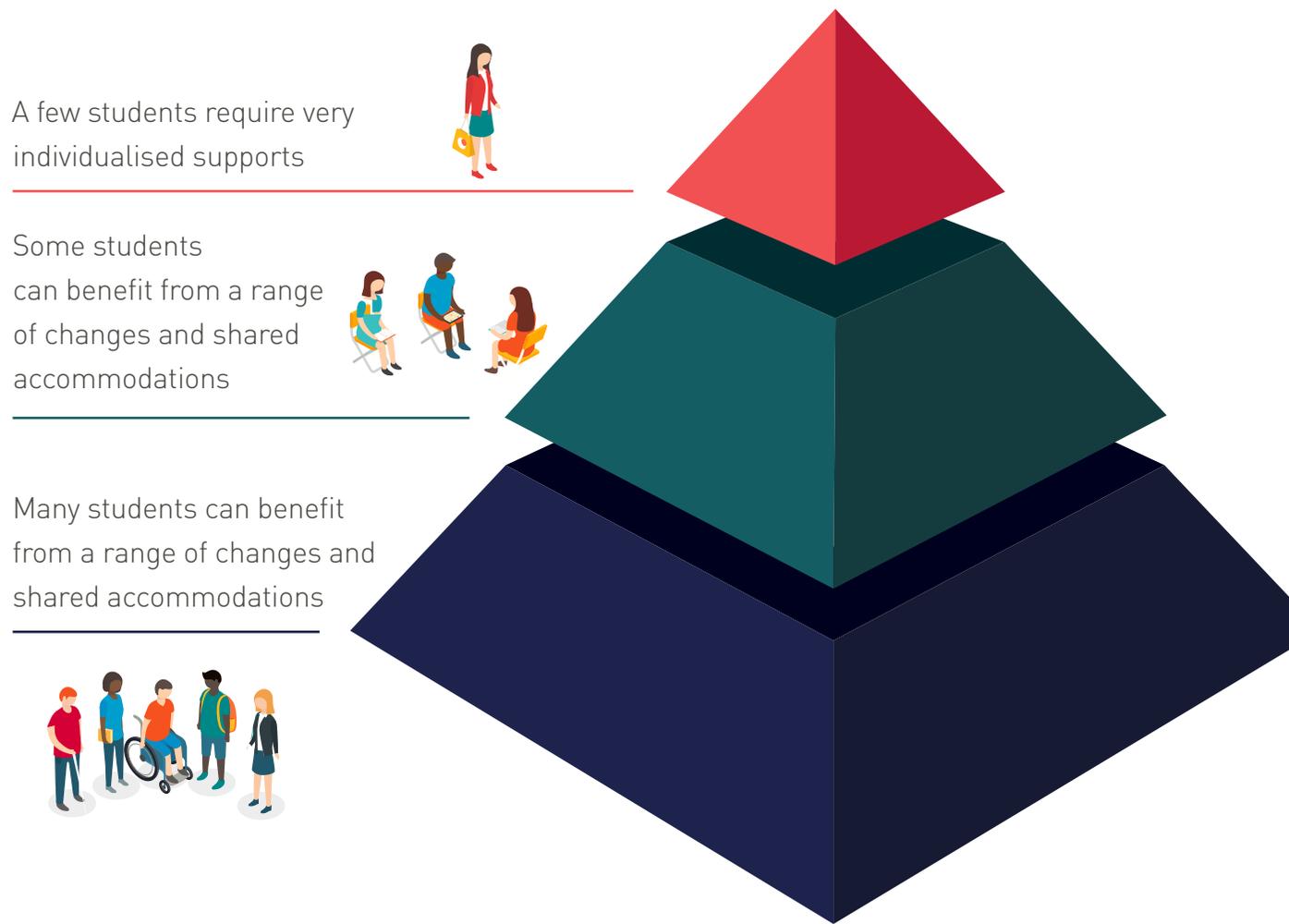
The Needs Assessment is the starting point and remains a point of reference for the Disability Officer – whether they are focusing on individual learning, group learning or the wider picture of pedagogy.

Whether changes to learning, teaching, the environment or a more individualised support are identified as necessary during the Needs Assessment, the Disability Officer has a central role, as it is they who have both a unique relationship with the student, and a key understanding of disability challenges in the higher education environment.

Students with disabilities register with the Disability Service, usually upon entering the Higher Education Institution, or at any point during their education. Every student with a disability has different needs. During the first meeting with the Disability Officer a Needs Assessment is carried out. These Needs Assessments determine the level of support that students require. The following areas are addressed:

- 1.** Nature of disability or condition, to include: impact on education, severity, hospital admissions etc.
- 2.** Treatment: any medication they are taking, outpatients' appointments, such as physiotherapy.
- 3.** Previous support: what arrangements were made at secondary school, if any.
- 4.** Current difficulties: what difficulties does the student anticipate they may have with their course.
- 5.** Access to equipment and IT facilities.
- 6.** Appropriate academic and disability support.

Figure 2: Where the focus shifts from including one student to inclusive pedagogical practices



The top of the model is symbolic of the smaller numbers of student that engage with the Disability Service in an inclusive environment. This demonstrates the shift towards the larger numbers that benefit from activity by the Disability Officer that result in practices that benefit all students.

Following completion of the Needs Assessment a report is generated and with the agreement of the student, this information is then passed on to the relevant staff in the Higher Education Institution. Needs Assessments are used to determine what reasonable accommodations are required by a student with a disability to ensure that they can engage, as far as possible, in all aspects of their education.

◀ **Examples of reasonable accommodations are outlined in the online manual and resources.**

Inclusive Practices – the shift from engaging with a few students to all students

All students, including students with disabilities, need to develop key learning skills and strategies to support their academic progress. It is particularly important that students have access to support in first year to assist with the transition to higher education and to promote independent learning. This includes notetaking strategies, study techniques, researching skills, time management, critical reading, academic writing, and proofing and editing written work.

Such skills and strategies can be provided through mainstreamed workshops, modules and online resources that are inclusive of the specific needs of diverse students. Educational technologies that build skills in these areas should be integrated into mainstreamed

learning support programmes and should also, where possible, be made available on all college computers. The appropriateness of mainstreamed learning support is considered as part of the Needs Assessment process.

Reasonable accommodation as coordinated by Disability Service for more than one student

Small group learning supports are also coordinated by the Disability Service to help students develop their academic skills. This reasonable accommodation is provided when a group of students with disabilities are facing similar challenges in their learning environments which are not catered for through mainstreamed provision. Therefore it makes for efficient practice to provide the accommodation in a group setting, where appropriate. The emphasis is on enabling students to acquire key learning skills and strategies so they can complete their coursework and assignments independently thereafter.

Students may also be required to engage with Assistive Technology to help build skills in this area and to encourage independent learning. Learning support coordinated by the Disability Service is not subject-specific and focuses on the improvement of general academic/study skills. For example, disability learning support staff do not assist with proofreading and editing written work but rather teach students to do these activities independently. This allows groups of students to learn and work together on a specific learning related task.

Role of technology for all students versus a student with a disability

All students in 3rd level education are expected to have access to a computer/laptop to participate effectively. The institution recognises that this may not be possible for all students and therefore computers and/or laptops are available for student use. Educational technology can help build and improve key academic skills such as notetaking, production of written work, reading, planning and organising effectively, memory and concentration. It promotes independence and helps all students (including students with disabilities) acquire key skills that are transferable to other educational settings and the workplace. Appropriate educational technology and training should be available to all students. This educational technology should, where possible, be part of the student image that is available across college campuses. Institutions are encouraged to provide Assistive Technology information and recommendations on their websites for the use of students/colleges who may benefit from this information.

◀ **Collaboration with the Assistive Technology officer and campus IT professionals is key and is outlined in the online manual and resource toolkit. The Assistive Technology role is outlined in the next section.**

Curriculum Development, Delivery and Disability

The diversity of the student population and the increasing demands for access to higher education, together with the impact of financial constraints, requires institutions to provide cost effective activities to deliver on the targets that they have been set. By delivering an inclusive approach to curriculum development and delivery, institutions will provide an effective and efficient method of support to the greatest number of students. It will ensure clarity of programme objectives and deliverables and will evidence the institution's commitment to inclusive practices. Including inclusive practice as the norm also allows for a more flexible approach, as it works with taught courses, e-learning and research. It provides disciplinary integrity and coherence for each programme type. Delivering curricula that have been designed to support the broadest range of the diverse student body will also enhance institutional reputation.

Institutions are recognising this and increasingly endorsing the practice of inclusive teaching and assessment, developing and designing courses that are accessible and enabling success for all students. The Disability Officer is well positioned to contribute to the development and delivery of innovative inclusive learning support initiatives and put in place appropriate mechanisms to ensure that the learning and academic supports offered to students represent best practice.

 **Good examples of on campus models of inclusive teaching are available in the online manual and resource toolkit**

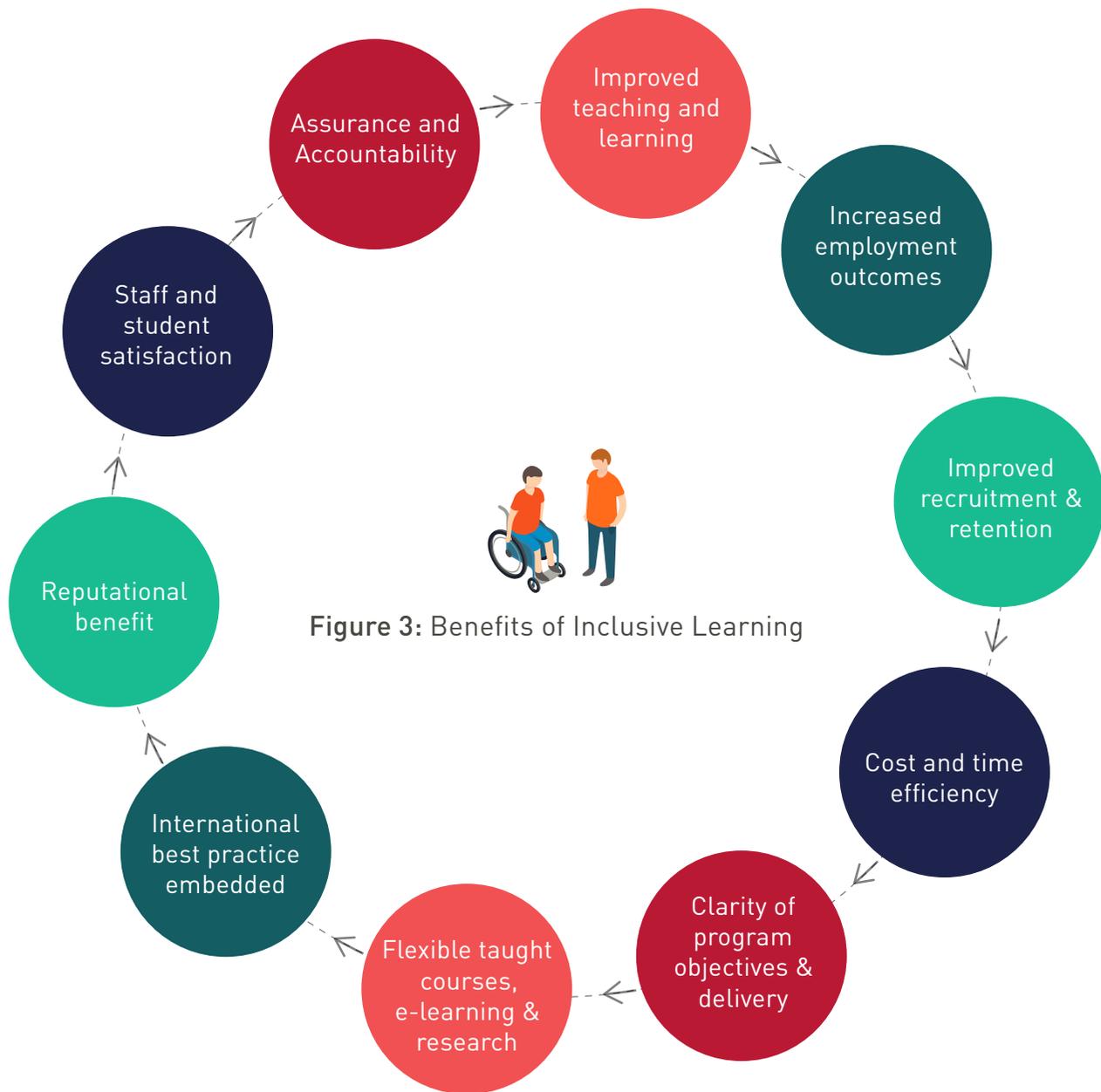


Figure 3: Benefits of Inclusive Learning

5

OTHER STAFF ENGAGED IN
DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES

5. Other Staff Engaged in Disability Support Services

Today the Disability Service on a college campus has two principle functions – firstly, to provide supports and services to the College’s disabled community of learners and secondly, to ensure their college is compliant with relevant legislation, policies and meets standards as set by HEA and codes of practice. How this takes place is continually evolving.

What remains constant however and has already been outlined, is that the driver for Disability Service delivery is the Needs Assessment process. The recommendations identified during this process are more often dependent on **a multi-disciplinary approach**, and this is supported by an **experienced team of professionals** who work to deliver a high-quality service.

College and campus life for a student with a disability is a learning experience in every sense and while students with a disability are encouraged to be independent in their learning, it can require input from other professionals. Most Higher Education Institutions readily acknowledge the diversity of learners today on campus and expect that the curriculum will be accessed by a diverse group with varying levels of skill. Where the impact of the disability is greater, there is a need to access appropriate, specific assistance.

The nature of disability can mean that students differ in how they process information; some will readily access information in a visual

format whilst others may need alternative types of representation such as auditory, digital or Braille formats. Providing information in alternative formats such as illustrations, verbal explanations, storyboards or film can help students to make sense of the information. Providing students with opportunities to engage with the appropriate technologies or ensuring that the content is communicated in a meaningful way will also help support learning and motivation. However, these activities are implemented by professionals with expert knowledge in each area – so for some students there is a team of people involved in ensuring that a level of service takes place as and when they require it.

Students registered with the Disability Service who engage in a Needs Assessment process may be directed to engage with different professionals, depending on their requirements. Where multiple reasonable accommodations are recommended, a team approach is necessary for efficiency and quality support. This team is made up of various professional staff, the main player being the Disability Officer. Other staff may also be involved. This can include Assistive Technology Officer, Psychologist and/or Occupational Therapists who provides relevant reasonable accommodation management support. In addition, educational support workers may provide specialist disability supports (examples of which include, Academic Personal Assistants, Note takers, Irish Sign Language Interpreters and Academic Tutors).

The team that any student engages with very much depends on the needs identified in the Needs Assessment. This is not fixed as the impact of disability can vary and can change.

The Disability Officer plays a key role, steering and working in collaboration with this team to ensure that add-on supports are provided where a student's disability is impacting on their learning experience. This is all the while recognising that where common barriers to learning are identified, they do have expertise in UDL practice and provision and can advise academic and administrative staff on all aspects of course delivery, promoting a more inclusive approach. Thus the Disability Officer is a mediator, negotiator and collaborator – an advocate and specialist for those students that need it most.

The ultimate goal for the future - an inclusive and enabling learning environment that encompasses all institution activities – does and will depend on the continued synergy between the Disability Officer and other support professionals with both the learner and college staff.

Specialist disability support professionals that engage with the Disability Officer

Academic Personal Assistant

An Academic Personal Assistant (Academic PA) provides assistance with mobility around the campus, educational or physical tasks (i.e. photocopying, notetaking, and carrying personal belongings) and some personal care needs that the student cannot complete independently.

Subject Specific Academic Tutor

An Academic Tutor reviews course material with students. Support is delivered on a one-to-one basis and involves recapping of material covered in lectures. It is not a 'grind' and cannot provide additional support over and above summarising the content from a particular lecture.

Assistive Technology Facilitator (ATF)/Alternative Media Format (AMF) Facilitator

An Assistive Technology Facilitator/Alternative Media Facilitator (hereafter ATF/AMF) advises students on appropriate technology to support them in achieving their full academic potential. The AMF/ATF may also provide training in the use of Assistive Technology to students and support the student to transfer inaccessible material

into alternative media formats. This enables a student to access the material using screen readers or other software.

Irish Sign Language (ISL) Interpreter

An Irish Sign Language (ISL) Interpreter facilitates communication between students who are deaf, and their peers and college staff. ISL interpretation provides access to the teaching and learning environment and enables the student's full participation in college life. ISL Interpreters must hold a recognised professional accreditation (i.e. Diploma/Honours Degree in ISL/English Interpreting from the Centre for Deaf Studies in Trinity College Dublin or Bristol University).

Learning Support Tutor

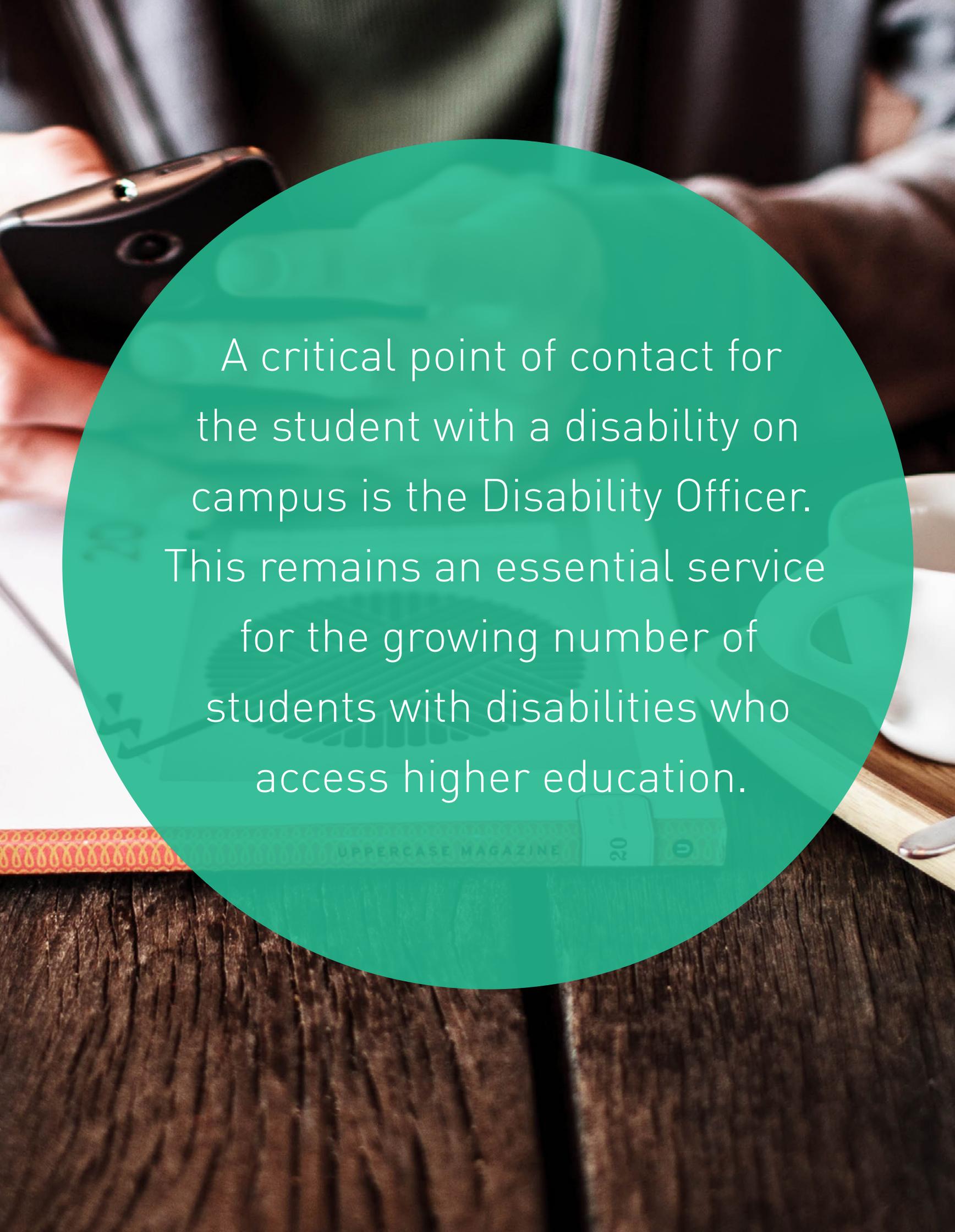
A Learning Support Tutor provides individual support to students with a disability for academic development such as study skills, essay planning, time management and preparing for exams.

Speed Text Operator

Speed Text is a real-time transcription system. It involves using two laptops - one for the deaf or hard of hearing student to read the information that is transcribed on the other laptop by a specially trained operator. Speed Text Operators are also known as palantypists or stenographers.



THE FUTURE ROLE OF THE DISABILITY OFFICER

A photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone over a wooden table. On the table, there is a white coffee cup on a saucer and a magazine titled 'UPPERCASE MAGAZINE' with the number '20' on its cover. A large, semi-transparent teal circle is overlaid on the image, containing white text.

A critical point of contact for the student with a disability on campus is the Disability Officer. This remains an essential service for the growing number of students with disabilities who access higher education.

6. The Future Role of the Disability Officer

As outlined in this publication, a critical point of contact for the student with a disability on campus is the Disability Officer. This remains an essential service for the growing number of students with disabilities who access higher education. Running a disability support service involves many tasks including the promotion of the service internally and externally, conducting Needs Assessments with students to identify reasonable accommodations, supporting individual students, collaborating with staff across the campus, administration of services, the provision of Assistive Technology, organising of funding, acting as an agent for change to influence policy and sharing ideas about inclusive practice, delivering staff training and not least, building relationships of trust across the campus.

It is timely that the role of the Disability Officer is explored and planned for at this stage. It is also opportune that this role is reviewed as Teaching and Learning (T&L) practices continue to develop and become more innovative. Although the T&L practices are continually changing to support learning, what is clear is that the Disability Officer is well positioned to engage with T&L to share their expertise on inclusive practice and Universal Design for Learning to ensure that these principles and values are embedded with all T&L activities and developments.



The role of the Disability Officer and the Disability Support Service in Higher Education in Ireland is defined and outlined for the first time in this publication – which merits wider discussion and development. However, this publication is not intended as a standalone document. It is a road map for professionals working in Disability Support Services so they may start to define not just their work – but their role.

As afore mentioned this document is part of a series of 2 publications and an Online Resource:

- 1.** Position Paper – Inclusive Education: A road map for disability support in higher education in Ireland
- 2.** The Role of the Disability Officer and the Disability Service in Higher Education in Ireland – a vision for future development 2017
- 3.** Online resource/manual outlining best practices in Inclusive Learning and the Provision of Reasonable Accommodations for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in Ireland.

As the Disability Officer role is explored and its nature better understood, it is apparent that a move to professionalisation is timely.

The future professional role does merit wider discourse but this can perhaps be initiated by posing three questions:

- 1.** The core business of the Disability Officer and the context of the demands of the Service they seek to provide is complex. Is it now timely that Disability Officers are recognised for the complexity of their role?
- 2.** It is evident that future Disability Officers will be required to sustain a wide breadth of specific knowledge and professional practices (disability awareness, Universal Design in teaching & learning, legislative requirements) if they are to be confident and keep a pace with ongoing changes in both the HE and disability sectors. Is there a need for preliminary training for new staff and CPD and supervision for all to ensure the standard of service being asked for is attained and maintained?
- 3.** The Disability Officer aims to support the overall objective for inclusivity and equality of service provision in the HEI in which they work. Is it time that the role evolves from the enhanced type of administrative role it currently is to a recognised distinctive professional post?

There are no simple answers to these questions however - they require deeper and further exploration. Whatever the roadmap for the immediate future, what is clear is that this role is not merely administrative, but has a much wider brief across the institution. There is a level of knowledge and professional competencies necessary to carry out even the core functions of this role on campus.

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Published by AHEAD

ISBN No: 978-0-9954772-7-8

Published by:

AHEAD Educational Press

East Hall

UCD

Carysfort Avenue

Blackrock

Co. Dublin

Design by Darling

www.hellodarling.ie

Tel: (01) 716 4396

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February 2018



A photograph of a city street scene. In the background, a wall is covered in white graffiti on a dark background. The graffiti includes buildings, stars, a hand holding a drink, and various abstract shapes. A sign on the wall reads "SUZZLE". In the foreground, a person is riding a bicycle. The person is wearing a dark jacket, blue jeans, and a red and black backpack. The bicycle is black with yellow accents. A large, semi-transparent green circle is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the text "Thank you" and a small illustration of a person riding a bicycle. Below the circle, the text "Association for Higher Education Access & Disability" is written in white.

Thank you

Association for Higher Education
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