# Voices in the Community

## Experiences of Disabled Postgraduate Students in Irish Higher Education

LaunchPAD
Postgraduate | Academia | Disability
An AHEAD & NDPAC Partnership

NDPAC

HEA HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY
AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS

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# 01 Acronyms and Terms List

| Reference | Description |
|---|---|
| **AHEAD** | An independent non-profit organisation working with and for disabled people to shape inclusive and empowering environments in tertiary education and employment. |
| **AI** | Artificial Intelligence, such as Chat GPT, Gen AI, Copilot. |
| **DARE** | Disability access route to higher education for school leavers in Ireland |
| **DAWN** | Disability Advisors Working Network |
| **DSS** | Disability Support Service |
| **ECR** | Early Career researcher |
| **EU** | European Union |
| **FSD** | Fund for Students with Disabilities |
| **HEA** | Higher Education Authority |
| **HEAR** | Higher education access route for school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged areas in Ireland |
| **HEI** | Higher Education Institution |

| Reference | Description |
|---|---|
| **Hidden cost of disability** | The hidden cost of disability refers to the extra, often unrecognized expenses that people with disabilities face in daily life, such as higher transport, healthcare, and personal assistance costs. These additional financial burdens can significantly impact their standard of living and economic independence. |
| **Horizon Europe** | The European Union's key funding program for research and innovation, running from 2021 to 2027 with a budget of €95.5 billion. It aims to boost scientific excellence, support innovation, and address global challenges, contributing to a green, healthy, digital, and inclusive Europe. |
| **Hybrid teaching and learning** | Being able to lecture/access lectures both in-person and from online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams etc. (via live stream or a recording). |
| **Impact 2030** | Ireland's national research and innovation strategy, aiming to maximize the impact of research and innovation on addressing key economic and societal challenges. |
| **IRC (Research Ireland)** | Irish Research Council (now called Research Ireland) |
| **IUA** | Irish Universities Association |
| **KPI** | Key Performance Indicator |

| Reference | Description |
|---|---|
| **LaunchPAD** | Is a three-year project aiming to Foster a sense of belonging by establishing the NDPAC, AHEAD partnership and community<br>Influence policy development by amplifying the lived experience of the diverse voices within the disabled postgraduate community<br>Sustain the community to make a lasting impact through advocacy and influence in higher education decision making |
| **LaunchPAD Ambassadors** | A group of 8 current disabled postgraduate students from a number of HEI's across the country who will work alongside LaunchPAD to attend conferences and symposiums to talk about their lived experience, and complete work packages, such as authoring the forward of this report, amongst many other things. |
| **LENS** | Learning and Educational Needs Summary |
| **NAP** | National Access Plan |
| **NDPAC** | National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee |
| **PA** | Personal Assistance |
| **SUSI** | Irish grant scheme for students attending third level |
| **Viva Voce** | Refers to an oral examination or assessment, often used in academic settings. It involves a discussion between the student and examiners, where the student defends their PhD thesis through spoken responses. |

"The pressure that I feel is insane, to the point where I'll be running two or three all nighters in a row, because I feel that much pressure from them to catch back up to where I was."

— Participant 4

# 02 Foreword

As LaunchPAD Ambassadors, we are proud and honored to introduce *Voices in the Community: Experiences of Disabled Postgraduate Students in Irish Higher Education.* This report is a vital step toward bringing into the open the struggles that we—and many other disabled postgraduates and early career researchers—have faced for far too long, often in silence. These are not just our experiences, but those of countless disabled postgraduates and early career researchers across Ireland and beyond.

Though we come from different countries, study in different disciplines, and live with different disabilities, we are united in a shared fight: the fight to be understood, to be recognised for our potential, and to see an academic world—which overlooked us for a very long time—finally embracing us for our abilities. We believe that change is not only possible, but necessary, so that higher education becomes a place where every scholar and academic can contribute fully and meaningfully.

This report is both a mirror and a map: it reflects our challenges while also showing the transformative power of small, simple changes. It reveals where higher education is still failing disabled postgraduates and offers clear, evidence-based steps to make it fairer for all. Through our voices, this report captures the everyday realities of life as a disabled postgraduate; the practical hurdles, the inaccessible campuses, the lack of flexible learning options, the emotional strain, the strain of having to self-advocate over and over, the emotional toll of isolation and the systemic barriers we face. It also highlights moments of hope: the relief of supportive supervisors, the solidarity of peers, and the possibilities that inclusion brings that can change an entire academic journey.

But this is more than an account of obstacles; it is a call to action. It sets out clear, practical, and achievable steps for higher education institutions, policymakers, and funding bodies to break down barriers, strengthen supports, and create an environment where disabled postgraduates can truly thrive. The stakes are high: when disabled researchers are excluded from postgraduate study and academic careers, the world loses out on their knowledge, expertise and contribution.

We urge every policymaker, higher education leader, and academic who reads this to take to heart both the responsibility and the opportunity to make real change. The goal is not just to meet obligations on paper, but to build a postgraduate system that genuinely values and sustains the contributions of all people, regardless of disability. We hope it also sparks further research to investigate the gaps in the system, and to include more voices and stories in this important conversation.

We express our gratitude to AHEAD, the National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee (NDPAC), and everyone who shared their time, expertise, and stories to make this work possible.

Our hope is that these findings will guide all of us toward a future where the next generation of researchers, in all their beautiful diversity, can access, succeed in, and shape the future of higher education.

**Amanie Issa**

**Leah Ennis McLoughlin**

# 03 Introduction

## Background

In 2015 the National Access Plan (DFHERIS, 2015) set a target of ensuring 8% of the new entrant undergraduate population are disabled students. This was exceeded in 2020/21 with 12.4% of new entrants being students with disabilities. However, only 6% of those who indicated a disability were pursuing postgraduate study (DFHERIS, 2022). Data published by AHEAD (2025) also outlined the underrepresentation of people with disabilities in postgraduate studies, with only 3.3% of the total postgraduate population in HEI's engaging with disability support services. This is in stark contrast to 9.3% at undergraduate level.

While there has been a steady increase year on year in the engagement of disabled people in postgraduate study, highlighting that some national and local initiatives have had a positive impact, participation still remains stubbornly low in comparison to the undergraduate rate, which suggests there may be a number of significant barriers to participation specific to postgraduate study and the academic careers which may follow from it.

In recognition of these low participation rates, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) established the inclusion of students with disabilities in postgraduate study as a national strategic objective, as outlined in the Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and success in Higher Education 2022-2028. It must also be highlighted that the European Union (EU, 2021) has developed an initiative called 'Horizon Europe' that is aimed at increasing the research output of the EU. Horizon Europe plans on helping researchers and top-class innovators to develop their ideas in order to deliver on the EU's strategic priorities. These priorities are (EU, 2021):

- Strengthening EU science and technology by increasing investment in highly skilled people and cutting-edge research.

- Enhance access to excellence for researchers across Europe to foster participation and collaboration.

- Focusing on green and digital transitions to improve the quality of our daily lives.

In order for the EU to really tap into the full potential of this initiative, huge efforts have to be made in removing the barriers to participation at postgraduate level for people with disabilities. Currently, many brilliant minds are being left out of such initiatives because, not only is postgraduate study prohibitively inaccessible, the experience of attaining a Masters or PhD is so exhausting and overwhelming, many leave academia and research behind entirely once they graduate.

To support progress on these objectives, the HEA funded the development of the LaunchPAD partnership, a collaboration between AHEAD and the National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee, with PAD standing for Postgraduate, Academia, and Disability.

LaunchPAD is a three-year project aiming to:

- Foster a sense of belonging by establishing the NDPAC and AHEAD partnership and community.

- Influence policy development by amplifying the lived experience of the diverse voices within the disabled postgraduate community.

- Sustain the community to make a lasting impact through advocacy and influence in higher education decision making.

To begin meeting these aims, particularly those in point two, a paper exploring the lived experiences of postgraduates and early career researchers (ECR's) was deemed necessary to capture a complete picture of the barriers and enablers to their success. However, we did not manage to recruit any ECR's despite a concentrated push to do so, therefore we focused on current postgraduates. This is part of a three-year plan to undertake a mapping exercise of the disabled postgraduate experience and the associated policy landscape. This phase of the research is about gathering the lived experience of Postgraduate students, with future phases examining the perspectives of institutional stakeholders and policy makers. The specific aims of this phase of the research are:

- To gather the lived experience of postgraduates and ECR's with disabilities.
- To map the barriers and enablers of their success.
- To uncover gaps in national funding and policy coverage from the experience of postgraduate students and early career researchers and explore supportive initiatives which have had a positive impact.

By analysing the lived experience of current postgraduates and ECRs with disabilities, we will be able to identify what some of the systemic barriers are, and support key stakeholders such as institutional policy makers, the Higher Education Authority, Research Ireland, and other relevant government agencies in addressing them. It is also important to note that there is limited research on disabled postgraduates and their experiences in Ireland, therefore this study will be amongst the first of its kind nationally, and amongst only a relatively small number of studies internationally, as the literature review will demonstrate.

Thus, the central research question guiding this, and future phases is:

→ What institutional and systemic factors influence the success or otherwise of disabled people in accessing and succeeding in postgraduate study and early career research?


LaunchPAD Ambassadors

# 04 Literature Review

## Introduction

It must be noted that there is very little literature on the topic of disabled postgraduates and their experiences studying Masters and PhD's. Through a review of the available literature, it became clear that disabled postgraduate experiences had simply fallen through the cracks. Much of the available literature focuses on ableism, transitions from higher education into the labour market, the experiences of academics with disabilities, and exclusion. Very little space is given to the general lived experience of disabled postgraduates. Therefore, it was felt that a scoping literature review would serve the research better, rather than a systematic review. According to Arksey and O'Malley (2005), a scoping review is used to map the body of literature on a topic area, providing a descriptive overview of the reviewed material without critically appraising.

This literature review will begin by giving an overview of the policy landscape in Ireland as it concerns disabled postgraduates. It will then outline the available international literature and how it relates to this project. This review was conducted by searching databases such as Google Scholar (as a jumping off point), JSTOR, and Web of Science. Almost no literature was available from an Irish context (Bar the NDPAC HEA report, 2023). Some of the search terms used were, 'disabled postgraduates', 'disabled postgraduate experience', 'Early career researchers with disabilities', 'academics and disabilities', 'barriers to postgraduate study', 'facilitators to postgraduate study', 'disabled scholars', 'postgraduate experiences', and 'inclusivity during postgraduate study'.

## The Policy Landscape in Ireland

As previously outlined in the introduction, only 6% of those who indicated a disability were pursuing postgraduate study (DFHERIS, 2022). The underrepresentation of disabled people in postgraduate study has been further corroborated by AHEAD (2024) who found that only 3.7% of postgraduate students were engaged with disability support services (DSS), while 9.9% of undergraduates were engaged with the DSS. AHEAD (2024) note that, as postgraduate study is often an enabler of high-income employment, it is imperative that equity of opportunity for disabled students is encouraged and fostered within Irish HEIs.

The NAP (DFEHRIS, 2022) outlined several key objectives in the plan that are relevant to the inclusion of disabled students in postgraduate study. These include:

- 1.1 to support students from priority groups (Disabled students, minority ethnic groups etc.) to access higher education and have an inclusive experience with a successful outcome.

- 1.6 to consider how to achieve a more diverse student population across all programmes and all levels of study, both undergraduate and postgraduate.

- 2.3 to explore new routes for priority groups to access programmes and improve the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

- 4.1 to develop strategic partnerships and approaches to support access, participation, and success by students from priority groups.

The NAP (DFHERIS, 2022) also established key performance indicator (KPI) 3, to specifically track progress on the participation of disabled students and other priority groups in postgraduate study over the lifetime of the plan.

# 6%

Percentage of students who indicated a disability who were pursuing postgraduate study in 2020/21

As previously outlined, the European Union (EU, 2021) has developed an initiative called 'Horizon Europe' that is aimed at increasing the research output of the EU. Horizon Europe plans on helping researchers and top-class innovators to develop their ideas in order to deliver on the EU's strategic priorities. These priorities are (EU, 2021):

- Strengthening EU science and technology by increasing investment in highly skilled people and cutting-edge research.

- Enhance access to excellence for researchers across Europe to foster participation and collaboration.

- Focusing on green and digital transitions to improve the quality of our daily lives.

In response to this initiative, the Government of Ireland developed 'Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy' (Government of Ireland, 2021). To meet the aims of Horizon Europe, Impact 2030 sets several targets, specifically Pillar 4, which locates talent at the centre of the research and innovation ecosystem, alongside a commitment to support all students to gain the necessary skills and experience to engage with this initiative (Government of Ireland, 2021). Impact 2030 has also set out a target to increase the number of researchers from a baseline of 9.52 to 15.00 per 1,000 people in the labour force. However, as data from AHEAD and the NAP outline, disabled postgraduates are in danger of being excluded from this metric if the systemic issues barring their participation are not tackled. This risks the loss of a reserve of diverse and talented researchers to the research community, loss of research output from researchers with vital lived experience of disability, and a loss of unique perspective on how each of the Horizon Europe strategies could be achieved.

Some stakeholders have begun to consider barriers in the system for disabled people and make targeted efforts to address them. In 2025, for example, the Irish Universities Association (IUA) launched a guidance document on the Viva Voce examinations detailing how examiners can best support doctoral candidates when performing their Viva (IUA, 2025). The Viva Voce is a high stakes summative assessment that all doctoral candidates must undergo. It is often a gruelling 2–4-hour presentation of one's research findings, with questioning from the examiners on everything from their data collection techniques to discussing some of the research's theoretical underpinnings. Retaining academic integrity while also providing support and accommodations to disabled candidates is the aim of this document. It outlines step by step guides for both students and examiners on how to go about implementing accommodations appropriately within this form of assessment.

The Viva Voce guidance document is a stride in the right direction. It recognises that each postgraduate is unique, and therefore their needs and supports are also unique. It aims to retain the privacy of the candidate where possible, only communicating what is essential about the accommodation/s needed to the examiners. It is an acknowledgement that accommodations do not mean a lack of academic rigour and integrity, but that in order for the examinations to be equitable, the student's needs have to be met first.

## The Lived Experience of Irish Disabled postgraduates

Despite there being virtually no literature on the lived experience of Irish disabled postgraduates, there does exist one case study report that helped to shape and inform this project. The National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee (NDPAC) collaborated with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in 2023 to discuss the experiences of disabled postgraduates and develop a list of barriers and enablers to postgraduate study. Five key themes emerged from the report (HEA, 2023):

- Financial challenges: including high costs associated with disability support, insufficient PhD stipends, and limited funding for personal assistance.
- The need for a whole institution approach to increase representation and awareness of the needs of disabled students.
- Flexible supports and accommodations catered to each individual.
- A holistic approach, including wrap around supports for mental health and career guidance.
- Part-time study options need to be more accessible to accommodate disabled student's needs.

These findings were discussed within the context of the lived experience of the members of NDPAC, with many of them lending their own stories to the report. Of particular note was the discussion around Catherines Law and Disability Allowance. Catherines Law ensures that PhD stipends are not counted as income within the means test for those receiving Disability Allowance. However, in recent years, due to the cost-of-living crisis, many stipends have been increased past the agreed income disregard, placing many postgraduates at risk of having their Disability Allowance payment decreased.

The report also came with a number of recommendations such as the development of transition pathways to postgraduate study, an increase in financial support, greater policy coherence across government departments, and further research into best practices and data collection on disabled postgraduate students for informed policymaking. Regarding transition pathways, prospective undergraduates with disabilities in Ireland can avail of DARE, the Disability Access Route to Education. DARE aims to support school leavers with disabilities, provide reduced points for admissions to third level, and aims to address educational challenges faced by students with disabilities during secondary education (HEA, 2023). There are some limited examples of funding pathways that are focused on supporting specific disabled postgraduates, such as the 'Central Remedial Clinic Ciaran Barry Scholarship' (HEA, 2025). However, although a small number of institutions have established individual access pathways to PHD study, these efforts are isolated, and no DARE-like coordinated national pathway to postgraduate study exists for people with disabilities.

## The Lived Experience of Disabled postgraduates, an International Perspective

When it comes to the lived experience of disabled postgraduates, there is much more literature available internationally compared to Ireland. However, many of the studies were either quantitative in nature or used secondary analysis of available literature as their methodology, very few relied on the recounting of the actual lived experience of postgraduates. Those that did, were the recounting of one person's experience as a postgraduate with a disability. Most studies were split between either the United Kingdom (UK) or North America (United States of America and Canada). Much of the theming centred around academia and ableism.

"I tend not to go to conferences because the challenges are substantial for me... even if I go to a conference, I'm nearly always leaving earlier because I'm never sure whether I can get from the parking space to the door there, whether you can open the door, whether you can get to the toilets, all that kind of stuff."

— Participant 1

Disabled Students UK (2023) published a report that stated only 33% of disabled postgrads feel they receive adequate support to study on an equal footing with non-disabled peers. Nearly half of the participants stated they did not know where or how to access support, with accommodations failing to take into account the realities of undertaking a research degree. Many participants also voiced their frustration with the 'administrative burden' that they are faced with to avail of supports. This often centred around having to have sign off by a medical professional on their diagnosis. The participants also demonstrated how important the supervisor/student relationship was, with the majority feeling a strong and positive relationship was essential to a sense of support and belonging. However, many participants felt that supervisors lacked disability awareness training. The report also called for a push in universally designed campuses, paying attention to not only the built environment but the sensory one, and crucially, allowing students to study at a pace that suits their needs, recognising that disabled PhDs are far more likely to drop out than their non-disabled peers.

Much of the issues faced by Disabled Postgrads in the UK is corroborated by Dali and Charbonneau (2024), who explored the challenges faced by disabled PhD neurodiverse students in North America, post COVID lockdown. Common barriers were stigma, discrimination, inadequate accommodations, and inaccessible physical and virtual spaces (Dali and Charbonneau, 2024). They found that the lack of effective accommodations and support services contributed to delays in graduation with an ever-increasing financial burden as they had to pay fees for every year they repeated (Dali and Charbonneau, 2024). Many of the participants also stated they feared disclosing their disability due to potential stigma and negative career impacts.

Through a systematic review of transitions from higher education to employment for students with disabilities, Goodall et al. (2022) found that the most frequently reported barrier among graduates was their concern over disclosing their disability. These concerns mainly stemmed from the fear that disclosure would result in stigma from peers and staff. As with Dali and Charbonneau's study, Goodall et al. (2022) found that these fears were well justified after some graduates who did disclose their disability experienced negative reactions from teaching staff and prospective employers.

Much of this is also corroborated by Castro et al. (2024) who explored the experiences of researchers with disabilities at academic institutions in the United States. They found that their participants also discussed issues around sharing disability information, with many facing stigma and discrimination. Many of the participants avoided 'disclosure' during the hiring process due to fear of it having negative impacts upon their career progression if hired. Castro et al. (2024) also found that their participants faced significant stigma around productivity when taking health-related leave, feeling like they were being seen to be doing less than their non-disabled colleagues. Interestingly, the participants of the study noted that they felt their disability identity was context dependent, influenced by perceptions and experiences in their work environment (Castro, et al. 2024).

Both Hannam-Swain (2017) and Inckle (2018) discuss the extra work they have to undertake as visibly disabled people in academia. Hannam Swain (2017) discusses how her disability means she often has to miss days due to fatigue or recovery, which in turn sets her back and leaves her scrambling to catch up on the work she missed out on, thus leaving her fatigued and the cycle starting all over again. Both Hannam-Swain (2017) and Inckle (2018) corroborate each other's experiences in having to provide additional unpaid labour to make sure their accommodation needs are met. For example, both have experience with inaccessible classrooms, where their wheelchairs cannot fit and being scheduled to teach in an 'accessible' room without an accessible presentation area. This means that they both have to spend time checking the rooms on their timetables to ensure they are fully accessible, something their institutions have requested of them. Inckle (2018) states that:

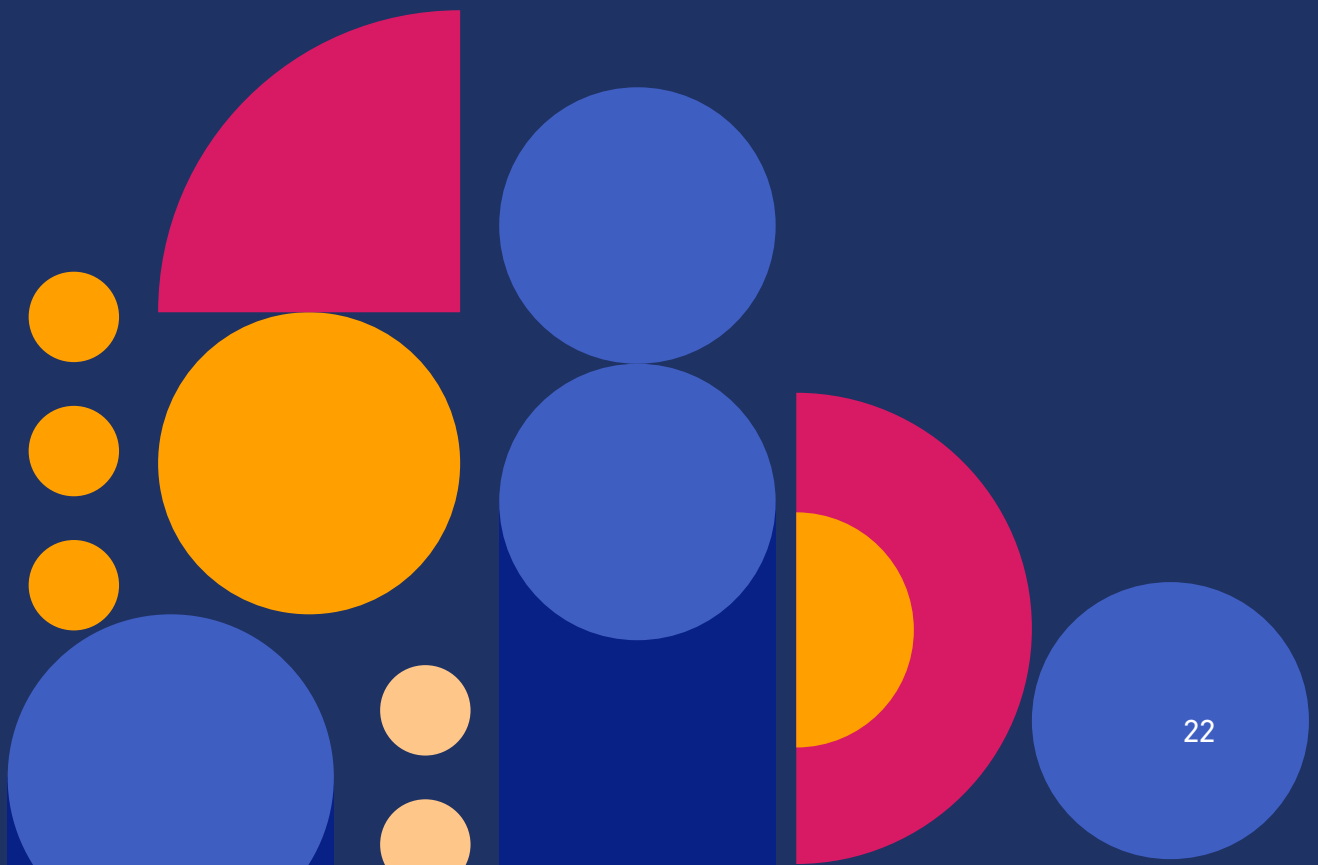
→ "This whole process is hugely physically and mentally demanding and it places a significant and unnecessary additional burden of work and (di)stress upon me. It also seems utterly absurd that there is such resistance to, and difficulty in providing, something as basic as wheelchair accessible teaching spaces for a lecturer who is a wheelchair user."

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the lack of literature on the lived experiences of disabled postgraduates highlights a significant gap in both national and international research. While broader themes such as ableism and transition to employment are well documented, the specific realities faced by disabled Master's and PhD students remain under-explored, specifically within an Irish context. With the Irish government now focused on achieving the aims of 'Horizon Europe' under 'Impact 20230', they risk excluding the essential experiences, unique perspectives, and talent that researchers with disabilities bring to the table if the systemic barriers are not addressed.

# 33%

Percentage of disabled postgrads feel they receive adequate support to study on an equal footing with non-disabled peers



# 05 Methodology

## Research Design

This project has utilised a systematic/historical approach to the research question, starting off by exploring the participant's experiences at undergraduate level engaging with disability support services and teaching staff, funding of studies etc., then asking the same questions, in more detail, about their postgraduate experiences. This has allowed us to get a baseline of the participant's past experiences, which can then act as a form of comparison to their experiences during their postgraduate studies.

As outlined in the literature review, many of the studies previously conducted on this topic focused on quantitative data that centred on niche areas of experience such as labour market transitions, exclusion, and ableism within academia. None of the studies focused on the disabled postgraduate experience as a whole, and very few relied on qualitative data. However, this project has focused on tapping into the lived experience of disabled postgraduates by applying qualitative data collection and analysis techniques.

## Sampling and Access

The sample was a non-probabilistic purposeful sample targeting current disabled postgraduate students and ECRs. To ensure we were acquiring a representative sample we began by building a registration form that captured demographic data such as:

- whether they were a postgraduate student or an early career researcher
- what field they were studying/researching in
- what disability categories they identified
- what accessibility needs they had in order to participate in an online interview.

The use of a form to guide selection ensured we were capturing a more varied array of experiences and not hearing from just a cluster of participants who all had a similar disability, or who all studied in similar fields. The form also allowed us to see where we would have to make concentrated efforts to target specific disability types after our initial dissemination. For example, as will be outlined in the limitations, we could see that nobody who was an Irish Sign Language (ISL) user had registered to be a participant, which we then went to great lengths to attempt to remediate.

The registration form was first sent to recipients who had signed up to LaunchPAD's mailing list. It was then circulated through AHEADs newsletter, featured on the landing page of AHEADs website, and sent to groups such the IUA Deans of Graduates studies, THEA (Technological Higher Education Association) Deans of Research, and DAWN (Disability Advisory Working Network), who then distributed through their own mailing lists to students in their institutions. The form received a total of 54 responses, of which 22 people were contacted and 15 became participants. The initial research proposal aimed for 15-24 participants, and so while some participants from the initial 22 selected dropped out due to illness or personal circumstances, the minimum target was met. It was at this stage that we became aware that we had not recruited somebody with a vision impairment or someone who was both deaf and an ISL user. In this instance we applied snowball sampling to some of the participants and to colleagues within AHEAD and NDPAC. This allowed us to successfully recruit a participant with a vision impairment, but we failed to recruit someone who was both deaf and relied on ISL.

| Participant | Disability Status | Area of Study |
|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | Physical Disability | Business management |
| Participant 2 | Deaf/Hard of Hearing | Business |
| Participant 3 | Autism; Mental Health Difficulty | Humanities |
| Participant 4 | Mental Health Difficulty; Significant Ongoing Illness | Geology |
| Participant 5 | ADHD | Education |
| Participant 6 | Mental Health Difficulty | Equality Studies |
| Participant 7 | DCD / Dyspraxia; Dyslexia or Dyscalculia (Specific Learning Difficulty); Stammering | Social Change |
| Participant 8 | Mental Health Difficulty | Humanities |
| Participant 9 | ADHD; Dyslexia or Dyscalculia (Specific Learning Difficulty); Physical Disability | Anthropology |
| Participant 10 | Significant Ongoing Illness | Natural sciences |
| Participant 11 | ADHD; Autism; Significant Ongoing Illness; Mental Health Difficulty | Humanities |
| Participant 12 | Physical Disability; Significant Ongoing Illness | Psychology |
| Participant 13 | Autism; Mental Health Difficulty | Education |
| Participant 14 | Hearing Impairment | Psychology |
| Participant 15 | Vision impairment | Socio-legal |

*Table 1: Participant Information*

## Data Collection

Data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed and agreed upon by members from AHEAD and NDPAC. There was no need to adapt the interview guide during the process as all participants responded positively to the questions and structure. The interview guide can be found in the appendices of this report. The semi-structured interview guide allowed us to dig deep into both the participant's experiences with higher education generally and more specifically their postgraduate journey to date. It also permitted us to build a profile of enablers and barriers to their success. Semi-structured interviews gave the process a much more informal air that allowed the participants to relax and open up. According to Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) 'a primary benefit of the semi-structured interview is that it permits interviews to be focused while still giving the investigator the autonomy to explore pertinent ideas that may come up in the course of the interview, which can further enhance understanding'.

All 15 of the interviews were conducted through Zoom and recorded for transcription purposes. To save time, the transcription software 'Descript' was used for the initial transcription of the recorded interviews. The interviews were then double checked for legibility and clarity and corrected by listening back to recording and following along on the transcribed interview. Consent to record, transcribe, and store the interviews (in line with AHEADs research and GDPR policies) was sought prior to the interview taking place in the form of a consent and information sheet outlining such, which each participant had to read, sign, and return. Initial automated transcriptions were deleted from the online Descript account following their correction and local storage on AHEAD's secure servers.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to the transcribed interviews. This was broken down into three stages: descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and defining overarching themes. The descriptive coding phase entailed reading through the transcript, highlighting relevant materials with brief comments then labelling the descriptive codes with short phrases that are as self-explanatory as possible such as 'experiences with supervisors. This phase was then repeated several times until the descriptive codes were either merged or redefined to a point of diminishing returns. Interpretative coding entailed grouping together the descriptive codes that shared a common meaning, thus, creating a code that captures that meaning, such as 'negative experiences with supervisors'. This then allowed for the application of an overarching theme as dictated by the interpretive coding and supported by the descriptive coding, such as 'the supervisor/student relationship'.

All the data analysis was completed in OneNote where the codes were grouped, and then relevant participant quotes were attached to these codes. As the project was initially entitled 'Voices in the Community', we wanted to keep the voice and lived experience of the students interviewed at the very heart of the project.

## Limitations

We did not speak to any early career researchers, despite targeted recruiting, and therefore we cannot provide a perspective of what life is like for Masters and PhD graduates. It would have been extremely beneficial to the research to have this perspective, especially around topics such as the 'publish or die' culture within academia and its implications for researchers with disabilities.

As we only spoke to current PhD and Masters students, we were therefore interviewing those who were successful in securing a place on a PhD programme and all had managed to successfully fund their studies either through the receipt of scholarships or personal/other financing. This meant we did not capture the voices of those for whom both the funding and application process in and of itself proved to be too big of a barrier to overcome. This voice is essential to understanding what barriers exist before the student is accepted into a HEI and onto a funding stream.

As previously mentioned, we failed to capture the lived experience of a postgraduate who was both deaf and relied on Irish Sign Language, despite snowball sampling and targeted recruiting. This was of great disappointment to us. The percentage of ISL users attending HEI's is persistently low, therefore we felt capturing this lived experience to be important.

# 06 Findings

## The Disabled Postgraduate Experience

The disabled postgraduate experience can be explained as a mosaic of happenings that is unique to each individual, with each mosaic capturing elements of social isolation, forced self-advocacy, inaccessible campuses, the hidden cost of disability, burnout and fatigue. Each disabled postgraduate journey will encompass some aspects of all of the above. However, it is important to note that many of the issues listed here are not faced exclusively by disabled postgraduate students, in fact, they are a microcosm of often much bigger cultural and environmental concerns faced by postgraduate students across the board. However, any issue faced by a non-disabled student, frequently becomes a much more acute problem for a disabled postgraduate due to the nature of disability and how it interacts with the environment the disabled person finds themself in. What we will find is that the disabled postgraduate is constantly pushing against the 'traditional' outline of what a PhD and Masters student is expected to be capable of.

Interestingly, several of the participants are pursuing PhD topics that relate directly or indirectly to their own lived experience.

→ "So, my research topic is self-management of long-term physical conditions during emerging adulthood."
— Participant 12

This speaks to the weight of a postgraduate's lived experience as a disabled person in their decision on what to study.

## Hesitancy to Apply and Accessibility Factors in the Decision-Making

As with a recounting of any journey, it's best to start at the beginning. For most of the participants, as they became prospective students, they began to factor accessibility into their choice of HEI. This took many forms, such as whether the HEI offered online classes and teaching opportunities, how many in-person days on campus were required, and if the DSS appeared engaged and supportive. For some of the participants, accessibility was the deciding factor on whether they attended one HEI over another.

→ "I did, yeah, absolutely, because it's, a huge undertaking. I really wanted to be sure that I wasn't going to be kind of worse off at the end of it, that I wasn't, you know, going to actively sort of harm myself in this process."

— Participant 8

Part of the process of factoring in accessibility into their decision also depended on how accessible the various application forms for entry were. The technical side of accessible forms and applications is of particular concern to participants who have a visual impairment.

→ "I mean, again, it's quite impairment specific. A lot of portals and documentations and forms you have to fill in tend to be Excel or some very fun PDF. Which are not accessible. And sometimes trying to explain to people why I can't access one PDF, but I can access another one [is tiring]."

— Participant 15

Another participant spoke of how they struggled with their first PhD application as they found the process arduous, sometimes confusing, and overly time consuming.

→ "Then when I wrote the actual nuts and bolts of applying for the PhD, I just wasn't able to do it, but I still tried. So, I basically applied for it and failed, I didn't get offered a place because they were like, we couldn't accept you on the basis of this application."

— Participant 3

Some of the participants also spoke of hesitancy when thinking of pursuing their studies. This hesitancy overlaps with feelings of imposter syndrome discussed later, but most were worried about burnout and the various demands of managing their disabilities making it exceedingly difficult to complete their studies.

→ "110%. I feel that every single day. I'm very worried about overload about burnouts. Obviously, I'm working full time as well and studying part time. So that, was one of the big things that kind of put me off."

— Participant 6

## Campus Accessibility

Most of the participants voiced their frustrations with trying to navigate inaccessible campuses across the country. This was of particular concern for participants who had a physical disability, a hearing or vision impairment, or a chronic illness. It became obvious from the analysis of the interviews that there was a significant lack of joined up thinking when it came to making campuses physically accessible. Participant 1 highlights some of these issues:

→ "There's a car park up next to another building. The ramps between that building and the building you need to go to are too steep or they're inaccessible [so I can't get there]."
— Participant 1

Having ramp access to a building is only useful if the ramp's elevation is sufficiently graduated and has sufficient landing space at the top so the person using the wheelchair can stop and open the door without rolling back. This lack of joined up thinking makes it extremely hard for people with physical disabilities to move freely about campus.
For those participants who had chronic illnesses or experienced fatigue, the sheer size of some campuses and the lack of consideration of this in class scheduling was an accessibility issue of its own:

→ "I guess the most difficult thing is sort of just the size of [HEI] campus, it's huge. It's massive, and so, if I'm needing to pop over to the lab, that's like a 15-minute walk away. Sometimes I'm running here, there and everywhere and it just is exhausting."
— Participant 4

Accessible bathrooms were another concern, particularly for students with a chronic illness and/or a physical disability:

→ "There is an elevator to get to the ground floor, but it doesn't always work. And even if I do go down, if that toilet is occupied, then there's not another toilet to go to. There's one that's in the next building."
— Participant 1

"Trying to make sense of how to find different classrooms when you really can't see the numbers, they're not very accessible. Colour contrast and all of that. Anyway, it was a world that I just felt like I was thrown in, [not] by choice."

— Participant 15

→ "I have to go from the attic to the basement, and that was one of the reasons why I needed to work from home, honestly, and I didn't want to say that was the reason, but like, it was, I was actually just exhausted going up and down and up and down the stairs [to reach the bathroom]."

— Participant 10

Having accessible bathrooms in a building is only useful if there is more than one and they are located near the lifts, or preferably on each floor. Participants also noted that they were informed that some HEI's have buildings that have a 'protected status' which does not allow for alterations, such as building an accessible bathroom. However, as in participant 10's case, who is a person with a chronic illness, some students with disabilities are still expected to work and study in these inaccessible places.

One participant who had a vision impairment spoke of how difficult it was to navigate a new campus, where signage had not been designed to consider visually impaired users:

→ "Trying to make sense of how to find different classrooms when you really can't see the numbers, they're not very accessible. Colour contrast and all of that. Anyway, it was a world that I just felt like I was thrown in, [not] by choice."

— Participant 15

This participant explained how it took time and effort to acclimate to a new campus and become somewhat comfortable finding their way around. Despite visiting the campus before starting on their programme of study, it still took time for them to become familiar with the campus, as there is a significant difference between a campus that is empty and a campus that is busy during term time. However, even participants without a visual impairment spoke of how difficult they found getting around:

→ "The other kind of issue that I had was just the lack of signage. I went there my first day, I will always go and do the transport there and make sure I know everything before I even need to be on site. So I went down and did that with a friend. And we got totally lost."

— Participant 13

Two of the participants had hearing impairments and they both spoke of how some of the tutorial rooms on campus were not accessible as the surfaces were too hard, causing sound to bounce around. Hearing was also made difficult by the layout of the room, where everyone was facing forward, making it difficult to lip read. When staff understood these challenges and took action, it was noted to have a positive impact on a participant's experience.

→ "And I found it very difficult to hear because the roof was so tall, the sound was just getting lost. Then, also the way people were sitting. I couldn't see people [to lip read] So I said that to my tutors. I was saying that its very difficult for me to participate in this space. And they came to me then, a couple of days later and said they were actually going to move to another room."

— Participant 14

Participants who had sensory issues also found their HEI campus to often be an inaccessible place for them due to the sensory overload they experienced. Busy campuses during term time and packed lecture and tutorial rooms were a cause of some distress for some of the participants.

→ "They are not designed to accommodate group work because in all the rooms the surface is a hard surface. So there's a lot of echo. When there were group discussions, I always felt overwhelmed, and it was very noisy, but I'm not sure if it's only me or everyone else, but I know the hard surface of the walls contributed to that."

— Participant 5

Participants reported that the sensory overload made for an exhausting experience for them, which only served to burden them further. However, college campuses were not the only inaccessible experience these participants faced.

## Experiences attending Conferences

An essential part of any postgraduate research experience is conference attendance. Nine of the fifteen participants spoke of how inaccessible they found conferences. For some, physically accessing the conference venue would be a challenge:

→ "I tend not to go to conferences because the challenges are substantial for me...even if I go to a conference, I'm nearly always leaving earlier because I'm never sure whether I can get from the parking space to the door there, whether you can open the door, whether you can get to the toilets, all that kind of stuff."

— Participant 1

→ "As a visually impaired person trying to navigate through, if the conference is a huge crowd, it's not easy. It's complicated. Unless I have a person [with me]. I was at a conference, which was almost 800 people, and it was impossible...I could not find anyone. I found it difficult. It was like crowds of sheep."

— Participant 15

For others, for example, those with a chronic illness or who experience sensory overload, conference attendance took a physical toll that either took days to recover from, or meant the participant could not attend at all:

→ "Some of them have been tricky. Not so much in terms of attending and accessing, but just the physical toll that it takes being there."

— Participant 4

There was a palpable sense of anxiety around not being able to attend/present at conferences. One participant explained:

→ "It's really expected as a PhD you would be traveling a lot to international conferences. To present your research. I feel like I'm not able, I don't have enough energy to engage in all those things. And I feel like sometimes I look at my colleagues and I'm like, oh, they're probably getting ahead of me a little bit. They're able to do all those things and you know when it comes to the next job interview for my postdoc, I mightn't have that edge because of that, you know."

— Participant 10

As evidenced above, many of the participants voiced concerns about missing out on the crucial social networking opportunities that conference attendance brings, which then went on to fuel wider concerns about their 'employability.'

For other participants, the cost of travelling to and attending conferences was prohibitive.

→ "All those conferences that I attended; they are all free. There's no need to receive any like monetary support. But there are a few conferences that I am interested to attend, and I need to pay, but I didn't think perhaps I can get support and because I don't want to spend money [and] it's too expensive for me."

— Participant 5

It became obvious during the interviews that none of the 15 participants were aware that the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) could be used to support reasonable accommodations for conference attendance (HEA, 2024).

With many participants experiencing significant barriers to attending conferences, many felt that an essential part of the postgraduate experience was being denied them. But it must also be noted that these conferences and their attendees are being denied the chance to hear from individuals whose lived experiences and research perspectives are not typical, especially seeing that many of the participant's research relates directly or indirectly to their own lived experience. Therefore, barriers which prevent disabled postgraduate voices from participating in the discourse only serve to perpetuate the 'traditional' image of what an academic, PhD, or Masters student looks like.

## Reluctant Advocates

Being forced to advocate for not only their own needs but the needs of other students with disabilities, became a common theme sewn into the lived experience of the participants. Some spoke of how having to constantly speak was exhausting:

→ "You have to fight for the basic requirements around buildings and access. You have to really, really fight for that. And you have to be the squeaky wheel. You have to be the voice and people say your complaining..... It does get draining. It gets frustrating I suppose, over time, you know? "

— Participant 1

Advocacy was often forced upon the participants because they were not being adequately supported, or because the HEI they were attending was not suitably accessible. This often led to situations where the participant was forced to contact a plethora of individuals to have their needs met.

→ "[I] explained to them how frustrated I was, and I had to [contact] the SU president, the SU welfare officer and the head of my course. Okay. I literally had to force people to take accountability for this."

— Participant 14

While advocacy undoubtedly can be a positive experience for many, some of the experiences illustrated here paint a picture of being forced into a corner where one must fight to be taken seriously and be adequately supported.

## Social Isolation and Burnout

While social isolation and burnout are not problems exclusive to the disabled postgraduate experience, as all postgraduates can attest to, it does become more acute as students are forced to juggle the demands of their disability, their self-advocacy, their studies, and their job. Most of the participants spoke of how isolated they often felt, with some also expressing their frustrations with burnout and fatigue, which frequently served to further isolate them, due to burnout causing flare ups of conditions and thus causing them to miss time in person with their cohorts as they recuperated.

→ "Well, it was me not coming into classes. It was quite a small group. I think it was only 10 or 11 people, so people got to know each other very well. But I was just some kind of random person. So, I wasn't able to turn up enough in the early days to get to know people. They sort of recognized me the odd day and said hello and stuff, but I didn't know anyone. They didn't know me, but they knew each other. And so being on the periphery of that wasn't the nicest feeling really."

— Participant 8

Social isolation took many forms for the participants. Some spoke of how they were the only PhD candidate within their department to start when they did:

→ "It's a very isolating time anyway. When I started, I was the only one to start at that time, so I've not had anyone who's at the same stage as I am."

— Participant 4

For some, the new experience of starting a course of study was so overwhelming and exhausting that they could not find the time or space for socialising, for others it was the exhaustion of having to mask (Autism masking is the act of suppressing or hiding autistic traits and behaviours to fit in with social norms or avoid judgment) all the time:

→ "I found [socialising] very, very, very difficult at the start of my studies. So, you're in a new environment with new people learning new material for the first time. And that was so exhausting that I didn't have the energy left for the socialising."
— Participant 14

→ "I was sitting with my supervisor and one or two lecturers [at a department event], but yeah, it's probably the first time I ever went home early from something. Usually, I settle in and I'd be grand but I think now the exhaustion probably had something to do with it as well. I didn't have the extra [energy] to kind of mask being introverted and actually go to people. I just didn't have the energy."
— Participant 12

For some of the participants, managing their disability, such as a Crohns flare up or period of severe depression and anxiety, causes them to lose time, time they then must make up quickly to stay on course.

→ "The pressure that I feel is insane, to the point where I'll be running two or three all nighters in a row, because I feel that much pressure from them to catch back up to where I was."
— Participant 4

Other participants spoke of supervisors trying to accommodate them during a period of burnout by allowing them time off, but due to the demands of the participants job and looming deadlines, this was not feasible at all:

→ "[supervisor said] just take time off. Which doesn't translate well when you're doing a PhD and working."
— Participant 13

It could be argued that social isolation and burnout go hand in hand with each other and are unfortunate parts of the postgraduate experience. However, it seems that disabled postgraduates, like with many issues affecting postgraduates in general, experience these problems more frequently and acutely than their non-disabled peers.

## The Rollback from Online Teaching and Learning

The lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic taught us that online or hybrid teaching and learning was possible, and with appropriate strategies and resources, could be effective. For many of the participants who studied during that period it meant that they no longer had to worry about the impact of disability on their attendance as they could log on from home during flare-ups or periods of illness. Some also reported that it allowed for a more relaxed pace of learning. Pre-recorded lectures meant they could rewatch as they needed and focus on class content instead of notetaking. Most importantly, it meant less time commuting and the option to reside outside of the locale of their institution, thus easing the financial pressure associated with housing rental. Many of the participants noted that online teaching and learning allowed for a more inclusive experience for them, one that led to less fatigue and burn out. However, as the lockdowns wound down in the wake of mass-vaccinations, HEI's across the country began to return to predominantly face to face teaching and learning experiences.

→ "I wish there was still loads of hybrid options because it would just be so much safer for me as well and I would end up going to a lot more stuff that way and feeling more involved. I kind of am sad that they rolled it all back for no reason.... I think for students who have a need for it, it should be an option too you know."

— Participant 10

Some of the participants had an understanding with their supervisor, who met with them online instead of face to face. However, the rollback to predominantly face to face teaching has meant that some participants can't engage with teaching opportunities as it would require them to increase their hours spent on campus and commuting.

→ "I'd have to just reduce my hours because like I have asked can I go teach online and they want all of the teaching to be face to face. I feel a bit of pressure. If I want to get my teaching experience, which I do for my career, I feel like I have to commute up to Dublin for it."

— Participant 10

Allowing for hybrid teaching and learning options makes for a more inclusive environment for postgrads with disabilities. Those who may feel shut out from pursuing postgraduate study because it would require them to live near campus, commute, and attend all their classes in person, may be empowered to apply for a PhD or Masters if it meant they could log on from home in a way which would allow them to better manage their disability.

## Disability Supports and Disability Support Services

Participants reported that effective disability supports, and disability support services are often the difference between the participant either having an enriching or completely disheartening experience during their postgraduate journey. There was almost an even split between the participants who had a negative experience and those who had a positive experience. However, due to a lack of resourcing around accommodations, some participants found they had to 'self-accommodate' and rely on informal support structures often implemented by their supervisors.

Many of the participants also spoke about the barriers they encountered when attempting to engage with the disability support service (DSS), such as requiring diagnostic proof of their disability, which was difficult for some of the participants to attain, and a lack of transparency around 'learning and educational needs' (LENS) reports. When approached correctly, disability supports, and disability support services can make a postgraduate student feel validated and assure them that they are a valued member of the student body. When handled badly, they risk causing alienation, isolation, and pushing the student towards dropping out.

## Positive Experiences with Disability Support Services

Participants characterised a positive experience with the disability support services in their respective HEI's as being engaged with their wellbeing such as, checking in on them periodically, not objectifying them as person with a disability, arranging meetings with them before they started their Masters or PhD to go through what supports they might need, and transparent communication. Participants 2 and 3 talk about their positive experiences with their DSS:

→ "[It was] really affirming and gentle and not gruelling or making me feel objectified or anything, as I had a lot of negative experiences with dealing with medical professionals and healthcare workers. It was [about] working with you, like working with me as who I am kind of thing."
— Participant 3

→ "They had a room where they discussed all the accessibility. They have their own building for the access people. And I went and talked to them. I was saying what [accommodations] could I get and stuff……And then when I started the course, I had a meeting with the disability officer, and she gave me the [live scribe] pen, gave me my time, anything I needed, and she would check in every semester. [It was] nothing I ever had before."

Participant 2 had a negative past experience attempting to engage with the DSS during their undergrad that heavily coloured how they felt about engaging with them again during both their Masters and their PhD. However, their experience was a transformative one. They changed HEI's and their new institution engaged with them around their hearing impairment from the very beginning. This experience was extremely validating for this participant, as participant 3 corroborates:

→ "And because of the support from the disability service, I was like, oh my God, I actually can do this. And I found it really rewarding. So, I decided to try and stay in it [their PhD]."
— Participant 3

When tailored support services are implemented successfully, the DSS can empower disabled postgraduates to continue to pursue their studies. They are often the difference between a disabled student who is thriving and one who is struggling.

## Negative Experiences with Disability Support Services

Participants characterised a negative experience with the DSS as being alienating and isolating, with services seeming not wholly interested in meeting their support needs, and with supports often being inappropriately retrofitted from those offered to undergraduates. Some participants also spoke of how they completely disengaged with the DSS because they were constantly being passed around and fobbed off, with not one person willing to take responsibility for implementing their accommodations, as was the case for participant 14:

→ "When I contacted the Disability Support Services in the college, they told me that because I'm on a part-time course. I'm under something called Lifelong Learning, so I don't fall under their remit. So, I went to Lifelong Learning. They told me that I'm not under their remit either. I contacted the Access Office, nobody replied to me. So this went on for about four months. So, what I ended up having to do was I was writing an email outlining all the people I tried to contact [and] explaining to them what the problem was."

— Participant 14

Some of the participants spoke of how they felt the postgraduate support structures were retrofitted from undergraduate supports and were not fit for purpose for postgrad students.

→ "I gave up trying to deal with them because everything that was set up and the way they were trying to deal with it seemed to be to get accommodations for undergrads around teaching and exams. There really didn't seem to be any support advertised for post grad students."

— Participant 4

→ "That I think the LENS reports, even the way the questionnaires are, is for set up for an undergrad student who's going to lectures, not [someone] who [may] be giving them. And the accommodations they offer you is about exams and obviously you don't do exams as a PhD even."

— Participant 10

This lack of defined and targeted support offerings for disabled postgraduates can serve to further alienate the disabled postgrad student, with participants perceiving that services misunderstand their often very specific support needs and making them feel like they do not belong in this space. It is no wonder then that some of the participants spoke of disengaging completely from the DSS.

## Self-accommodation, Informal Supports, and the use of AI

In the absence of the formal support services offering targeted supports for postgraduates, participants had to self-accommodate and rely on informal support arrangements that were often just verbal agreements between staff and the student. Many of the participants spoke of how this often came at a financial cost as they had to purchase accommodations such as technology themselves. Self-accommodation has thus become yet another factor in the hidden cost of disability (Department of Social Protection, 2021). Informal support arrangements also caused many of the participants unnecessary added stress as they worried about them being removed due to a change in supervisor or staff not sufficiently meeting their needs as they were not obligated to do so.

Participants met their own needs by buying Dictaphones to record lectures, text to speech software, tablets, proof-reading services, and transcription software.

→ "One of them for example that I'm using, and I use literally on a daily basis is Speechify. So, I really struggle with maintaining concentration levels. So, if you feed it your PDFs it reads it to you, but like in a podcast. "

— Participant 6

→ "I think you might laugh now when I tell you this, but one of the key innovations for me was my wife actually bought me an iPad for my birthday. And when I started using the iPad, I realized I could work from lying down. I did usually spend kind of seven to eight hours resting, lying down just as pressure relief from sitting in a chair essentially."

— Participant 1

→ "So, without telling the teachers I've done this, I, I've had to use transcription software because there were just parts of the conversation that I just wasn't picking up, no matter how many times I listened to it."

— Participant 14

However, self-accommodation also meant that some participants would have to remind staff of their needs every lecture and meeting. In the absence of a LENs report, a report that is circulated amongst staff members detailing how that student should be supported, this was often the case:

→ "And so instead I focused on telling my teachers what I need from them. And that's an ongoing thing that every time I have a class, I have to say something. Okay. It, it's very time consuming. It's very exhausting "

— Participant 14

Without official support from the DSS, many of the participants reverted to arranging supports informally, one on one, with lecturers and supervisors. Supports arranged informally which were cited by participants included extended deadlines, an understanding that allowed the participant to work from home, being given/allowed to utilise a piece of software or tech, being exempt from group work, and even splitting workload over semesters so they could fulfil both teaching and learning obligations.

→ "And the fact that I'm able to move back to [location] and work remotely and live in a mobile home, even though [the support arrangement] is insecure, it's unofficial and everything. I still feel like I'm the lucky one because it [means] I can still pursue my PhD."

— Participant 10

→ "I had a group presentation, but I said to him at that stage, early in the term, I'm not able to do this again. And he was nice about that, and he said, okay, you can do an individual presentation and you can record it and send it to me. So that was much better, but I don't know, I was also kind of annoyed that I didn't know [I could] ask for that."

— Participant 8

As evidenced from the above, informal support arrangements relied upon the general compassion and empathy of the staff involved in the participant's postgraduate programme. This is not always a guarantee, and as will be outlined in a later section, disability awareness is often found to be lacking amongst academic staff. Unofficial accommodations are precarious and could be taken away at any time with a change in staff structure.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) was a feature of many of the self-accommodation discussions with the participants. Those who struggled with organisation used it for time-management:

→ "I use many AI tools to organize my study. Most of the tools are a paid version of tools, so I need to allocate a certain amount of money, which is quite a lot [for] me."

— Participant 5

Other participants were using it to fine tune their research.

→ "Now, you know, I'm trying to use a lot of tools like AI and everything to do better observations and to fine tune my writing and also to help with referencing."

— Participant 7

But mostly it was being used as a tool to help with referencing and collating resources and literature into once place.

→ "And I use Gen AI to help me kind of collate all of my resources into one place with citation and bits like that, but it just really helps me with streamlining that process. Especially not coming from an academic background."

— Participant 6

Arguably, AI, as a form of accommodation, could be transformative. Using AI as an inclusive learning tool for self-accommodation offers an interesting counterpoint to the need for persistent self-advocacy in the participant's interactions with the DSS. The AI models cited by several participants as important aids to their studies listen, take direction from the participants about their study needs and do not question why, or present the kind of barriers to access experienced by participants on a daily basis.

## Medical Evidence of Disability

In most higher education institutions in Ireland, students must provide specific kinds of medical evidence as proof of disability to register with disability support services and receive the full range of appropriate supports. This need for specific evidence as a prerequisite for receiving the full range of disability supports is heavily influenced by the eligibility criteria for the National Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) which supports institutions to cover the cost of reasonable accommodations.

Funding from this mechanism can only be used to support students who have provided specific forms of medical evidence to the institution to verify their disability status, often from specific types of medical professionals and within specific age limits for the reports requested depending on the disability category in question. Although the legal obligation for institutions to provide reasonable accommodations is separate and unconnected to this fund, in reality, its criteria has heavily influenced the information required to register with services and access supports on the ground.

For many of the participants, acquiring a sign off on their diagnosis from a General Practitioner (GP), Psychiatrist, or other medical professional was a significant barrier to engagement with the DSS. This is often the result of under-resourced DSS's, who would love the opportunity to give supports to anyone who asks for them. However, participants have felt that this climate breeds an atmosphere that is suspicious of every applicant to the DSS.

"I had a group presentation, but I said to him at that stage, early in the term, I'm not able to do this again. And he was nice about that, and he said, okay, you can do an individual presentation and you can record it and send it to me. So that was much better, but I don't know, I was also kind of annoyed that I didn't know [I could] ask for that."

— Participant 8

→ "I think the bureaucracy, the paperwork, and I think just somehow the default system is that people are lying. So, the default is not that people are trying to get benefits, you know?... this assumption is not helpful."

— Participant 7

Acquiring the right paperwork was especially difficult for neurodiverse participants such as those in the Autism, ADHD, and Dyslexia categories. Some of these participants had no formal diagnosis, were awaiting diagnosis, or were diagnosed only recently, within the last 5 years. For the participants in the ADHD and Autism category, acquiring a formal diagnosis was an expensive and time-consuming exercise. Public waiting lists are 3-4 years long (Oireachtas Joint Committee on Autism, 2023), and private diagnosis is prohibitively expensive, especially for cash strapped postgrads.

→ "But they want 850 euro for the diagnosis. So, at the time I couldn't afford that. No. So I still haven't paid for it."

— Participant 13

→ "I do not have any certificate that [says] I'm dyslexic or dyspraxic because the process itself is so tiresome. I don't want to go through that again."

— Participant 7

Therefore, many did not have a formal diagnosis, which became a significant barrier for them when they began to engage with the DSS. Some of these participants were only offered basic, cost-free supports, in some cases only those that were not even postgrad specific such as extra time in exams being offered to research students.

For the other participants who were not neurodiverse, it was still a challenge to acquire the necessary documentation. Some met push back when they went looking for the required evidence:

→ "My psychiatrist refused saying that he and the team decided not to sign off on it because they didn't want to label me with a disability and give me a negative stigma. And also, that they didn't want me getting grants and awards because of my illness."

— Participant 6

For others, even though their disability was a visible disability, acquiring the paperwork was time consuming and delayed them being able to engage with supports:

→ "So, the, the request itself was going to take, I don't know how many months. In order to get the proof."

— Participant 14

Some participants noted how this felt like a violation of their privacy, and that the DSS were requesting information that they did not need to know about them:

→ "It just felt like they knew more than they needed to about me and I don't know why a letter from a GP wouldn't suffice…it was just sort of needlessly invasive, I thought, especially for what little I was actually looking for."

— Participant 8

While needing a medical diagnosis to access the DSS was an issue for many of the participants, this becomes more acute for international students as they may already have the proof, but now they must pay to have their disability legitimised by an Irish GP or other practitioner. This was true for almost every issue discussed above. If English was not their first language, they often had to self-accommodate by paying for proof-reading services, it also meant they faced further social isolation as they found it hard to break into Irish social circles, the list could go on. International disabled postgraduates are a particularly vulnerable group who are very rarely part of the conversation as their numbers are few, therefore representation is difficult.

Overall, the participants experience in acquiring the necessary paperwork to avail of accommodations from their respective DSS's leans more to the negative side. It is notable that the registration process for a support system built to make the university more accessible has led some participants to feel mistrusted and disconnected from the university.

## Experiences with Official Accommodations

Those who had access to official support from the DSS spoke of both empowering and frustrating experiences. For those who found their supports met their needs it meant the difference between floundering and flourishing. For those who struggled to have the accommodations implemented properly, or at all, a lack of joined up thinking left them frustrated and unsupported. Participants 1 and 4 illustrate this:

→ "Fantastic support in the fact that they're able to find a spot for me to lay down. But the spot wasn't accessible, so that meant I had to get a member of staff from facilities to help me into the building. I had to organize this and I had to be there for a certain time."

— Participant 1

→ "I let them know in advance that I would be needing either rooms with lift access or ground floor rooms. Because at the time I tried going back for a semester while I was waiting for the surgery, and they just wouldn't accommodate that sometimes. And so I was having to go to classes up two or three flights of stairs when I can't breathe, and my heart is literally about to give up."

— Participant 4

A lack of joined up thinking regarding accommodations was a big issue for many of the participants. It meant that even though they technically had support in place, accessing said support was often unnecessarily difficult as staff had failed to thoroughly think through the steps needed for that student to access it, sometimes leaving them stranded.

One of the most pressing examples for many of the participants was the lack of quiet study spaces. All the participants who availed of official supports from the DSS were given access to quiet spaces on campus. For some, this was a designated spot in the library, for others it was a sensory cubicle that promised a distraction free and quiet environment. Because there were so many students requiring access to the sensory cubicles or quiet spaces, participants were only allowed 1 to 4 hours of use per day depending on the HEIs policy.

→ "We are only allowed to use the sensory cubicle maximum four hours every day. But usually my booking will finish at around five or 6:00 PM. And I still need around another two hours extra before I go home."
— Participant 5

The increasing need for quiet study spaces meant designated spots became overrun with other students that often did not respect the rules in place.

→ "And then they provided a quiet space. So they had a building where you could just go. And it slowly has deteriorated in terms of accessibility because there's so many people now that need that space for other things, you know."
— Participant 9

Many of the participants also had positive stories to tell of their experiences with the accommodations they received from the DSS. This took some of the pressure off them meeting the demands of both their disability and their postgraduate programme, allowing them to reach their full potential.

→ "The [Lens report] says that I get extra time in exams and flexibility with deadlines, and that flexibility with deadlines piece is good. I don't need to bring a sick note for certain days of absence either. [But] luckily that's never been an issue with my supervisor anyway."
— Participant 10

→ "I have the Scribe pen and if I'm doing an assignment, I can get an extra two weeks on top of it to complete it. But sometimes when you're reading and writing, it's a lot more time to look up a word, for example. So, I have extra time. I also have a microphone thing for the teacher to talk in, [that] connects to my hearing aids."

— Participant 2

Two of the participants needed personal assistance to help them complete exams during their Masters programmes. Both participants voiced frustration at the inadequate quality of the personal assistance made available to them and the high turnover rate of PA's.

→ "She wasn't used to typing, she was leaving double spaces and opening a bracket and leaving a space. And I just went, stop. I'm doing exams. I can't be worrying about who's coming to do the exam....They [the DSS] actually came back and they said, Oh, well you can't have someone who has proper secretarial skills, you know for typing, because that would give you an advantage, and I said no it doesn't, because I have to speak, they have to type, you can't speak while you're thinking, so it's actually a lot longer to do an exam."

— Participant 12

→ "In the beginning I had different PAs, which of course means I have to train them how to do it. Then, in three months, I have a new PA, the trust level is never going to be there. It was a constant stress of needing to double check, or frustration because I couldn't double check properly how it looked visually."

— Participant 15

It is evidently a mixed bag whether an official accommodation will truly meet the needs of the student availing of it. For those who have positive experiences it allows them to flourish, for those with frustrating experiences it adds extra stress on top of an already stressful time for the participants.

## Experiences with Supervisors

Essential to any successful postgraduate journey is having a positive relationship with your supervisor. This becomes even more critical when the postgraduate has a disability and is relying on both their supervisor to take any accommodation needs they have on board, and to embed them in how they teach and develop that student. The participants who had a good relationship with their supervisor spoke of less pressure and a much more positive and flexible working environment.

The participants who had negative experiences often felt that their needs were being ignored, felt pressured to drop out, and spoke of excessive amounts of stress as they were expected to conform to often inflexible and traditional ideals of what a postgraduate student should be capable of.

## Positive Supervisor Relationships

The participants characterised a good supervisor relationship as them being understanding and compassionate about the demands of the participants' disability, being aware of their accommodations and implementing them when needed, allowing for flexible working hours and deadlines, facilitating their participation at conferences and other events, and being open to a different way of working than they may be used to.

→ "[I have] huge flexibility on working hours. Then we've always had a policy of if I end up in hospital, just let them know and we kind of put a pause on anything that I'm expected to do"
— Participant 4

→ "I did tell [supervisor] about my mental health issues, and they were really, really nice about it, and I just kind of said a bit about what this will mean, that [certain things] would be challenging for me, and that I would just need to go at my own pace with that stuff, and she was she was really nice about it."
— Participant 8

For these participants, life as a research Masters or PhD student became less stressful as they were given the space to enjoy their studies at a pace that met their needs. Often, the supports that the supervisors put in place were not mandated by the DSS, supports such as flexible deadlines, and being allowed to work from home. These supports were often put in place informally as issues arose. Some participants noted that it is complete 'luck of the draw' whether you were assigned a supervisor who was willing to accommodate your needs.

## Hostile Feelings

However, even those with good supervisor relationships still often felt like burdens, or a nuisance, or suffered from bouts of imposter syndrome. This never seemed to come about from any direct action from the supervisor, but many participants spoke of picking up on hostile feelings towards them that they could not adequately explain. It must be noted here that these participants may be noticing the supervisor's own stress as they are often overworked and burdened with large workloads (Padyab and Lundgren, 2023).

→ "I felt that the health problems were causing more trouble than they feel happy putting up with. Generally it's good, but there a few times I've felt not particularly well supported."
— Participant 4

→ "I question myself a lot for whether or not I should be doing a PhD..... I'm quite stubborn about it because I know that [HEI] always says that they want diversity and they want disabled people to be supported and the government says that too, that they want to support disabled students and everything. So that's why I'm being almost stubborn about it."
— Participant 10

## Negative Supervisor Relationships

Some of the participants had entirely negative experiences with their supervisors. This was often characterised by a lack of understanding, and a lack of even wanting to understand how the participant is affected by their disability and how this will impact upon how they work as a student. Some participants met pushback from supervisors who had what participants perceived as a traditionalist view on what a Masters or PhD candidate should be capable of. Participant 9 talks of how his Dyslexia was not accommodated by his supervisor, and participant 13 explains how her supervisor reacted after she tried to change to a more accommodating supervisor:

→ "I had some issues with my supervisor. And he was, I could only describe mean in his approach and his feedback. He wasn't particularly nice or encouraging or inclusive or anything that as an educator he should be. He was kind of saying to me, well, if you submit that, I won't support you. He told me my literature review was shite."

— Participant 9.

→ "I'd tried to get a second supervisor and I explained all the issues that I had quite detailed and it was all fired back in my face and basically I [had a] not very nice meeting with her, basically her berating me that I had embarrassed her and I had done XYZ and I was the worst in the world, you know, and I was made to feel like literally this small."

— Participant 13

While it was only a small portion of the participants that had entirely negative experiences, the impact this left upon their Masters and PhD journeys was disastrous, with some dropping out and pursuing their studies later, and others questioning whether they really should be pursuing postgraduate study at all.

Even the participants who had positive experiences still saw a need for better staff training and awareness around disability, which can foster compassion and understanding, paving the way for positive experiences to be had by both parties.

→ "I think there needs to be better training around the way supervisors interact with students and it is just coming down to a complete lack of understanding, a lack of training, a lack of awareness around those particular problems [chronic illness]."

— Participant 4

Negative supervisor relationships often resulted in participants feeling alienated and that there was no space for someone with a disability on the program.

→ "The capitalist society we live in, disability does not have a space and it never has. You're either a burden or you have to pretend it doesn't exist. There isn't really an in between."

— Participant 6

What most of these experiences boil down to is a lack of awareness on how disability affects a student's day to day life. There is a sense that students are expected to fit a traditionalist view on what an academic and PhD student should be capable of, with no consideration for doing things differently or allowing for difference at all.

## Experiences with Lecturers

Many of the participants spoke of their experiences with lecturers and how they were or were not accommodated during their taught modules. Some of the participants noted a lack of communication around whether teaching staff received their LENs report from the DSS, with a couple of participants noting that it seemed their lecturer forgot about their accommodations. This led to more situations where the student was forced to self-advocate, as in participant 2's experience where their lecturer repeatedly forgot to face forward when talking so they could lip read, which meant having to remind them every time they had the class.

→ "I hate telling people that I'm deaf. So, the disability officer she sent emails to my lecturers explaining that there's students in your class, that are deaf, blah, blah, blah. So, they knew I was deaf going in, and, you know, sometimes I felt like some of them forgot [and I had to ask them to face forward]."

— Participant 2

Other participants noted positive experiences with lecturers, where, as with some of the supervisors, they supported them ad hoc, and switched up their teaching styles to better accommodate the participant. Participant 5 spoke of their experiences in having their ADHD accommodated by a couple of understanding lecturers, using in one case a differentiated approach specifically for them, and in another by their application of a universal design for learning (UDL) approach for all students:

→ "I had one lecturer who acknowledge my ADHD, although I didn't have a formal diagnosis. So he differentiated his approach just for me. All other students updated with him, like on monthly basis, but with me, he arranged for me to update on a weekly basis."

— Participant 5

## Funding

It is an established limitation of this study that it only examined the experiences of postgraduates who were successful in funding their studies, whether it be from scholarships or grants, or from their own funds. Despite this, many of the participants struggled to fully fund the full four years of their PhD or had to finance their studies from many precarious streams of revenue. Also, a lack of signposting on how and where to apply for funding was sometimes a barrier in its own way. Participants also spoke of the inflexibility of funding, meaning if they had to take time off books due to illness, they would then have had to waste a year's funding and be liable for fees in the final year of their programme, which in turn became another factor in the hidden cost of disability. None of the participants who experienced having to go 'off books' managed to have their funding suspended until they returned. The inability to pursue funded part-time study due to inflexible funding streams also seemed to contribute to many participants' stress and burnout as they ignored the demands of their disability in order to finish their PhDs and Masters on time.

"I had some issues with my supervisor. And he was, I could only describe mean in his approach and his feedback. He wasn't particularly nice or encouraging or inclusive or anything that as an educator he should be. He was kind of saying to me, well, if you submit that, I won't support you. He told me my literature review was shite."

— Participant 9

## Funding Experiences

For some participants, the application procedures for applying for funding were a significant barrier. They cited a lack of sign posting around where and, crucially, how to apply for funding. With no centralised hub of information available to prospective postgraduates, many floundered when it came time to apply.

→ "But I didn't know this, and it's not told to anyone that before you do your PhD you have to be applying for funding a year in advance. Which I wasn't aware of, nobody had told me this... it didn't tell me anywhere, even on the [HEI] site."

— Participant 13

Some of the participants were funding their studies through various revenue streams. Some of them also spent one year of the four years of funding pursuing a Masters programme, making them liable for fees in their final year. Of the participants for whom this was the case, none of them had a concrete plan in place on how they were going to fund their final year.

→ "So, I have one year gone on the taught masters and now I'm starting a four-year PhD, but I only have funding for two years left."

— Participant 3

→ "Well, as I mentioned, the disability allowance I get to keep that. And I also get a SUSI grant at the special rate because of the disability allowance. And that could potentially be problematic when it comes to the end of my PhD, because they give four years funding for both [a Masters and a PhD] at a maximum. And I've already spent one on my Masters, so I only have three years for a PhD."

— Participant 8

One participant talked of how the funding barrier was the most significant for them, but how knowing they could avail of specific funding spurred them on to pursue their studies, despite having, in this instance, to provide 50% of the fees from their own pocket.

→ "So that's what really made me consider it and what made me go for it. I mean, it's not a full scholarship, but it's part funding. Because that financial part had always been the biggest thing that had stopped me....So they pay 50 percent of everything at the moment, and then the other 50 percent is just from my own pocket."

— Participant 6

For most of the other participants, they were funded through scholarships that financed their full fees. Some were funded by the Irish Research Council (IRC), the John Young Scholarship, an Ad Astra funding attachment for a postgraduate student, the EU Commission, SUSI, and the Mary Robinson scholarship.

→ "I got a John Young scholarship, so a Young scholarship in [HEI], so I got one of them. Which again was great, paid my fees and it was a stipend of 5, 000 a year, you know."

— Participant 9

→ "My supervisor was employed on an Ad Astra contract, which meant that she got, I think it was four years. Like a four-year contract with attached funding for a PhD student, and so I was funded that way through [HEI]."

— Participant 4

It is clear that the participants were funding their Masters and PhD programs in any way they could, be it from their own pocket or from scholarships and grants. This fractal way of funding their studies however, often left them in financially precarious positions where they had to find an alternative source of funding for their final year/s.

## Inflexibility of Funding

Four of the participants discussed how the inflexibility of most funding streams left them liable for fees in the final year because they had to go 'off books' to deal with flare ups and periods of illness due to their disability. Many noted how it would have taken the pressure off if they had been allowed to drop to part-time study while also being allowed to retain their funding.

→ "That was a bit sad I think because at the time I was very very ill, and I didn't have a place in [location] still to live. So, it meant moving back to like a really overcrowded housing situation while I was really sick and going through surgeries. And I had no income as well that whole year and I feel it made my health worse because of the stress. Trying to work full time somewhere else isn't suitable, so I wish that they'd offered me to do maybe part time, but at the same time the funding will only fund you if you're full time."

— Participant 10

→ "I think with PhDs, I think there needs to be more flexibility around [part-time]. Where there should be a thing where PhDs can go, look. You know, I need an extra six months but not have the fees."

— Participant 12

This is of particular concern for postgraduates who have chronic illness and mental health difficulties. A person with Crohns Disease or someone with bipolar disorder, for example, cannot predict when they will be affected by their condition in such a way that it totally disrupts their everyday routine. The inflexibility of funding means they are often pushed into precarious financial positions and the risk of non-completion is amplified.

# 07 Recommendations

Below is a list of recommendations for stakeholders across all facets of the postgraduate experience.

## → Recommendation

Take Strategic Action to increase participation in training for Supervisors and Lecturers

## ◎ Action

It is recommended that supervisors and lecturers are incentivised to undertake Disability Awareness and Universal Design for Learning training by implementing a recognition for participation in processes related to recruitment and promotion, and meeting criteria for institutional awards and internal research funding processes.

- Where possible, mandate introductory disability awareness and inclusive practice training for Supervisors at an institution or departmental level.
- Ensure disability awareness and inclusive practice in supervision is built into existing wider professional development programmes for academic staff, such as postgraduate certificates in teaching and learning and research.
- Explore ways to incentivise completion of disability awareness and inclusive practice training offering through strategies such as requiring them to advance on career promotion tracks and rewarding completion in scoring for institutional research/teaching and learning awards.

**Time Scale** Long Term
**Stakeholders** Deans of Graduate Studies, Heads of Research, HEI's

## → Recommendation

Flexible Funding Options

## ◎ Action

Stakeholders such as Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship Programme, Research Ireland, SUSI, and other research and postgraduate grant providers should seriously consider:

- Developing part-time funded scholarships.
- Implement policy that allows grant holders to take sick leave that extends their funding during said sick leave.
- Develop policy and procedures to account for potential long-term illness
- Develop disability focused scholarships with the above flexibility built into the model.
- For SUSI, consider extending the funding past the current 4-year limit as many postgrads study a Masters before their PhD which takes away a year of funding from the 4 year limit, making them liable for fees in their final year.
- Increase flexibility in SUSI funds/research stipends to allow for funding time limits to cover completion of the Viva and associated corrections.

**Time Scale** Long Term

**Stakeholders** Research Ireland, DFHERIS, SUSI

## → Recommendation

Develop Disabled Postgrad Specific Entry Route

## ◎ Action

For relevant system stakeholders to consider developing a national postgraduate specific entry route akin to DARE. It is a limitation of this study that we did not talk to participants for whom the application process was a barrier. If it makes sense to have an entry route into undergraduate study, then it should make just as much sense to have an entry route for disabled postgrads which considers the impact of disability, particularly given the low participation rate at this level. Many of the DARE participants may wish to pursue postgrad studies once they have finished their undergraduate degrees and having another direct entry route for them to avail of would streamline this process.

**Time Scale** Long Term
**Stakeholders** HEI's, HEA, DFHERIS

## → Recommendation

Develop Tailored Supports for Disabled Postgrads

## ◎ Action

HEI disability support services should collaborate with postgraduate students, particularly research students, to develop a range of supports dedicated to needs of disabled students in the research context. Services should develop dedicated pages on their websites to widely communicate the availability of postgraduate-specific supports. Disability support staff should also endeavour to check in with their students on a semi-regular basis to ensure accommodations are still meeting needs.

**Time Scale** Long Term
**Stakeholders** Disability Support Services, HEI's

## → Recommendation

Relax Medical Sign Off on Diagnosis

## ◎ Action

Disability Support Services should aim to relax the medical evidence requirements for access to postgraduate supports, such as the required sign off by a specific medical professional on the student's diagnosis. DFHERIS/ HEA should seek to lower corresponding barriers for eligibility for the Fund for Students with Disabilities to enable HEIs to provide support to disabled postgraduates who do not possess this documentation.

**Time Scale** Long Term
**Stakeholders** Disability Support Services, HEI's, HEA, DFHERIS

## → Recommendation

Develop a 'Conference Attendance' Guide

## ◎ Action

The LaunchPAD Ambassadors to collaborate and develop a 'Conference Attendance' guide that could be hosted on HEI disability support websites. This will include tips on networking, advocating for hybrid events, and outlining that the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) can be used to cover the cost of reasonable accommodations required to facilitate disabled students' attendance at conferences.

**Time Scale** Short Term
**Stakeholders** LaunchPAD, LaunchPAD Ambassadors

## → Recommendation
Hybrid Conference Attendance

## ◎ Action
Conference organisers, especially those who are organising disability or accessibility focused events should consider facilitating hybrid presentations and networking where possible.

**Time Scale** Long Term
**Stakeholders** Conference Organisers across Ireland

## → Recommendation
Continue to Implement Universal Design

## ◎ Action
HEI's to ensure an accessible campus by embedding the Altitude charter.

**Time Scale** Long Term
**Stakeholders** HEI's

## → Recommendation
Build a Strong Alumni Network

## ◎ Action
LaunchPAD to begin establishing a strong alumni network of previous and current postgrads with disabilities, so the previous generation of disabled students can demonstrate to the new generation that it can be done and share what worked for them.

**Time Scale** Long Term
**Stakeholders** LaunchPAD, NDPAC, LaunchPAD Ambassadors

## → Recommendation
Offer Alternative Assessment

## ◎ Action
Lecturers should consider alternative assessments where students complete assignments in a variety of ways, such as a traditional essay, a group project, a presentation, or short form video. Ensure that this alternative assessment is outlined in the course handbook to allow students time to plan ahead and choose what assessment they would like to undertake.

Institutions should support educators in deploying alternative assessments through enhanced support from academic developers and teaching assistance.

**Time Scale** Long Term
**Stakeholders** Lecturers, HEI's

## → Recommendation
Hybrid Teaching and Learning

## ◎ Action
Considering the current housing crisis and its effects upon postgraduate students seeking accommodation, it is recommended that HEI's consider a return to hybrid teaching and learning. Hybrid teaching and learning also allows those for whom commuting, and accessing often inaccessible campuses is an issue to participate in postgraduate study.

**Time Scale** Long Term
**Stakeholders** HEI's, Supervisors, Lecturers

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"She wasn't used to typing, she was leaving double spaces and opening a bracket and leaving a space. And I just went, stop. I'm doing exams. I can't be worrying about who's coming to do the exam... They [the DSS] actually came back and they said, Oh, well you can't have someone who has proper secretarial skills, you know for typing, because that would give you an advantage, and I said no it doesn't, because I have to speak, they have to type, you can't speak while you're thinking, so it's actually a lot longer to do an exam."

— Participant 12

# 09 Appendices

## 1.1 Registration form including information sheet

Interview for Voices in the Community research with LaunchPAD

### Section 1

**LaunchPAD is a 3-year HEA-funded joint venture between AHEAD and NDPAC** (National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee), aimed at breaking down barriers and facilitating enablers to postgraduate study. Recently published AHEAD research shows that only 3.2% of the total postgraduate population engage with Disability Support Services, in comparison to 8.5% at undergraduate level. In recognition of these low participation rates the Higher Education Authority (HEA) **established the inclusion of students with disabilities in postgraduate study as a national strategic objective**, as outlined in the Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022 – 2028. LaunchPAD was founded in response to this recognition.

In years 1 and 2 of LaunchPAD we are focused on developing and sustaining a postgraduate community, and we want to influence policy development by amplifying the lived experience of postgraduates with disabilities. With this in mind **LaunchPAD are seeking postgraduates and early career researchers with disabilities to talk about their experiences of postgraduate life as a person with a disability.** These experiences will go on **to inform a research paper entitled 'Voices in the Community'.** The conclusions and recommendations resulting from the 'Voices in the Community' paper will then be **used to influence and shape key stakeholders and policy makers decisions** on the particular barriers and enablers to success for postgraduates and early career researchers with disabilities.

LaunchPAD is calling for participants to share their views in the form of a **1 to 1 semi-structured interview** conducted by the project leader Nicole Bennett. All interviews will **take place over Zoom** at a **time and date that best suits the interviewee**. Each interview will **last approx. 1 hour and 30 mins**.

If you are interested in being a part of this research we would like you to express your interest **by completing this form**.

LaunchPAD values disabled people's time and input when participating in research and sharing their lived experience and will, if selected, compensate your contributions with either a cash gift or voucher of your choice of **68 EUR**.

Please note, this is an **expression of interest to participate** in the interviews. Participants will be selected according to the criteria we have set out to ensure we have a diverse range of participants therefore it is possible that not all who complete this form will be selected.

# 3.2%

Percentage of the total postgraduate population engage with Disability Support Services, in comparison to 8.5% at undergraduate level

## Section 2

**Project title:** 'Voices in the Community'

**Why is it being undertaken:**
This research seeks to better understand the experiences of postgraduates and early career researchers (ECR) with disabilities. This learning will be used to help further develop policies that directly address the issues faced by postgraduates and ECR's, while also creating a learning environment where they can succeed without impediment.

This study is part of a 3-year project called LaunchPAD that is focusing on the experiences of postgraduates and ECR's with disabilities, while trying to build a community made up of these groups and engage stakeholders and policy builders.

**Who is undertaking the research:**
LaunchPAD are carrying out this research which is funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) through AHEAD. Nicole Bennett is the project lead and is supported by Dara Ryder, CEO of AHEAD.

**What will I be asked about?**

- You will be asked about your experiences in securing funding and accessing accommodations for study.

- You will be asked about what your experiences have been with lecturers, thesis supervisors, and disability officers in your respective institution.

- You will be asked to tell us your experience of accessing specific labs, placements, and field observations if your course of study calls for them.

- You will be asked about aspects of your postgraduate journey so far that has enabled your success, or that has put a barrier in place.

- You will be asked to outline your day to day activities as a postgrad or ECR in order for comparisons to be made between experiences.

**What does taking part involve?**

- You will be invited to take part in a one-to-one interview over Zoom.
- Each interview will last approx. 1 and a half hours.
- Zoom links will be sent out in the week before the semi-structured interview.
- The paper is due to be published around May-June 2025 and will be shared with all participants.

**Your Participation:**

Your participation in this research will be entirely voluntary and you may leave the research up to 6 weeks after the date of your interview.

LaunchPAD values disabled people's time and input when participating in research and sharing their lived experience. We will compensate your contributions as part of this research with a cash gift or voucher of your choice of 68 EUR.

**Confidentiality**

The semi-structured interviews will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner. The research team commit to conduct the research ethically, in line with AHEAD's Research Policy.

Any information or data which you share during this research will be treated confidentially and, if published, you will not be identified.

The data from the interviews will be transcribed and some direct quotes may be used. If direct quotes are used and published, your name will not be used but a pseudonym (another name) may be given to you. We may audio record the interview to assist with notetaking.

All of the data will be stored securely and will be destroyed in accordance with GDPR and AHEAD's Data Protection Policy. Periods for data destruction and retention can be made available on request.

**Accessibility**

If you have any accessibility considerations which would make your participation in this research, please tell us so we can put in place the appropriate supports.

If you require any of this information in an alternative format, please email nicole.bennett@ahead.ie

**Questions:**

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact the project lead Nicole Bennett at nicole.bennett@ahead.ie.

**Informed Consent**

- I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet, what the research is about and how I will be involved.
- I understand how my data will be managed.
- I am aware that I do not have to answer any question, and I have the right to withdraw from the research, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating, and up to 6 weeks after my interview takes place.
- I am aware that data collected will be stored securely, safely and in accordance with AHEAD's Data Protection Policy.

I understand the above information and consent to participate in the interview.

- Yes ☐
- No ☐

**Personal Details**

First Name

Surname

Pro-Nouns

- She/her
- He/him
- They/them

Email

Contact Number

Please indicate whether you are a:

- Disabled postgraduate student
- Disabled Early Career Researcher

**Educational and Disability Data**

*To ensure we get a wide range of views and a diverse perspectives for the research, we are collecting this information to assist with the selection criteria.*

**What disabilities do you have?**

*Please note, these following categories are aligned with the Higher Education Authority categories used for students with disabilities. You can choose more than one option. If you are unsure, you can complete the Other box.*

- ADHD
- Autism
- Blind or Low vision
- DCD/Dyspraxia
- Deaf or hard of hearing
- Dyslexia or Dyscalculia (Specific learning difficulty)
- Intellectual disability
- Mental health difficulty
- Neurological/speech and language
- Physical Disability
- Significant Ongoing illness
- Other

Please indicate what field of study you are engaged in i.e Engineering, Psychology, Biology etc.

**Accessibility Considerations**

Accessibility Supports for Online Interview

*Please let us know if you require any further supports to enable your full participation in the research.*

- No additional supports needed
- ISL Interpreter
- Captions
- I will have a PA/ Carer/ Advocate attending with me
- Other

## 1.2 Informed Consent form

**Project title:** Voices in the Community

- I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet, what the Voices in the Community paper is about and how I will be involved.

- I understand how my data will be managed.

- I am aware that I do not have to answer any question, and I have the right to withdraw from the research, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating and up to the point of the launch.

- I understand that some data or findings may also be used in combined and anonymous form, for research/statistical purposes or publication in order to inform future additional research and interested parties of AHEAD's achievements and progress.
  - An example of how this may be presented in publications is; 70% of disabled people in our consultation agreed that ".....".

- I am aware that data collected will be stored securely, safely and in accordance with AHEAD's Data Protection Policy.

**I understand the above information and consent to participate in the Voices in the Community research.**

Please mark an X beside your response below.

- Yes ☐
- No ☐

**Name:**
**Signature:**
**Date:**

If you have concerns about how this research is being conducted, please contact the AHEAD CEO, Dara Ryder – dara.ryder@ahead.ie.

## 1.3 Semi-structured Interview Guide

### 'Voices' Semi-structured Interview Guide

**Opening RECORD**

Could you give a brief introduction that includes what you are studying/researching, what university you are attending, and the nature of your disability

**Undergraduate**

- Could you give an overview of your experience as an undergraduate/with a disability? **(this section may not be relevant to every participant as many may acquired a disability after they completed their undergraduate studies)**
  - Did you enter your undergrad through DARE or another similar programme aimed at people with disabilities?
  - Did you engage with the Disability Support Service? How was your experience with them?
  - Did you engage with any societies or clubs during your time at undergrad?
  - Could you describe how you went about securing the accommodations you needed?
  - Is there anything you would do differently that would change your experience at undergrad?

**Postgraduate Overview**

- What prompted you to pursue postgraduate studies?
  - Did you feel any hesitancy in pursuing postgrad studies due to your disability? Why?
  - How did you choose your postgrad studies/select your PhD thesis? Did you factor in accessibility into your choice?
- Can you give me a breakdown of your day-to-day activities as a postgraduate?
  - Is it any different from your day to day as an undergraduate?

**Funding**

- Could you explain to me how you funded your studies?
  - What was your experience in securing funding?
  - Did you ever have to request a change in your funding? Such as moving to part time study? Or going off books?

**Disability Support Services**

- Have you engaged with disability support services as a postgrad?
- What was your experience like getting your disability recognised by the service?
  - Did you have to have a GP or psychiatrist sign off on your disability?
  - Did you encounter any pushback from the disability office in getting your needs recognised?
    What accommodations did you have?
    Were all your accommodations met?
  - If no, could you outline why you didn't?
    How did you get by without having accommodations in place?

**Barriers and Enablers**

- Could you describe any instance/s where a barrier/s may have prevented you from reaching your full potential during your studies?
  - What could have been done differently to prevent this?
- Could you describe any incident/s that enhanced your experience as a postgrad with disabilities?
  - What about this experience, in particular, enhanced your experience at postgrad?
- Have you ever dropped out from a course of study/went off books before? Could you explain why?
  - What prompted you to try again?
- What was your most pressing issue as a postgrad with a disability?
  - What would be your suggestion to change/improve this?

**Experiences with Staff and Supervisors**

- Could you describe to me what your experience with lecturers has been like?
  - Were they accepting of your accommodations?
- Could you describe to me what your experience with your thesis supervisor has been like?
  - Was there anything that could have improved this relationship?

**Accessing the Campus, Labs, Lecture Rooms, and College life**

- Could you describe what your experience has been like accessing the college campus?
- Could you describe what your experience has been like accessing physical lecture rooms?
  - Does your institution offer online classes? How have you found accessing those?
- Could you describe to me what your experience has been in accessing labs/placements/field observations?
  - What specific accommodations did you need to access etc?
  - If you could change anything about your experience in attending (?) would you? What would it be?
- Have you attended any conferences?
  - What has been your experience in attending conferences?
  - Has your institution supported you? Through funding? By providing accommodations?

**Social Life**

- Have you joined any clubs or societies as a postgraduate?
  - What has been your experience of them?
  - Have they been accommodating?
  - Why have you opted not to join any clubs or societies?
- Do you notice any differences between your social life as an undergraduate and your social life as a postgraduate?
- Do you have any peers that also have a disability?

## Conclusion

- In summary, how would you describe your overall experience as a postgrad with a disability.
- Is there anything you would like to discuss that we haven't already?
- Do you have any questions for me before we wrap up?

"I let them know in advance that I would be needing either rooms with lift access or ground floor rooms. Because at the time I tried going back for a semester while I was waiting for the surgery, and they just wouldn't accommodate that sometimes. And so I was having to go to classes up two or three flights of stairs when I can't breathe, and my heart is literally about to give up."

— Participant 4

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Thank you

Go raibh maith agat

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