



**Survey on the Participation Rates
of Students with Disabilities in
Higher Education for the
Academic Year 2009/2010**

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Foreword

The numbers of students with disabilities choosing to go to higher education has dramatically risen over the last decade from 990 to over 6,000. These students with disabilities have expectations of gaining qualifications, building careers and being active citizens of Ireland. These statistics indicate that this upward trend in students with disabilities expecting to go on to higher education is continuing and every year there is an increase in the number succeeding in gaining a place in a course of their choice.

This success can be attributed to the policy of the Department of Education and Skills and the HEA and higher education institutions, of funding additional supports in recognition of the disadvantage experienced by students with disabilities and the need to ensure equity of learning within education. This means that students who have an impairment that interferes with their ability to communicate or to access learning materials, buildings or assessment will be facilitated through the use of a broader range of flexible pedagogy and the use of ICT and assistive technology. Increasingly, Inclusive Teaching and Learning practices are becoming embedded within mainstream practice in campuses nationwide.

It is interesting to note that in spite of the overall success of students with disability in higher education there remain persistent pockets of considerable disadvantage. Only 17% of students with sensory disabilities go on into higher education as opposed to over 55% of total school leavers¹. This survey shows that most students with disabilities are engaged on Arts and Humanities programmes despite feedback from employers suggesting that there is greater demand in areas such as computing.

Currently, students with disabilities, in particular those with sensory impairments, are excluded from access to teacher training colleges. This is due to attitudinal and structural barriers. The required medical documentation requests the student to describe their “mental and physical defects” and the requirement for fluency in Irish poses a barrier for deaf people who use sign language. The Teaching Council and the Department of Education and Skills recognize the inherent unfairness in the current system and are considering how they can become more inclusive by examining proposals recommended that candidates can substitute the requirement for Irish with fluency in sign language. Ireland is a signatory to the Bologna Communiqué 2010 which states that “Access into higher education should be widened by fostering the potential of students from underrepresented groups and by providing adequate conditions for the completion of their studies”².

¹ National Office of Equity of Access, “National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013”, 2008, (Dublin: Higher Education Authority)

² Bologna Process, “Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28-29 April 2009”, 2009, (Belgium: Bologna Process)

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Introduction

AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability) is an independent non-profit organisation working to promote full access to and participation in further and higher education for students with disabilities and to enhance their employment prospects on graduation.

AHEAD is a centre of Inclusive Practice guidance which provides information to students and staff on practices in higher education and employment. In meeting its aims and objectives, AHEAD administers and coordinates a number of projects. These include;

- GET AHEAD which provides career advice and networking opportunities to students and graduates with disabilities
- The WAM Programme which works with employers on providing mentored work placement opportunities for graduates with disabilities and;
- LINK, which is an Erasmus funded network of organisations promoting the inclusion of students and graduates with disabilities within the EU.

A core function of AHEAD's work is to monitor the overall picture and progress of students with disabilities in terms of their access to and participation in higher education. To this end AHEAD surveys all Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Ireland on a periodic basis in order to get a snapshot of the numbers of students with disabilities getting to and progressing through the higher education system in Ireland and to identify trends and areas of improvement. These surveys carried out by AHEAD are the only national measure of the numbers of students with disabilities in higher education. This report details the results of AHEAD's survey on the participation of students with disabilities in higher education during the academic year 2009/2010.

Survey Method

This survey was carried out by AHEAD, the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability, in collaboration with the Disability/Access Officers of various institutions throughout the country. A questionnaire was sent to the Disability/Access Officer in each of the targeted institutions. The institutions who received the survey were targeted based on those included in the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) statistics on the total student population for the academic year 2008/09³, with the aim of comparing our data with the recently released HEA data for 2009/10. 26 institutions responded to the survey, all of which are listed below. Some institutions were unable to complete every section of the survey, and this is explained in footnotes throughout the report.

Universities	Institutes of Technology and Other Institutions
University College Dublin	Athlone Institute of Technology
University College Cork	Cork Institute of Technology
National University of Ireland, Galway	Dublin Institute of Technology
Trinity College Dublin	Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology
National University of Ireland, Maynooth	Dundalk Institute of Technology
Dublin City University	Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology
St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra	Institute of Technology Blanchardstown
University of Limerick	Institute of Technology Carlow
Mary Immaculate College	Institute of Technology Sligo
National College of Art and Design	Institute of Technology Tallaght
St. Angela's College	Institute of Technology Tralee
	Letterkenny Institute of Technology
	Limerick Institute of Technology
	Tipperary Institute
	Waterford Institute of Technology

In this report you will find comparisons between the findings of this survey and the findings of three similar surveys of the participation rates of students with disabilities for the academic years 2008/09, 2005/2006 and 1998/1999, all of which were undertaken by AHEAD. There are some differences in the approach to the four surveys (although the 05/06, 08/09 and current surveys are almost identical), most notably that the 98/99 survey was much larger in scale, and it is important to point out these differences if one is to make an informed comparison of the educational landscapes of the relevant years. In the 98/99 survey, 42 institutions returned information regarding the participation of students with disabilities, in comparison with 22 in 05/06, 21 in 08/09 and 26 in the current survey, although most of the major institutions are represented in all four. There are also some comparisons made where possible, with a survey carried out by AHEAD on the same topic made for the academic year 1993/1994 and it should be noted that this survey included

³ Higher Education Authority, "HEA Annual Statistics 2008/2009", 2009, <www.hea.ie/en/statistics> [accessed April 8th 2010]

Northern Ireland higher education institutions, which were not included in the subsequent participation surveys.

Another major difference is the categories which students with disabilities are broken down into. In the current survey, as in 08/09 and 05/06, students with disabilities are broken down into nine categories, while in previous surveys there were different numbers of categories, so for the sake of comparison, a certain amount of collation had to be done. Table 1 in the Appendix shows the categories from each survey and which ones have been included together for the purpose of comparison.

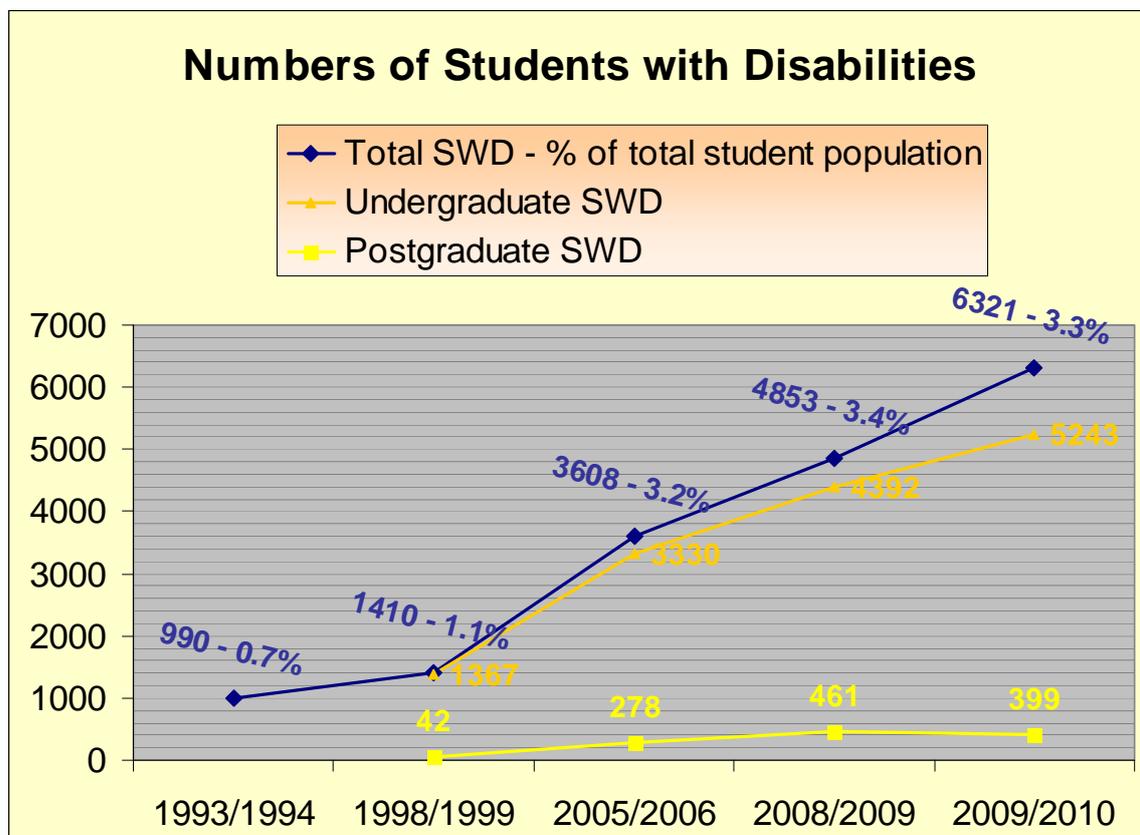
It should be noted that when the term “students with disabilities” is used in this report, it refers only to students who have registered with the disability/access service of one of the participating institutions and who have declared a disability, verified by medical documentation. In other words, students with a disability who have not registered with the services of one of the participating institutions are not included in the findings.

Findings

Participation Rates of Students with Disabilities

Twenty-six higher education institutions in Ireland identified a total of 6,321 students with disabilities, representing 3.3% of the total student population, of which 5243 are studying undergraduate courses and 399 are studying postgraduate courses. This represents a 30% rise in the number of students with disabilities from 08/09, when the figure was 4,853 but a drop in the percentage of the total student population they represent from 3.4% in 08/09 to 3.3%.

Figure 1 shows the increasing numbers of students with disabilities from AHEAD's first survey of the subject in 1993/94 right through to 2009/10



The average participation rate in Institutes of technology was 3.6% in comparison to 3.0% in the University sector. Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology had the highest rate of participation at 7.5%, followed by National College of Art & Design at 7.2% and Tipperary Institute at 6.8%. See Table 3 in the Appendix for further information on the numbers of students with disabilities registered in each of the responding institutions.

The figure representing the rise in the number of students with disabilities is misleading, as there are five more institutions represented in this survey than the last and if we consider only the twenty institutions that completed both, the outcome shows a different picture, with the numbers of students with disabilities rising 17% percent in the last year, while the overall student population in the same twenty institutions rose on average by 20%.

Although the percentage drop from 3.4% to 3.3% is a small one, it is notable for being the first time this percentage figure has decreased since records for this statistic began, having risen from 0.7% in 93/94, to 1.1% in 98/99, to 3.2% in 05/06, to 3.4% in 08/09, before the drop to 3.3%. Some might argue that the numbers of students with disabilities in higher education in Ireland has reached its natural level, but when you compare our statistics with the UK, where 4.7% of all full time undergraduates receive the Disabled Student's Allowance⁴ and 7.2% of first year students declare themselves (no documentation requested) as having a disability on registration⁵, then it is clear that we still have a long way to go before we even match the rates of other European countries.

New Entrant and Final Year Undergraduates with Disabilities

The institutions surveyed were asked to supply numbers of new entrant undergraduates registered with the disability service in 2009/10, "new entrant" meaning students in their first year of study. A total of 1736 new entrants were registered with the services of the responding institutions, representing 27% of the total disabled student population, down from 32% in 08/09.

The responding institutions also supplied the numbers of final year undergraduates registered with the disability service in 2009/10. A total of 1054 final year undergraduates were registered with the services of the responding institutions, representing 17% of the total disabled student population⁶.

Mature Students with Disabilities

The institutions surveyed were asked to supply numbers of mature students registered with the disability service in 2009/10. A total of 896 mature students were registered with the services of the responding institutions, representing 17% of the total population of students with disabilities⁷.

Nature of Disability

The responding Higher Education institutions provided the disability profile of 5243 undergraduates with disabilities and 399 postgraduates with disabilities⁸. Of the 5642 students represented in the disability profile, 3415 (61%) have a specific learning difficulty, 380 (7%) have a physical or mobility related disability, 148 (3%) are blind or visually impaired, 207 (4%) are deaf or hard of hearing, 473 (8%) have a mental health difficulty, 111 (2%) have Aspergers

⁴ Higher Education Statistics Agency, "*Participation of students in higher education who are in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)*", 2007, <<http://www.hesa.ac.uk/>> [accessed September 2010]

⁵ Higher Education Statistics Agency, "*UK domiciled HE students by qualification aim, mode of study, gender and disability 2008/09*", 2009, <<http://www.hesa.ac.uk/>> [accessed September 2010]

⁶ UCD and DIT could not provide this breakdown and so they are not included in this figure

⁷ UCD, NUIG and DKIT not provide this information and so they are not included in this figure

⁸ UCD could not provide this breakdown and so they are not included in the figures for this section

Syndrome, 83 (1%) have ADHD or ADD, 549 (10%) have a significant ongoing illness and 276 (5%) were placed in the “other” category.

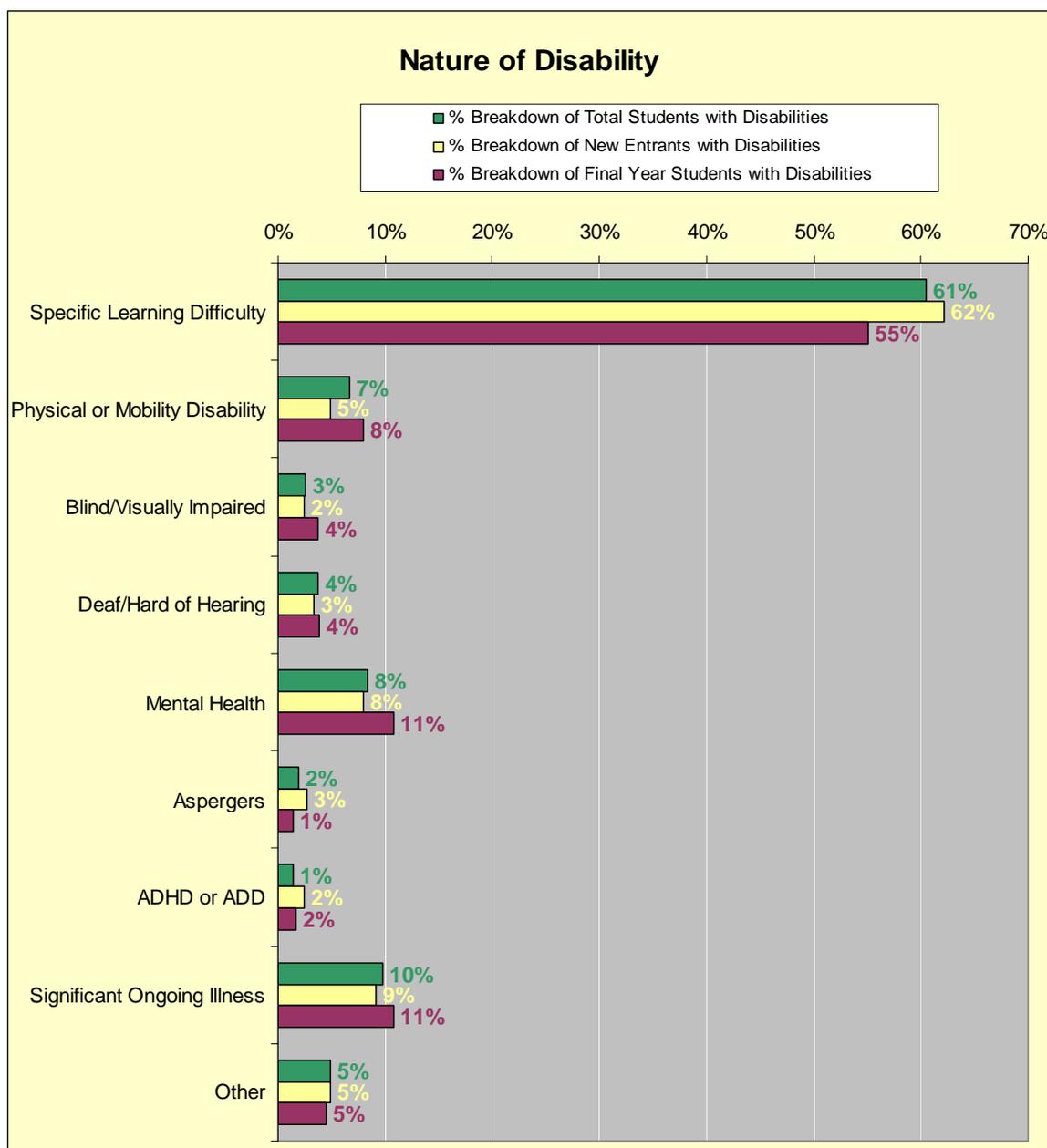
The percentage breakdown is much the same as in 2008/09 with only Specific Learning Difficulties (up 2%), Physical or Mobility Disabilities (down 1%), Aspergers (up 1%), significant ongoing illness (down 2%) and other (up 2%) showing minor changes.

Of the 1736 new entrant undergraduate students, 1080 (62%) had a specific learning difficulty, 84 (5%) had a physical or mobility related disability, 43 (2%) were blind or visually impaired, 57 (3%) were deaf or hard of hearing, 139 (8%) had mental health difficulties, 47 (3%) had Aspergers Syndrome, 42 (2%) had ADHD or ADD, 159 (9%) had a significant ongoing illness and 85 (5%) were placed in the “other” category.

Of the 1054 final year undergraduate students, 581 (55%) had a specific learning difficulty, 84 (8%) had a physical or mobility related disability, 39 (4%) were blind or visually impaired, 41 (4%) were deaf or hard of hearing, 114 (11%) had mental health difficulties, 15 (1%) had Aspergers Syndrome, 18 (2%) had ADHD or ADD, 114 (11%) had a significant ongoing illness and 48 (5%) were placed in the “other” category.

It is notable that while the total, new entrant and undergraduate breakdowns are almost identical, the postgraduate breakdown differs significantly from the others, with students with specific learning difficulties making up 43% of the postgraduate breakdown compared to 61% of the total breakdown, students with physical disabilities making up 15% of the postgraduate breakdown in comparison to 7% of the total breakdown and students in the visual impairment (5%), mental health difficulty (14%) and significant ongoing illness (15%) categories also representing a significantly larger percentage of the postgraduate population than the total population of students with disabilities.

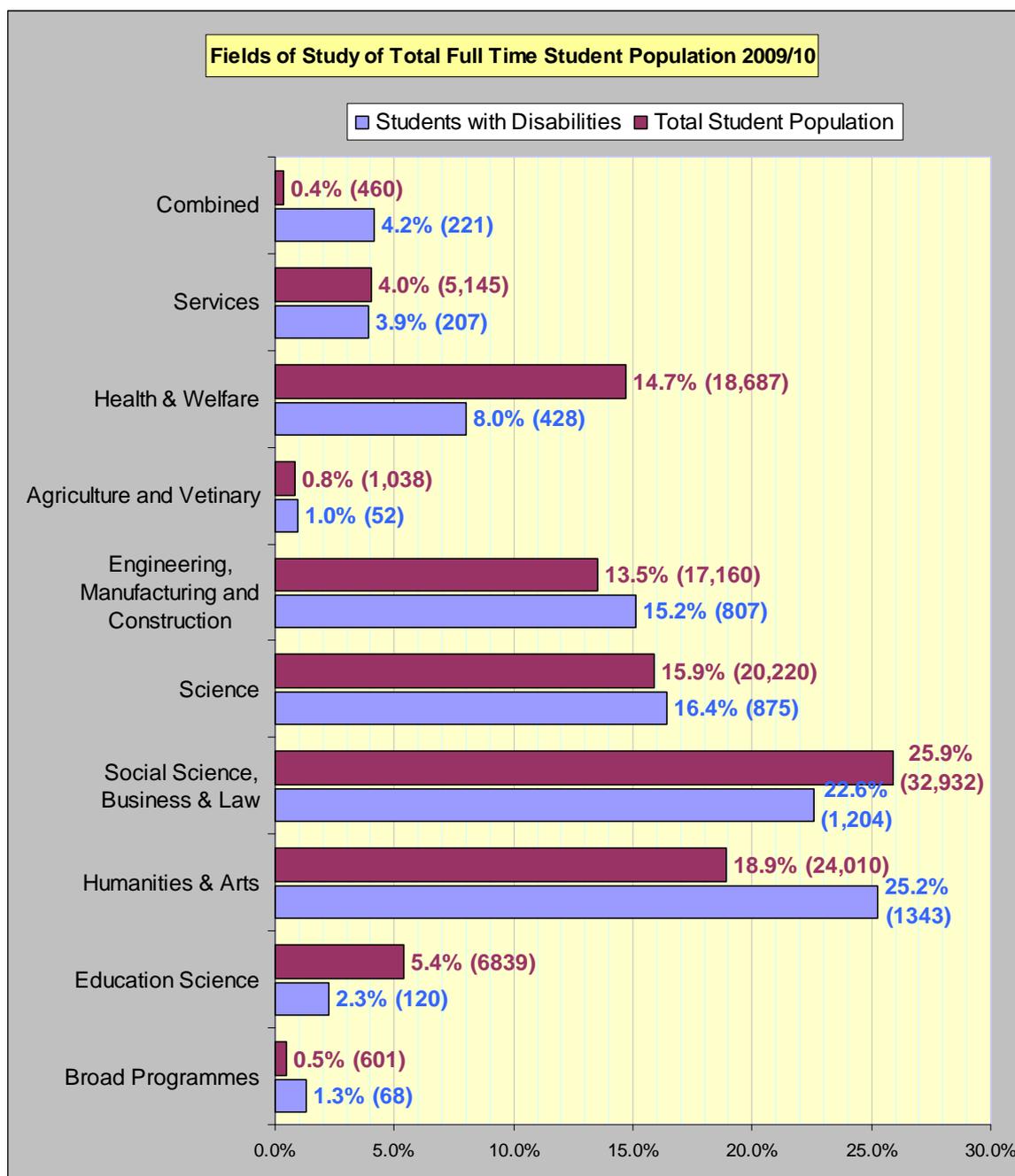
Figure 2 shows the disability profile of total, new entrant and final year students with with disabilities



Fields of Study of Students with Disabilities

The responding institutions reported on the number of students with disabilities in each field of study. Each institution was given the subject breakdown as used by the HEA in their statistics, each subject coming under one of 10 categories and were asked to report the number of students with disabilities in each category.

Figure 3 shows the fields of study of students with disabilities and compares them to the figures for the total student population⁹



'Humanities & Arts' was the most common field of study for students with disabilities in the responding institutions with 25.2% of the makeup, followed by 'Social Science, Business & Law' with 22.6% and 'Science' with 16.4%¹⁰. The least common fields of study for students with disabilities were 'Agriculture and Veterinary' with 1%, 'Broad Programmes' with 1.3% and 'Education Science' with 2.3%. The largest differences between the percentage breakdown for fields of study of students with disabilities and the

⁹ Higher Education Authority, "HEA Annual Statistics 2009/2010", 2010, <www.hea.ie/en/statistics> [accessed Oct 10th 2010]

¹⁰ UCD and CIT could not provide this breakdown and so are not included in the figures.

breakdown for the total student population arise in the fields of 'Health & Welfare', 'Humanities and Arts' and 'Education Science'. 8% of students with disabilities study in the field of 'Health & Welfare' in comparison to 14.7% of the total student population, 25.2% of all students with disabilities study in the area of 'Humanities & Arts' in comparison to 18.9% of the total student population and 2.3% of students with disabilities study in the field of 'Education Science' compared to 5.4% of the total population.

Two subject areas which are not contained as separate fields of study in the chart but warrant special mention are Computing (containing computer science and computer use) and Nursing (containing nursing and caring). 5.7% of all students study Nursing compared to 3.6% of students with disabilities while 6.9% of the total student population study Computing compared to 5.1% of students with disabilities.

On the Ground

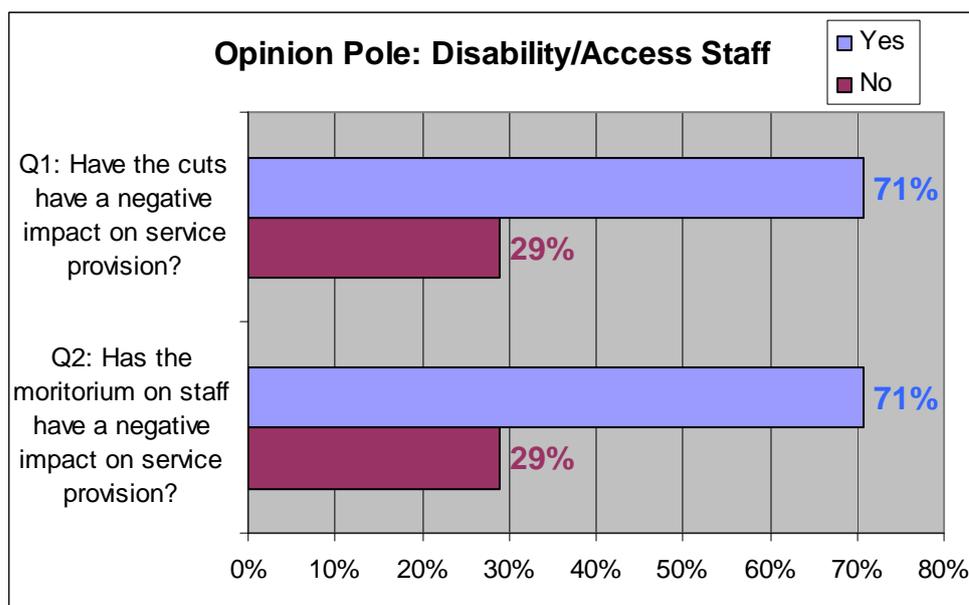
The questionnaire sent to institutions also contained three questions designed to gauge the opinion of Disability/Access Staff on the ground in the responding institutions on the impact of the current national economic difficulties on the provision of service for students with disabilities and the overall performance of their own institutions with regard to inclusive practice. Each respondent was asked to answer yes or no, or in the case of the inclusive practice question to give a score from 1 to 10, and was then given the opportunity to elaborate with comments. Each question is transcribed below, along with details of the responses and a representative selection of the comments provided.

Question 1 - Cuts: Have the recent cuts to the Minister's Fund for Students with Disabilities had a negative impact on the quality of service provided for students with disabilities in your institution? – Responses provided: 24, Yes: 71%, No: 29%

Comments:

“The biggest factor is the uncertainty which we face, not knowing what level of funding we will receive for students. So while we are accepting students into our university we will not know until after the first semester whether the supports we put in place will actually be funded. If the finance department were to be fully aware of this possibility I have no doubt that we would be curtailed in the number of students we accept with a disability into our university.”

Figure 4 shows the percentage breakdown of the yes and no answers received to the 'on the ground' questions asked in the survey



“Recent cuts have further diminished the services of an already overstretched access office. There is now limited provision of dedicated one-to-one specialist support and has had an impact on the provision of assistive technology / training.”

“As an Institute serving a large rural population with extremely limited public transport and even more limited accessible transport, the proposed eradication of the transport allocation will have a significant impact on service provision. The cap for students with sensory disabilities, again does not in any way acknowledge the level of additional personal and academic support needed for their full access and participation.”

“With the major cut backs it is impossible to provide the supports previously given to students with disabilities. Those who would previously have been entitled to extra tuition, educational support workers, software, etc. now are denied the opportunity to receive these supports.”

“The rate for students with Specific Learning Difficulties only allows for the minimum service to be delivered.”

Question 2 - Moratorium: Has the moratorium on staff recruitment had a negative impact on the quality of service provided for students with disabilities in your institution? – Responses provided: 24, Yes: 71%, No: 29%

Comments:

“We had a number of new first year students with physical difficulties and they needed PAs all day so not being able to recruit new employees as Educational Support Workers meant that we had to cut down on service as the existing Educational Support Workers could only stretch to a certain limit.”

“The limited provision of learning support is of particular concern for dyslexic students who have to produce lengthy academic pieces of work in their final year.”

“We have had a high turn over of staff who have either availed of incentivised career breaks, retirement or ended their contracts. This is having a very significant impact.”

Question 3 – Inclusive Practice: Out of ten, how would you rate the embedding of inclusive practice across your entire institution, with 1 representing no embedding of inclusive practice and 10 representing inclusive practice fully embedded across all areas? – Responses provided: 22, Average rating: 5.8 out of 10

Comments:

“There is still difficulty in changing the attitude of most staff including administrative, technical and lecturing.”

“While there has been some resistance and reluctance from certain members of the academic staff in moving towards inclusive practice, policy from management has pushed the process along and we currently find ourselves in a situation where inclusivity will hopefully soon become the norm.”

“More work is required but policy changes and buy-in from senior officers is assisting.”

“The disability service is still isolated and is seen as the service that provides all supports for issues related to disability. We still have huge strides to make with the academics.”

“Course design and delivery are still designed with the average student in mind. The view that students with disability are ‘looked after’ by Disability Services is very prevalent.”

“We do very well with using Assistive Technology as part of the mainstream. The practical nature of many of our courses lend themselves easily to inclusive practice and this has been taken on board by lecturing staff.”

Conclusion

In the summer of 2010 AHEAD surveyed all HEA funded HEI's in Ireland in order to ascertain the number of students with disabilities in the Irish higher education system for the academic year 2009/2010. A structured questionnaire was sent out and responses were received from 26 institutions. Following data collation and analysis, the following represent the most salient findings emerging from the research process concerning students with disabilities in higher education for the academic year 2009/2010:

- 26 HEI's in Ireland identified a total of **6,321** students with disabilities representing **3.3%** of the total student population.
- **1736** of these students with disabilities were new entrants, representing 27% of the disabled student population.
- **1054** of these students with disabilities were final year undergraduates, representing 17% of the disabled student population.
- In terms of disability profile, the majority of students with disabilities have a specific learning difficulty (**61%**).
- When compared with the general student population, students with disabilities remain underrepresented in subjects related to 'Health & Welfare' and 'Education Science' as well as in subjects such as 'Nursing' and 'Computing'. Interestingly a higher percentage of students with disabilities are studying in the field of 'Humanities & Arts'.
- The impact of cuts in funding is most definitely being felt by disability/access staff on the ground with many noting the uncertainty associated with funding and the diminishing of already over-stretched support services associated with a context where resources are decreasing while numbers attempting to access these resources are increasing.
- When asked about the embedding of inclusive practices across their entire institution, the average rating for all responses out of 10 was **5.8**.

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Appendix

Table 1 shows the categories of disability used in each AHEAD Participation Rates survey referred to in the report and which ones have been included together for the purpose of comparison.

For the Purpose of Comparison in the Current Survey	2009/10	2008/09	2005/06	1998/99	1993/94
Specific Learning Difficulty	Specific Learning Difficulty	Specific Learning Difficulty	Specific Learning Difficulty	Neurological Disability	Neurological Disability
Physical or Mobility Disability	Physical or Mobility Disability	Physical or Mobility Disability	Physical or Mobility Disability	Physical Disability	Physical Disability
Blind or Visually Impaired	Blind or Visually Impaired	Blind or Visually Impaired	Blind or Visually Impaired	Blind or Visually Impaired	Blind or Visually Impaired
Deaf or Hard of Hearing	Deaf or Hard of Hearing	Deaf or Hard of Hearing	Deaf or Hard of Hearing	Deaf or Hard of Hearing	Deaf or Hard of Hearing
Other	Mental Health Difficulty, Aspergers Syndrome, ADHD or ADD, Significant Ongoing Illness, Other	Mental Health Difficulty, Aspergers Syndrome, ADHD or ADD, Significant Ongoing Illness, Other	Mental Health Difficulty, Other	Significant Health Condition, Other	Epilepsy, Other

Table 2 shows which subjects are contained within each Field of Study. This breakdown is taken from the student statistics found on the Higher Education Authority website, www.hea.ie

Broad Programmes
Basic / broad general programmes*(010)
Literacy and numeracy(080)
Personal skills(090)
Education
Education science(142)
Training for pre-school teachers(143)
Training for teachers at basic levels(144)
Training for teachers with subject specialisation(145)
Training for teachers of vocational subjects(146)
Humanities and Arts
Combined Arts & Humanities(200)
Combined Arts(210)
Fine arts(211)
Music and performing arts(212)
Audio-visual techniques and media production(213)
Design(214)
Craft skills(215)
Combined Humanities(220)
Religion(221)
Foreign languages(222)
Mother tongue(223)
History and archaeology(225)
Philosophy and ethics(226)
Social Science Business and Law
Combined Social Science, Business and Law(300)
Combined Social and behavioural science(310)
Psychology(311)
Sociology and cultural studies(312)
Political Science and civics(313)
Economics(314)
Combined Journalism and Information(320)
Journalism and reporting(321)
Library, information, archive(322)
Combined Business and Administration(340)
Wholesale and retail sales(341)
Marketing and advertising(342)
Finance, banking, insurance(343)
Accounting and taxation(344)
Management and administration(345)
Secretarial and office work(346)
Working life(347)
Law(380)

Science
Combined Science, Mathematics and Computing(400)
Combined Life Science(420)
Biology and biochemistry(421)
Environmental Science(422)
Combined Physical Science(440)
Physics(441)
Chemistry(442)
Earth Science(443)
Combined Maths and Statistics(460)
Mathematics(461)
Statistics(462)
Computer Science(481)
Computer Use(482)
Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction
Combined Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction(500)
Combined Engineering & Engineering Trades(520)
Mechanics and metal work(521)
Electricity and energy(522)
Electronics and automation(523)
Chemical and process(524)
Motor vehicles, ships and aircraft(525)
Combined Manufacturing and Processing(540)
Food processing(541)
Textiles, clothes, footwear, leather(542)
Materials (wood, paper, plastic, glass)(543)
Mining and extraction(544)
Combined Architecture and building(580)
Architecture and town planning(581)
Building and civil engineering(582)
Agriculture and Veterinary
Combined Agriculture & Veterinary(600)
Combined Agriculture, forestry and fishery(620)
Crop and livestock production(621)
Horticulture(622)
Forestry(623)
Fisheries(624)
Veterinary(641)
Health and Welfare
Combined Health and Welfare(700)
Combined Health(720)
Medicine(721)
Nursing and caring(723)
Dental Studies(724)
Medical diagnostic and treatment technology(725)
Therapy and Rehabilitation(726)
Pharmacy(727)
Combined Social Services(760)
Child Care and youth services(761)
Social work and counselling(762)

Services
Combined Services(800)
Combined Personal Services(810)
Hotel, restaurant and catering(811)
Travel, tourism and leisure(812)
Sports(813)
Domestic services(814)
Hair and beauty services(815)
Transport services(840)
Combined Environmental Protection(850)
Environmental protection technology(851)
Natural environments and wildlife(852)
Community sanitation services(853)
Combined Security Services(860)
Protection of persons and property(861)
Occupational health and safety(862)
Military and defence(863)
Combined
Balanced Combination across difference Fields of Education(900)
Balanced Combination of 'Humanities/Arts' and 'Social Sciences Business/Law'(910)

Table 3 shows the numbers of students with disabilities registered with the disability/access service in each responding institution

University Code	Numbers of Students with Disabilities	Percentage of Total Student Population
UCD	679	2.80%
UCC	625	4.1%
NUIG	360	2.1%
TCD	685	4.1%
NUIM	276	4.1%
DCU	291	2.6%
SPD	16	0.6%
UL	310	2.7%
MIC	34	1.1%
NCAD	68	7.2%
St Angela's	19	1.9%
Institute of Technology Code	Numbers of Students with Disabilities	Percentage of Total Student Population
AIT	196	4.6%
CIT	314	2.6%
DIT	602	2.9%
DLIADT	163	7.5%
DKIT	100	2.3%
GMIT	237	4.4%
ITB	113	3.9%
ITC	97	2.9%
ITS	191	4.8%
ITT	73	1.7%
ITTRA	215	6.2%
LYIT	134	4.9%
LIT	233	4.5%
TI	34	6.8%
WIT	256	4.1%
University Total	3363	3.0%
Other Total	2958	3.6%
Overall total	6321	3.3%



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