Disabled Students Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2023/24

ahead

ISBN No: 978-1-916836-09-9

Research: Dr Richard Healy and Dara Ryder

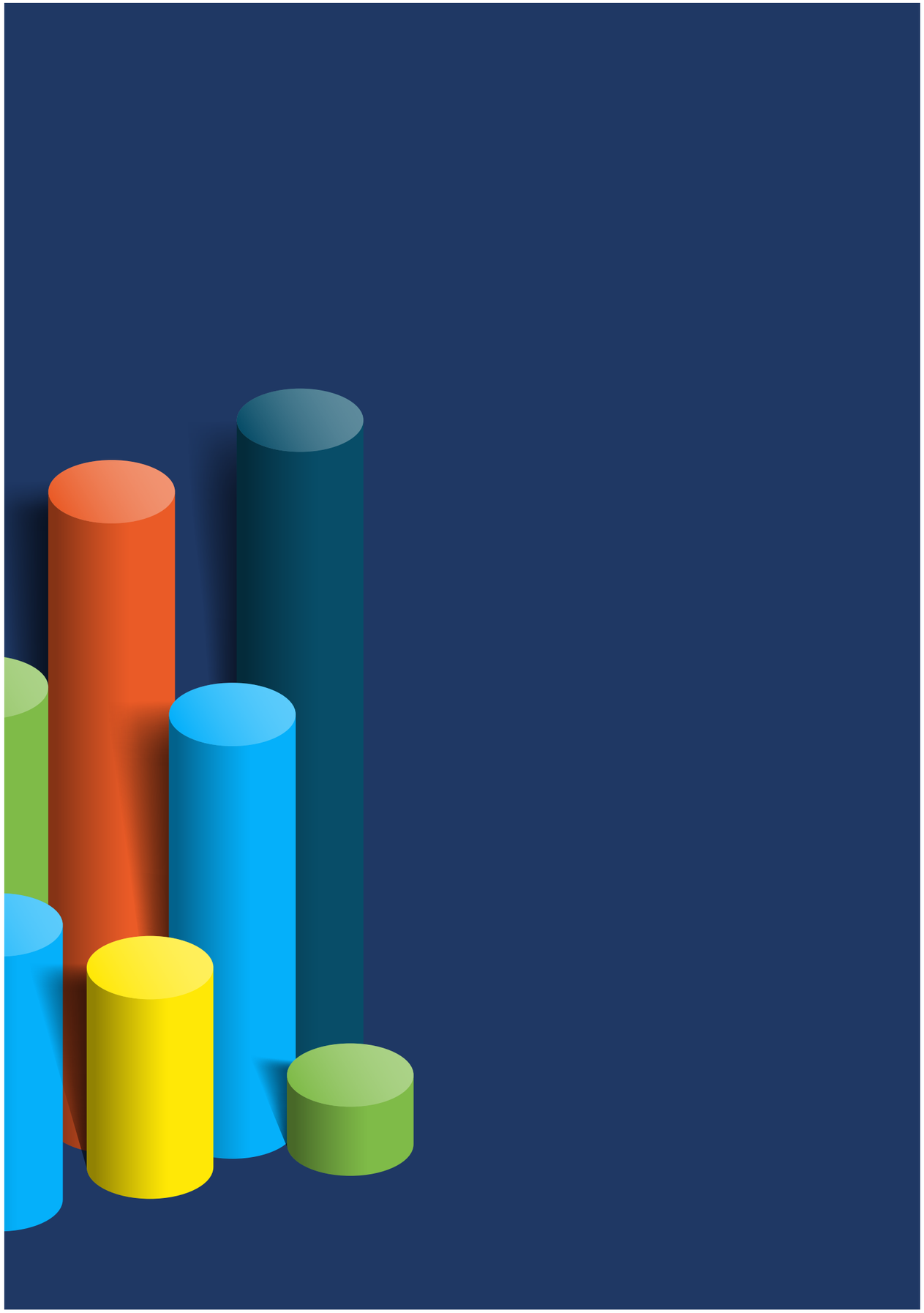
Published by:
AHEAD Educational Press
East Hall
UCD
Carysfort Avenue
Blackrock
Co. Dublin

Email: ahead@ahead.ie

July 2025

AHEAD's core work in the higher education sector is supported by the Higher Education Authority (HEA).

Disabled Students Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2023/24



Note on Using Interchanging Language

In this publication, the terms “students with disabilities” and “disabled students” are used interchangeably. AHEAD recognises that different terminology is prevalent and culturally dominant in different regions and spaces, and we respect the right of individuals and communities to self-determinate.

The term ‘disabled people’ is recognised by many within the disability rights movement in Europe to align with the social and human rights model of disability, as it is considered to imply that people with an impairment are disabled by barriers in the environment and society as opposed to their disability. However, we also recognise that others prefer the term “persons with disabilities” to indicate that they are first and foremost human beings and are therefore entitled to enjoy human rights. This also reflects the language used in the UNCRPD. Finally, we recognise that some people do not identify as being disabled.

The interchanging language in this publication is intended to be inclusive and respectful of all.

Contents

Introduction 1

Research Methodology 7

Participating Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) 9

Findings 11

Participation Rates of Students Registered for Disability Supports: 12

Undergraduate and Postgraduate Participation 13

Full-Time and Part-Time Participation Rates 14

New Entrant Undergraduates with Disabilities 18

DARE 18

Disclosure Rates for New Entrants-HEA Data Comparison. 20

New Registrations 21

Mature Students 22

International Students 23

Apprenticeships 23

Students Registered with DSS Not in Receipt of the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) 24

Nature of Disability 27

New Entrant Undergraduate Disability Breakdown 31

Undergraduate Disability Breakdown. 32

Postgraduate Disability Breakdown. 34

Fields of Study 38

Fields of Study Breakdown by Disability 40

ADD/ADHD 41

Aspergers/Autism 43

Blind/Visually Impaired 45

Deaf/Hard of Hearing 47

DCD-Dyspraxia 49

Mental Health Condition 51

Neurological/Speech and Language 53

Significant On-going Illness 55

Physical Disability 57

Specific Learning Difficulty 59

Other 61

Intellectual Disability 63

Examination Accommodations 66

Examination Accommodations by Category of Disability 68

Examination Accommodation by Type 70

Inside Services 74

On the Ground-Opinions of Disability Support Staff 79

Sub Question A 80

Sub-Question B 88

Sub-Question C 96

Summary 100

Primary Recommendations 110

Bibliography 116

Appendices 122

Appendix 1 - Number of students with disabilities studying within each responding higher education institution 2023/24 122

Appendix 2 - Fields of Study 123

Introduction

AHEAD is an independent, non-profit organisation that works with and for disabled people to help shape inclusive and empowering environments across Irish tertiary education and employment. In working towards our mission, our research and policy team carry out a broad range of research projects, which enable us to draw on an up to date and credible evidence base and policy relevant knowledge and statistics in our engagement with key stakeholders and pertinent actors from the Higher Education (HE) sector. Our annual Participation Rate Reports are central to this work as they provide a reliable and valid overview of the engagement of disabled students with HE disability support services in Ireland. Through our engagement with, and membership of, many advisory boards, sub-committees and steering groups, we use this, and other research data to stimulate positive outcomes and solution-focused interventions for disabled people in education and the labour market.

AHEAD's ethos and activities are underpinned by a rights-based, social model of disability approach (Oliver, 1994), and buttressed by relevant human rights mechanisms and legislation. The current AHEAD *Strategic Plan* (AHEAD, 2024a) includes a firm commitment to promote equity of access and engagement in tertiary education and the labour market by employing the principals of the UN CRPD and Sustainable Development Goals, among a range of other national and international rights instruments. In this way, we aim to empower disabled students as rights holders as opposed to passive recipients of support. Instead, disabled students become active agents in their own education, enjoying equity of access and better opportunity to succeed. The current *Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education*, colloquially known the National Access Plan has helped reduce many of the barriers that have traditionally inhibited people with disabilities from accessing and engaging with Higher Education (HE), (HEA, 2022). However, this Reports is a broad overview of the experiences and narratives of disabled students as they progress through their studies, with a particular emphasis on their engagement with disability support services. We also aim to capture some of the challenges that Disability Support Staff (DSS) encounter as they strive to support students in a system that is arguably in need of reform due to the welcome exponential increase in disabled people accessing tertiary education.

AHEAD's annual *Participation Rate* reports are the only complete national analyses of student engagement/registration with disability support services in the Higher Education (HE) sector in Ireland. Our data is regularly cited in national reports and academic literature and also informs much of AHEAD's activities in the policy landscape. For example, the perennial under-representation of disabled students engaged in postgraduate study, identified through longitudinal analysis of the datasets that underpin these reports, prompted the establishment of LaunchPAD[1]. This partnership, between AHEAD and the National Disabled Postgraduates Advisory Committee (NDPAC) seeks to explore the barriers that frequently inhibit disabled graduates from pursuing postgraduate study by leveraging the collective experiences of current postgraduates and early career researchers and amplifying this voice in the policy landscape.

Current Census data explicates that 63% of Irish people with the age range of 35 to 44 year olds have attained a third-level qualification, which is 21% higher than the EU-27 average for the same age grouping, (CSO, 2022). This is a likely outcome of an Irish labour market that is now alluded to as being firmly "knowledge-based" (Department of Education and Skills, 2016; Higher Education Stategy Group, 2011), which situates tertiary education as central in contemporary society, if one is to access and participate in society and the labour-market in a meaningful, equitable manner, (HEA, 2023a).

Indeed, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* explicitly stipulates that "a high proportion of the skills that we need now in the workforce are high-order knowledge-based skills, many of which can *only* be acquired in higher education institutions" (Higher Education Stategy Group, 2011, p. 4). From a right-based, and moral perspective, Irish society must afford equal opportunity to disabled people to attain the requisite qualifications and gain the skills required to participate in this economy in the same manner as their non-disabled peers.

To this end, Higher Education Institutions (HEI) must strive to become inclusive, flexible and responsive to the needs of disabled students. Places of education should be environments in which diversity (including disability) is embraced and accepted, with the needs of the student understood, (Arduini, 2020, p. 91). By identifying the factors that restrict this from occurring, alongside collating data from DSS staff regarding the recommendation and application of accommodations, AHEAD hope that the data that emanates from this Report can assist HEIs, policymakers and key actors from the sector embed inclusivity into the fabric and culture of HE.

1 https://www.ahead.ie/postgraduate

This iteration of our Participation Rate research for the academic year 2023/24 is again made possible by the consistent support and core funding of the Higher Education Authority (HEA). We welcome their continuous commitment to promote equity of opportunity for underrepresented cohorts in the Irish HE sector, (HEA, 2019, 2022). The vast majority of HEIs who submitted data for this Report are also in receipt of HEA funding, and AHEAD recognises and welcomes the huge time and effort afforded by participating Disability Support Service (DSS) staff in responding to the distributed survey. Importantly, when disabled students/students with disabilities are alluded to in this Report, it is the cohort of students who are registered with Disability Support Services who are being referred to. The interaction between DSS and students availing of disability support is central to understanding the experiences of disabled students, and the challenges encountered by DSS during the provision of accommodations. A longitudinal overview of these Reports illustrates that support services are now severely over-burdened and under-resourced (AHEAD, 2024c), which is arguably inhibiting DSS from:

a. providing sufficient levels of support.
b. monitoring the quality of support provision when translated into the teaching and learning space.
c. affording appropriate time, expertise and best practice when engaging with students.

Notwithstanding the legal obligation conferred on HEIs to accommodate disabled students to engage with their studies in an equal manner, the provision of supports is crucial in facilitating student success and retention (Kilpatrick et al., 2017), an imperative if students with disabilities are to develop a sense of belonging and 'mattering' during their studies, (Rath, 2020). There have been a number of recent policy developments that have already occurred or are planned to be implemented in the near future that should be noted when reading this Report:

1. The Irish Universities Association (IUA) commitment to review the DARE programme[2].

2. The current Census data from 2022 which indicated that 22.2% of the Irish population currently self-identify as disabled.

3. The government's Budget 2025 commitment to increase the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) by 18%.

2 Disability Access Routes to Education.

22.2%

Irish population currently self-identify as disabled

4. The post-Budget 25 commitment from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) to address the core funding gap identified in *Funding the Future 2022*, (Department of Further and Higher Education, 2022), with an additional €58.7 million to "increase staffing levels and capacity, enable a greater alignment of provision with priority skills needs and facilitate the further development of tertiary programmes".[3]

5. The launch of ALTIT**UD**E Charter, which seeks to embed a Universal Design approach into the systems and processes of tertiary education providers, thus empowering disabled students to engage with all aspects of college life, while simultaneously reducing the pressure on support services.

6. Programme for Government commitments to enable third-level colleges to support disabled students during their studies (Government_of_Ireland, 2025, p. 93).

7. The continued implementation of the ALTIT**UD**E Charter across tertiary education. In April 2025, approximately one-third of HEIs publicly declared their intention to adopt the Charter. The Charter has the potential to help alleviate some of the more pressing issues that can restrict disabled students from succeeding in their studies.

To this end, the qualitative section of this Report includes a number of questions pertaining to the DARE (Disability Access Route to Education) and the FSD (Fund for Students with Disabilities). AHEAD will use this data to identify barriers and potential enablers to maximise the efficacy of both policy mechanisms in any future discussion or policy development, in an effort to leverage the collective experiences of DSS who are directly involved in the provision of supports, alongside the student perspectives of participating in the process. In the same manner, some of the core findings that emanate from this Report, alongside the benchmarking of current data with that of prior Reports, will enable AHEAD to:

— Calculate the percentage of the student body that are registered with disability supports in their institution (and across all participating HEIs).

— Compare the participation rates of disabled students at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

3 https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-03-27/44/

— Further disaggregate the data through the dual lenses of disability category and field of study.

— Explore the process of examinations and associated accommodations that are intended to promote equity of opportunity for disabled students.

— Carry out year on year, continued analysis of the number of students per Support Staff member in HE.

— Use data from prior reports for year-on-year benchmarking and comparison.

— Recommend solution focussed interventions through the identification of barriers and contribute to a more equitable tertiary education sector for disabled students through the meaningful expression of the student voice.

— Highlight the large cohort of disabled students who are potentially engaged in HE and have not disclosed.

— Undertake a holistic overview of the interaction between DSS and students availing of disability support. AHEAD maintain that it is crucial to understand this process from a dichotomous viewpoint.

AHEAD first conducted research on the participation rates of students with disabilities in 1993/94 (non-annual), before changing to annual reports in 2008/09. From this prolonged and continual engagement with annual data sets, we can identify patterns and trends, many of which help in unpacking the experience of students with disabilities. This Report is considered a mainstay of our work that aims to promote equity of educational engagement and opportunity for students with disabilities in Irish HE.

This research aims to explore the HE learning landscape for disabled students post-entry, with a particular emphasis on accessing and availing of disability supports. In this way, this Report can help examine the efficacy of national policy mechanisms (e.g. FSD, DARE), highlight persistent obstacles that inhibit the provision of adequate support and assist DSS members to facilitate the continuously rising cohort of students registering for accommodations and support.

Research Methodology

AHEAD distributed a detailed survey to the disability/access offices of 23 higher education[4] institutions in the Republic of Ireland in late May 2024, seeking participation rate statistics for the academic year 2023/24. For the purpose of this research, the term higher education institution (HEI) is defined as those with whom the Higher Education Authority (HEA) works under statute or who are in receipt of core public funding, with the exception of National College of Ireland (which is funded by the Department of Education and Skills). Many of the responding HEIs are still working through the process of merging from multiple Institutes of Technology (IT) into single Technological Universities (TU) under the auspices of the Technological Universities Act 2018. While the vast majority of these structural changes have been implemented, a small number of respondents submitted their data as separate campuses, as opposed to submitting a single over-arching data set under the moniker of the individual TU.

To this end, the overarching dataset is informed by data from every publicly funded HEI, which enables an analysis of a broad range of quantitative data regarding disability category, fields of study, exam accommodations and student profile/status (i.e. postgraduate, undergraduate, new entrant, mature student, international student etc.). The survey also included a section for qualitative data (Question 13, entitled "On the Ground") that sought to examine the efficacy of the FSD from the perspective of responding DSS, alongside sub-questions pertaining to the implementation of DARE.

The survey employed for collating data is developed in partnership with DSS from participating institutions, through annual, direct dialogue with support staff who frequently suggest amendments to the survey's structure and format. This assists us to better capture the disability support service process and gather more reliable data. This approach is crucial as it allows this research to explore the practicalities and realities of support provision, which would potentially have been overlooked without this input.

4 A number of former Institutes of Technology (now Technological Universities) submitted their data separately (further discussed in this Section of the Report.

For the academic year explored in this Report (2023/24), there were two minor but important additions/changes to the survey. Despite not being included as a standalone disability category in the FSD, the number (and participation rate) of students who disclose an Intellectual Disability is now included in the AHEAD survey as a specific category, primarily as an instrument to establish a baseline for the collection of data for this cohort prior to the implementation of Path 4 Phase 2 which is expected to increase numbers in the category. In line with the forthcoming IUA review of the DARE programme (see introduction), the survey also includes specific questions regarding the number of students engaged with supports who used the DARE access route. This is further disaggregated by those who secured reduced points entry via DARE, and the number of DARE applicants who achieved the necessary points to enrol via standard entry but were still classified as entering via the DARE programme.

It is important to note that while the HEA also publish annual data that explores the participation rate of disabled students in HE, there are significant differences in the methodologies used in both reports. While this (and prior) Report is informed by data from our annual survey which is completed by Disability Support Offices of responding HEIs, the HEA employ data elicited from the Equal Access Survey to underpin their analysis. The Equal Access Survey[5] is disseminated to all first-year undergraduate students upon registration, with students invited to voluntarily submit a survey for the purpose of analysis, oversight and monitoring. There is frequently a significant disparity between the HEA and AHEAD findings, however having dual datasets can serve to enrich the findings, enabling comparison and an inquiry into disclosure of disability and registration for supports.

Prior to the publication of our Report for the academic year 2021/22, students registered with disability supports were included in the data using their primary disability as an indicator, (AHEAD, 2023b). As such, it was acknowledged that by omitting additional disabilities from the research, our findings were limited and potentially lacked the relevant validity to monitor the incidence of disability across the HE landscape.

5 https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/07/Equal-Access-to-Higher-Education-for-all_2021.pdf

By only using primary disability to examine the research data, much of this more nuanced disability breakdown data was therefore missing from our analysis. To remedy this, we now continue to include additional disabilities when collecting the data in order to elicit more extensive and precise findings. In short, it is the incidence of disability as opposed to its status as primary or additional that will be recorded and examined, although both are gathered to ensure rigour within the dataset.

Participating Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

All HEIs who were requested to submit a survey responded to the call for institutional data. The following institutions submitted a completed survey: (It should be noted that some Technological Universities submitted their surveys under the auspices of their former IT status. As this change is still in progress, and to negate the need for significant data mergers for some DSS, some surveys were tendered individually):

As the Report is informed by survey data, the vast majority of the data is quantitative. However, the final question, which underpins the On the Ground section of the Report (Survey question 13 A to C) seeks qualitative data from respondents. The topics explored in this section are routinely changed to align with policy change and/or issues that have come to the fore during the academic year in question. For this Report, the On the Ground Section includes the following:

— In your opinion, why do some students who enrol in the institution via DARE not register and engage with disability support services?

— In what ways do the FSD Guidelines (and Framework) assist you, and inhibit you from providing supports for disabled students?

— In what ways could the FSD Guidelines (and Framework) be improved to enable you to more effectively support disabled learners?

All data is anonymised as per normative research practice. Responding DSS are assigned an identifier for the analysis of qualitative data. It should be noted that all respondents have consented to take part in this Report. As per Article 35[6] of the General Protection Data Regulations (GDPR), a Data Protection Impact Assessment was carried out. This was deemed necessary as sensitive, disability related statistics were collected, despite the absence of personal identifiers.

6 https://gdpr.eu/article-35-impact-assessment/

Participating Higher Education Institutions (HEIs):

- Atlantic Technological University (formerly Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT), Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) and Institute of Technology Sligo (ITS)).
- Dublin City University (DCU).
- Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT).
- Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT).
- Marino Institute of Education (MIE).
- Mary Immaculate College (MIC).
- Maynooth University (MU).
- Munster Technological University (formerly Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) and Institute of Technology, Tralee (ITTRA)).
- National College of Art and Design (NCAD).
- University of Galway (GAL).
- Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI).
- St. Angela's College, Sligo (St. Ang.).
- South-East Technological University (formerly Institute of Technology Carlow (ITC) and Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT)).
- TU Shannon (formerly Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT) and Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT).
- Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin) (formerly Dublin Institute of Technology, IT Tallaght and IT Blanchardstown (ITB)).
- Trinity College Dublin (TCD).
- University College Cork (UCC).
- University College Dublin (UCD).
- University of Limerick (UL).
- National College of Ireland (NCI).

Findings

Participation Rates of Students Registered for Disability Supports

This section of the Report now begins to disaggregate the data collated from all responding HEIs for the academic year 2023/24. Drawing from all responding surveys, the data indicates that 22,511 students registered for disability supports, representative of 8% of all students enrolled in participating HEIs, (n=281,847). For the academic year 2022/23, 7.4% (n=20,351) of the student population were registered with support services (AHEAD, 2024c), demonstrating that the percentage of all students now registering with DSS has continued on an ascending trajectory. As such, the percentage of students registered with supports has increased by 8.56% (n=2,160) when compared with data from 2022/23., (Ibid.). Prior AHEAD Reports have consistently illustrated this trend of year-on-year increases, with 6.9% (2021/22) and 6.6% (2020/21) of all students registered with their HEI's DSS, (AHEAD, 2023b). Moreover, the 8.56% increase reported for the academic year 2023/24 represents the largest year-on-year rise in the participation rate since our report for the academic year 2017/2018, (AHEAD, 2019).

A more comprehensive analysis of the data drawing from individual HEIs illustrates the range in the percentage of students with disabilities registered with supports across all responding institutions. It should also be noted here that it is the rate of participation that is deemed to be the principal indicator of change, as opposed to numerical data, considering that the total number of students enrolled in each HEI differs significantly. The percentage range is reported to be between 2.6% (Technological University Shannon-Midwest) and 12.5% (Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology) of all students enrolled in each institution. Other HEIs that reported high levels of engagement with disability supports include the Letterkenny Campus of Atlantic Technological University (formerly Letterkenny Institute of Technology) at 12.2% and Saint Angela's College and the National College of Art and Design who both reported that 11.6% of the student population were registered with their institution's DSS. Access to HE is a complex topic that includes factors (e.g. accommodation, transport) that are frequently beyond the scope of individual HEIs and relevant actors and stakeholders. As such, the analysis of the range of students registered with disability supports is not intended as a critique or an indicator of best practice.

A meta-analysis of longitudinal AHEAD data from previous Participation Rate reports indicates that there has been a 364% increase in the number of students registered for supports since 2008/09 (the inaugural year of annual AHEAD reports regarding participation rates). This exponential increase at point of entry, illustrated in Figure 1. is arguably an outcome of effective and successful policy mechanisms and funding streams that aim to enable traditionally under-represented cohorts to access HE. The *Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education* (HEA, 2022) is a key national instrument that strives to reflect the diversity of Irish society in the HE student body. A range of targeted funding streams (e.g. PATH), alongside the introduction of alternative access routes to HE (e.g. DARE, HEAR) have enabled under-represented cohorts to access HE in greater numbers than ever before. However, a diverse student body brings new challenges for teaching and support staff. One of the objectives of AHEAD's Participation Rate reports is to analyse the provision of accommodations that can help foster an equitable environment in which disabled students cannot just access but thrive and progress through their studies in HE.

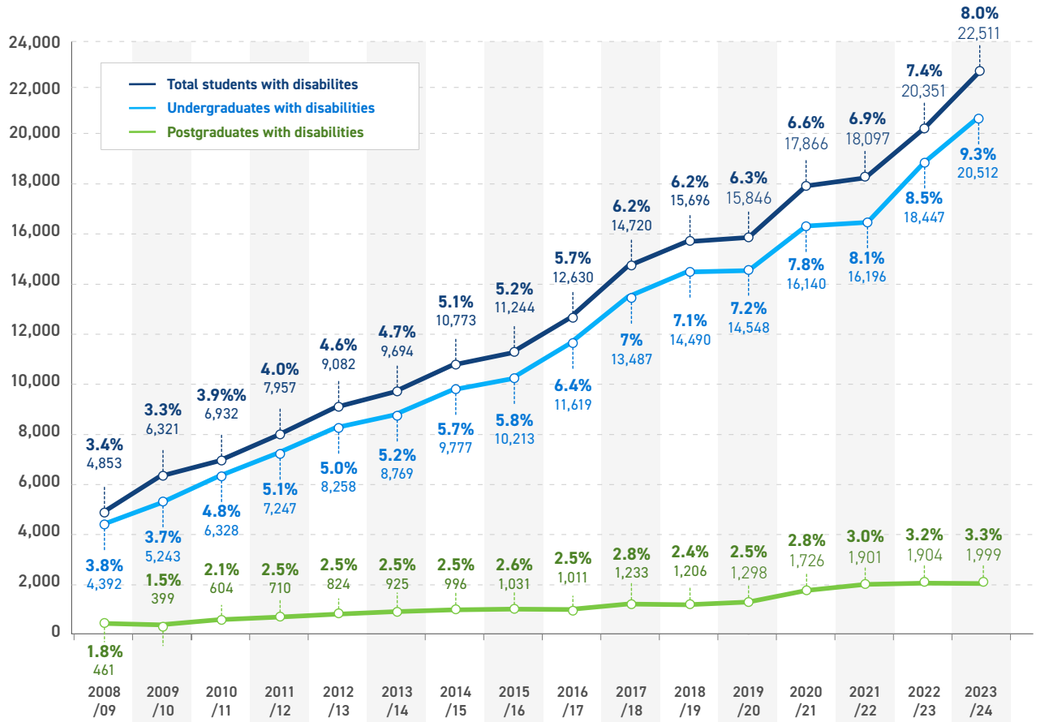


Figure 1. Number of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education and the percentage of the Total Student Population they Represent, 2023/24.

Undergraduate and Postgraduate Participation

This section of the Report marks a closer examination of the rate of participation of undergraduate and postgraduate students with disabilities. An annual increase in both cohorts was identified in the 2022/23 Report, which is again recorded for the academic year 2023/24. However, despite both retaining increases, postgraduate participation remains persistently low in comparison with undergraduate participation. The attainment of a postgraduate qualification is particularly relevant to graduate outcomes, which are evidently improved by a postgraduate qualification, (HEA, 2023c). Postgraduate study is an obvious enabler of high-income employment for all students. However, considering the accepted intersection of disability and poverty across the broad range of academic literature (Cullinan, 2017; Cullinan et al., 2015; Indecon, 2021), postgraduate study is arguably more important for disabled students in a knowledge-based labour market (Department of Education and Skills, 2016) underpinned by frenetic competition. To this end, it is imperative that equity of opportunity for disabled students to engage with postgraduate study is promoted and encouraged in Irish HE.

The data collected from the 23 responding HEIs demonstrated that 20,512 undergraduate students were registered with disability supports in 2023/24. This is representative of 9.3% of all undergraduate students enrolled with responding HEIs and 91.1% of all students registered with support services. This figure reflects a 8.6% increase in the rate of participation for disabled undergraduate students in relation to 2022/23 data, when the rate of participation for disabled students was recorded as 8.5%, (n=18,447), (AHEAD, 2024c). Pertaining to postgraduate students, the data from responding institutions highlighted that 3.3% (n=1,999) of the total number of postgraduate students enrolled in responding HEIs were registered with their DSS, which represents 8.9% of all students with disabilities. This is indicative of an 4.7% increase in the rate of participation relative to the 2022/23 data (Ibid.).

The perpetual under representation of disabled students at postgraduate level is a key factor that can potentially inhibit labour market participation for disabled graduates. This has been highlighted in a number of prior Participation Rate reports, (AHEAD, 2021, 2023b). Postgraduate qualifications are an obvious driver of meaningful employment capital, therefore potential drivers of access to postgraduate study for students with disabilities should be examined by policymakers and stakeholders to identify the causes of this persistent under-representation.

The current *National Access Plan* includes a HEA commitment to monitor postgraduate study among disabled students, fostering equitable pathways and reducing the many barriers that often preclude opportunity to participate for this cohort, (HEA, 2022). AHEAD are currently working in partnership with the National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee (NDPAC), who combine a rights-based perspective and the leveraging of collective experience to advocate for change in the postgraduate space, (HEA & NDPAC, 2023). Following the launch of LaunchPAD (Postgraduate, Academia and Disability), AHEAD have commenced an further exploration of the experiences of disabled postgraduate students in Irish HE in order to provide empirical evidence to influence the following aims and objectives:

- Foster a Sense of Belonging by Establishing the NDPAC / AHEAD Partnership and Community.
- Influence Policy Development by Amplifying the Lived Experience of the Diverse Voices in the Community.
- Sustain the Community to Make a Lasting Impact Through Advocacy and Influence in HE Decision-Making.

Full-Time and Part-Time Participation Rates.

The survey distributed to participating institutions included an inquiry into the percentage of disabled students engaging with full or part-time study. This data indicated that there were 19,249 full-time students registered with disability supports across all responding HEIs, representative of 8.9% of all full-time students enrolled in HE. When compared with 2022/23 datasets, this shows that the rate of full-time participation for disabled students has decrease by 1.34%.

Pertaining to part-time study, the data elicited from responding surveys demonstrates that there were 1,144 part-time students registered with their institution's DSS, representative of 1.8% of all part-time students enrolled across responding HEIs. In relation to 2022/23 data, this represents no change in the percentage of students engaging with disability support services in their institution, (AHEAD, 2024c). Part-time study can assist in fostering pathways for disabled people into HE, and AHEAD retain concerns regarding the persistent under-representation of disabled students engaged in this mode of study. While the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) and Student Assistant Fund (SAF) are both available to part time students, the introduction of SUSI funding to enable disabled students to access funding for all part time courses would likely enable disabled students to engage with this mode of study for all fields of study. While AHEAD welcome policy initiatives that facilitate access to SUSI funding for some courses[7], we would suggest that all part-time courses are made available to disabled students with funding from SUSI. With many part time courses being underpinned by an element of blended learning, and recent research suggesting that blended learning is now alluded to by disabled students as the preferred and most accessible mode of study, (AHEAD, 2023a), any move towards widening SUSI to fund all part-time courses should be considered. To not do so arguably restricts disabled people from studying in a course of their choice, therefore excluding disabled people from some courses and inhibiting equitability of opportunity. With part time study being potentially more suitable for some disabled students, the barriers that can prevent students with disabilities from accessing this mode of study should be explored by stakeholders. Figure 2 illustrates the under-representation of disabled students in part-time HE courses. The graphic further disaggregates the data by postgraduate and undergraduate status.

7 https://www.susi.ie/eligibility-criteria/approved-courses/undergraduate-students-approved-institutions---part-time-courses/universities/

22,511

students with disabilities registered with support services for the academic year 2023/24

132%

rise in the last 10 years

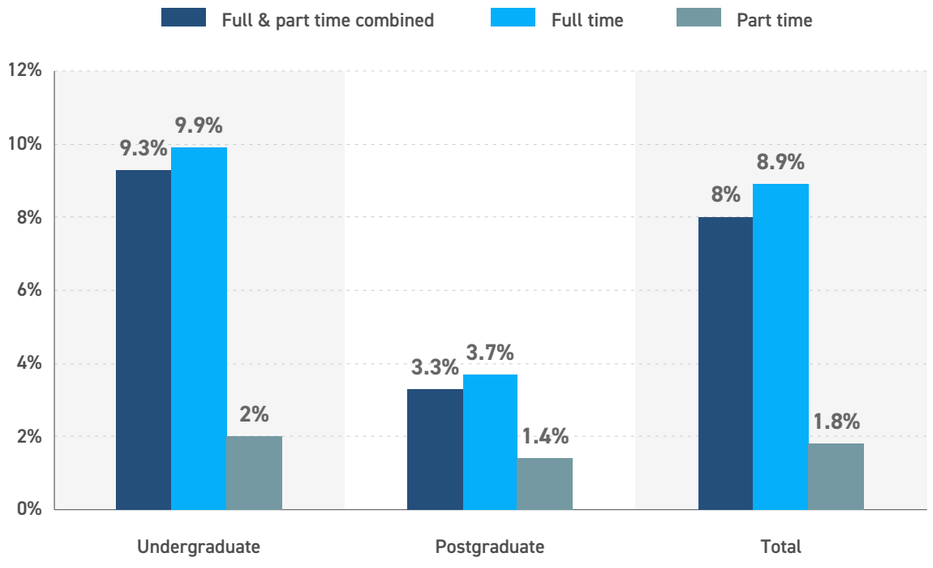


Figure 2. Percentage of students with disabilities in full-time and part-time education as a percentage of the total student body 2023/24

A further disaggregation by postgraduate and undergraduate study demonstrates that 9.9% (n=17,972) of all full-time undergraduate students are registered with disability support services, with only 2% (n=784) of all part-time undergraduates registered with supports. Moreover, 3.7% (n=1,277) of full-time postgraduates and 1.2% (n=360) of part-time postgraduates were reported to be registered with disability support services[8].

8 One HEI was unable to provide a breakdown of the numbers of disabled students engaged with part-time/ full-time study in their institution. The numbers have been adjusted to provide an accurate percentage.

New Entrant Undergraduates with Disabilities.

The survey distributed to participating HEIs defines new entrants as a student entering a full-time undergraduate programme (year 1) for the first time. The survey data for the academic year 2023/24 stipulates that 10% (n=6,060) of all new entrants across all participating institutions (n=60,573) were registered with disability supports in their HEI and 26.9% of all students registered with disability support services (n=22,519). In comparison with 2022/23 data, which indicated that 7.8% (n=4,773) of new entrants were accessing supports, there has been a 28% increase in the rate of participation of new entrant undergraduate students who are registered with supports. This substantial increase is potentially an outcome of the increasing efficacy of national policy and targeted funding streams. For example, the percentage of students accessing HE through the DARE programme has increased by 34.5% in the last three academic years, (HEA, 2024).

DARE

As discussed, the format and structure of the AHEAD survey distributed to participating HEIs is annually adjusted, with input from disability support staff invited to reflect a rapidly changing HE landscape. Apart from the traditional CAO point system that is determined by the student's performance and results from the Leaving Certificate, DARE is currently the second most utilised access route to HE, with current HEA data stipulating that 7.4% of all students accessing HE availed of this programme in 23/24, (HEA, 2024). The programme is also due to be reviewed by the Irish Universities Association in the near future, and it was therefore deemed to be a relevant addition to this Report.

In order to be eligible for DARE, students are required to submit medical verification or evidence of disability, a Supplementary Information Form and Educational Impact Assessment. The CAO website advises students to complete these documents with a parent or guardian with input also required from second-level staff[9] for the Educational Impact Assessment. In essence, DARE is still a strictly points based system, with minimum entry requirements retained by participating institutions dependent on course type and HEI. The reduction of required points can vary every year and is dependent on a number of factors, which include:

9 https://www2.cao.ie/downloads/documents/2024/DARE2024.pdf

— The overall number of places on the course.
— The number of reserved DARE places on the course.
— The number of DARE eligible applicants competing for these reserved places.

The terms and conditions of DARE clearly state that students who avail of the programme must register with disability support services in their HEI. The consequences for not doing so include the potential of the application being withdrawn, (IUA, 2023). Students who identify and disclose a sensory or physical disability are prioritised due to the perennial under-representation of these cohorts in Irish HE. It should also be noted that the On the Ground section of this report is informed by qualitative data from survey respondents who reported on their experiences and opinions of DARE students and their enrolment, or lack thereof, with DSS.

All respondents contributed data for this section of the Report, enabling an overview of the numbers of students engaged with DARE, demarcated by those who entered with the necessary CAO points (DARE Merit/On or above points) for their course and those who did not achieve the required points (DARE-Below Points). As DARE is an access route to HE, all DARE students are New Entrant Undergraduates. For the academic year 2023/24, 14.3% (n=3,219) of all students registered with their institution's DSS were DARE-Merit students. As such, this cohort of students had applied through the DARE programme but were awarded their place on merit (on or above points). 9.8% (n=25,196) of all students registered with disability support services entered HE through DARE with reduced points. As this is a new addition to our annual Report, there are no data from prior years for comparison. However, as alluded to above, HEA data indicates a 34.5% increase in applicants in the last three years, (HEA, 2024).

While the DARE programme is conditional on mandatory registration with disability support services (IUA, 2023), AHEAD understand anecdotally that this does not always occur. To this end, the adjusted survey also asked respondents to report in the number of DARE applicants who register for disability/access support services, again demarcated by 'reduced point' (sometimes referred to as 'Below Points') and 'merit' (often referred to as 'below points') applicants. Two responding HEIs were unable to provide this data, and the numbers have been adjusted for accurate reporting.

Across all responding HEIs, 3,411 students who had availed of the DARE programme were registered with their institution's HEI, illustrative of 8.8% of all students registered for disability support and 55% of all students who availed of this access route to HE. The data further indicated that 1,536 DARE students availed of the 'reduced points' access route to HE, representative of 45% of all DARE students registered with their HEI's DSS and 7.2% of all students registered with DSS from responding HEIs.

Disclosure Rates for New Entrants-HEA Data Comparison.

As previously discussed, when students with disabilities/disabled students are alluded to in this Report, it is in reference to students who have registered with their institution's disability support services or Access Office. As the methodology that underpins this Report uses data that is collated from surveys that have been distributed to participating HEI's DSS, the research data emanates only from students who have disclosed at least one disability to their institution's support services. This facilitates a robust analysis of accommodations, the ratio of support staff to student and a range of other inquiries. However, it is accepted that there are a number of disabled students accessing HE who have chosen not to disclose or are unable to register with their HEI's disability support services due to an array of reasons, including personal choice and the cost of medical verification required for registration, (AHEAD, 2023a, 2024c). Moreover, disclosing disability can be a complex, arduous and challenging endeavour for some students, with AHEAD research reporting a number of barriers that often combine to deter disclosure and registration with disability supports. These include the belief that doing so may be detrimental to their career prospects, may engender different treatment from educators and fears that disclosing a disability can be detriment to social engagement within the student body, (AHEAD, 2023a; Lyman et al., 2016; Meeks et al., 2021; Meeks et al., 2018).

The HEA however, employ an alternative methodology when collating data pertaining to disability in HE. The HEA's data is collated by voluntary self-disclosure through the Equal Access Survey (EAS), which retains the student's student number as an indicator to track progression, retention and lack thereof. The EAS is distributed to all undergraduate new entrants and the HEA estimate that "almost 3 in 4"[10] of all new entrant undergraduates submit data in this way. The HEA consistently report a substantially higher percentage of students reporting at least one disability when compared with AHEAD research. It could be argued that the level of anonymity and absence of any medical verification requirement, alongside a desire to be independent, advances a 'safe space' for disclosure for disabled students. According to HEA data, 20.2% of responding students disclosed at least one disability when submitting their EAS, (HEA, 2024). In the AHEAD dataset, 10% (n=6,060) of students registered with supports were reported to be in the new entrant undergraduate cohort (n=60,573). While it is accepted that the alternative underlying datasets may perpetuate some discrepancies, the marked difference in the participation rates statistics for this cohort suggests that a sizeable number of students with disabilities do not formally disclose their disability, thus precluding them from accessing and engaging with DSS in their HEI.

New Registrations

New registrations are students who register with disability support services in their HEI for the first time. While the majority who register do so in their inaugural year of study, others often do not do so until after their first year of study. As discussed, in the academic year 2023/24, there were 6,060 new entrants who disclosed at least one disability and registered for supports, representative of 10% of all new entrants (n=60,573) and 26.9% of all students registered with disability support services (n=22,519). Of this cohort, the data demonstrates that 1,956 students were not in their first year of study, representative of 32.3% of all new registrations (n=6,060) and 8.7% of all students registered with disability support service across all participating HEIs (n=22,519). AHEAD's Participation Rate research for the academic year 2022/23 stipulated that 44% of new registrations were not in their first year of study, (AHEAD, 2024c). This demonstrates a 26.6% decrease in the percentage of students who registered for supports when not in their first year of study, (Ibid.). However, it should be noted that the statistic alluded to in the 22/23 Report (44%) was an outlier when considered in the context of historical, longitudinal data pertaining to this issue, (Ibid.).

10 https://hea.ie/2022/10/03/hea-statistics-newsletter-quarter-3-2022/

Much like disclosure, there are a number of factors that are likely linked to students not registering for supports in their initial year of study, considering that the hesitancy in disclosing is likely underpinned by the same rationale as those who do not disclose when initially engaging with HE. Research suggests that some of the factors that discourage students from disclosing disability in their inaugural year of study include late diagnoses of disability (Hart & Healy, 2018), and the high cost of obtaining medical verification of disability, which is deemed necessary if students want to engage with their HEI's DSS and avail of FSD funding streams. While this is not consistent with legislation that stipulates that duty bearers (in this case the HEI) are obligated to accommodate disabled students[11] to enable them to engage with their studies in the same manner as their non-disabled peers, the Guidelines that underpin the FSD include a requirement to provide medical evidence of disability prior to accessing disability supports, (HEA, 2021). The FSD is further explored in the On the Ground section of this Report and is informed by qualitative data from responding DSS.

Mature Students

Current HEA research stipulates that 5.3% of the student population across all HEA funded institutions identify as mature students, (HEA, 2024). According to the data collated from responding institutions, there were 1,247 mature students registered with disability support services across all participating HEIs.[12] This represents 5.5% of all students registered with disability supports, (n=22,519) and 5.6% of all mature students (n=30,363).

Year on year benchmarking indicates a 24% decrease in the rate of participation of mature students with at least one disability across all institutions in relation to 2022/23 data (7.4% of all mature students were registered with their HEI's DSS in 2022/23), (AHEAD, 2024c).

11 As per the Equal Status Act and the UN CRPD

12 Three HEIs were unable to provide data pertaining to Mature/International students registered with DSS and the figures have been adjusted to determine an accurate percentage (participation rate).

International Students

Across all participating institutions, the data indicates that there were 1,231 international students who disclosed at least one disability and engaged with disability support services for the academic year 2023/24. This is representative of 3.3% of all international students enrolled in HEA funded HEIs (n=43,369) and 5.5% of all students with disabilities (n=22,519). When compared with statistics published in AHEAD's *Participation Rates Report* for the preceding academic year (2022/23), year-on-year benchmarking signifies a 46% decrease in the rate of engagement of international students with disability support services, (AHEAD, 2024c).

Apprenticeships

AHEAD began monitoring the number and rate of participation of disabled students/learners who were engaged in apprenticeships in HE in our 2021/22 Report, (AHEAD, 2023b). AHEAD are currently members of the National Apprenticeship Office Sub-Committee, (which has been re-branded as Generation Apprenticeship), where we strive to highlight the needs of disabled apprentices as they access and navigate the apprenticeship framework. Currently, the *Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025* states that just 2.7% of apprentices have self-disclosed a disability, (DFHERIS, 2021). AHEAD intend to continue to monitor the participation rates of disabled apprentices to support our engagement with policy stakeholders in the apprenticeship arena.

9 of the 23 responding HEIs submitted data pertaining to apprenticeships to inform this Report. These datasets explicated that there was a total of 7,592 learners participating in Craft Apprenticeships across all responding HEIs, of which 6.7% (n=509) were registered with their institution's DSS. This represents no change to the rate of participation of disabled students/learners in relation to 2022/23 data, (AHEAD, 2024c). Pertaining to all other apprenticeships, survey respondents reported that there were 1,752 students/learners enrolled in participating HEIs, of which 2.3% (n=75) were engaging with disability support services in their HEI, which is again the same as of last year's rate of engagement, (Ibid.).

Students Registered with DSS Not in Receipt of the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD)

AHEAD's Participation Rate Report for the academic year 2022/23 included an inquiry, underpinned by qualitative data which explored the challenges often encountered by students and support services when *FSD Guidelines* preclude students from accessing DSS or availing of FSD funding, (AHEAD, 2024c). This data suggested that many DSS members were often inhibited from providing support to students who could not provide medical evidence to confirm their disability, which is a central facet of the rigid structure of the *FSD Guidelines*, (HEA, 2021). Many respondent postulated that the dichotomy of *FSD Guidelines* and the legal obligations imbued on HEIs as duty bearers was difficult to navigate. A number of respondents alluded to affording primacy to the *Guidelines*, while others were more concerned with the legal obligation to provide support to all disabled students, regardless of medical verification, (AHEAD, 2024c). To this end, AHEAD have continued to collate data regarding disabled students who do not or cannot access this crucial funding stream.

The data for the academic year 2023/24 illustrates that 11.1% (n=2,506) of students registered with supports do not receive financial assistance from the FSD. This equates to a 5.9% decrease in the percentage of students who are not supported by the FSD relative to the 2022/23 dataset, (AHEAD, 2024c). A more rigorous overview of the data collated from responding HEIs highlights the wide range in the percentage of students who are not eligible to access the FSD but are registered with disability supports. Across the 23 surveys, some HEIs reported that all students registered with support services in their institution were FSD eligible, while one HEI indicating that 36.7% of students who had registered with support services were precluded from accessing financial support from the FSD.

This section of the survey also enabled respondents to contribute qualitative data to further expand upon their figures and unpack some of the challenges that are embedded in the FSD framework.

> *"The majority of students who are unfunded are international students or their documentation is insufficient, (such as GP Evidence)".*
> - Survey Respondent 1.

> *"Students on the Access Foundation course are not FSD funded. Also, many students with a mental health condition have provided evidence from their GP".*
> - Survey Respondent 3.

38.8%

of students who were registered for supports for the academic year 2023/24 reported a Specific Learning Difficulty. This was the most common disability category recorded.

"Insufficient evidence or documentation is often provided, meaning some students are not eligible to apply for the fund. For example, a GP letter may have been the only evidence supplied, in this instance a students would have been offered exam supports only. There is a need clarity on their FSD eligibility".
- Survey Respondent 19.

"Our HEI supports students with disabilities regardless of the funding status of the student".
- Survey Respondent 21.

"We have a significant number of students with Mental Health difficulties who do not have evidence from a psychiatrist and therefore they are not eligible for funding. We also have a significant number of International Students".
- Survey Respondent 23.

The qualitative data suggests that there are a number of consistent barriers that restrict some students from availing of this key funding stream, for example international status and the frequently reported reluctance to disclose a mental health difficulty. The requirement of often costly medical verification has also identified as one that inhibits many disabled students from accessing the Fund. Furthermore, the data implies that the FSD is not underpinned by consistent standards and uniformity of application, thus leaving disabled students from certain HEIs at a distinct disadvantage. The challenges that are routinely encountered by HEIs in their endeavour to provide funded supports for disabled students could be addressed to some degree by the implementation of UDL informed practices in the teaching and learning space, (Capp, 2017; Healy et al., 2023). UDL has the potential to alleviate some of the more pressing issues that emanate from the year-on-year exponential increases in the number of disabled students accessing HE in the last 15 years. It can help reduce the burden on support services by proactively addressing diversity and inclusion at the point of course design. A number of HEIs across are currently in the process of implementing the ALITUT**UD**E Charter (ALTITUDE_Project, 2024), which was produced through a collaboration of six national agencies (including AHEAD), 15 HEIs and 6 ETBI. The aim of the Charter is to stimulate the embedding of a UD approach across all aspects of institutional practice in Irish tertiary education. If UDL is to become normative practice in Irish HE, the arguably unsustainable approach to disability support provision currently implemented (Healy et al., 2023) by overburdened and under-resourced DSS (AHEAD, 2024c) can be transformed, thus enabling DSS to target their expertise and time where they are most needed.

Nature of Disability

AHEAD's Participation Reports use identical disability categories to those that inform HEA[13] findings from their analysis of the breakdown of students with disabilities enrolled across all HEA funded HEIs and their Funds for Students with Disabilities (FSD) Guidelines, (HEA, 2023b). As such, this allows for a rigid year-on-year benchmarking approach from which we can explore trends and patterns through the lens of annual iterations using standardised cohort indicators.
These categories include[14]:

- Specific Learning Difficulty.
- Mental Health Condition.
- Significant Ongoing Illness.
- Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.
- Aspergers Syndrome/Autism.
- Developmental Co-Ordination Disorder- Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia.
- Neurological/Speech and Language.
- Physical Disability.
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing.
- Blind/Visually Impaired.

The category "Other" is employed to capture students who do not identify with these precise disability categories yet are registered with their institution's DSS. It should also be noted that this Report continues to use an analysis of primary and secondary (additional) disabilities, as per 2021/22, (AHEAD, 2023b). Prior to 2021/22, AHEAD's Participation Report used primary disability as a standalone indicator that determined our findings. The pivot to a more robust methodology that records students who disclose additional disabilities enables a more accurate overview of the incidence of disability across the entire cohort of disabled students (n=22,519).

The data elicited from all participating HEIs demonstrates that 19.5% (n=4,380) of all students with disabilities have disclosed more than one disability when registered with disability support services.

13 https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/third-level-education/fees-and-supports-for-third-level-education/financial-supports-for-students/

14 The 2023/24 Guidelines contains disability categories with changes that were made post survey design. As per Methodology, the categories used in the survey are retained and will be adjusted for the forthcoming Report (2025/26).

This is representative of a 7.5% increase in the participation rate of students registered with their HEI's DSS who disclosed more than one disability in relation to 22/23 data. This includes both undergraduate and postgraduate students, with some students being counted more than once. As such, it is the incidence of disability that is being recorded, advancing a framework from which a more reliable and credible than that which underpinned iterations of this Report prior to 2021/22.

Figure 3 illustrates the breakdown of students registered with support service/ access services by disability category (primary and additional). It should be noted that some of the disability categories used in this Report have been changed slightly in the FSD Guidelines (HEA, 2021). However, considering the data in the AHEAD survey employed those used below, the statistics will be presented in this manner. Also, while Intellectual Disability is not a category used in the FSD, it will be used throughout the Report to examine the efficacy of the PATH 4, Phase 2 funding stream that was introduced prior to this Report (see methodology).

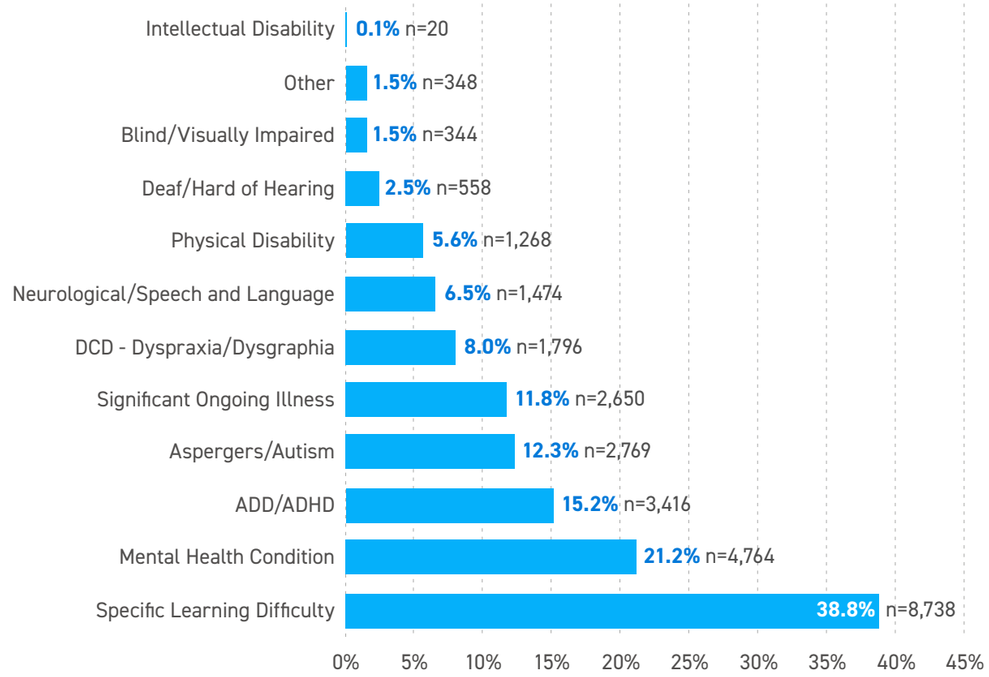


Figure 3. Breakdown of total students (postgraduate and undergraduate) registered with disability support services by category of disability, 2023/24.

The most common disability category that was reported (including primary and additional disabilities) by students who were registered for supports for the academic year 2023/24 was Specific Learning Difficulty (38.8%, n=8,738). This was followed by Mental Health Condition (21.2%, n=4,764), ADD/ADHD (15.2%, n=3,416), Aspergers/ Autism (12.3%, n=2,769), Significant Ongoing Illness (11.8%, n=2,650), DCD-Dyspraxia/ Dysgraphia (8%, n=1,796), Neurological/Speech and Language (6.5%, n=1,474), Physical Disability (5.6%, n=1,268), Deaf/Hard of Hearing (2.5%, n=558) and Blind/Visually Impaired (1.5%, n=344). The category "Other" was disclosed by 1.5% (n=348) of all students registered. There were 20 students who disclosed an intellectual disability reported across all responding HEs, representing 0.1% of the total student population.

Figure 3. indicates that students who disclosed sensory disabilities to DSS continue to be significantly under-represented across all HEA funded HEIs. This has been illustrated in several *Participation Rate Reports* alongside the core recommendations from AHEAD that emanated from these Reports, (AHEAD, 2023b, 2024c). When compared with current census data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO), the under-representation of this cohort requires acknowledgment and collaborative, strategic and solution-focused interventions from key stakeholders and actors from the HE sector. The Census 2022 data indicated that 6% of the Irish population, and 27% of all citizens who stipulated to having "at least one long-lasting condition or difficulty to any extent", identified as blind or visually impaired, while 5% (21% of all Census respondents who identify as having "at least one long-lasting condition or difficulty to any extent") self-disclosed as being deaf or hard of hearing, (CSO, 2023). While there is an obvious caveat to this frame of reference, considering the differing underlying datasets and CSO data that indicates that the majority of this cohort are over 50 years old (Ibid.), it is the perennial under-representation that underpins this analysis.

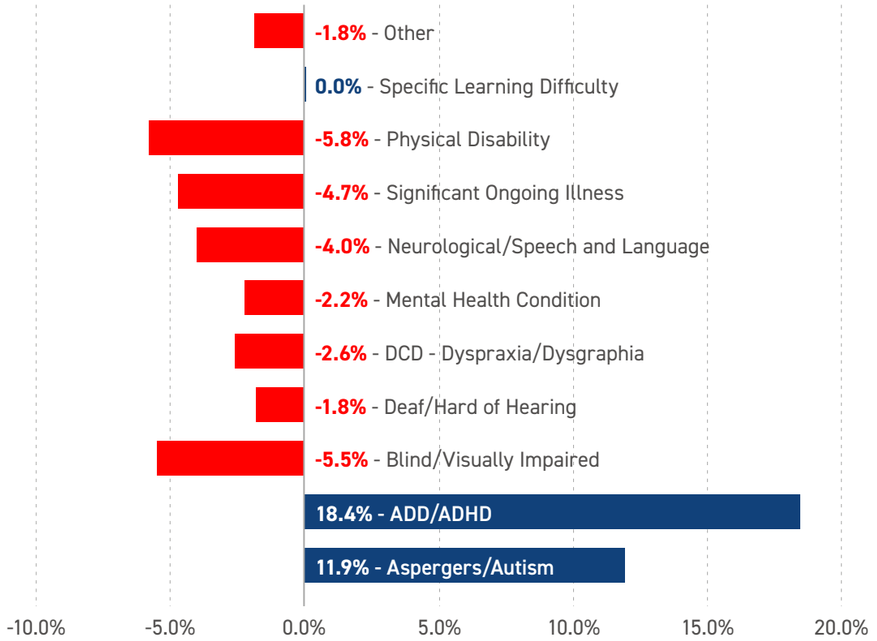


Figure 4. Year-on-Year Change in the Percentage of Students Engaging with DSS, by Disability Category, (22/23 and 23/24).

Figure 4 is representative of the year-on-year change in the percentage of students engaging with their institution's DSS, relative to our 22/23 Report, (AHEAD, 2024c). The statistics are disaggregated by category of disability and include postgraduate and undergraduate students (Intellectual Disability is not included, as data for this disability category was not included in the 232/24 survey). Some of the more notable differences in the percentages of disabled students registered with support services, relative to 2022/23 data include: ADD/ADHD (18.4% increase), Aspergers/Autism (11.9% increase), Physical Disability (5.8% decrease), Significant Ongoing Illness (4.7% decrease) and Blind/Visually Impaired (5.5% decrease). The statistics for this section of the Report are demonstrative of incidence of disability, as such, a student may be represented twice in this dataset, dependent on the disclosing of more than one disability. For example, student A may have disclosed Physical Disability as their primary disability and Other as an additional disability.

New Entrant Undergraduate Disability Breakdown

This section of the Report explores the new entrant undergraduate cohort and disaggregates this dataset by disability category for the academic year 2023/24. It analyses the cohort of students who are engaging with the first year of their undergraduate studies, (n=6,060). Figure 5 represents the percentage of new entrant undergraduates registered with disability support services disaggregated by students who have disclosed each disability as their primary or additional disability/ disabilities, when engaging with their institution's DSS.

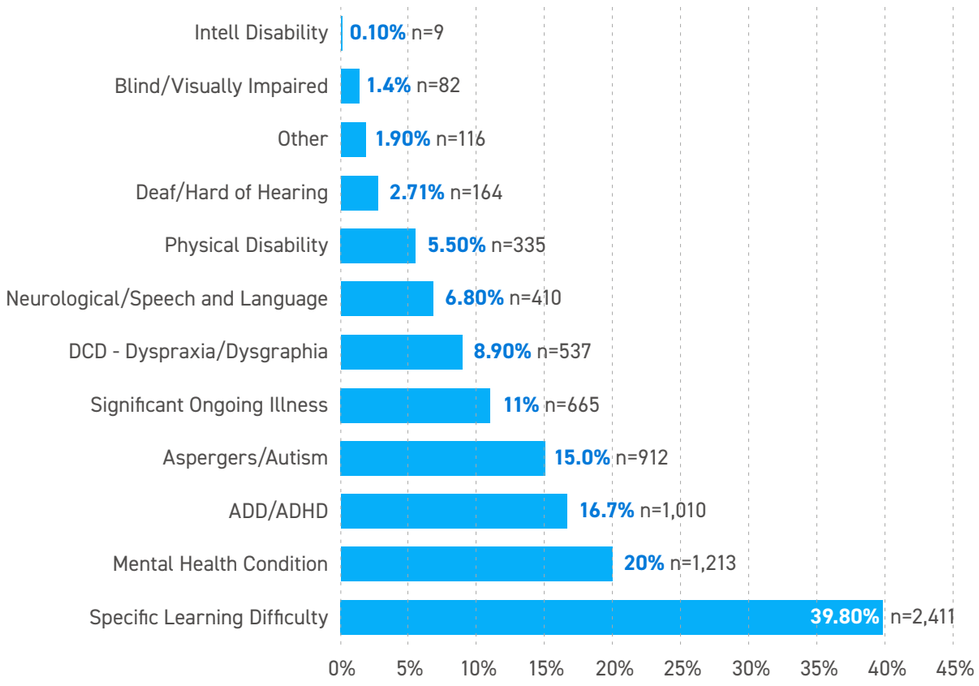


Figure 5. Breakdown of new entrant students registered with disability support services by category of disability for the academic year 2023/24.

Pertaining to this cohort, 39.8% (n=2,411) disclosed a Specific Learning Difficulty, 20% (n=1,213) a Mental Health Condition. 16.7% (n=1,010) disclosed ADD/ADHD, 15% (n=912) disclosed Aspergers/Autism, 11% (n=665) a Significant Ongoing Illness, 8.9% (n=537) DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia, 6.8% (n=410) identified with the Neurological/Speech and Language category with 5.5% (n=335) disclosing a Physical Disability, 2.71% (n=164) as Deaf/Hard of Hearing, 1.9% (n=116) identified with the Other category 1.4% (n=82) identified as Blind/Visually Impaired. Intellectual Disability, a disability category that has been added to current FSD recognised categories in this Report was disclosed by 0.1% (n=9) of all students engaged with DSS from responding institutions.

Undergraduate Disability Breakdown.

Responding institutions reported that there were 20,512 undergraduate students registered with disability supports for the academic year 2023/24, representative of 91.1% of all students engaging with disability support in their HEI. 9.3% of all undergraduate students were registered with their HEI's DSS, indicative of a 9.4% increase in comparison with data from our 2022/23 Report, which reported that 8.5% of all undergraduate students in participating HEIs were registered with their institution's DSS, (AHEAD, 2024c). Figure 6 represents a breakdown of this cohort by disability category, again using incidence of disability (i.e. primary and additional disabilities) as a frame of reference. From the collated data from respondents, 23.3% (n=4,566) of all undergraduate students registered with their HEI's DSS disclosed more than one disability.

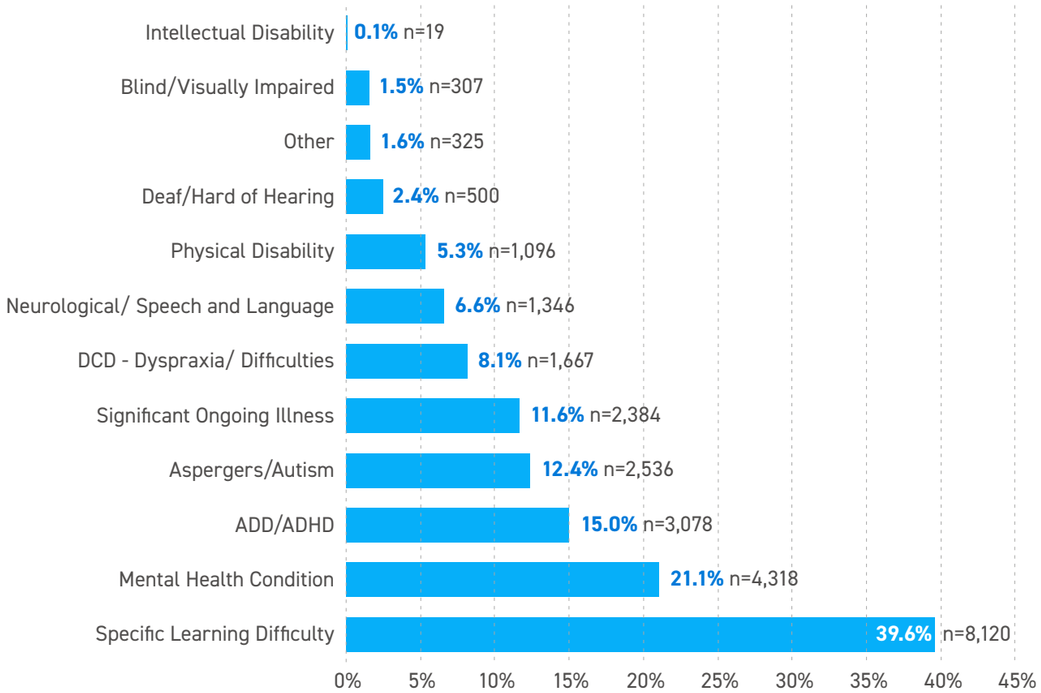


Figure 6. Breakdown of undergraduate students registered with DSS by category of disability 2023/24.

Figure 6 illustrates that the three categories of disability that were disclosed by the highest percentage of undergraduate students were Significant Learning Difficulty (39.6%, n=8,120), Mental Health Condition (21.1%, n=4,318) and ADD/ ADHD (15%, n=3,078). The three categories of disability disclosed to DSS by the lowest percentage of undergraduate students were: Intellectual Disability (0.1%, n=19), Blind/Visually Impaired (1.5%, n=307) and Other (1.6%, n=325). These statistics are similar to our 2022/23 and 2021/22 *Reports*, with some minor changes in the order (ascending and descending), (AHEAD, 2023b, 2024c), with the exception of Intellectual Disability which was not included as standalone disability in previous iterations of our Participation Rate Reports (see introduction).

It is notable that sensory disabilities continue to be under-represented in this dataset HE, with Blind/Visually Impaired and Deaf/Hard of Hearing being among the lowest recorded categories of disability in a number of previous reports, (AHEAD, 2023b, 2024c). Students who have disclosed an Intellectual Disability (0.1%) are now the smallest cohort of disabled students at undergraduate level, replacing the disability category Blind/Visually Impaired, which represented 1.5% of all disabled undergraduate students registered with DSS in the academic year 2022/23, (AHEAD, 2024c).

A complete overview of the incidence of disability among undergraduate students registered with disability supports is buttressed by the following statistics: Deaf/Hard of Hearing (2.4%, n=500), Physical Disability (5.3%, n=1,096), Neurological/Speech and Language (6.6%, n=1,346), DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia (8.1%, n=1,667), Significant Ongoing Illness (11.6%, n=2,384) and Aspergers/ Autism (12.4%, n=2,536).

Postgraduate Disability Breakdown.

This section of the Report explores the number and percentage of postgraduate students engaged with DSS across all responding institutions, disaggregated by disability category for the academic year 2023/24. The data elicited from the surveys collated from responding institutions indicated a modest increase on the percentage of postgraduate students registered with supports in comparison with the data from 2022/23, (AHEAD, 2024c). In 2022/23, the number of postgraduate students registered with disability support was 1,904, or 3.2% of all postgraduates enrolled across participating HEIs. This year's (2023/24) survey respondents reported that 3.3% (n=2,007) of postgraduate students were registered with their HEI's DSS, representative of a 5% (n= 103) increase (0.1 percentage points), when compared with the 2022/23 dataset. Furthermore, 20.6% (n= 410) of postgraduate students registered with supports reported more than one disability. Figure 7 demonstrates the prevalence of each disability category across all postgraduate students registered with their HEI's support services.

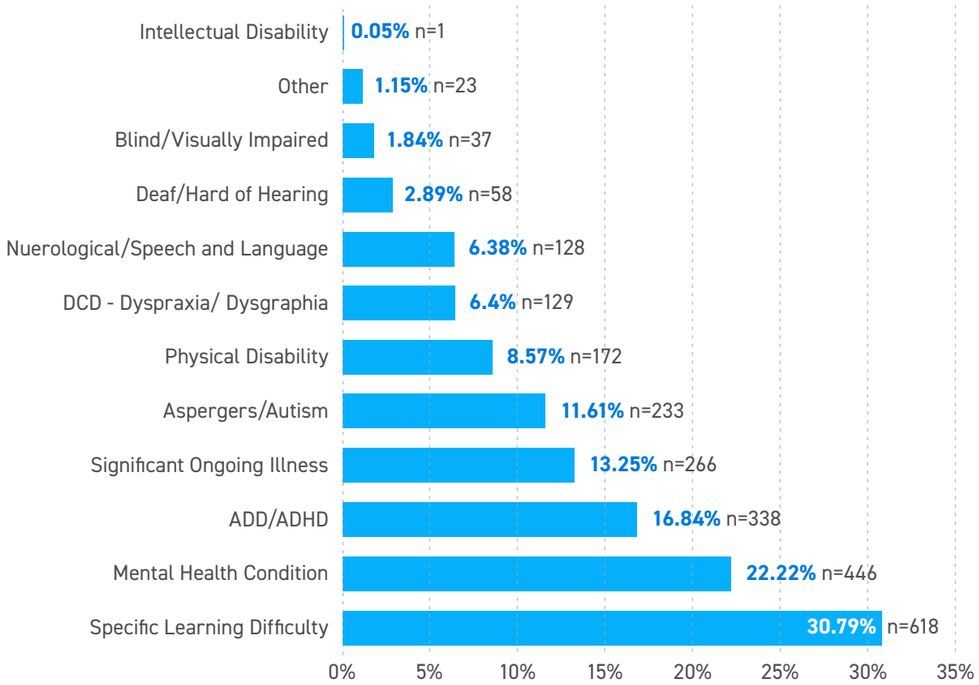


Figure 7. Postgraduate Disability Breakdown for the Academic Year 2023/24

Figure 7 illustrates the incidence of disability among all postgraduates who are registered for disability support in their HEI, as per responding surveys. An overview of the prevalence of disability categories, according to the 2023/24 dataset indicates that the three categories with the highest rates of participation were: Specific Learning Difficulty (30.79%, n=618), Mental Health Condition (22.22%, n=446) and ADD/ADHD (16.84%, n=338). The three categories with the lowest participation rate were Intellectual Disability (0.05%, n=1), Other (1.15%, n=23) and Blind/Visually Impaired (1.84%, n=37).

The remaining categories and the percentage of postgraduate students that have disclosed this disability when accessing disability supports were: Significant Ongoing Illness (13.25%, n=266), Aspergers/Autism (11.61%, n=233), Physical Disability (8.57%, n=172), DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia (6.4%, n=129), Neurological/Speech and Language (6.38%, n=128) and Deaf/Hard of Hearing 2.89%, n=58).

Despite the increase in postgraduate students registered with disability support services explicated in this *Report*, prior AHEAD *Participation Rate* reports have continuously captured a year-on-year under-representation of disability at postgraduate level across responding HEIs, (AHEAD, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2023b, 2024c). This under-representation is particularly highlighted when one considers that the data collected from responding institutions expounds that 9.3% (n=20,512) of undergraduate students access DSS in their institution. Despite this being a core recommendation in a number of prior AHEAD reports, alongside our continuous engagement with key actors and stakeholders in the policy landscape pertaining to this issue (for example AHEAD sit on a range of Steering Groups, Advisory Committees and regularly include the lack postgraduate participation for disabled students in relevant policy submissions), the rate of participation remains consistently low. These statistics suggest that disabled students tend not to progress to postgraduate study as frequently as their non-disabled peers. Postgraduate study is a precursor to better opportunities and pathways into the labour market, thus enabling disabled people to engage in a knowledge-based labour market in an equitable manner as their non-disabled peers. To this end, there should be solution-focused strategies, interventions and funding streams, echoing those that have been successful in generating access to HE for disabled people (for example DARE and PATH) following graduation with an onus on increasing the participation rate for disabled students in postgraduate study. This would help counter the disability/poverty intersection that is accepted in Ireland across the broad range of academic literature and research, (Cullinan et al., 2015; EDF, 2023; European, 2020; Indecon, 2021).

In response to the continuous underrepresentation of disabled students at postgraduate level which has been illustrated in a number of Participation Rate Reports (AHEAD, 2021, 2023b, 2024c), LaunchPAD, (PAD being an acronym for Postgraduate, Academia and Disability) an initiative that emanated from AHEAD's partnership with NDPAC was formed with the following aims:

- Foster a Sense of Belonging by Establishing the NDPAC / AHEAD Partnership and Community.
- Influence Policy Development by Amplifying the Lived Experience of the Diverse Voices in the Community.
- Sustain the Community to Make a Lasting Impact Through Advocacy and Influence in HE Decision-Making.

21%

Arts and Humanities is the field of the study with the highest number of disabled students across participating institutions

The LaunchPAD Partnership is currently training disabled students, and early career researchers to be LaunchPAD Ambassadors, which will empower them to be agents in their own change. AHEAD's Research and Policy Team are also in the process of developing a research project entitled 'Voices in the Community' which will unpack the lived experiences of disabled postgraduates and researchers.

Fields of Study

As a point of departure, the Report now examines the participation rate of disabled students in the various fields of study. According to the responding institutions, the total number of students with disabilities registered with disability supports for the academic year 2023/24 was 22,519, or 8% of the total number of students enrolled in participating HEIs. The fields of study that inform this Report are drawn from the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). Our previous participation rate reports use this standard as does the HEA in their reports, enabling accurate comparison between both datasets. Figure 8 illustrates the breakdown of students with disabilities engaging with the different fields of study (drawing from the surveys from responding institutions) compared with the breakdown of the full student body (drawing from HEA data), (HEA, 2024).

The three fields of study that were reported to have the highest rate of participation for students with disabilities were Humanities and Arts (21%, n=4,732), Business, Administration and Law (16.2%, n=3,641) and Health and Welfare (13.8%, n=3,097). The three fields with the lowest rate of participation for this cohort were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.6%, n=133), Services 2.2%, (n=488) and Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary (2.9%, n=654). The remaining fields of study were demarcated by rate of participation as follows: Education (5.3%, n=1,227), Information and Communication Technologies (5%, n=1,133), Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (9.7%, n=2,175), Engineering, manufacturing and construction (11.8%, n=2,663) and Natural Sciences, mathematics and statistics (11.4%, n=2,566).

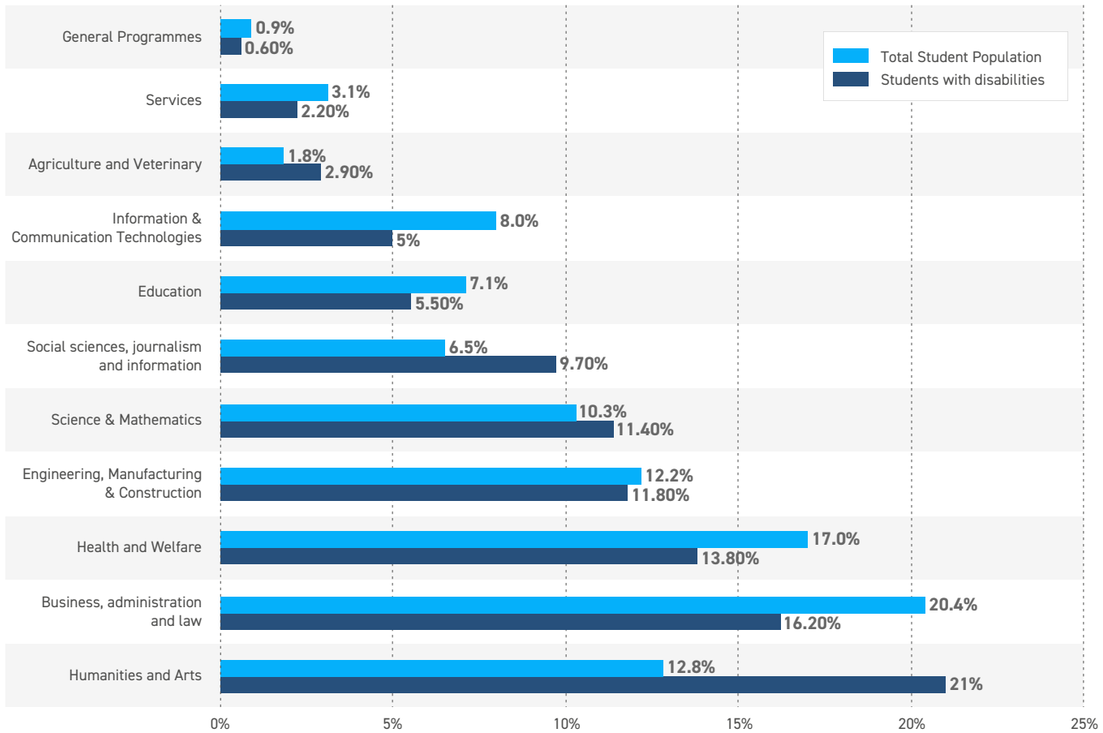


Figure 8. Participation Rates in each Field of Study. Percentage of Disabled Students in Comparison with the Total Student Body, 2023/24.

The HEA data is particularly useful for this section of the Report as it enables analysis of both the under and over representation of disabled students in the different fields of study. A number of previous Participation Reports have recorded a significant over-representation in Arts and Humanities, (AHEAD, 2021, 2023b, 2024c). While Arts and Humanities is still the field of study with the greatest difference in the participation rate of disabled students when compared to the total student body (21% compared to 12.8% of the total student population), other notable disparities include Business, Administration and Law (16.2% of students registered with DSS compared with 20.4% of the total student body), Health and Welfare (13.8% of students registered with DSS compared with 17% of the total student body), Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (9.7% of students registered with DSS compared to 6.5% of all students) and Information and Communication Technologies (5% of students registered with DSS in comparison with 8% of all students).

The fields of study with the lowest difference between the participation rate of disabled students and the total student body were reported to be Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (12.2% of the student body and 11.8% of students registered with DSS) and Education (7.1% of the total student body and 5.5% of disabled students).

Fields of Study Breakdown by Disability

This section of the research now analyses the data from responding institutions by examining each disability category disaggregated by field of study. The survey completed by responding HEIs included data that disaggregated the participation rates of students with disabilities by fields of study and disability categories. Separate tables of data that represent each disability category are included to facilitate ease of interpretation, considering the complex datasets. The fields of study are again predicated upon the ISCED Classifications[15], which are also employed by the HEA in their research.

Thus, the tables in this section present an individual breakdown of each disability category by field of study. Each table consists of the participation rates in all fields of study across (i) the total student population (as per HEA data), (ii) the total students with disability population breakdown across all fields of study (as per AHEAD data), (iii) the percentage of students in this disability cohort who are enrolled in each field of study, and (iv) the number of students in this category of disability enrolled across each field of study. There is a brief synopsis of the key points and comparison with 2022/23 data (AHEAD, 2024c) following each data table.

As discussed, Intellectual Disability, despite not being a stand-alone category of disability in the Fund for Students with Disabilities, is included in this Report.

15 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=International_Standard_Classification_of_Education_(ISCED)

ADD/ADHD

Table 1- Breakdown by field of study for students in the ADD/ADHD category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

15.2% of all SWDs are in ADD/ ADHD Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in ADD/ADHD Category Studying Field	% of Students in ADD/ADHD Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in ADD/ADHD Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.9%[16]	0.6%	19	0.6%	14.3%
Education	7.1%	5.5%	99	2.9%	8.1%
Arts and humanities	12.8%	21.0%	848	24.9%	17.9%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.5%	9.7%	401	11.8%	18.4%
Business, administration and law	20.4%	16.2%	496	14.5%	13.6%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	11.4%	421	12.3%	16.4%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.0%	5.0%	235	6.9%	20.7%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.2%	11.8%	380	11.1%	14.3%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	65	1.9%	9.9%
Health and welfare	17.0%	13.8%	390	11.4%	12.6%
Services	3.1%	2.2%	55	1.6%	11.3%
Total			3,409	100.0%	

16 HEA total number of students enrolled in each field is available here.

— The two fields of study with the highest percentage of students who have disclosed ADD/ADHD when registering with DSS as either their primary of additional disability were Arts and Humanities (24.9%, n=848, representative of a decrease of 0.4%) and Business, Administration and Law (14.5%, n=496, representative of a decrease of 2.7% in relation to 2022/23 data).

— The two fields of study with the lowest rate of participation for this cohort were Services (1.6%, n= 55), representative of a decrease of 0.59% and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.6%, n=19), representative of a 100% decrease in relation to 2022/23 data from responding institutions).

— Students registered for supports and disclosing ADD/ADHD as either their primary or one of their additional disabilities were significantly over-represented in Arts and Humanities. 24.9% (n=848) of this cohort were enrolled in this field of study, compared with 12.8% of the total student population. Although this is consistent across all disabled students, the percentage of students who disclose ADD/ADHD was higher than the mean of all students with disabilities.

Aspergers/Autism

Table 2- Breakdown by field of study for students in the Asperger's/Autism category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

12.3% of all SWDs are in Aspergers/Autism Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Aspergers/ Autism Category Studying Field	% of Students in Aspergers/ Autism Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Aspergers/ Autism Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.9%	0.6%	24	0.9%	18.0%
Education	7.1%	5.5%	66	2.4%	5.4%
Arts and humanities	12.8%	21.0%	964	35.2%	20.4%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.5%	9.7%	234	8.5%	10.8%
Business, administration and law	20.4%	16.2%	273	10.0%	7.5%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	11.4%	408	14.9%	15.9%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.0%	5.0%	314	11.5%	27.7%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.2%	11.8%	253	9.2%	9.5%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	41	1.5%	6.3%
Health and welfare	17.0%	13.8%	127	4.6%	4.1%
Services	3.1%	2.2%	37	1.3%	7.6%
Total			2,741	100.0%	

- The fields of study with the highest rates of participation for this disability category were Arts and Humanities (35.2%, n=964, representative of a 7.65% increase in relation to 22/23 data) and Natural Sciences, Journalism and Information (14.9%, n=408, representative of a 9.1% decrease in relation to 22/23 data).

- The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation for this cohort were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.9%, n=24, representative of a 50% increase in relation to 22/23 data) and Services (1.3%, n=37), representative of a 8.3% decrease in relation to 22/23 data).

- Students who disclosed Aspergers/Autism as a primary or additional disability were significantly under-represented (relative to the total student population) in the following fields of study: Education (2.4% compared to 7.1% of all students), Business Administration and Law (10% compared to 20.4% of all students) and Health and Welfare (4.6% compared to 17% of all students).

- Students who disclosed Aspergers/Autism as a primary or additional disability were over-represented in Information, Communication Technologies (11.5% compared to 8% of all students).

Blind/Visually Impaired

Table 3 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Blind/Visually Impaired category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

1.5% of all SWDs are in Blind/ Visually Impaired Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Blind/Visually Impaired Studying Field	% of Students in Blind/Visually Impaired Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Blind/Visually Impaired Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.9%	0.6%	3	0.9%	2.3%
Education	7.1%	5.5%	22	6.5%	1.5%
Arts and humanities	12.8%	21.0%	62	18.2%	1.3%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.5%	9.7%	44	12.9%	2.0%
Business, administration and law	20.4%	16.2%	69	20.3%	1.9%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	11.4%	31	9.1%	1.2%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.0%	5.0%	20	5.9%	1.8%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.2%	11.8%	23	6.8%	0.9%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	5	1.5%	0.8%
Health and welfare	17.0%	13.8%	55	16.2%	1.8%
Services	3.1%	2.2%	6	1.8%	1.2%
Total			340	100.0%	

— Apart from the disability category "Other", (and the newly included Intellectual Disability) the Blind/Visually Impaired cohort had the lowest rate of participation for the academic year 2023/24. This is a repeat of the trends that emanated from our 2022/23 Report, (AHEAD, 2024c). As such, sensory disabilities (which include the Blind/Visually Impaired and Deaf/Hard of Hearing cohorts) are consistently the two disability categories with the lowest rate of participation among all disabled students registered with their HEI's disability support services.

— The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation from the Blind/Visually Impaired cohort were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.9%, n=3, representative of a 50% increase in relation to 22/23 data) and Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary (1.5% percent, n=5), representative of a 31.8% decrease in relation to 22/23 data).

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation for this cohort were Arts and Humanities (18.2%, n=62, representative of an 19.8% increase in relation to 22/23 data) and Business, Administration and Law (20.3%, n=69), representative of a 20.1% increase in relation to 22/23 data).

Deaf/Hard of Hearing

Table 4 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Deaf/Hard of Hearing category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

2.5% of all SWDs are in Deaf/Hard of Hearing Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Deaf/Hard of Hearing Category Studying Field	% of Students in Deaf/Hard of Hearing Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Deaf/Hard of Hearing Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.9%	0.6%	5	0.9%	3.8%
Education	7.1%	5.5%	34	6.1%	2.8%
Arts and humanities	12.8%	21.0%	110	19.8%	2.3%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.5%	9.7%	49	8.8%	2.3%
Business, administration and law	20.4%	16.2%	114	20.5%	3.1%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	11.4%	52	9.4%	2.0%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.0%	5.0%	19	3.4%	1.7%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.2%	11.8%	60	10.8%	2.3%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	14	2.5%	2.1%
Health and welfare	17.0%	13.8%	88	15.9%	2.8%
Services	3.1%	2.2%	10	1.8%	2.0%
Total			555	100.0%	

- The fields of study with the highest percentage of students registered as Deaf/Hard of Hearing were Arts and Humanities (19.8%, n=110), representative of a 1.5% increase in relation to 22/23 data) and Business, Administration and Law (20.5%, n=114), representative of a 5.13% increase in relation to 22/23 data.

- The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation by students from the Deaf/Hard of Hearing category were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.9%, n=5), representative of a 350% increase in relation to 22/23 data) and Services (1.8%, n=10), representative of no change in relation to 22/23 data.

- Apart from the over-representation in Arts and Humanities that is consistent across all disability categories, no other field of study had a marked over-representation for this cohort.

- Outliers of under-representation include Information, Communication and Technologies (3.4% compared to 8% of all students) and Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (8% compared with 12.2% of all students).

DCD-Dyspraxia

Table 5 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the DCD-Dyspraxia category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

8.0% of all SWDs are in DCD - Dyspraxia Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in DCD - Dyspraxia Studying Field	% of Students in DCD - Dyspraxia Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in DCD - Dyspraxia Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.9%	0.6%	4	0.2%	3.0%
Education	7.1%	5.5%	76	4.2%	6.2%
Arts and humanities	12.8%	21.0%	444	24.7%	9.4%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.5%	9.7%	165	9.2%	7.6%
Business, administration and law	20.4%	16.2%	336	18.7%	9.2%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	11.4%	182	10.1%	7.1%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.0%	5.0%	134	7.5%	11.8%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.2%	11.8%	239	13.3%	9.0%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	48	2.7%	7.3%
Health and welfare	17.0%	13.8%	124	6.9%	4.0%
Services	3.1%	2.2%	45	2.5%	9.2%
Total			1,797	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest percentage of students from this disability category were Arts and Humanities (24.7%, n=444), representative of a 3.35% increase in relation to 22/23 data and Business, Administration and Law (18.7%, n=366), representative of an 5.7% increase in relation to 22/23 data.

— The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation for this disability category were Generic Programmes and Qualification (0.2%, n=4), representative of 100% increase in relation to 22/23 data) and Services (2.5%, n=45), representative of a 10.7% decrease in relation to 22/23 data.

— Significant under-representations are evident in the following fields of study: Health and Welfare (6.9% compared with 17% of all students) and Education (4.2% in comparison with 7.1% of all students).

— Over-representations occur in the following fields of study: Arts and Humanities (24.7% in comparison with 12.8% of all students) and Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (9.2% in comparison with 6.5% of all students).

Mental Health Condition

Table 6 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Mental Health Condition category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

21.2% of all SWDs are in Mental Health Condition Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Mental Health Condition Category Studying Field	% of Students in Mental Health Condition Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Mental Health Condition Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.9%	0.6%	45	1.0%	33.8%
Education	7.1%	5.5%	204	4.3%	16.6%
Arts and humanities	12.8%	21.0%	1,205	25.7%	25.5%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.5%	9.7%	609	13.0%	28.0%
Business, administration and law	20.4%	16.2%	630	13.4%	17.3%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	11.4%	665	14.2%	25.9%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.0%	5.0%	207	4.4%	18.3%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.2%	11.8%	276	5.9%	10.4%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	111	2.4%	17.0%
Health and welfare	17.0%	13.8%	696	14.8%	22.5%
Services	3.1%	2.2%	46	1.0%	9.4%
Total			4,694	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation for this disability category were Arts and Humanities (25.7%, n=12.5), representative of a 6.55% decrease in relation to 22/23 data and Health and Welfare (14.8%, n=696), representative of a 4.5% decrease in relation to 22/23 data).

— The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation were Services (1%, n=46), representative of a 50% decrease in relation to 22/23 data) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (1%, n=45), representative of a 50% increase in relation to 22/23 data.

— Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Engineering, manufacturing and construction (5.9% in comparison with 12.2% of all students) and Business, Administration and Law (13.4% in comparison with 20.4% of all students).

— Significant over-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (13% in comparison with 6.5% of all students) and Arts and Humanities (25.7% in comparison with 142.8% of all students).

Neurological/Speech and Language

Table 7 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Neurological/Speech and Language category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

4.9% of all SWDs are in Neurological/Speech and Language Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Neurological/ Speech and Language Studying Field	% of Students in Neurological/ Speech and Language Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Neurological/ Speech and Language Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.9%	0.6%	12	0.8%	9.0%
Education	7.1%	5.5%	78	5.3%	6.4%
Arts and humanities	12.8%	21.0%	289	19.8%	6.1%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.5%	9.7%	156	10.7%	7.2%
Business, administration and law	20.4%	16.2%	256	17.5%	7.0%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	11.4%	181	12.4%	7.1%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.0%	5.0%	76	5.2%	6.7%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.2%	11.8%	168	11.5%	6.3%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	33	2.3%	5.0%
Health and welfare	17.0%	13.8%	177	12.1%	5.7%
Services	3.1%	2.2%	36	2.5%	7.4%
Total			1,462	100.0%	

- The fields of the study with highest rate of participation for this disability cohort were Arts and Humanities (19.8% percent, n=289), representative of a 2.59% increase in relation to 22/23 data and Business Administration and Law (17.5%, n=256), representative of an 2.9% increase in relation to last 22/23 data.

- The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation for this disability cohort were Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary (2.3%, n=33), representative of a 4.6% increase in relation to 22/23 data and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.8%, n=12), representative of a 33.3% increase in relation to 22/23 data.

- Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Health and Welfare (12.1% in comparison with 17% of all students) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (5.2% in comparison with 8% of all students).

- Significant over-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Arts and Humanities (19.8% in comparison with 12.8% of all students) and Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (10.7% in comparison with 6.5% of all students).

Significant On-going Illness

Table 8 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Significant On-going Illness category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

11.3% of all SWDs are in Significant Ongoing Illness Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Significant Ongoing Illness Category Studying Field	% of Students in Significant Ongoing Illness Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Significant Ongoing Illness Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.9%	0.6%	13	0.5%	9.8%
Education	7.1%	5.5%	194	7.4%	15.8%
Arts and humanities	12.8%	21.0%	503	19.3%	10.6%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.5%	9.7%	215	8.2%	9.9%
Business, administration and law	20.4%	16.2%	408	15.6%	11.2%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	11.4%	382	14.6%	14.9%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.0%	5.0%	114	4.4%	10.1%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.2%	11.8%	221	8.5%	8.3%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	68	2.6%	10.4%
Health and welfare	17.0%	13.8%	447	17.1%	14.4%
Services	3.1%	2.2%	43	1.6%	8.8%
Total			2,608	100.0%	

- The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Arts and Humanities (19.3%, n=503), representative of a 6.8% decrease in relation to 22/23 data and Health and Welfare (17.1%, n=447), representative of a 0.6% increase in relation to 22/23 data.

- The fields of study with the lowest rates of participation for this cohort were Services (1.6%, n=43), representative of a 6.7% increase in relation to 22/23 data and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.5%, n=13), representative of a 66.7% increase in relation to 22/23 data.

- Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Business, Administration and Law (15.6% in comparison with 20.4% of all students) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (4.4% percent in comparison with 8% of all students).

- Significant over-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Arts and Humanities (19.3% percent in comparison with 12.8% of all students) and Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics (14.6% in comparison with 10.3% of all students).

Physical Disability

Table 9 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Physical Disability category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

5.6% of all SWDs are in Physical Disability Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Physical Disability Studying Field	% of Students in Physical Disability Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Physical Disability Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.9%	0.6%	13	1.0%	9.8%
Education	7.1%	5.5%	64	5.1%	5.2%
Arts and humanities	12.8%	21.0%	265	21.1%	5.6%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.5%	9.7%	144	11.5%	6.6%
Business, administration and law	20.4%	16.2%	224	17.8%	6.2%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	11.4%	121	9.6%	4.7%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.0%	5.0%	53	4.2%	4.7%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.2%	11.8%	91	7.3%	3.4%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	35	2.8%	5.4%
Health and welfare	17.0%	13.8%	230	18.3%	7.4%
Services	3.1%	2.2%	15	1.2%	3.1%
Total			1,255	100.0%	

- The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Arts and Humanities (21.1%, n=265), representative of a 2.8% decrease increase in relation to 22/23 data and Health and Welfare (18.3%, n=230), representative of a 1.08% decrease in relation to 22/23 data.

- The fields of study with the lowest rates of participation for this cohort were Services (1.2% percent, n=15), representative of a 36.8% decrease in relation to 22/23 data and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (1%, n=13), representative of a 150% increase in relation to 22/23 data.

- Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Engineering, manufacturing and construction (7.3% in comparison with 12.2% of all students) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (4.2% in comparison with 8% of all students).

- Significant over-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Arts and Humanities (21.1% in comparison with 12.8% of all students) and Education (5.1% in comparison with 7.1% of all students).

Specific Learning Difficulty

Table 10 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Specific Learning Difficulty Category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities (SWD) and for the student population in general.

38.8% of all SWDs are in Specific Learning Difficulty Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Specific Learning Difficulty Category Studying Field	% of Students in Specific Learning Difficulty Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Specific Learning Difficulty Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.9%	0.6%	38	0.4%	28.6%
Education	7.1%	5.5%	527	6.1%	43.0%
Arts and humanities	12.8%	21.0%	1,349	15.5%	28.5%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.5%	9.7%	745	8.6%	34.3%
Business, administration and law	20.4%	16.2%	1,513	17.4%	41.6%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	11.4%	718	8.3%	28.0%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.0%	5.0%	332	3.8%	29.3%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.2%	11.8%	1,531	17.6%	57.5%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	360	4.1%	55.0%
Health and welfare	17.0%	13.8%	1,234	14.2%	39.8%
Services	3.1%	2.2%	329	3.8%	67.4%
Total			8,676	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Business, Administration and Law (17.4%, n=1,513), representative of a .6% percent increase in relation to 22/23 data) and Engineering, manufacturing and construction (17.6% percent, n=1,531), representative of a 2.33% percent increase in relation to 22/23 data.

— The fields of study with the lowest rates of participation for this cohort were Services (3.8%, n=329), representative of a 5.3% decrease in relation to 22/23 data and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.4%, n=38), representative of a 33.3% increase in relation to 22/23 data.

— Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Business, Administration and Law (17.4% in comparison with 20.4% of all students) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (3.8% in comparison with 8% of all students).

— Significant over-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Engineering, manufacturing and construction (17.6% in comparison with 12.2% of all students) and Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary (4.1% in comparison with 1.8% of all students).

— This cohort comprises of 38.8% (n=8,676) of all disabled students accessing disability support services in HE for the academic year 23/24. As such, the data is relatively consistent with the all-student population. Furthermore, it is the only cohort that does not have an over representation in Arts and Humanities. An analysis of the data demonstrates that students who disclose a Specific Learning Difficulty are likely to be engaging with fields of study in a similar manner to the all-student cohort. Many of the other trends that are seen to be consistent across all students with disabilities are not reiterated in this cohort.

Other

Table 11 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Other category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities and for the student population in general.

1.5% of all SWDs are in Other Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in Other Studying Field	% of Students in Other Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in Other Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.9%	0.6%	0	0.0%	0.0%
Education	7.1%	5.5%	27	8.9%	2.2%
Arts and humanities	12.8%	21.0%	43	14.1%	0.9%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.5%	9.7%	27	8.9%	1.2%
Business, administration and law	20.4%	16.2%	42	13.8%	1.2%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	11.4%	27	8.9%	1.1%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.0%	5.0%	13	4.3%	1.1%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.2%	11.8%	39	12.8%	1.5%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	22	7.2%	3.4%
Health and welfare	17.0%	13.8%	46	15.1%	1.5%
Services	3.1%	2.2%	19	6.2%	3.9%
Total			305	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Health and Welfare (15.1%, n=46), representative of a 7.9% decrease in relation to 22/23 data and Arts and Humanities (14.1%, n=43), representative of a 27% increase in relation to 22/23 data.

— The fields of study with the lowest rates of participation for this cohort were Services, Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (4.3%, n= 113) representative of a 23.1% decrease in relation to 22/23 data and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0%, n=0), representative of a 100% decrease in relation to 22/23 data.

Intellectual Disability

Table 12 - Breakdown by field of study for students in the Intellectual Disability category compared to the breakdown by field of study for all students with disabilities and for the student population in general.

0.1% of all SWDs are in Intellectual Disability Category	% of Total Students Studying Field	% of Total SWD Studying Field	Numbers in ID Studying Field	% of Students in ID Category Studying Field	% of SWDs Studying Field in ID Category
Generic programmes and qualifications	0.9%	0.6%	0	0.0%	0.0%
Education	7.1%	5.5%	2	10.0%	0.0%
Arts and humanities	12.8%	21.0%	5	25.0%	0.0%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.5%	9.7%	2	10.0%	0.0%
Business, administration and law	20.4%	16.2%	4	20.0%	0.0%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.3%	11.4%	1	5.0%	0.0%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	8.0%	5.0%	1	5.0%	0.0%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.2%	11.8%	1	5.0%	0.0%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	1	5.0%	0.0%
Health and welfare	17.0%	13.8%	2	10.0%	0.0%
Services	3.1%	2.2%	1	5.0%	0.0%
Total			20	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Arts and Humanities (25%, n=5), and Business Administration and Law (20%, n=4). The disability category is a new addition to the AHEAD Report for this academic year (23/24). Therefore, there are no previous statistics for comparison. This category of disability also has the lowest number of students engaging with disability supports across all responding HEIs (n=20).

100%

Intellectual Disability was the category of disability with the highest percentage of students (n=20) who reported they were in receipt of Exam Accommodations

Examination Accommodations

As a point of departure, this section of the Report now examines the provision of exam accommodations for students engaged with their institution's DSS in the academic year 2023/24. The exam is recognised as the principal indicator of student success and progression; however, the emergence of Generative AI, contract teaching and the perennial diversification of the student body have prompted renewed academic inquiry and discussion among stakeholders regarding assessment, in particular summative, end of term exams. While a number of national funding streams and policy frameworks, for example the *Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education* (HEA, 2022) have evolved their prior focus on access to a broader view of student success, there is an urgent need for HEIs to implement agile and responsive supports for these students as they progress through all aspects of their studies. Considering the status of the exam, as that which determines student progression and success in most cases, it is crucial that disabled students are supported to engage with exams in an equitable manner to their non-disabled peers. If HE is to become an environment that embraces and welcomes diversity, all facets of the student experience require continuous review, monitoring and oversight. Put succinctly, the welcome shift in focus from access to success in pre-discussed policy instruments must be complimented by strategic practices and actions within HEIs that support these students while engaging with their studies.

The exam has been alluded to as "the single most powerful influence on learning in formal courses", (Taras, 2008, p. 3). However, current pedagogical discourse now recognises that the traditional exam format does not always foster equality and equitability and for some students with disabilities, is arguably a locus of disadvantage, (O'Neill, 2017; O'Neill & Padden, 2021). Feedback from the student body further reaffirms this, with a number of research reports indicating that many students have reported a preference to move away from end of term, memory based exam structures, (AHEAD, 2023a; IUA, 2021). For disabled students, this form of assessment can often inhibit students from demonstrating their capabilities, competencies and fulfilment of the learning outcomes of their studies. Indeed, research suggests that some disabled students report selecting their units in line with assessment formats that align with their strengths and weaknesses, thus restricting their choices in what courses they want to access, (Morris et al., 2019).

The current system of prescribed accommodations aimed at fomenting equitable assessment for disabled students has been posited as unsustainable (Healy et al., 2023), considering the exponential increase in the number of disabled students engaging with disability support services across publicly funded HEIs, (AHEAD, 2023b). As will be discussed, this increase (which is a likely outcome of efficacious national policy) has not been accompanied by a simultaneous, tantamount rise in the number of support staff, leading to Access Offices and support services becoming increasingly over-burdened and under-resourced. This is arguably a key factor that frequently engenders frustration and anxiety among some students who require these essential services, (AHEAD, 2023a). While research indicates that disabled students who avail of accommodations demonstrate greater achievement and higher progression rates, there are a number of factors that combine to deter these students from accessing accommodations. These include:

The desire for self-sufficiency.

- The desire to avoid negative social reactions.
- Insufficient knowledge regarding how to access disability supports.
- The quality and efficacy of available accommodations.
- The non-uniformity of support implementation.
- The fear of future ramifications (e.g. availing of accommodations is frequently considered to be potentially harmful to career prospects), (AHEAD, 2023a; Lyman et al., 2016).

To this end, it is crucial that the exam accommodation process is one that is responsive to the needs of disabled students, with an impetus on fostering fairness in exams. Fair and equitable exams are key to enabling disabled students to prosper in line with their competencies and capabilities. Ireland's pivot to a knowledge-based economy (Department of Education and Skills, 2016) has situated the exam as key determinant in the student's chances of engaging with this economy. Higher Education has been alluded to being "central to producing a pipeline of skills for our economy, driving innovation in enterprise, producing research which helps to meet grand challenges ranging from health to the environment, driving social mobility for individuals and fostering our shared civic values as a society", (Department of Further and Higher Education, 2022, p. 2). Effective and cogent exam support provision that is attractive to disabled students can help forge pathways for these students to be afforded the opportunity to engage and be included in a knowledge-based economy in which a tertiary qualification is often a prerequisite for participation.

For the academic year 2023/24, responding institutions reported that 90.3% (n=20,327) of all students engaging with disability supports had received at least one exam accommodation. This represents a 2.7% increase in the rate of engagement with examination accommodations in relation to 22/23 data, (AHEAD, 2024c).

Examination Accommodations by Category of Disability

This section of the Report uses primary and additional disability to elicit a breakdown of examination accommodations by category of disability. Figure 9 illustrates the percentage of students registered with supports who have disclosed each category of disability when engaging with support services and being recommended at least one exam accommodation. Each category includes students who have disclosed each disability as their primary of additional disability.

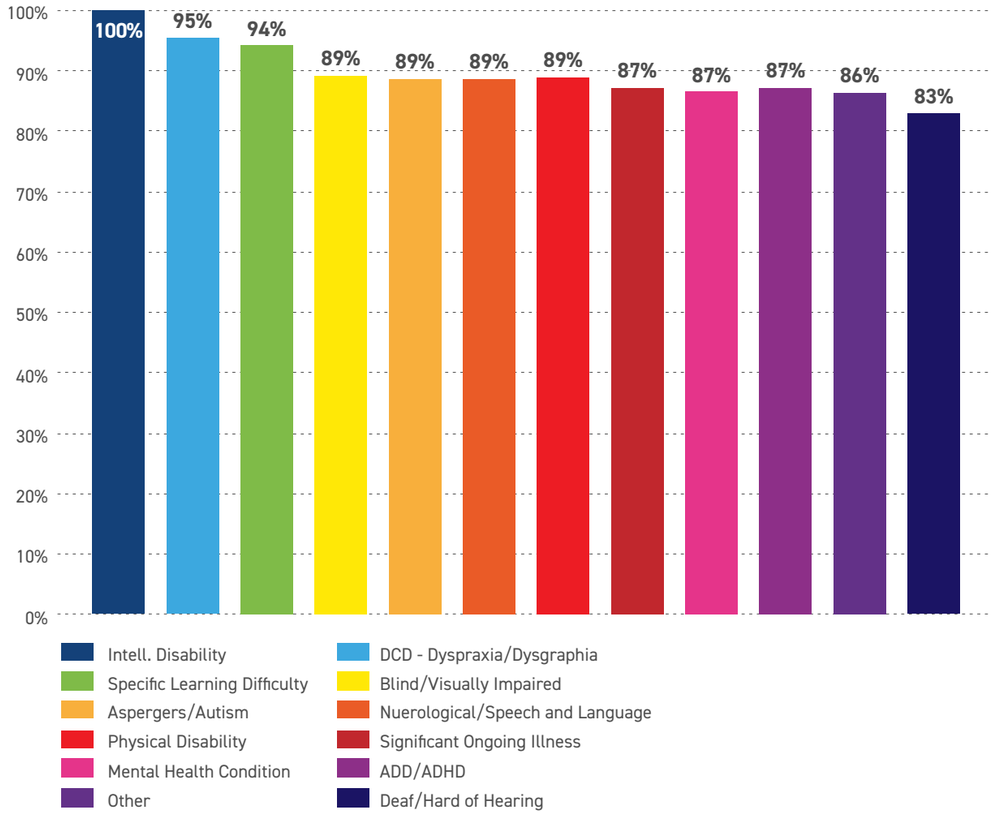


Figure 9. Breakdown of Recommended Exam Accommodations by Disability Category. 23/24.

The disability categories with the highest percentage of students in receipt of accommodations were Intellectual Disability (100%, n=20), DCD-Dyspraxia (95%, n=1,713), Specific Learning Difficulty (94%, n=8,230). The disability categories with the lowest percentage rates of students in receipt of exam accommodations were Deaf/ Hard of Hearing (83%, n=463), Other (86%, n=301), and ADD/ADHD (87%, n=2,978), Mental Health Condition (87%, n=4,122) and Significant Ongoing Illness (87%, n=2,311).

The remaining disability categories were calculated, in ascending order thusly: Physical Disability (89%, n=1,129), Neurological/Speech and Language (89%, n=1,307), Aspergers/Autism (89%, n=2,458) and Blind/Visually Impaired (89%, n=307).

The continuous diversification of the student body, which includes the exponential increase in the number of disabled students engaging with disability support services that has been highlighted in this and a number of previous AHEAD Participation Rate Reports (AHEAD, 2021, 2023b, 2024c), further illustrates the importance of authentic, relevant and universally designed assessment across the HE landscape. Considering the centrality of the exam as that which determines progression, it is crucial that the exam is equitable and fosters equal opportunity for students to demonstrate that they have adhered to the content of their course and are afforded effective support and intervention to show they have aligned their studies with the relevant learning objectives. When assessment is viewed through the lens of social justice, HEIs have a responsibility to embed fairness in the assessment process. The majority of HEIs include pledges to social justice, well-being and civic justice in their mission statements, (McArthur, 2015). One could argue that exam accommodations are active manifestations of this pledge. For McArthur, supporting disabled students to progress is both beneficial to the student and society, as it enables this cohort to be included in the workplace, and fosters pathways into a purposeful employment in a labour market in which a tertiary qualification is now often a necessity for inclusion, (Ibid.).

Examination Accommodations by Type

The survey distributed to participating HEIs included a section that asked respondents to provide data pertaining to the type of exam accommodations that were approved for students registered with support services in their respective institution. The following accommodations were included in the survey: Extra Time, Alternative Venue, Use of Assistive Technologies- software or hardware (e.g., scanning pen, text to speech software, Grammarly etc.), Use of a Computer with General Software, Human Reader-Invigilator to help read paper, Human Scribe, Enlarged Print Paper, Use of Sticker of Tip Sheet to refer examiners to marking guidelines for students with Specific Learning Difficulty or who are Deaf or hard of hearing, Rest breaks, Paper in braille or electronic format or Other/Bespoke Request. Figure 10 is a graphic disaggregation of the data that was collated from responding HEIs concerning the types of accommodations provided/recommended.

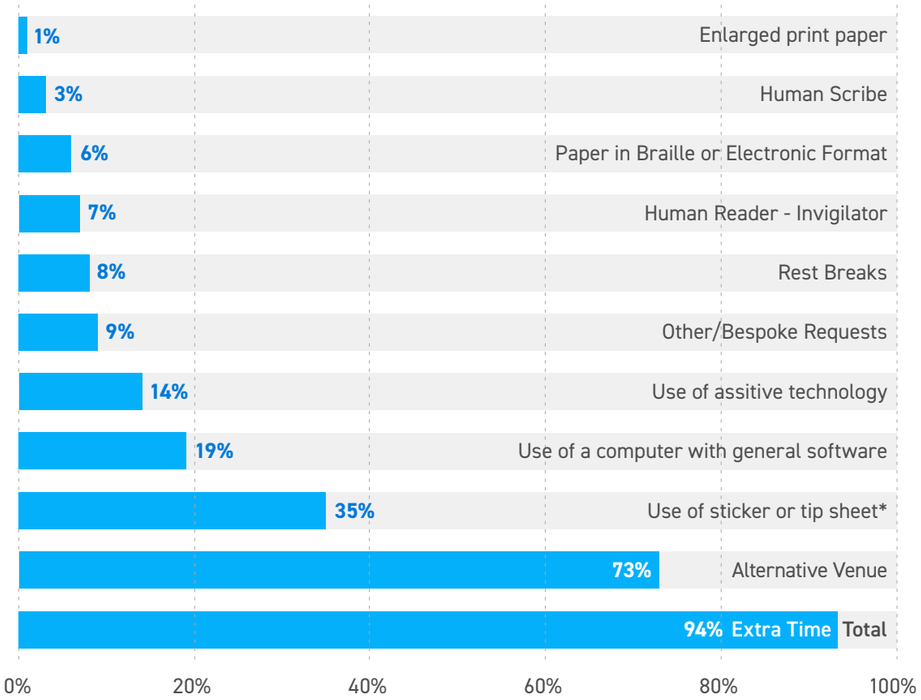


Figure 10. Breakdown of recommended accommodations by Accommodation Type 2023/24. (As a % of all disabled students in receipt of accommodations).

**Use of Sticker/Tip Sheet refers to examiners using marking guidelines for students with a Specific Learning Difficulty or who are Deaf or hard of hearing.*

Figure 10 represents the percentage of students in receipt of specific accommodations as a percentage of all students who were granted at least one accommodation (n=20,327). In line with previous Participation Rate Reports, Extra time (94%, n=19,016) was the most common exam accommodation recommended by support staff across all responding HEIs. While this accommodation is generally demarcated by the time allocated per hour (ranging from 5 minutes per hour to over 20 mins per hour in five-minute increments), this data is now combined for ease of reading and interpretation. The data pertaining to Alternative Venue is also collated and disaggregated in this way, to enable a broader overview of individualised and specific assessment supports. 73% (n=14,862) of students in receipt of exam accommodations were recommended an alternative venue (for example a room with reduced noise) in which they could sit their exams.

Participating institutions indicated that:

- **94%** (n=19,016) of all students in receipt of supports were recommended extra time to complete their exam.
- **73%** (n=14,862) of this cohort were recommended an alternative venue to sit their exam.
- **35%** (n=7,317) of disabled students recommended exam accommodations were approved the use of a sticker or tip sheet to refer examiners to marking guidelines for students with a specific learning difficulty.
- **19%** (n=3,924) were recommended the use a computer with general software.
- **14%** (n=2,929) were recommended the use of Assistive Technology during their exam.
- **8%** (n=1,539) had rest breaks during exam time.
- **7%** (n=1,503) were recommended a human reader (assistance in reading the exam paper).
- **6%** (n=1,176) engaged with their exam using paper in Braille or electronic format.
- **3%** (n=607) were recommended the use of a human scribe.
- **1%** (n=153) used enlarged print paper during their exams.
- **9%** (n=1,922) requested and were recommended bespoke accommodations for their exams.

The broad range of individualised exam supports is welcomed by AHEAD and demonstrates that rising diversity, and therefore disability, has prompted many HEIs to respond to widening participation in HE. The "Bespoke/Other" category was included in the survey to encompass individualised accommodations that are recommended to students but do not fall under any of the normative accommodations. The number of students who were recommended bespoke accommodations (n=1,922, 9% of all students in receipt of at least one accommodation) indicates that some respondents are now responsive to the diverse needs and requests of disabled students. AHEAD welcome innovation and flexibility in the exam support process, and our survey asked respondents to elaborate and further define the Other/Bespoke option. The following bespoke accommodations were collated (verbatim) from the overarching dataset elicited from all responding surveys:

- Noise Cancelling Headphones, Soft chair.
- Coloured overlays, venue near toilets, Noise reduction headphones, glucose monitor and app.
- Height adjustable desk/ adjustable chair.
- Food and drink, special furniture, medical monitors, noise cancelling headphones, interpreter for exam.
- Earplugs (n=5); Student's PA in attendance (n=5); A Print Magnifier (n=2); Student may need to be escorted to Student Health Centre if non-urgent medical assistance is required (n=40); Permitted food in exam hall (n=34).
- Bed for Rest Breaks (narcolepsy).
- Hand-held magnifier, sign language interpreter, seating aid permitted, use of overlays, heat packs permitted, access to monitoring app/device.
- Use of gloves due to prevent excessive sweating due to disability.
- Coloured ruler, coloured notepad.
- Awareness cards for examiners in non-written exams, use of laptop.
- 1 to 1 announcements.
- Phone to check blood sugars, invigilators are seizure aware.
- MP3 audio file of exam paper, yellow exam paper, yellow answer booklet.
- We had 4 students who requested that their 3-hour exam was divided into 2 1-and-a-half-hour exams. Some students sat the exams in the same day after an appropriate break whereas others sat the exams on different days.
- Removal of ticking clocks from the exam hall.

The broad range of bespoke accommodations is testament to the agility, dedication and effort of disability support staff in accommodating students during assess. While AHEAD advocate for the embedding of Universal Design for Learning in HE, it is accepted that many of the accommodations that are alluded to as bespoke/other are often beyond the scope of a UDL approach. While addressing diversity at the point of design can reduce the need for accommodations (Capp, 2017), some students will always require supports. From a rights-based perspective, the provision of timely and effective exam accommodations is a legislative obligation that is imbued on HEIs as Duty Bearers. Disabled students, as rights holders, are entitled to be accommodated to foster equity and equality in the exam process. Considering HEIs that are funded by the HEA are public sector institutions, the Public Sector Duty (Article 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014[17]) also obligates Duty Bearers to:

1. Eliminate discrimination.
2. Promote equality of opportunity and treatment of its staff and the persons to whom it provides services.
3. Protect the human rights of its members, staff and the persons to whom it provides services.

Exam supports and accommodations are also recognised as key enablers that facilitate retention and completion for disabled students, (Thomas, 2016). Notwithstanding this, AHEAD's Participation Rate Report for the academic year 2022/23 highlighted a potential disconnect between students availing of exam accommodations and support staff who recommended them, (AHEAD, 2024c). This Report suggested that the DSS perspective of the implementation of supports in the learning space was not consistent with the student experience. Moreover, across that academic literature pertaining to exam accommodations, it has been argued that they can often reflect ableism, socially construct disability (Nieminen, 2022) and reinforce exclusion, (Hanafin et al., 2007). To this end, it is crucial that stakeholders address the ratio of Disability Support Staff members to student, a key recommendation of a number of prior AHEAD Reports, (AHEAD, 2021, 2023b, 2024c). Increasing the number of support staff will help alleviate much of the burden that is inadvertently placed on support staff and enable them to recommend more suitable exam accommodations, this fostering equity and enabling disabled students to prosper in line with their capabilities, removing the locus of disadvantage of the end of term exam.

17 https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2014/act/25/enacted/en/html

Inside Services

This section of the Report now focuses on the number of support staff, and the ratio of support staff members to students registered with DSS for the academic year 2023/24. Previous Reports have indicated that the exponential increase in disabled students registered for supports since the academic year 2011/12 has not precipitated an equivalent increase in support staff across all publicly funded HEIs, (AHEAD, 2021, 2023b, 2024c). It should also be noted that this perennial, welcome increase exhibits no signs of abating, with more and more students from traditionally under-represented cohorts currently availing of pathways into HE. In fact, research from the *Growing Up in Ireland Study* at post-primary level indicates that levels of both self-identification and formal diagnosis of disability within the 13-year old cohort significantly outstrips that currently in HE, suggesting the growth trajectory in HE will continue for many years to come as this cohort transition, (Smyth & Russell, 2024).

Drawing from the data submitted by responding institutions, the number of staff members employed by responding institutions with responsibility for providing support to students with disabilities was calculated and then used to establish the number of students per staff member[18]. Disaggregating the data submitted by responding institutions, we were able to calculate the number of students per Support Staff Member. Support Staff Member includes both Learning Support Staff and Disability Support Staff Member, which are also recorded individually. An analysis of this data indicates that there were 484 students per Learning Support Staff member (Figure 11), 191 students per Disability Support Staff member (Figure 12) and a combined 137 students per Support Staff member for the academic year 2023/24 (Figure 13).

18 Methodology: Responses were delivered as a decimal number where one full time (5 days a week) staff member = 1, and part-time staff members were included as a pro rata fraction of 1. For example, a college with one full time staff member working 5 days a week and one part time staff member working 2 days a week would report 1.4 staff members. Where staff members had shared responsibility over students with disabilities as well as other student groups, they were asked to estimate how much of their remit was dedicated to students with disabilities.

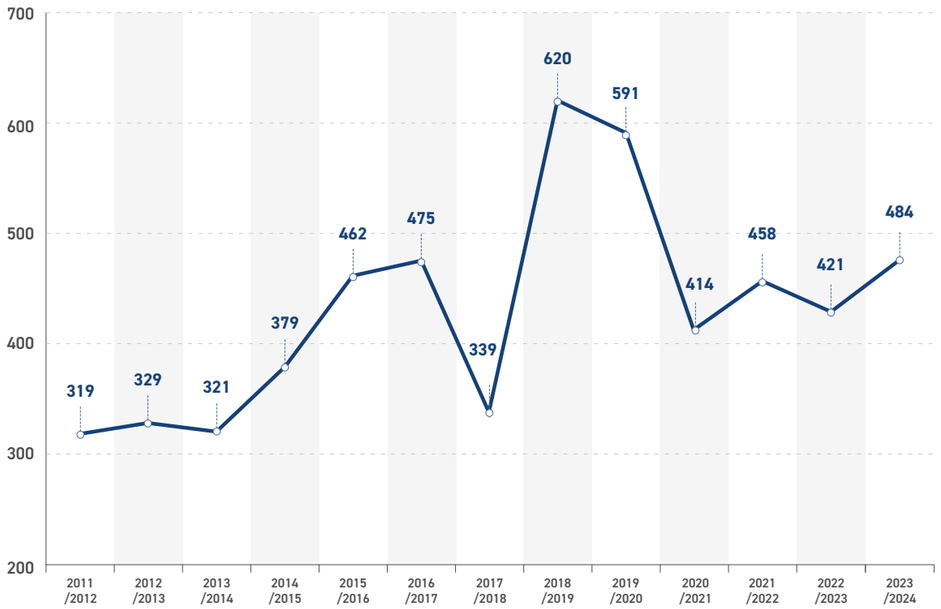


Figure 11. Students per Learning Support Staff Members for the academic years 2011/12 to 2023/24

Figure 11 illustrates that there were 484 disabled students for every Learning Support Staff member across all participating HEIs in the academic year 2023/24. This equates to a 15% increase(n=63) in comparison with 2022/23 data, (AHEAD, 2024c) and represents an increase of 52% increase (n=165) since AHEAD commenced collecting data pertaining to support staff student ratios in 2011/12.

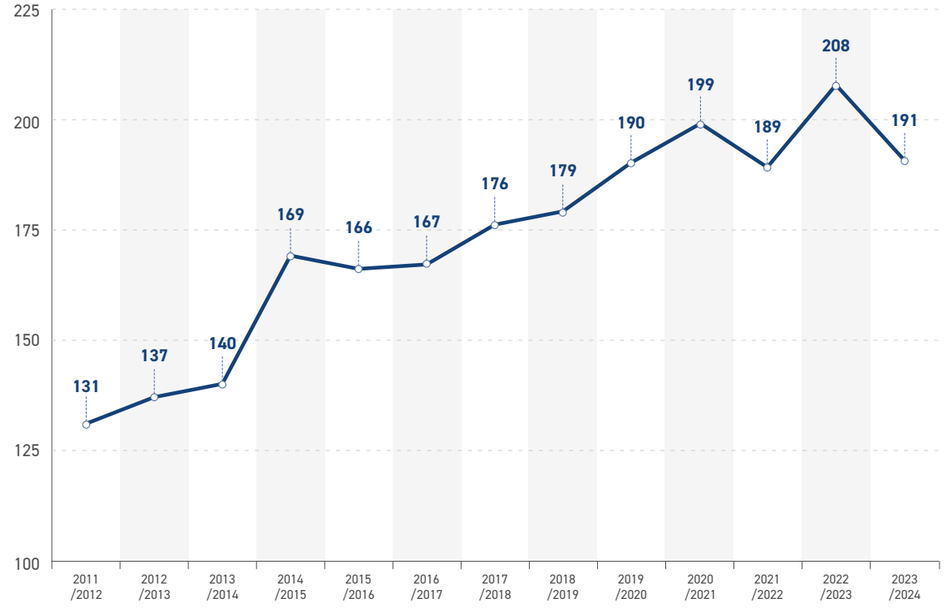


Figure 12. Students with Disabilities Per Disability Support Staff Member 2011/12 -2023/24

The number of disabled students per Disability Support Staff member is arguably the most important statistic in the "Inside Services" section of this Report, considering it pertains most directly to the Needs Assessment and Accommodations processes of disability support provision. Figure 12 indicates that for the academic year 2023/24, there were 191 students per DSS member. This represents an 8% decrease (n=17) in relation to 2022/23 data, (AHEAD, 2024c). However, a longitudinal analysis of year-on-year data over time from AHEAD research illustrates a 46% increase (n=60) since the academic year 2011/12.

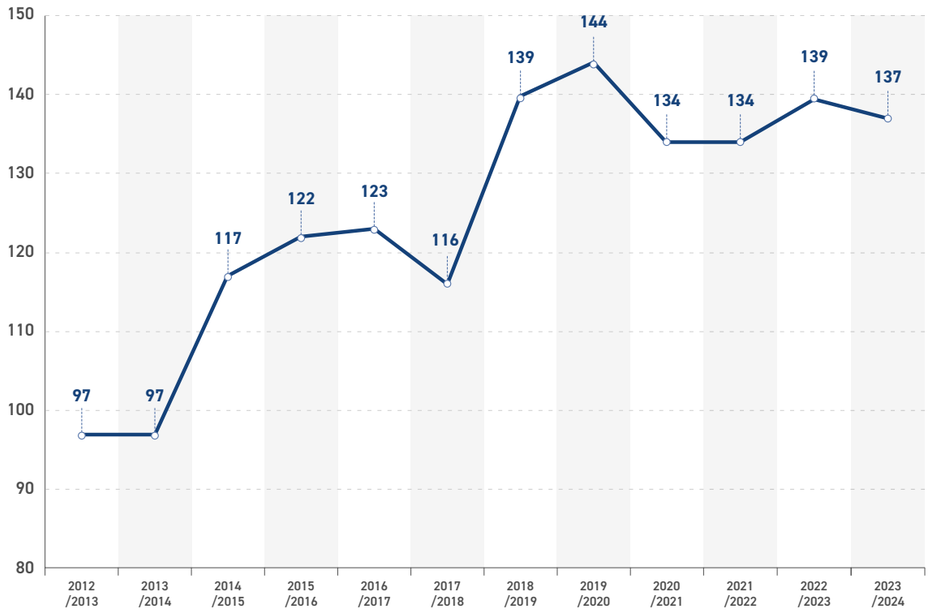


Figure 13. Students per Support Staff Member - 2011/12 to 2023/24.

Figure 13 represents a combination of Learning Support Staff and Disability Staff per student engaged with support services across all participating HEIs. The graph demonstrates that there were 137 students per support staff member for the academic year 2023/24. This is indicative of a 1% decrease (n=2) in relation to 2023/24 data, (AHEAD, 2024c), and demonstrative of a 47% (n=44) increase since the academic year of 2011/12.

The rising ratio of students per support staff member over time highlighted in this report is arguably an indicator that the legislative obligation to provide sufficient, appropriate and effective disability support is not being realised in many HEIs. The obvious implications of under-staffed support services are accommodations not fostering equitable academic outcomes for disabled students (Brett, 2016; Kilpatrick et al., 2017) and some students becoming disillusioned and questioning the quality and benefits of the accommodation process, (AHEAD, 2023a; Lyman et al., 2016).

With the new *Programme for Government* highlighting "fair and equal access to quality further and higher education, regardless of socioeconomic status, ability, or geographical location" (Government_of_Ireland, 2025, p. 71), it is crucial that this commitment translates into tangible entitlements, in the guise of adequately staffed support services for disabled students.

An effective needs assessment process and the appropriate and full translation of recommended accommodations into the teaching and learning space is fundamental to the empowerment and that many DSS are routinely over-burdened and under-resourced, a point reiterated when one examines the longitudinal data sets, (AHEAD, 2013, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2024c).

The implementation of the *ALTIT**UD**E Charter* (ALTITUDE_Project, 2024), an initiative that emanated from PATH 4 (Phase 1) funding, can over time, potentially alleviate some of the more pressing issues that frequently inhibit the efficacy of disability support provision, by recognising human diversity in the design of systems and processes. The implementation stage of ALTITUDE is considered urgent due to the twin processes of the exponential, 364% increase in disabled students registered with their HEI's disability support services, alongside recent publications that illustrate that the student body is becoming increasingly diverse, (Flood & Banks, 2021; HEA, 2023a). The Charter was launched in 2023 and was developed alongside key actors and stakeholders from the Irish tertiary education system. By leveraging the collective experiences and expertise of key universal design advocates from the sector, ALTITUDE seeks to embed a UD approach across all of campus, thus engendering a robust, independent, evidence-based pedagogical paradigm shift away from strong reliance on the retro-fit approach that dominates current practices in most HEIs, (ALTITUDE_Project, 2024).

The Charter is accompanied by a Toolkit (Implementation Guidelines) and a Technical Report. Following its launch, AHEAD have engaged with a number of HEIs pertaining to the operationalising of ALTITUDE in their institution. The 'all of campus' approach that underpins the Charter encompasses the teaching and learning space, the built environment, digital accessibility and student engagement. The implementation of ALTITUDE can potentially assist in reducing the burden on under-resourced DSS, therefore enabling them to use their time and expertise where it is most needed.

On the Ground-Opinions of Disability Support Staff

While AHEAD's *Participation Rate Reports* are primarily quantitative in nature, this section of the research is derived from qualitative data predicated on questions used to explore current research, findings and discursive trends drawn from the timeframe, or academic year, synonymous with this Report (i.e. 2023/24). Following on from our analysis of the uniformity and efficacy of disability support provision, alongside the requirement of medical verification of disability prior to availing of supports in our Report for the academic year 22/23 (AHEAD, 2024c), our qualitative questions for this Report examined DSS perspectives regarding the DARE access route to HE and the *FSD Guidelines, (HEA, 2023b)*. Both are key tenants of the disability support landscape and require nuanced analysis to help evaluate both the delivery of disability support and the mechanisms which inform the practices of support staff and the level of support available to some disabled students.

When interpreting the qualitative data from the respondents presented in this section, it is useful to have the following context:

— DARE is an initiative led by higher education institutions themselves. It is coordinated by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) on their behalf, and its operation is supported/steered by the IUA Access Steering Group, and its DARE Operations Subgroup. Many HEI representatives sit on these groups and directly feed into the ongoing operation and evolution of DARE.

— The current structure and operational timelines of the FSD which are commented on by respondents largely derive from the recommendations of an independent review of the Fund published in 2017, which the majority of the publicly funded HEIs in existence at the time contributed to.

It should also be noted that the data collated and disaggregated for this question is derived from respondent's survey and does not always reflect the values and opinion of AHEAD. However, we believe that enabling support staff to express their concerns and have them heard in the policy landscape is a valid research strategy in helping to unpack the dynamics of support provision across publicly funded HEIs.

This evidence-based approach can potentially generate discussion, inform reviews and instigate change across the sector. Alongside AHEAD data from other research, it can also help offer a robust overview of the processes and interactions that routinely underpin the provision of accommodations, considering much of our work pertains to the student's experience of this interaction. The On the Ground section is informed by the final question of the survey and is optional. However, notwithstanding this, every respondent completed this question, which suggests that both the FSD and DARE are contentious issues that can be difficult to navigate for disability support staff. As per normative research practice, each respondent was assigned an identifier, enabling them to express their opinions and report their experiences confident in their anonymity.

Previous iterations of this question in prior Participation Rate Reports have been informed by a Lickert Scale methodology (AHEAD, 2021, 2023b, 2024c). However, for this Report, this question comprised of three sub-questions, all of which sought qualitative responses from respondents. The sub-questions were the following:

-- A. In your opinion, why do some students who enrol in the institution via DARE not register and engage with disability support services?

-- B. In what ways do the FSD Guidelines (and Framework) assist you, and inhibit you from providing supports for disabled students?

-- C. In what ways could the FSD Guidelines (and Framework) be improved to enable you to more effectively support disabled learners?

Sub Question A:

-- A. In your opinion, why do some students who enrol in the institution via DARE not register and engage with disability support services?

All survey respondents contributed to this sub-question, and while the question explicitly asks for opinion, it should be noted that respondent's answers are buttressed by real-life experience of this specific access route in action. A number of commonalities and themes emerged from the rich qualitative data, many of which highlight inconsistencies and areas for improvement in both the FSD and DARE which if addressed, would significantly enhance the student experience.

From a systemic perspective, currently, DARE Guidelines confer an obligation on students availing of this access route to register for disability supports upon the commencement of their studies:

> *I understand that, if I accept a DARE place, a condition of acceptance is that I must register with the Disability Service of the participating higher education institution which I am admitted to and agree on a schedule of meetings with that service. I accept that failure to register or attend scheduled meetings with the Disability Service without prior permission from the service, could result in my reduced points DARE place being withdrawn.*[19]

According to the HEA, 7.4% of all new entrant students entered via the DARE programme in the academic year 2023/24, (HEA, 2024). While this statistic is not disaggregated by the "merit" or "reduced points" status of the DARE offer, taken as a single access route to HE, only the traditional CAO points avenue is used by a higher percentage of all students who enrolled in any publicly funded HEI in 2023/24, (HEA, 2024). It is also representative of a 34.5% increase in the percentage of new entrants accessing HE through DARE since the academic year 2021/22, and a 21.3% increase since the preceding academic year (22/23), (HEA, 2024).

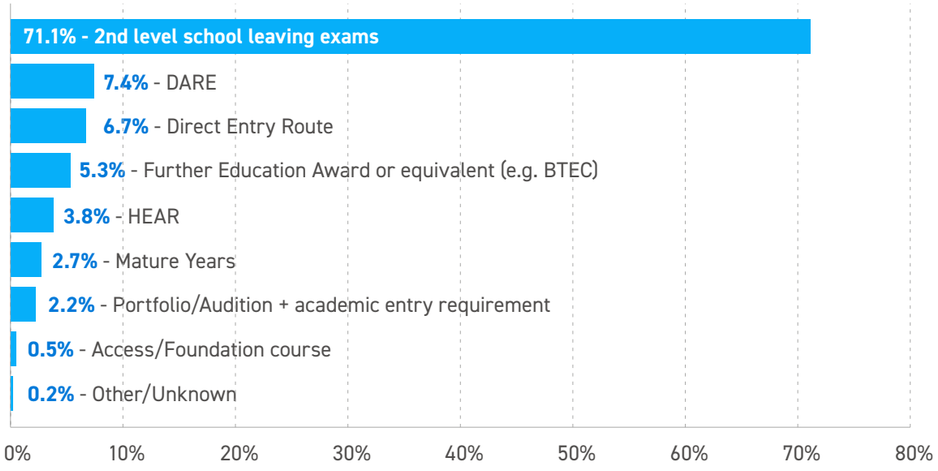


Figure 14. Access Data Dashboard-New Entrants 2023/24.[20]

19 https://www2.cao.ie/downloads/documents/2024/DARE2024.pdf page 24, DARE Terms and Conditions, Number 7

20 https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/

The annual increase in the number of students using DARE to access HE is arguably a tangible indicator that the programme is perceived by many applicants to be an agile and flexible access route to HE that fosters pathways for disabled people to be educated, experience HE and participate in their studies in an equal manner as their non-disabled peers. The aim of this analysis is to unpack this solution focused intervention from the perspectives of disability support staff and to identify some of the core issues that may potentially inhibit DARE from fully meeting the needs of the students that it intends to support.

The current *National Access Plan* is under-pinned by a concerted, consolidated attempt to create inclusive environments for traditionally under-represented cohorts to enter HE, (HEA, 2022). The primary objectives of the *Plan* aligns with Keane's concept of double equity, which postulates that enabling students to become qualified in a range of professions, for example teaching, is not only an advantage to the student, rather it is also beneficial to society in general, (Keane & Heinz, 2015). Keane posits that assisting disabled students to enter the teaching profession for example serves to not only empower the student teacher but can also promote social justice through the normalisation of disabled people in professions in which they can be perceived as role-models to others, (Ibid.). DARE plays a key role in enabling disabled people to enter into these professions.

Prior to analysing and examining the data, some existing, potential issues with the DARE application process from a rights-based perspective should be highlighted, considering many are alluded to in the qualitative data. Drawing from public domain resources available to students considering DARE as an prospective access route to HE[21] (IUA, 2023), there are a number of application documents to complete, many of which necessitate collaboration with second level staff members, and/or parents or guardians.

A student who wishes to use the DARE programme as their access route to HE must have the following documentation:

1. A Supplementary Information Form (SIF), which includes a personal statement from the student in which they can discuss the impact that their disability has had on their education prior to third level.
2. An Educational Impact Assessment (again completed with a secondary level staff member).

21 https://accesscollege.ie/dare/

3. Evidence or medical verification of disability (this in most cases must be provided by a recognised, qualified professional (e.g. Neurologist, Consultant Psychiatrist, Psychologist), (Ibid.).

This procedure, alongside the recommendation that students engage with their parents/guardians when applying for DARE, indicates that the application process is acknowledged to be a complex and nuanced undertaking for prospective applicants, which can require a significant level of social and economic capital to complete and to access the necessary diagnostic documentation.

However, it could be argued that the rigid emphasis on documentation, some of which can only be attained with the assistance of a registered health professional or consultant, may preclude certain students from engaging with DARE. The overt requirement of documentation that can be out of reach for some disabled students is of particular relevance here, especially given the often-significant cost of medical diagnosis and the long waiting lists for some forms of diagnosis.

The Guidelines and pre-discussed DARE resources also allude to further Terms and Conditions that are important to note here. Each participating HEI has a reserved number of places to offer eligible DARE applicants, potentially at lower Leaving Certificate points (reduced points entry) than those required by the general student population. Due to perennial under-representation, three disability categories, namely Physical Disability, Blind/Vision Impairment and Deaf/Hard of Hearing are given priority status in the allocation of DARE places to eligible candidates. However, outside of that, DARE applicants are not accepted or considered on the basis of need or the impact of disability on education. Rather, a competitive points system is retained among the cohort of eligible applicants. It is within these parameters that the qualitative data is now examined.

The DARE programme and other support mechanisms that enable under-represented cohorts to access HE are an active manifestation of goals in almost every HEI's Strategic Plan, which are routinely underpinned by a commitment to social justice and citizen empowerment (McArthur, 2015). Legislatively speaking, the *HEA Act 2022* confers on the HEA the function of promoting equality of opportunity for all students in Irish HE[22]. To this end, an analysis of the DARE access route, informed by leveraging the collective expertise and experiences of support staff is a valid exercise in order to examine the operationalisation of DARE, the barriers that may inhibit some students from engaging with it and any existing issues that may restrict the programme from serving the students whom it is intended to support.

A thematic analysis of the qualitative data suggests that, according to most respondents, the three primary barriers that frequently deter DARE students from registering with their HEI's DSS include the following:

- Perception of stigma, discrimination and a desire to be independent.
- Lack of awareness of the HE support system among the cohort of students who access HE through the DARE programme.
- Some students utilising DARE primarily as an access mechanism as opposed to a supports instrument and so deciding not to register with their HEI's DSS.

Stigma, discrimination and desire to be independent:

Within the existing body of research, there is an abundance of articles and literature pertaining to the stigma and discrimination that can be part of disabled students' experiences and narratives while engaging with HE, (J. Ingle, 2023; Smith et al., 2021). The outcome of this can be a perception among this cohort that college campus can be an ableist environment (Bartolo et al., 2023), despite the exponential increase in disabled students enrolling in HE year on year, which has again been made manifest in this Report. The data that underpins this section of the Report illustrates that many responding DSS members posit that some new entrant students who access HE through DARE are frequently concerned about the implications of disclosing their disability/disabilities, which is an obvious prerequisite to registering for disability support. Some respondents postulated that students often retain fears of the ramifications of being a DARE applicant:

22 https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/31/enacted/en/html

They do not want to be connected to DARE as they are afraid that their disability will be shared, and it will impact on their academic and professional progression. - DSS 1.

Students choose not to avail of supports as they do not want to be different or 'stick-out' like they did in school. - DSS 6.

It should be noted that perceptions of ableism or stigma among new entrants are often underpinned by life experiences of students who have not yet engaged with HE, and/or their experiences of support provision at second level, considering the DARE application period takes place prior to course commencement. However, perceived fears regarding potential discrimination or "special treatment" were alluded to by a number of respondents, highlighting a "disconnect", or a perceived non-inclusive culture in the student body. This postulation is prevalent across the existing body of national and international research and literature, (AHEAD, 2023a; Bartolo et al., 2023; Rath, 2020).

Students are often concerned about availing of 'special treatment' to demonstrate their ability to meet the learning outcomes and the possible stigma attached to registering for disability support. - DSS 3.
Some do not identify with term 'disability' so are put off by Disability Service title. Some have mentioned not wanting to use up resources needed for students with 'real disabilities'. not wanting to be different, or 'othered' by their friends and peers. - DSS 14.

For many students, enrolling in HE is arguably considered to mark and embody the transition to adulthood and a semblance of independence with agency and autonomy in their lives, often for the first time. As such, many are eager to "go it alone to see if they can manage without supports" (DSS 14). This theme, often advanced by a desire for self-sufficiency, was alluded to by a number of respondents and is again consistent with other research findings, (AHEAD, 2023a; Lyman et al., 2016).

... they (students) prefer to navigate the first year without registering with the Disability Support Service and choose not to avail of supports in order to be independent in line with their peers. - DSS 13.

Students who come through the DARE scheme may not engage with the Disability Support Service (DSS) due to a desire for independence.... Some students see University as a fresh start, and they wish to proceed without support. - DSS 21.

Further analysis of the data explicates that while a cohort of students refrain from registering for supports initially, some re-assess this decision in their second or third years of their studies.

Another reason reported by students is that they believe they do not 'need' the supports but realise in 2nd or 3rd year that they could benefit from supports and will register then. - DSS 16.

Student Awareness of Disability Support Services

When applying for DARE, the application form recommends that students engage with their parents or guardians, considering the complexity of the process and requirement to engage with third parties (e.g. secondary school teachers, medical, registered professionals). However, in some cases, DSS staff reported their perception that applications are frequently completed almost solely by parents with little engagement from the students themselves. In such cases, the student appears on the periphery of the DARE application process, as opposed to being central to it.

In some cases, respondents even reported that some students who availed of the programme seemed unaware of their status as a DARE applicant.

Some students have parents who completed their CAO application forms using the parent's own email address, and who apply for DARE eligibility on their behalf. Some students who accept a place on a course may not be aware of DARE or their DARE eligibility or even what is in their diagnosis. - DSS 5.

This is often compounded by a lack of understanding of third-level support provision and how it differs from that which the student may have availed of at second level. The data suggest that there is an obvious disconnect between second and third level supports, as opposed to a continuum of support provision for the duration of a student's education.

Other students are simply unaware that they need to link in with the office after beginning college, under the impression that everything from secondary school transfers over to third level. - DSS 18.

Some students might not be aware that disability support services are available or that their condition qualifies them for assistance. They often don't understand the supports themselves and sometimes don't think there is anything that can be done for their disability. - DSS 5.

One respondent further inferred that some students may expect to have little input or autonomy in the disability support process, therefore, it is likely that they either decline to engage with support services due to this reason or believe that they will automatically receive disability support during their studies.

I think there is a fear that the supports will replicate those of School where students have little to no say in their preference for supports. - DSS 24.

Many first-year students assume they are automatically registered so fail to register in year 1. - DSS 7.

The challenges and difficulties of transitioning from second to third level education should be recognised by key actors involved in the provision of disability support in HEIs when DARE students do not register for support. Students can feel overwhelmed by the change in teaching and structure (timetables, large University campuses etc.), being away from home for potentially the first time and the added responsibilities that this encompasses. The pivot to third-level education is underpinned by vast amounts of 'new' information. It is, therefore, unsurprising that registering with disability support services may be overlooked by some DARE applicants, who may also miss crucial communication from the Disability/Access Office during a time of great change.

A lot of information is presented to new entrants at a time when they are busy arranging their accommodation, deciding on modules and transitioning to a new learning environment and they can sometimes miss the invitation to apply for disability supports. - DSS 5.

If students do not attend the orientation day, they are harder to engage with as they haven't met the Disability officer in person. - DSS 16.

Finally, as discussed, the propensity of a cohort of parents to apply for DARE on behalf of their children can advance the scenario in which students are unaware of their obligation to register with their HEI's DSS. This can be magnified in cases where the applying student did not require the reduced points accommodation to be accepted onto their chosen course. As such, it was reported that some of these applicants do not identify as DARE applicants, and/or don't perceive disability support to be necessary. Subsequently, some of these students do not register with disability support services for those reasons.

Applying to DARE to be eligible to compete for a reduced point place. If entering in on merit, these students may not deem support necessary. - DSS 2.

(Some students) May think that accessing disability support at university is only available to students taking up a DARE reduced points place. - DSS 3.

Sub-Question B:

-- B. In what ways do the FSD Guidelines (and Framework) assist you, and inhibit you from providing supports for disabled students?

In order to optimise our research for maximum benefit, the On the Ground section of Participation Rate Reports is routinely readjusted to reflect ongoing discursive and sectorial trends, policy development or any significant change that has occurred since our preceding Report.

The Fund for Students with Disabilities, which is managed by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on behalf of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), has long been a cornerstone of funding individualised disability supports in higher education and is widely acknowledged as a key tool for HEIs in providing appropriate supports and meeting associated legal obligations.

However, AHEAD's pre-Budget 25 submission to DFHERIS utilised HEA data that examined the under-resourcing and financial limitations of the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) in the context of rising numbers of students. An in-depth analysis of this data enabled us to identify a 33% decrease in the average funding per student between the academic years of 2017/18 and 2022/23[23]. When taken in tandem with the continuous increases in the ratios of students to support staff members, which has been a consistent finding of our Participation Rate Reports (AHEAD, 2021, 2023b, 2024c), it is perhaps unsurprising that elements of this key instrument in meeting the needs of disabled students can also present significant challenges for DSS when attempting to recommend and quality assure the implementation of disability support.

Our Participation Rate research for the academic year 2022/23 reinforced this point, with a number of contributors reporting the difficulties of working within the perceived rigid parameters of the FSD and the challenges of insufficient access to appropriate finance for supports. This was explicitly alluded to by some respondents, with one suggesting that over-burdened and under-resourced DSS retain concerns regarding the efficacy of the Fund in assisting students through financed supports.

> *Due to being under resourced, we cannot always guarantee students get what they need when they need it.* - DSS member from Participation Rate Research Report, 2022/23, *(AHEAD, 2024c, p. 63).*

To further our analysis of the Fund and its effectiveness as an enabler and driver of best practice through the provision of appropriate and timely disability support, we asked respondents to report on ways in which the Fund assists and hinders their endeavours to support disabled students in HE.

23 Data provided by the HEA indicated that the average FSD funding per student decreased from €650.47 in 2017/18 to €436.95 in 2022/23.

The FSD as an enabler of adequate support:

This sub-question is intended to examine systemic inhibitors and enablers related to the Fund from the perspectives of DSS staff members whose work is heavily influenced and shaped by the FSD Framework and Guidelines. Notably, the data collated from respondents to this question is heavily skewed towards factors that inhibit the provision of adequate disability support across all participating HEIs. Indeed, the obvious advantage of the availability of a dedicated funding stream to finance the procurement of often high-cost assistive technology and necessary "external support workers" (DSS Member 1) as a "block grant" (DSS 4) was frequently omitted by respondents as a key enabler that demonstrates the efficacy of the Fund, and no further enablers were reported in the data.

> *The FSD guidelines and framework assist by funding the provision of ESWs (Educational Support Workers), AT equipment, sign language interpretation and transport for students who would otherwise find it challenging to participate at third level.* - DSS 5.

> *The FSD guidelines and framework assist in financing the provision of supports relating to external supports for high priority students requiring ISL, PA, Notetaking and/or Transport, and providing assistive technology to students with specific requirements.* - DSS 10.

Despite the obvious positives the Fund brings as alluded to above, the very few responses gathered about how it enables student support is suggestive of a significant frustration amongst DSS staff around aspects of its structure and implementation.

The FSD an inhibitor of adequate support:

As a point of departure, sub question C asked respondents to discuss the FSD as an inhibitor of appropriate disability support provision. The data was again thematically analysed and delineated by two primary factors that were reported by respondents as barriers that restrict best practice. Indeed, the data illustrates that many respondents maintain that review and reform of the fund is necessary if the FSD is to fully enable DSS staff to recommend and implement effective disability support provision in the HE space in Ireland.

Discursive Alignment and Systemic Disconnect:

A number of respondents reported that the FSD, including its underpinning Guidelines and framework, frequently advances challenges and obstacles when taken in tandem with current legislation and the operationalisation of other disability support mechanisms (such as DARE) in use.

As per the previously discussed DARE programme, the obligation conferred upon students to attain and provide specific medical documentation as a prerequisite to engaging with DSS was reported to be a persistent barrier that precludes alignment with both the social model of disability (Oliver, 1994) and national and international equality legislation, with particular attention afforded to the UN CRPD and the Equal Status Act 2000-2018. Furthermore, while the DARE programme is informed by similar eligibility criteria to the FSD, one could argue that it has made *some* minor strides in moving away from the medical model of disability and embracing the social model of disability that informs the UN CRPD. The acceptance of school-based assessments and inclusion of Educational Impact Assessments in the DARE process represents a small, yet tangible pivot to reducing barriers and addressing the functional impact of disability in a manner that the FSD does not.

> *We try to offer a social model of support, yet the medical model must be adhered to for the purpose of FSD eligibility.* - DSS 1.

The FSD does not afford such opportunities for students to report or use information about the functional impact of their disability and its role in fostering inequalities and inequities in their education in order to access the Fund. To this end, much like the DARE programme, eligibility for funded supports financed by the FSD is frequently precluded by the necessity to attain medical evidence of disability from often costly professionals.

> *A diagnosis from a consultant is required for mental health eligibility and people who need the most support often can't access a consultant across Ireland, with a long waiting list to access services. Seeking a diagnosis also places a financial burden on students which creates an additional roadblock.* - DSS 5.

> *..we are increasingly seeing a cohort of students, that we provide support for, but do not meet FSD evidence criteria, due to lack of official consultant documentation, particularly for mental health, ADHD and dyslexia/(SLD).* - DSS 7.

The propensity of some HEIs to facilitate students to access their institution's DSS despite not being supported by the FSD is likely a consequence of some students not having access to often costly health professionals to obtain specific medial evidence required under the Guidelines of the Fund, (HEA, 2023b), coupled with the HEIs legal obligation to reasonably accommodate all disabled students. This practice is welcome but not uniform across the sector.

> *For mental health those who have been diagnosed and are being treated by a GP should qualify for funding, they should not have to go to a psychiatrist, especially in our HEI where we have the highest rate of students who qualify for SUSI so they are being very disadvantaged as cannot afford psychiatry.* - DSS 14.

Participating HEIs reported that 11.1% of all students registered with DSSs across all publicly funded HEIs were not supported by the FSD. However, with one institution stipulating that 36.7% of all students registered with their DSS were not deemed eligible for FSD support, the potential of the rigid medical evidence criteria within the *FSD Guidelines* to amplify inequity for disabled students who experience socioeconomic disadvantage is notable. This is of particular relevance due to the accepted intersection of poverty and disability alongside the high cost of living with a disability in contemporary Ireland, (Cullinan, 2017; Cullinan et al., 2015).

Moreover, the primacy afforded to medical and/or health documentation in the *FSD Guidelines* highlights the Fund's misalignment with legislation/rights instruments in a similar manner to that recorded in the exploration of the DARE programme. The current iteration of *The AHEAD Journal* (Spring 2025) includes an exhaustive examination of the FSD by Declan Treanor[24], the Director of Disability Services in Trinity College Dublin. Treanor highlights the need for a systemic review and reform of the FSD framework in order to align current discursive practices with the legislative obligations conferred upon HEIs as Duty Bearers in the operationalisation of human rights instruments. His opinion and description of Trinity College Dublin's approach to disability support provision suggests that some HEIs are cognisant of the obligations conferred upon them by both the UNCRPD and national equality legislation (e.g. Equal Status Act 2000-2018) and have made a concerted to support all disabled students regardless of their ability or willingness to provide specific medical documentation.

24 https://www.ahead.ie/journal/Opinion-Supporting-Students-with-Disabilities-A-Call-for-Change-in-Eligibility-Criteria

This approach, which focuses on the barriers and impact of disability as opposed to diagnostic documentation, recognises that a needs-based approach can help foster an environment in which disabled students can progress and succeed in Irish HE. However, this approach is not common across the sector and the data suggests the structure of the FSD guidelines is a significant factor. As such, when access to disability support is determined by a requirement for specific evidence and verification as opposed to approaches more aligned with the social model of disability and state ratified human rights instruments, students who require support are restricted from engaging with their HEI's DSS.

> *These students present with significant challenges which impinge their ability to progress with their course related work as we are unable to provide the support that they would benefit from due to the lack of EOD (evidence of disability).* - DSS 14.

> *Students who would be possible (sic) for the Disability Service to support are unable to be supported because they are missing the required documentation for eligibility while they await a verified diagnosis. These students are unable to build rapport with an advisor and are at higher risk of non-progression. - DSS 5.*

Allocation of Funding

Finally, while the allocation of dedicated, block funding was endorsed as a significant enabler of good practice by many survey respondents, the manner in which the Fund is distributed to HEIs was reported to be a barrier that can impede the provision of adequate and timely accommodations for disabled students registered with support services. To contextualise the data, a brief overview of the allocation process, drawing from the most recent *FSD Guidelines* includes the following, (HEA, 2023b):

1. Data regarding the number of students registered for disability support is sent by HEI's to the HEA. This is sent annually using an FSD RAR (Resource Allocation Return), which is used by the HEA to audit, verify and allocate funds from a fixed national funding pot to individual HEIs.

2. The HEA calculate the amount of the total available budget granted to each HEI, which is "based on weighted student numbers and levels of need as reported by HEIs to the HEA", (HEA, 2023b, p. 17).

3. Funds are allocated to each HEI and predicated upon the previous year's RAR.

4. Funds are distributed and aligned with the calendar year, as opposed to the academic year.

5. A Contingency Fund is available and designed to assist HEIs in meeting any unanticipated demand or "exceptional circumstances", (HEA, 2023b, p. 18). The fund usually opens for applications in October each year.

An analysis of the data using the above requirements as a frame of reference indicates that the timing of fund allocation can be a barrier to support services in meeting the needs of students. A number of respondents indicated that the use of the calendar year when allocating funds often restricted forward planning and made it difficult to accommodate need, in particular when there was a delay in payment from the HEA to HEIs.

> *The reporting of the financials for the FSD is calendar year and would be better if it were academic year. The funding this year reached HEI bank accounts in May which is very late, the semester was over more or less. DSS 17.*

> *Retrospective funding model is not fit for purpose. Not able to plan ahead comfortably when new students register in September/October.* - DSS 20.

A number of respondents demonstrated their frustration with the entire process of using the FSD and drawing from Fund. The Guidelines and framework were labelled "a very poor model" (DSS 12), "not fit for purpose" (DSS 20) and "an administrative burden" (DSS 23) for some HEIs to negotiate. This was further amplified by the challenges of being restricted from planning for the forthcoming year and difficulties in utilising the Contingency Fund.

> *(The) Annual grant works across 2 academic years and grant arrives in April so planning is hard to work out; contingency funding isn't working well when we have no idea what disabled students are arriving in autumn and if needs high costs not meeting need.* - DSS 5.

> *The FSD inhibit us, due to having to do returns and plan for money allocated to colleges before we know what students we have coming in and what needs they may have. Very poor model.* - DSS 12.

The perennial, year-on-year increases in the numbers of students registering with support services, which is and has been a central finding of this and previous AHEAD annual Reports (AHEAD, 2021, 2023b), is a likely outcome of effective policy mechanisms and treaties (for example *The Bologna Process*[25] and the current iteration of the *National Access Plan*) that strive to reflect the diversity that is now embedded in Irish society in the student body. As such, the 367% increase in the number of students registered with disability support services across all publicly funded HEIs is a reflection, in part at least, of the success of these policy initiatives, in particular the *Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education*, a report colloquially referred to as the National Access Plan (or NAP), (HEA, 2022).

The success of the *Plan* and the concomitant increase in disabled students engaging with HE arguably represents an unanticipated demand and/or exceptional circumstance, both of which are explicitly mentioned in the *FSD Guidelines* as reason for applying for the Contingency Fund, (HEA, 2023b, p. 18). While this is perhaps untenable and dilutes the concept of unanticipated demand somewhat, the point is that while the increase in the numbers of disabled students accessing HE is obviously welcome, policy makers and stakeholders should strategically embed key actions that are responsive to realised or surpassed targets that emanate from the success of their policy instruments and mechanisms. When this does not happen, systems of support often struggle to assist disabled students to participate in their studies *post* access. This becomes an even greater challenge considering the FSD is calculated on the previous year's numbers, which are increasing significantly year-on-year.

> *(The) timing of the funding and the return of the RAR prove incredibly challenging. This year we were given our allocation letter on the 23rd of March, so we are nearly 4 months into the year before we are made aware of our allocation. Our allocation is also significantly below the amount of funding required to support students registered with the DSS, while the contingency fund is something that can be applied for but is not guaranteed.* - DSS 24.

> *Providing the allocation on an annual calendar rather than an academic calendar causes confusion and adds to our administrative burden by requiring an additional application for contingency funding. On the other hand, applying for funding retrospectively eliminates the pressure in term 1 to get all students assessed and approved for an FSD claim within the space of 2-3 months.* - DSS 23.

25 https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/bologna-process

> *The Guidelines do not allow for forward planning/procurement of assistive technology in anticipation of incoming students.* - DSS 21.

It should be noted that some of the above mentioned structures such as the previous-year basis of the allocation derived from a review of the *FSD Guidelines*, which drew from input from disability support staff in October 2017, (HEA, 2017a). However, the evolving nature of supports, combined with a 78% increase in the number of students registered with DSS across all responding institutions since the last review of the *Guidelines* suggest now is a timely point for review. A number of respondents reported that a full review of the *Guidelines* and Framework is essential if the FSD is to assist HEIs to support disabled students in an equitable manner.

> *A review of the FSD guidelines and framework, including criteria (particularly evidence of disability documentation), timeframes for applying for annual and contingency funding, and the allocation model (specifically a review of the weighting formula to recognise high support needs around co-morbidity and supporting students with mental health, ASH and ADHD diagnosis), would be welcome. The last review was in 2018 so a review would be timely.* - DSS 3.

Sub-Question C:

--C. In what ways could the FSD Guidelines (and Framework) be improved to enable you to more effectively support disabled learners?

Following an exploration of the FSD as an enabler and inhibitor of best practice, respondents were next asked for their opinions on improving the efficacy of the FSD, including its framework and Guidelines. Considering survey respondents are required to work within the parameters of the FSD, they are ideally placed to provide input into how the Fund could be improved to enable them to support students to engage in their studies more effectively. The data collated from responding HEIs explicates that for many, a full review of the Fund is required, primarily due to the rapid diversification of the student body (HEA, 2023a) with a particular emphasis on the annual exponential increases in the number of disabled students now accessing HE and registering with disability support services, (AHEAD, 2024c).

Sub question C is an opportunity for responding DSS staff to suggest solutions that will help them to use the FSD to assist all students who require supports that incur an expense. The question aims to afford meaningful expression to those who routinely operate the Fund, thus leveraging the collective experiences and expertise of those whose work is often enabled and limited by the Guidelines that underpin the operationalisation of the Fund. It is not surprising that the majority of respondents' recommendations are related to their contributions to sub questions A and B. Therefore, to avoid repetition, many of the issues that have already been reported as inhibitors of best practice have been omitted from this discussion, in order to elicit a more in-depth overview of the how the Fund can be improved to assist more students who require support.

Much like Treanor's assessment of the FSD (as discussed above), a number of respondents called for a full review of the FSD and its Guidelines. It could be argued that rapid recent changes in the student body mean the FSD and its associated Guidelines no longer sufficiently recognise the complexity, nuances and diversity of disability. Rather, the categories of disability and documentation required to verify them are rigid and preclude support staff from using their expertise and experience to assess the functional impact of disability and support students in a similar manner to professionals in secondary education.

Resource allocation in the school system is improving whereby supports can now be provided to students without a diagnosis, based on a school's own attainment tests. Many students with mental health conditions see a psychologist but Psychologists are not included for eligibility verification on the guidelines. The FSD Guidelines feel out of step with the changing landscape and creates hurdles to achieving full inclusion. - DSS 5.

If there is substantial evidence that a student has been in receipt of support throughout their education and has evidence of this, this should be acceptable when deemed appropriate in conjunction with the learning needs assessment. - DSS 11.

A number of respondents cited the need for interim funding to enable students who are waiting on medical verification to be financially supported by the Fund. This would allow students to avail of the Fund prior to receiving the necessary documentation or verification. Considering many of these students may have been in receipt of support in second level due to the reduced onus on medical evidence and verification in that sector, the abrupt cessation of essential support in the transition to HE may lead to withdrawal and/or unexpected difficulties navigating the student's studies. Others called for more flexibility to enable DSS to use the financial support of the FSD to support students they deem through their professional judgement to be in need of support.

The Guidelines should be reviewed to allow students who do not have full evidence or are awaiting evidence to be supported via this fund. - DSS 4.

More flexibility around utilising the fund would also be welcome, particularly as there is a difficulty and high cost for students to obtain a diagnosis. This could address the exclusion of some cohorts who are legally recognised as having a disability, but do not have the FSD required documentation to access FSD funding. - DSS 3.

However, if DSS are to be afforded more agency and autonomy in how they utilise what is a limited funding 'pot', if follows that the FSD funding stream will require a significant increase to facilitate additional students. Notwithstanding the pre-discussed 18% increase in FSD funding that has been committed to by the Government (DFHERIS) for the forthcoming year (2025), some respondents postulated that the FSD is not financially sufficient to meet the goals of the current *National Access Plan*, nor is funding predicated upon the increasing numbers of students engaging with support services which the plan seeks to facilitate.

Funding should be increased in line with actual costs for high cost supports e.g. Personal Assistants, Transport, Irish Sign Language. - DSS 7.

The National Access Plan asks us to increase the number of students who are vision and hearing impaired, but the Fund does not support that in particular when it comes to ISL interpreters. - DSS 2.

The allocation of the FSD should be increased based on the percentage increase of disabled students and aligned with the National Access Plan target of 18% of all new entrants being disabled by 2028. - DSS 4.

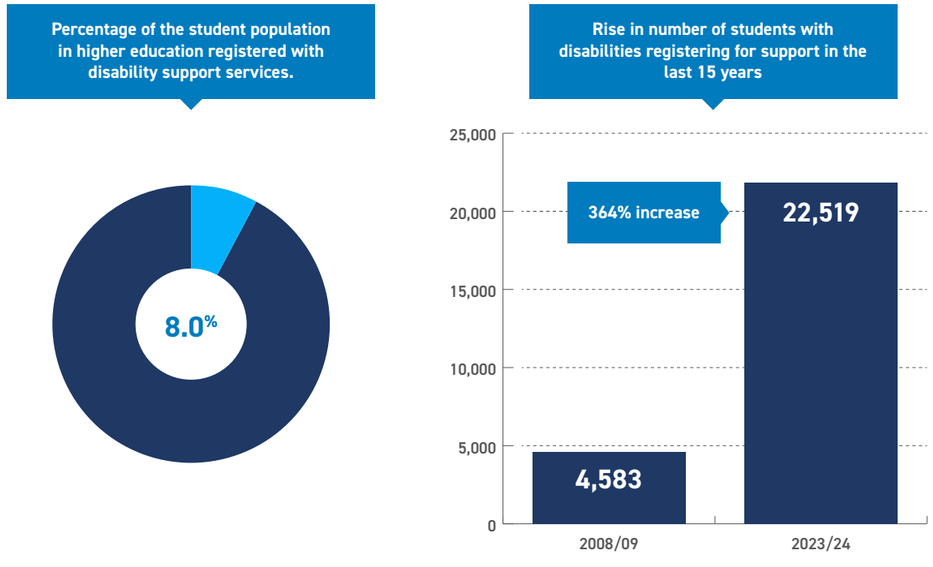
Finally, the need to expand the eligibility criteria of the Fund to support high needs International Students was reported by a small number of respondents. While this Report explicates that 3.3% of all international students are registered with disability support services, 3 respondents highlighted that the Fund does not support this cohort, with one respondent reporting that "international students are not covered by the process", (DSS 1).

It is essential that this is addressed in any review of the FSD Guidelines and Framework, considering the important revenue that International Students provide to the Irish HE system. To this end, it is vital that Irish HE remains an attractive place of education for this cohort, which has been reported as a key source of funding for Irish HEIs. This is of particular relevance for 'non-EU' international students, who were reported to be paying fees in the region of €9,750 to €54,000 per annum as of April 2019, depending on their chosen discipline[26].

26 https://thepienews.com/international-students-at-irish-universities-contribute-e386m-to-economy/

Summary

This Report now concludes with as synopsis of the key statistics from the data collated from all 23 responding institutions for the academic year 2023/24.

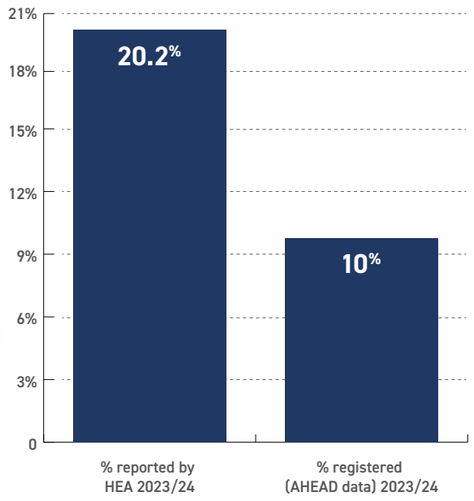


— **8% (n=22,519) of all students enrolled across responding HEIs were registered with disability support services in 2022/23.** 22,519 students were registered with support services in their HEI, representative of 8% of the total student body (n= 281,847). All publicly funded Irish HEIs contributed to the research, enabling a robust and credible overview of the rate of participation of disabled students with their institution's disability support services. This figure is illustrative of an 8.56% increase (n=2,168) in the rate of participation in relation to 22/23 data, (AHEAD, 2024c).

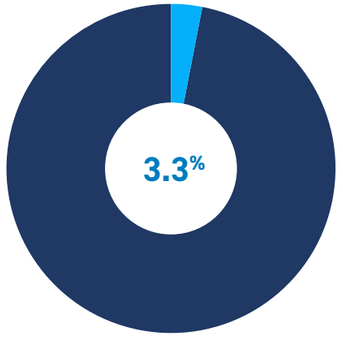
— **364% rise in number of students with disabilities registering for support in the last 15 years.** A meta-analysis of historical AHEAD data demonstrates that there has been a 364% increase (n=17,666) in the number of students with disabilities accessing their institution's DSS since the academic year 2008/09 (the inaugural annual report published by AHEAD), (AHEAD, 2013, 2019, 2021).

— **A significant percentage of new entrant students have a disability but do not disclose and register for support.** In 2023/24, data from the HEA Equal Access Survey (EAS) explicates that 20.2% of the new entrant undergraduate population who responded have disclosed at least one disability through the EAS, (HEA, 2024). The data from this Report demonstrates that 10% (n=6,060) of all new entrants across all participating institutions (n=60,573) were registered with disability supports in their HEI. While this is illustrative of a 28.2% increase in the rate of participation for this cohort in relation to 23/24 data (AHEAD, 2024c), the significant disparity between the figures (i.e. HEA and AHEAD data), suggests that there is a sizeable number of new entrant undergraduate students who have disclosed a disability using the Equal Access Survey but are not registered with their institution's disability support services. AHEAD acknowledge that disclosure is a complex issue, with our own research and other findings from across the broad range of academic literature indicating that some of the barriers or factors that informed non-disclosure include fears about career prospects, the cost of medical evidence required for registration, stigma, and a lack of awareness among students pertaining to third-level support provision and implementation, (AHEAD, 2023a; Bartolo et al., 2023; Meeks et al., 2018).

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



Participation rate of postgraduate students with disabilities remains low, at 3.3% of the total postgraduate cohort.



— **Postgraduate participation rate rising steadily, but students with disabilities remain significantly underrepresented in postgraduate study.** The participation rate of postgraduate students registered with disability support services remained low at 3.3% (n=2,007), despite increasing by 5.1% in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2024c). The trend of a persistently a low postgraduate participation rate, when compared with an undergraduate participation rate of the 9.3% (n=20,512) is a consistent finding in previous AHEAD reports, (AHEAD, 2019, 2021, 2023b, 2024c).

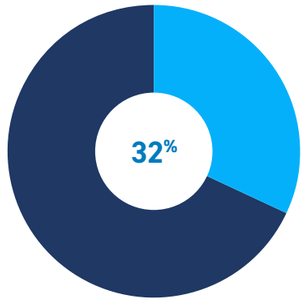
— **Almost 1 in 8 students registered with services not eligible for the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).** Responding HEIs reported that 11.1% (n=2,506) of students registered for supports were not eligible for any funding from the FSD to help finance support and/or accommodations. A closer look at the data shows a significant range in the percentages of students registered with disability support services who are not eligible to be supported by the FSD due to the rigid *Guidelines* that underpin the Fund, (HEA, 2023b). A number of respondents posited that no students registered with DSS were restricted from accessing the FSD for costed support, with others reporting that 36.7% of students registered with their HEI's DSS were not supported by the FSD.

More than 1 in 8 students (11.1%) registered with services not eligible for the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).

11.1%

of students registered for supports in responding institutions are not covered by the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD)

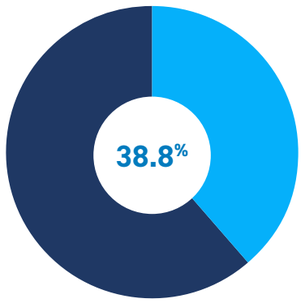
A third (n=6,060) of new registrations with disability support services were not in their first year of study.



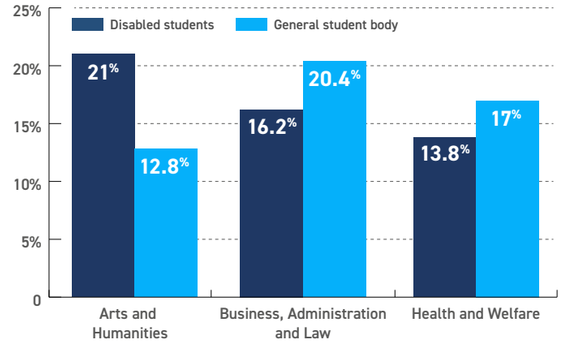
— **32.3% of new registrations with disability support services were not in their first year of study**. In 2023/24, 1,956 students were reported to be not in their first year of study, representative of 32.3% of all new registrations (n=6,060) and 8.7% of all students registered with disability support service across all participating HEIs (n=22,519). This represents a significant 26.6% decrease in the percentage of students who registered for supports when not in their first year of study in relation to 23/24 data, (AHEAD, 2024c). Much like disclosure, there are a number of factors that are likely linked to students not registering for supports in their initial year of study, considering that the hesitancy in disclosing is likely underpinned by the same rationale as those who do not disclose when initially engaging with HE. Research suggests that some of the factors that discourage students from disclosing disability in their inaugural year of study include late diagnoses of disability (Hart & Healy, 2018), stigma (Bartolo et al., 2023), a desire for independence and the high cost of obtaining medical verification of disability, which is deemed necessary if students want to engage with their HEI's DSS and avail of the FSD funding stream. Stigma and the desire to be independent.

— **Specific Learning Difficulties remains the most common category of disability.** As has been the case over a number of Participation Rate research reports (AHEAD, 2021, 2023b, 2024c), Specific Learning Difficulty was again the disability category which most of students with disabilities disclosed when registering with disability support services. For the academic year 2023/24, it was reported as a primary or secondary disability by 38.8% (n=8,738) of all students registered with their HEI's disability support services. This was followed by Mental Health Condition (21.2%, n=4,764), ADD/ADHD (15.2%, n=3,416), Aspergers/Autism (12.3%, n=2,769), Significant Ongoing Illness (11.8%, n=2,650), DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia (8%, n=1,796), Neurological/Speech and Language (6.5%, n=1,474), Physical Disability (5.6%, n=1,268), Deaf/Hard of Hearing (2.5%, n=558) and Blind/Visually Impaired (1.5%, n=344). All percentages are calculated as a portion of the total students registered with disability supports cohort. The category "Other" was disclosed by 1.5% (n=348) of all students registered. There were 20 students who disclosed an intellectual disability reported across all responding HEs, representing 0.1% of the total student population.

The most commonly reported disability category of students were those in the Specific Learning Difficulty category, at 38.8%



— **Students with disabilities significantly more likely to be enrolled on a course in the field of Arts and Humanities.** This is once again the field of the study with the highest number of disabled students across participating institutions. This statistic has been replicated in a number of previous participation rate reports, (AHEAD, 2021, 2023b, 2024c). Furthermore, it is also the field of study with the greatest disparity between the participation rate of disabled students (21%) compared to that of the general student body (12.8%-from data collated by the HEA). Other notable disparities include Business, Administration and Law (16.2% of students registered with DSS compared with 20.4% of the total student body), Health and Welfare (13.8% of students registered with DSS compared with 17% of the total student body), Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (9.7% of students registered with DSS compared to 6.5% of all students) and Information and Communication Technologies (5% of students registered with DSS in comparison with 8% of all students).

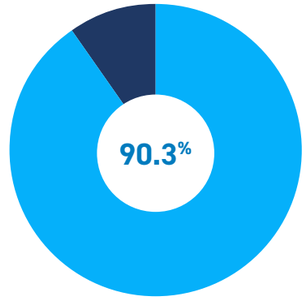


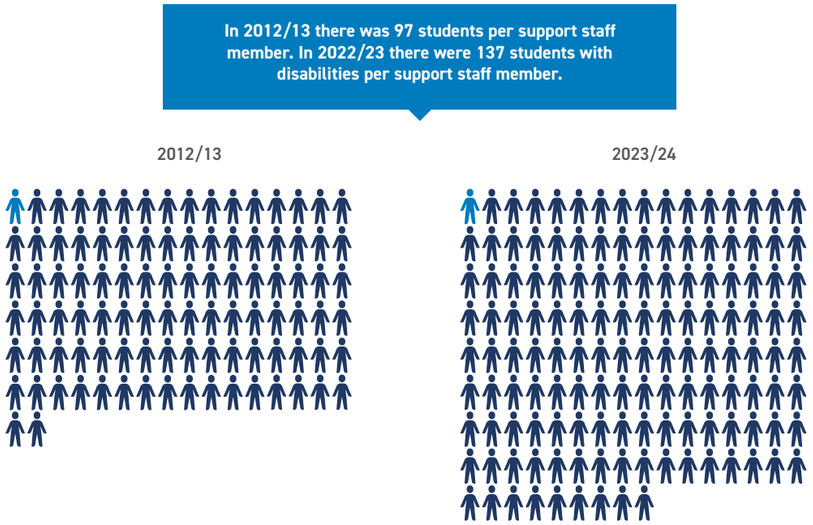
Arts and Humanities is once again the field of the study with the highest number of disabled students. It is also the field of study with the greatest disparity between the participation rate of disabled students compared to that of the general student body. Other notable disparities include Business, Administration and Law, and Health and Welfare.

— The fields of study with the lowest difference between the participation rate of disabled students and the total student body were reported to be Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (12.2% of the student body and 11.8% of students registered with DSS) and Education (7.1% of the total student body and 5.5% of disabled students).

— **Vast majority of students with disabilities were recommended exam accommodations as part of their needs assessment.** Participating institutions reported that 90.3% (n=20,327) of all students engaging with disability supports had received at least one exam accommodation in the academic year 2023/24. This represents a 2.7% increase in the rate of disabled student engagement with exam accommodations in relation to 22/23 data, (AHEAD, 2024b).

90.3% of students with disabilities were recommended one or more exam accommodations in 2023/24





— **The rising ratios of students per DSS staff members that has been reported in a number of prior Reports has stalled for Disability Support Staff member and Support Staff member. However, the ratio of students per Learning Support Staff member continued to rise.** Drawing from the data submitted by responding institutions, we were able to calculate the number of students per support worker, including learning support officer, disability support service staff member and support staff member (disability and learning support combined). An analysis of this data indicates that there were 484 students per Learning Support Staff member (Figure 11), demonstrative of an increase from 421 students in 22/23, (AHEAD, 2024c). More positively, decreases in the ratio of students per Disability Support Staff member (Figure 12) from 208 students to 191 students and students per Support Staff member (a combination of disability and learning support staff members) from 139 to 137 students per staff member (Figure 13) were recorded for the academic year 2023/24.

— **According to responding DSS, they perceive a number of factors which deter students who have availed of DARE as an access route to HE from registering with their HEI's DSS, despite registration with disability support being explicitly alluded to as a prerequisite in current DARE Terms and Conditions.** A thematic analysis of the qualitative data from the On the Ground section of the Report highlighted three primary barriers that frequently deter DARE students from registering with their HEI's DSS:

- Perception of stigma, discrimination and a desire to be independent.

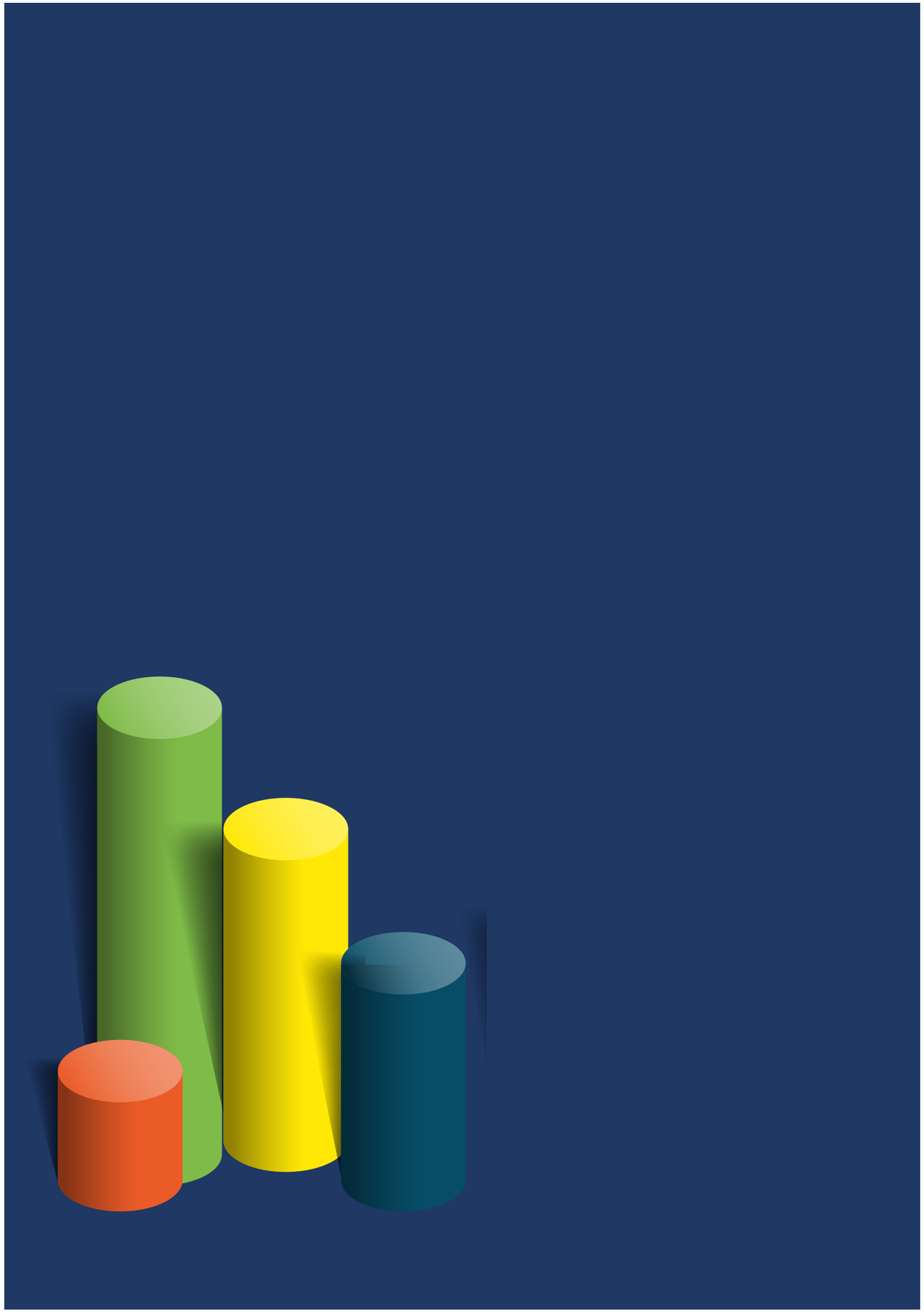
- Lack of awareness of the HE support system among the cohort of students who access HE through the DARE programme.

- Some students using DARE as an access mechanism as opposed to a supports instrument. Students who access via DARE but received the standard points requirement or higher frequently decide not to register with their HEI's DSS.

— **The qualitative data also aimed to capture and highlight some of the enablers and inhibitors experienced by DSS staff members when working within the parameters of the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) Guidelines and associated framework.** The data was again thematically analysed and delineated by the two primary factors that were reported by respondents as inhibitors of best practice and the provision of appropriate and timely disability support.

- **Discursive Alignment and Systemic Disconnect:** many of those that contributed to this question highlighted a series of disconnects that often preclude the continuum of support provision for students transitioning from secondary school to HE – most notably the very specific medial evidence required to access the Fund which is now at odds with approaches in second level.

- **Allocation of Funding:** Data from respondents demonstrated that many were frustrated with the timing of allocation of the Fund. AHEAD note that the current allocation time emanated from a review that was informed by input from DSS staff in 2017, (HEA, 2017b). However, with the HE sector in rapid transition coupled with the evolving nature of supports and greater numbers of disabled students now accessing HE, a call for a full review of FSD Guidelines seems a valid next step, which was consistent across much of the data collated from responding DSS staff.



Primary Recommendations

This section of our *Participation Rate Reports* typically draws from this research and its findings, stakeholder activity (i.e. new policy implementation etc.), external research and any collaborations that AHEAD took part in during the academic year being analysed (2023/24) and shortly thereafter. Our *Report* for the academic year 2022/23 marked a clear point of departure vis-à-vis the format of the recommendations section that normatively concludes these Reports, (AHEAD, 2024c). This Report will be structured in the same way, with a more concise table of Primary Recommendations, which also includes the actions required to implement these recommendations, the suggested timescale for completion and the relevant stakeholders whose purposes are synonymous with the furtherance of these actions.

This is in part due to a number of recommendations that have been routinely reiterated in preceding *Participation Reports* (AHEAD, 2021, 2023b). In this way, AHEAD can monitor the progression, or lack thereof, of the recommendations that are continually made manifest in our annual reports. This also enables us to analyse if there are any interventions which are stakeholder-specific and use this policy relevant data in our work in the policy landscape (for example in our membership of 15 Policy Steering Groups, policy consultations etc.) and in our regular engagement with stakeholders. Moreover, recommendations that are not explicitly dependent on stakeholder activity, practice or obligation, can underpin forthcoming AHEAD actions, research and activities which aim to initiate change in the HE landscape for disabled students.

Recommendation	**Support continued implementation/ effective adoption of the ALTITUDE Charter with sustainable incentives to help embed universal design in Irish tertiary education.**
Action	ALTIT**UD**E – The National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education - was adopted by approximately one third of publicly funded tertiary education institutions on the first national adoption day on Apr 9th, 2025. The development of this extensive cross-sectoral initiative was funded by a once off HEA PATH 4 phase 1 funding stream, and preparing for adoption was initially supported via the introduction by the HEA of the Inclusive Environment Fund. In order for the continued adoption and effective implementation of the Charter, national stakeholders should seek to consistently incentivise and oversee the application of universal design by: — Incorporating universal design criteria in a broad range of tertiary education national funding streams such as those focussing on capital infrastructure, technological transformation, the enhancement of teaching and learning, research and human capital. — Aligning national quality assurance and strategic performance mechanisms with related elements in the Charter to incentivise and oversee implementation of a UD approach in important quality mechanisms. — Developing a national community of practice to support adoption and effective implementation of the ALTITUDE Charter. An adequately supported Charter, with incentives and oversight on universal design from key actors and stakeholders has the potential to radically transform campus and pedagogical practice in Irish HE while making tertiary education accessible to what is a rapidly diversifying Irish society.
Time Scale	Ongoing, Long-term
Stakeholders	DFHERIS, HEA, HEIs, QQI, AHEAD

Recommendation	**The forthcoming review of the DARE programme should be informed, in part, by input from disability support staff from HEIs. It should also make efforts to move further away from the overly medicalised current model and place more emphasis on the functional impact of disability for prospective applicants.**
Action	The IUA's forthcoming review of the DARE programme should seek input from disability support staff who work within the parameters of the programme on a regular basis. While some minor strides have been made to consider the functional impact of disability within the DARE process, reduced emphasis on very specific diagnostic documentation should be considered as part of a new approach that affords primacy to the disadvantages that have precluded disabled students from engaging in their studies and demonstrating learning in an equal manner to their non-disabled peers.
Time Scale	Short term
Stakeholders	IUA
Recommendation	**Use data from Path 4 Phase 2 pilot to evaluate support needs of students with intellectual disabilities, with a view to updating FSD budget and framework to explicitly and effectively support this cohort.**
Action	While AHEAD largely employ the same categories of disability as the FSD when collating data for Participation Rate Reports, we now include Intellectual Disability to establish a baseline for the collection of data for this cohort prior to the implementation of PATH 4 Phase 2 initiatives. While the PATH 4 Phase 2 model means that programme teams are directly provided funds to deliver additional wrap-around supports from within the programme team, it stands to reason that if the pilot is successful, these programmes will be mainstreamed and students with intellectual disabilities should be supported via the disability office alongside their peers. Policy makers should evaluate data emerging over the course of the pilot about the nature and cost of the support needs of this cohort, and work towards amending the framework and budget of the FSD to explicitly include them in its provisions.
Time Scale	Medium Term
Stakeholders	DFHERIS, HEA

Recommendation	Develop and Support the Implementation of Inclusive Assessment Standards.
Action	Over 9 in 10 of students registered with disability support services were in receipt of at least one exam accommodation in 23/24. This number can be reduced, therefore reducing systemic pressure on services while still retaining the validity of assessment (content, construct and criterion validity (Eignor, 2013)) by introducing more flexible and alternative avenues for students to demonstrate the core competencies of their course/module(s). When one considers the significant cohort of disabled students who are not engaged with DSS (which has been discussed in this Report), AHEAD recommend that choice is embedded into the fabric of the assessment process, fostering multiple means for students to express their learning and engagement with their studies in line with learning outcomes and construct validity criteria. QQI should consider how to develop and embed inclusive assessment standards as part of their planned forthcoming Green Paper on Assessment. HEIs should consider how to promote inclusive assessment approaches through adapted quality assurance procedures and related training drives.
Time Scale	Short Term
Stakeholders	QQI, HEIs, DFHERIS

Recommendation	Key actors and stakeholders should review how disability supports and services are funded in Tertiary Education.
Action	The number of disabled students engaging with HE has risen exponentially over the last 15 years. This 364% increase in the numbers of students accessing HE during this time frame is arguably an outcome of effective policy instruments (e.g. the current National Access Plan) and associated targeted funding streams. However, the corollary of this welcome increase is over-burdened, under-resourced disability support services alongside increasing ratios of student to support staff member across responding institutions, with related funding streams not rising in line with the rapid increase (discussed in detail in this Report). This has obvious ramifications on the quality and uniformity of disability support (AHEAD, 2024c) and the translation of prescribed accommodations into the teaching and learning space. AHEAD research also illustrates that disabled students are often frustrated with the level of disability support available to them in their institution, (AHEAD, 2023a) and the inconsistent implementation of prescribed accommodations into the teaching and learning space. Any review of the delivery of disability support in HE should encompass funding, in particular the Fund for Students with Disabilities and the requirement for very specific diagnostic documentation/medical evidence prior to engaging with supports, a stipulation of the Fund that does not align with the UN CRPD and other rights instruments. This requirement also puts eligibility criteria to access support funding out of step with the general allocation model operation in secondary education, meaning some students previously supported may struggle to access supports in the tertiary system. AHEAD research has identified similar systemic issues in the FET sector (AHEAD, 2024b) pertaining to the delivery of disability support to students and recommend that the delivery and funding of disability support is reviewed by DFHERIS across both the HE and FE sectors simultaneously, thus aligning disability support models with Departmental objectives of a unified tertiary education approach that is accessible to everyone “and not just some[27]”.
Time Scale	Long Term.
Stakeholders	DFHERIS, HEA, SOLAS

27 Minister James Lawless DFHERIS, IUA Keynote May 12th 2025.

Recommendation	**Engage in cross-departmental action to address the persistently low participation of students with sensory disabilities**
Action	Sensory disabilities (which include students who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing and/or Blind/Visually Impaired) are persistently the disability categories with the lowest rate of participation, as per a number of recent Participation Rate reports, (AHEAD, 2021, 2023b, 2024c). While the DARE programme guidelines make efforts to remedy this under-representation by making them priority groups, relevant government departments such as DFHERIS and the Department of Education and Youth (DEY) should engage in cross-departmental collaboration to explore and address any latent barriers that are inhibiting these students from accessing and participating in HE. Potential enablers to address this disparity should be examined to increase the participation rates of students with sensory disabilities in HE. Figure 3 indicates that students who disclosed sensory disabilities (Deaf/Hard of Hearing 2.5%, Blind/Visually Impaired 1.5%) to DSS are under-represented across all HEA funded HEIs. This has been illustrated in several *Participation Rate Reports* which also concluded with core recommendations that aimed to highlight the matter, (AHEAD, 2023b, 2024c). When compared with current census data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO), the under-representation of this cohort requires acknowledgement and solution focussed discussion and further interventions from key stakeholders and actors from the sector.
Time Scale	Long-Term
Stakeholders	DFHERIS, DEY, HEA

AHEAD commit to responding to repeated recommendations (from prior Reports) by using them to inform our engagement with key actors and stakeholders from the HE policy landscape and our advocacy work. We also endeavour to use some of these recommendations to review the survey that will inform the *Participation Rate Report* for the forthcoming academic year (2024/25).

Bibliography

AHEAD. (2013). *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2011/12*. AHEAD Educational Press.

AHEAD. (2018). *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2017/18*. AHEAD Educational Press.

AHEAD. (2019). *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2018/19*. A. E. Press.

AHEAD. (2021). *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2019/20*. AHEAD Educational Press: Dublin.

AHEAD. (2023a). *Changing Landscapes*. AHEAD.

AHEAD. (2023b). *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2021/22*. AHEAD Educational Press.

AHEAD. (2024a). *AHEAD Strategic Plan 2024 /28*. A. E. Press. https://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/AHEAD%20Strategic%20Plan%202024%20-%20online%20version.pdf

ALTITUDE_Project. (2024). *ALTITUDE - The National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education*. A. E. Press.

Arduini, G. (2020). Curriculum innovation with Universal Design for Learning. *Education Sciences & Society - Open Access*, *11*(1). https://doi.org/10.3280/ess1-2020oa9460

Bartolo, P. A., Borg, M., Callus, A.-M., De Gaetano, A., Mangiafico, M., Mazzacano D'Amato, E., Sammut, C., Vella Vidal, R., & Vincent, J. (2023). Aspirations and accommodations for students with disability to equitably access higher education: a systematic scoping review. *Frontier Education*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1218120

Brett, M. (2016). Disability and Australian higher education: Policy drivers for increasing participation. *Student equity in Australian higher education: Twenty-five years of a fair chance for all*, 87-108.

Capp, M. J. (2017). The effectiveness of universal design for learning: a meta-analysis of literature between 2013 and 2016. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *21*(8), 791-807. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2017.1325074

CSO. (2022). *Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2022*. CEntral Statistics Office. Retrieved November 25th from https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-eda/educationalattainment-thematicreport2022/keyfindings/

CSO. (2023). *Census 2022 Profile 4 - Disability, Health and Carers*. CSO. Retrieved 04/04/2024 from https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp4/census2022profile4-disabilityhealthandcarers/

Cullinan, J. (2017). *The hidden cost of disability*. Retrieved July 5th 2024 from https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2017/1129/923751-the-hidden-cost-of-disability/

Cullinan, J., Lyons, S., & Nolan, B. (2015). *The economics of disability-insights from Irish research*. Manchester University Press.

Department of Education and Skills. (2016). *The National Skills Strategy 2025*. D. o. E. a. Skills. https://assets.gov.ie/24412/0f5f058feec641bbb-92d34a0a8e3daff.pdf

Department of Further and Higher Education, R., Innovation and Science. (2022). *Funding the Future: Investing in knowledge and skills: Ireland's Competitive advantage*. G. o. Ireland. https://assets.gov.ie/222798/56d15094-5221-42ba-935a-943970e044e5.pdf

DFHERIS. (2021). *Action Plan for Apprenticeship, 2021 to 2025*. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/0879f-action-plan-for-apprenticeship-2021-2025/

EDF. (2023). *European Human Right Report--The Right to Work: The employment situation of persons with disabilities in Europe*. E. D. Forum. https://www.edf-feph.org/content/uploads/2023/05/hr7_2023_press-accessible.pdf

Eignor, D. R. (2013). The standards for educational and psychological testing. In *APA handbook of testing and assessment in psychology, Vol. 1. Test theory and testing and assessment in industrial and organizational psychology.*

European, D. F. (2020). *Poverty and Social Exclusion of Persons with Disabilities: European Human Rights Report Issue 4 - 2020*. E. a. C. P. European Union's Rights.

Flood, M., & Banks, J. (2021). Universal Design for Learning: Is It Gaining Momentum in Irish Education? *Education Sciences*, *11*(7), 341. https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/7/341

Government_of_Ireland. (2025). *Draft Programme for Government-Securing Ireland's Future*. Retrieved from https://7358484.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net/hubfs/7358484/Programme%20for%20Government.pdf

Hanafin, J., Shevlin, M., Kenny, M., & Neela, E. M. (2007). Including young people with disabilities: Assessment challenges in higher education. , *54*, 435-448.

Hart, W., & Healy, D. (2018). 'An inside job': An autobiographical account of desistance. *European Journal of Probation*, *10*(2), 103-119. https://doi.org/10.1177/2066220318783426

HEA. (2017a). *Review of the Fund for Students with Disabilities*. HEA. https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/10/HEA-Review-of-the-Fund-for-Students-with-Disabilities.pdf

HEA. (2019). *Understanding and Enabling Student Success in Irish Higher Education*. National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

HEA. (2021). *Fund for Students with Disabilities. Guidelines for Higher Education Institutions 2021/22*. HEA. https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2021/10/FSD-Guidelines_2021-22-_Final.pdf

HEA. (2022). *National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success*

HEA. (2023a). *Eurostudent Suvey VIII-Report on the Social and Living Conditions of Higher Education Students in Ireland 2022*. https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2023/04/Eurostudent-8-Final-Report.pdf

HEA. (2023b). *Fund for Students with Disabilities-Guidelines for Higher Education Institutions 2023/24*. https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/06/FSD-Guidelines_2023-24-_Final-Version.pdf

HEA. (2023c). *Graduate Outcomes & Disability*. HEA. Retrieved 03/03/23 from https://hea.ie/statistics/graduate-outcomes-data-and-reports/graduate-outcomes-for-access-groups/1-graduate-outcomes-for-graduates-with-a-disability-foreword/

HEA. (2024, Oct 21, 2024). *Key Fact and Figures 2023/24*. Retrieved November 27th from https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/

HEA, & NDPAC. (2023). *Experiences of and Challenges Faced by Disabled Postgraduate Students*. HEA.

Healy, R., Ryder, D., & Banks, J. (2023). Universal Design for Learning Policy in Tertiary Education in Ireland: Are we Ready to Commit? In L. Dukes & J. Madeus. (Eds.), *Handbook on Higher Education and Disability*. Elgar Publishing.

Higher Education Stategy Group. (2011). *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. Department of Education and Skills.

Indecon. (2021). *The Cost of Disability in Ireland*. D. o. S. Protection.

IUA. (2021). *Your Education, Your Choice, Your Vision: Results of the Student Campaign run by the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning (EDTL) project, April – May 2021*. IUA.

DARE-Handbook 2024, (2023). https://www2.cao.ie/downloads/documents/2024/DARE2024.pdf

J. Ingle. (2023). Ways of rethinking inclusion for disabled students in Higher Education. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*(29).

Keane, E., & Heinz, M. (2015). Diversity in initial teacher education in Ireland: The socio-demographic backgrounds of postgraduate post-primary entrants in 2013 and 2014. *Irish Educational Studies*, *34*(3), 281-301.

Kilpatrick, S., Johns, S., Barnes, R., Fischer, S., McLennan, D., & Magnussen, K. (2017). Exploring the retention and success of students with disability in Australian higher education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *21*(7), 747-762.

Lyman, M., Beecher, M. E., Griner, D., Brooks, M., Call, J., & Jackson, A. (2016). What keeps students with disabilities from using accommodations in postsecondary education? A qualitative review. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, *29*(2), 123-140.

McArthur, J. (2015). Assessment for social justice: the role of assessment in achieving social justice. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education.*, *47*(7), 967-981. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2015.1053429

Meeks, L. M., Case, B., Stergiopoulos, E., Evans, B. K., & Petersen, K. H. (2021). Structural Barriers to Student Disability Disclosure in US-Allopathic Medical Schools. *Journal of Medical Education and Curricular Development*, *8*, 23821205211018696. https://doi.org/10.1177/23821205211018696

Meeks, L. M., Herzer, K., & Jain, N. R. (2018). Removing barriers and facilitating access: increasing the number of physicians with disabilities. *Academic Medicine*, *93*(4), 540-543.

Morris, C., Milton, E., & Goldstone, R. (2019). Case study: suggesting choice: inclusive assessment processes. *Higher Education Pedagogies*, *4*(1), 435-447.

Nieminen, J. H. (2022). Governing 'the disabled assessee': a critical reframing of assessment accommodations as sociocultural practices. *Disability & Society*, *37*(8), 1293-1320.

O'Neill, G. (2017). It's not fair! Students and staff views on the equity of the procedures and outcomes of students' choice of assessment methods. *Irish Educational Studies*, *36*(2), 221-236. https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2017.1324805

O'Neill, G., & Padden, L. (2021). Diversifying assessment methods: Barriers, benefits and enablers. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 1-12.

Oliver, M. (1994). *Capitalism, disability and ideology: A materialist critique of the normalization principle*. Oliver.

Rath, V. (2020). *Social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland.* [Unpublished Thesis]. Trinity College Dublin. http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/95415

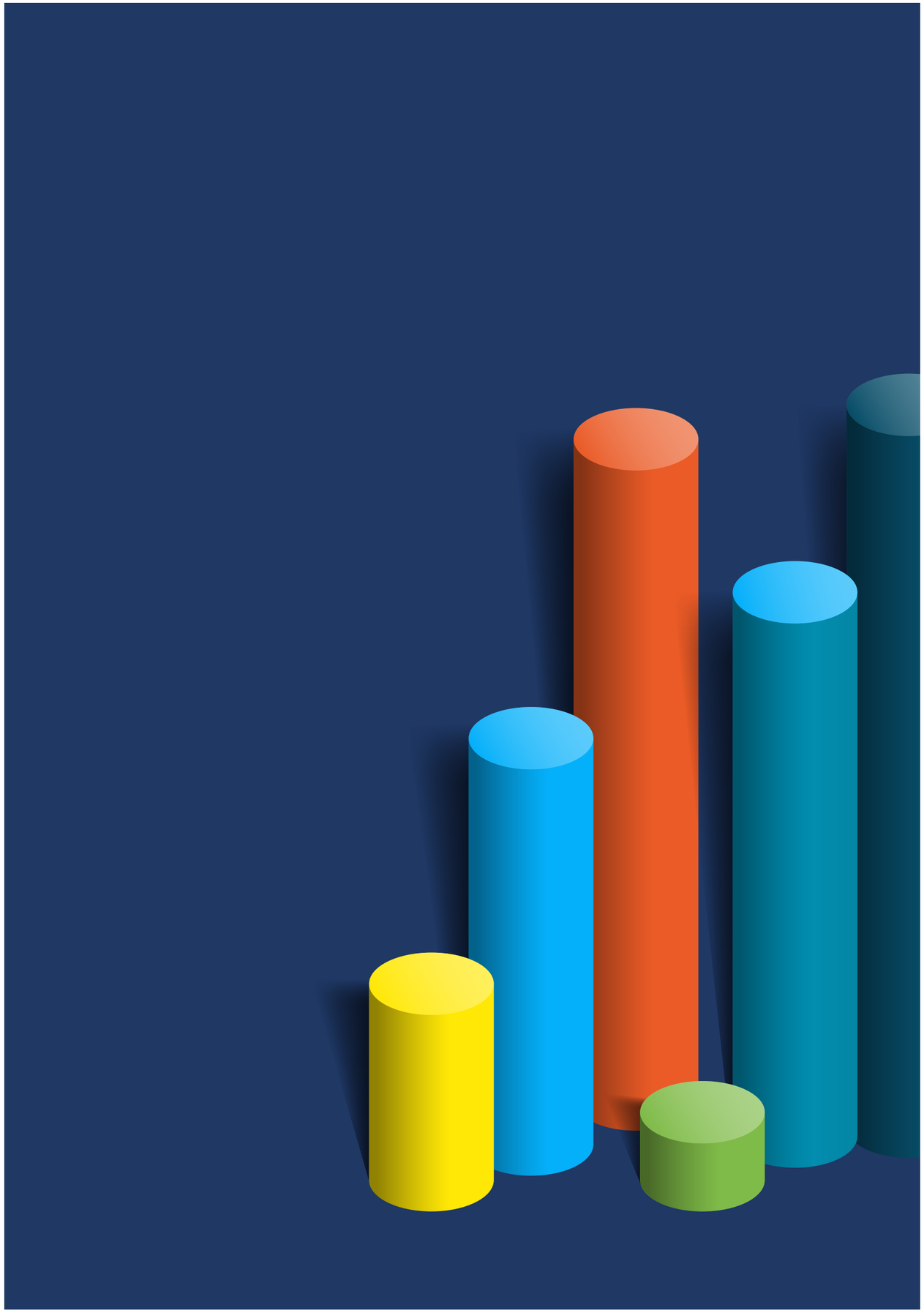
Smith, S. A., Woodhead, E., & Chin-Newman, C. (2021). Disclosing accommodation needs: exploring experiences of higher education students with disabilities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *25*(12), 1358-1374.

Smyth, E., & Russell, H. (2024). *Trends in disability prevalence among young people: Insights from the Growing Up in Ireland Study*.

Taras, M. (2008). Assessment for learning: Sectarian divisions of terminology and concepts. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *32*(4), 389-397.

Thomas, L. (2016). Chapter 9 - Developing Inclusive Learning to Improve the Engagement, Belonging, Retention, and Success of Students from Diverse Groups. In M. Shah, A. Bennett, & E. Southgate (Eds.), *Widening Higher Education Participation* (pp. 135-159). Chandos Publishing. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-100213-1.00009-3

United_Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*. Retrieved 14/04/23 from https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd



Appendix

Appendix 1 - Number of students with disabilities studying within each responding higher education institution 2023/24

Institution Name	Total Students with Disabilities	Students with Disabilities as a % of Total Institution Population
TUS (Athlone Campus)	439	7.4%
ATU (Galway/Mayo)	876	9.4%
ATU (Sligo Campus)	449	4.2%
ATU (Donegal Campus)	592	12.2%
DCU	1,233	6.8%
DkIT	321	6.2%
DLIADT	293	12.5%
MIC	283	5.6%
MIE	135	9.5%
MTU	1,503	9.6%
MU	1,203	8.7%
NCAD	169	11.6%
NCI	181	2.6%
University of Galway	1,807	9.1%
RCSI	254	6.0%
SETU (Carlow / Waterford Campus)	1,163	6.4%
St Angela's	185	11.6%
TCD	2,267	11.6%
TU Dublin	1,959	7.2%
TUS (Mid-West)	610	8.1%
UCC	2,126	8.2%
UCD	2,973	8.7%
UL	1,138	6.1%

Appendix 2 - Fields of Study

The Fields of Study are listed as per the international standard classification of education (ISCED). The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is a framework for assembling, compiling and analysing cross-nationally comparable statistics on education. ISCED is a member of the United Nations International Family of Economic and Social Classifications and is the reference classification for organizing education programmes and related qualifications by levels and fields of education. The ISCED is viewable here.

AHEAD Educational Press
East Hall UCD
Carysfort Avenue
Blackrock, Co. Dublin

Tel: (01) 7164396
Email: ahead@ahead.ie

Supported by the Higher Education Authority