

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

Summary of Findings
and Recommendations



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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.

Introduction

This document provides a summary of the key findings and recommendations from AHEAD's annual research: *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2023/24*. The Report is available in its entirety on the AHEAD website (www.AHEAD.ie). All Disability Support Services (DSS) from the 23 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) who were requested to submit a survey responded to the call for institutional data. However, it should be noted that some Technological Universities submitted their surveys under the auspices of their former Institute of Technology status. This is primarily due to the complexities of merging data across institutions.

The aim of this Report is to empower students as rights holders, assist, represent and advocate for the realisation of their rights and enhance the experiences and narratives of disabled students as they access and engage with Higher Education. We also hope that the Report can be used as an effective tool by DSS as they work to embed inclusivity, equity of access and opportunity for disabled students in their institutions.

Some of the core findings that emanate from these reports advance a better understanding of the disability narrative in HE. The data enables AHEAD to:

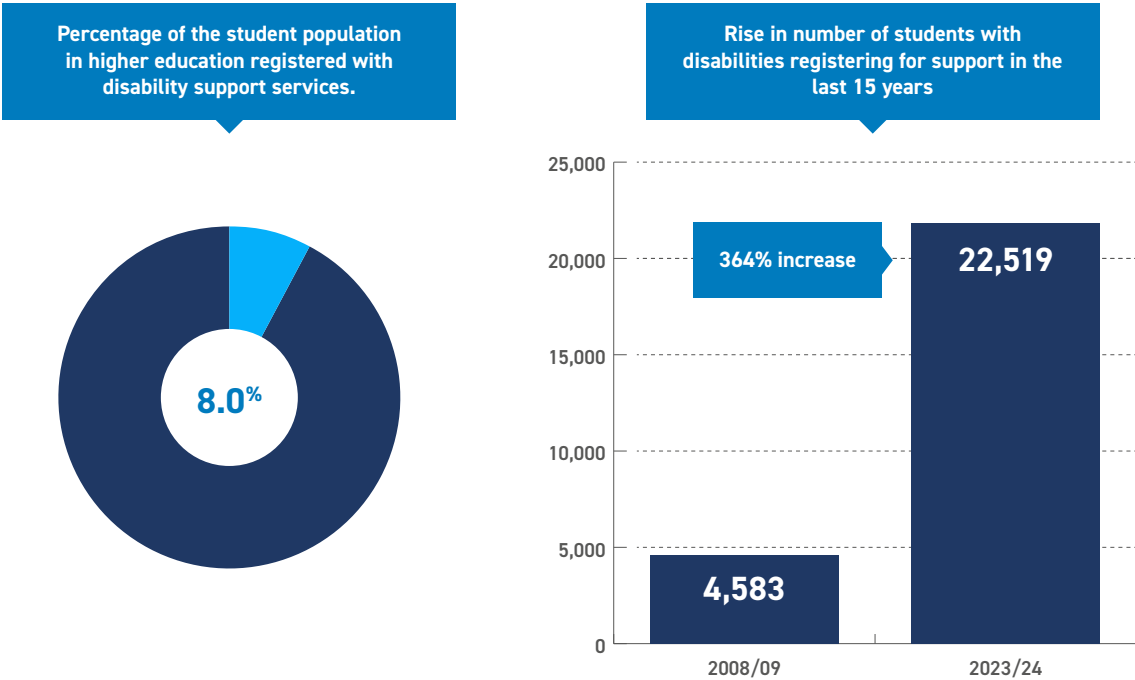
- Calculate the percentage of the student body that are registered with disability supports in their institution (and across all participating HEIs).
- Compare the participation rates of disabled students at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Compare this data with previous reports.
- Further disaggregate 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.
- Conduct a qualitative exploration of DSS's perceptions regarding the need to provide medical evidence of disability prior to accessing support services and the efficacy of implemented supports, post recommendation.
- 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 and the perspectives and working environment of DSS.

Following a detailed analysis and reporting of the data from the 23 responding institutions, we here present a summary of the key findings and contributions for the academic year 2023/24:

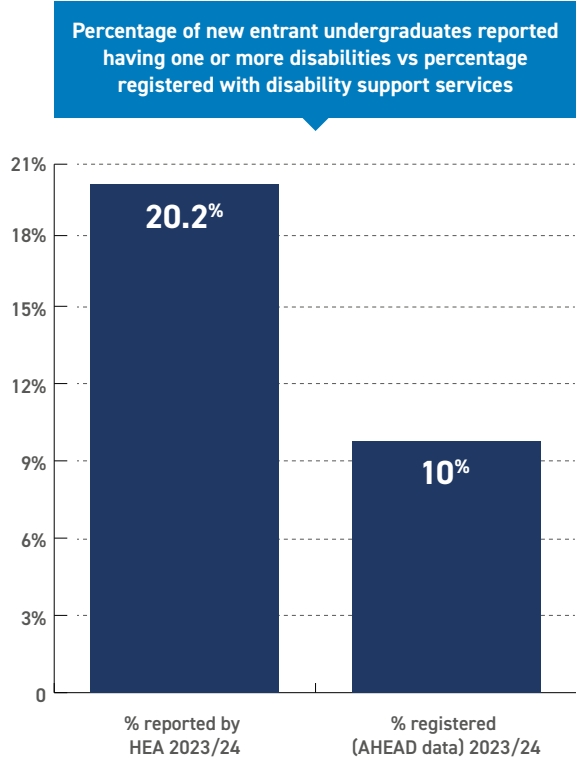
Summary of Findings

This is a synopsis of the main findings from the Report for the academic year 2023/24. A more comprehensive and detailed analysis can be found in the full document, which can be downloaded, free of charge from www.ahead.ie.

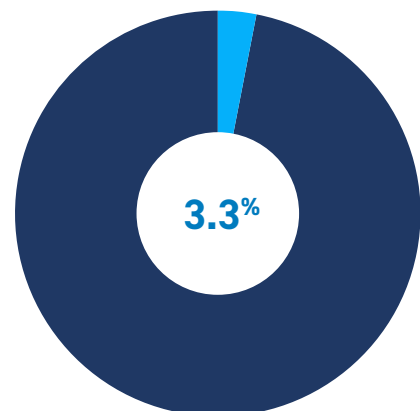


- **8% (n=22,519) of all students enrolled across responding HEIs were registered with disability support services in 2022/23.** 22,519 students were registered with support services in their HEI, representative of 8% of the total student body (n= 281,847). All publicly funded Irish HEIs contributed 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=2168) 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=17666) 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).



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=2007), 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).

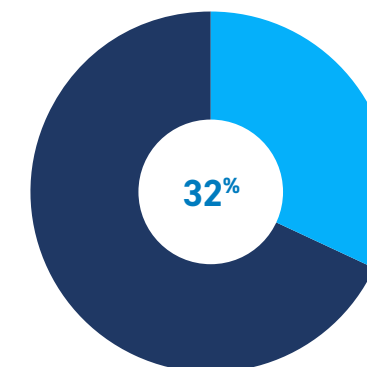
— **Almost 1 in 8 students registered with services not eligible for the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).** Responding HEIs reported that 11.1% (n=2,506) of students registered for supports were not eligible for any funding from the FSD to help finance support and/or accommodations. A closer 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).



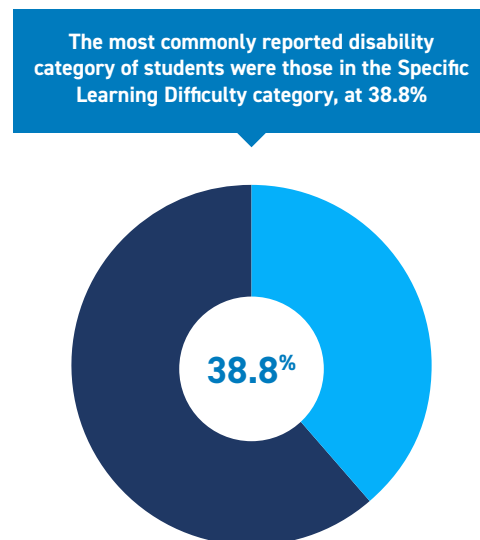
— **32.3% of new registrations with disability support services were not in their first year of study.** In 2023/24, 1,956 students were reported to be not in their first year of study, representative of 32.3% of all new registrations (n=6,060) and 8.7% of all students registered with disability support 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

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

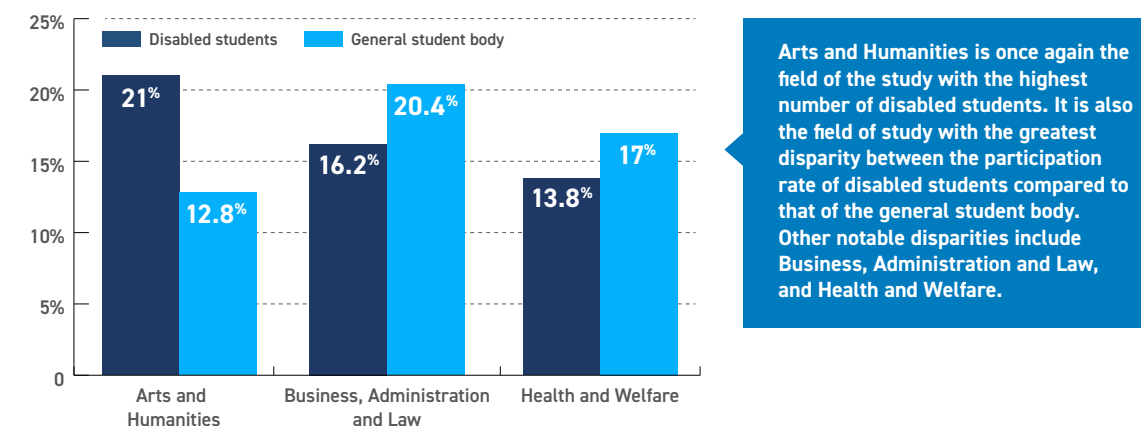


— **Specific Learning Difficulties remains the most common category of disability.** As has

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.



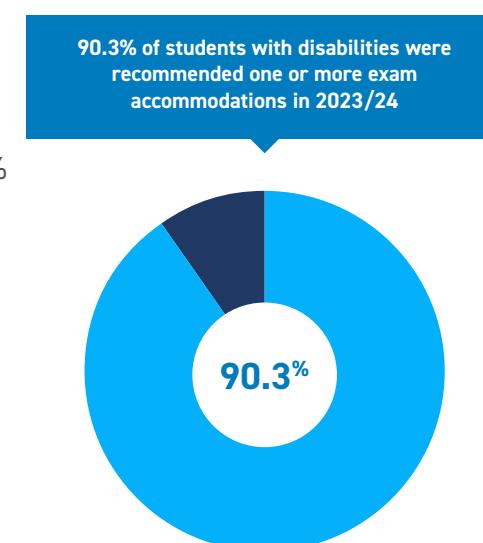
- **Students with disabilities significantly more likely to be enrolled on a course in the field of Arts and Humanities.** This is once again the field of the study with the highest number of disabled students across participating institutions. This statistic has been replicated in a number of previous 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).



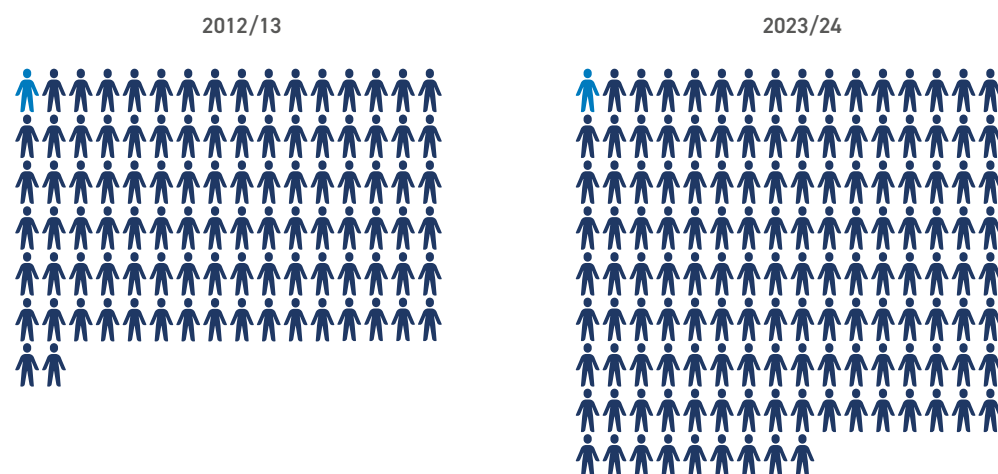
- The fields of study with the lowest difference between the participation rate of disabled students and the total student body were reported to be Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (12.2% of the student body and 11.8% of students registered with DSS) and Education (7.1% of the total student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



In 2012/13 there was 97 students per support staff member. In 2022/23 there were 137 students with disabilities per support staff member.



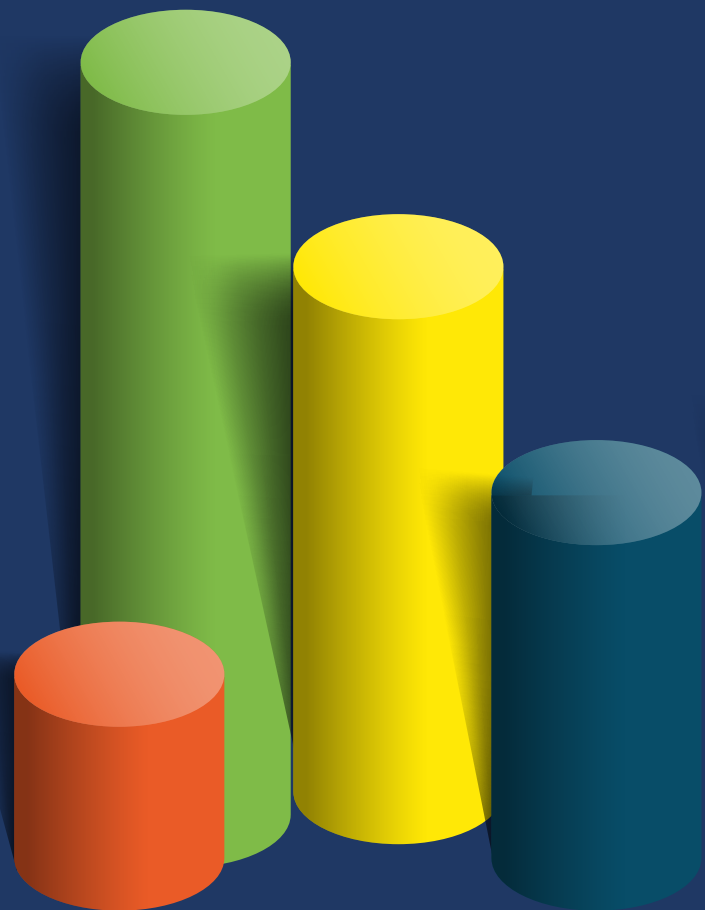
- **The rising ratios of students per DSS staff members that has been reported in a number of prior Reports has stalled for Disability Support Staff member and Support Staff member. However, the ratio of students per Learning Support Staff member continued to rise.** Drawing from the data submitted by 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 <u>ALTITUDE Charter</u> with sustainable incentives to help embed universal design in Irish tertiary education.
Action	<p><u>ALTITUDE – The National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education - was adopted</u> 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.</p> <p>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:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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. <p>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.</p>
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

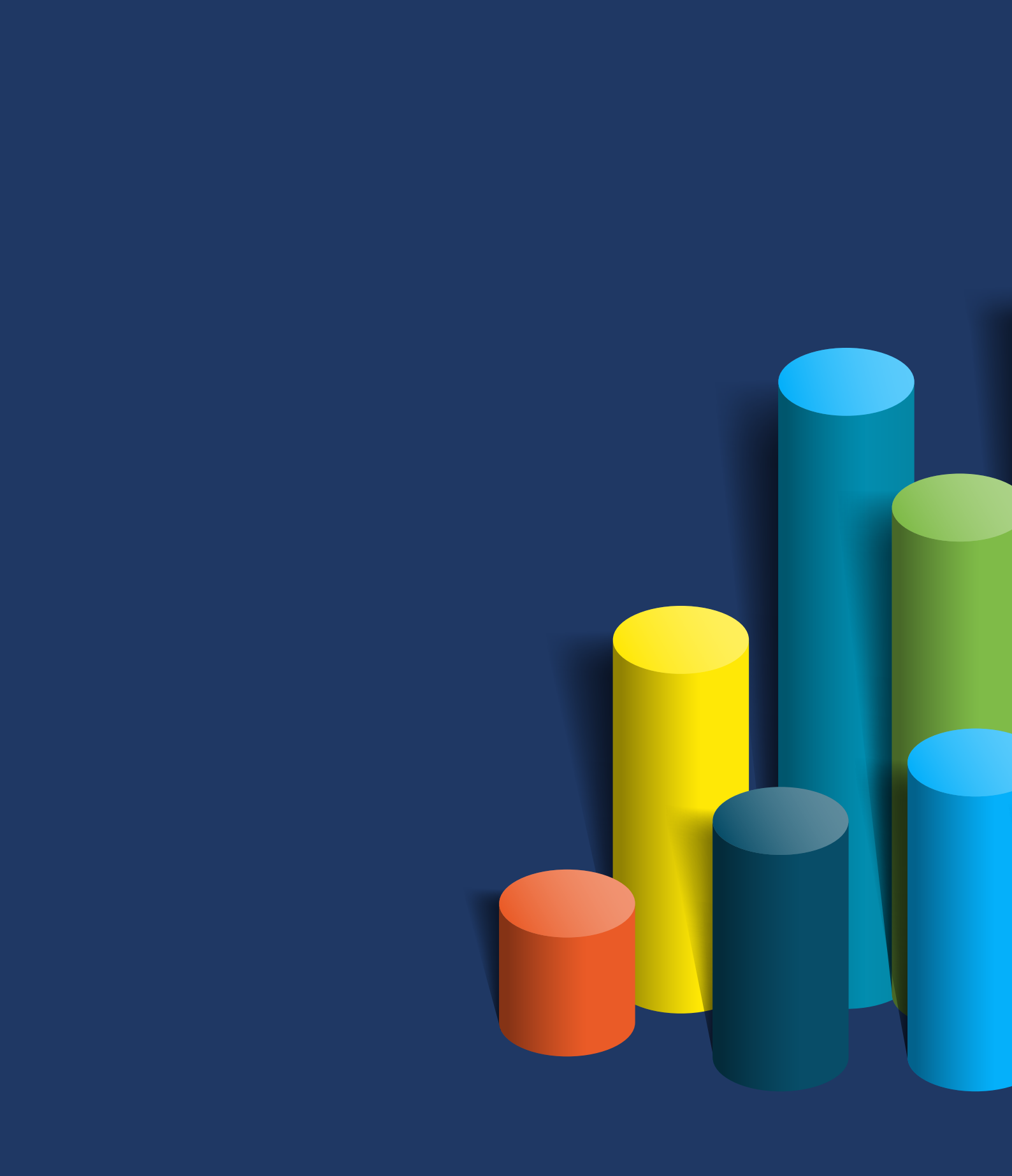
Recommendation	Develop and Support the Implementation of Inclusive Assessment Standards.
Action	<p>Over 9 in 10 of students registered with disability support services were in receipt of at least one exam accommodation in 23/24. This number can be reduced, therefore reducing systemic pressure on services 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.</p> <p>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.</p>
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	<p>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!”.</p>
Time Scale	Long Term.
Stakeholders	DFHERIS, HEA, SOLAS

1 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	<p>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.</p> <p>Potential enablers to address this disparity should be examined to increase the participation rates of students with sensory disabilities in HE.</p> <p>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 <i>Participation Rate Reports</i> 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.</p>
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).



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