
Student Central at Maynooth University: A Review

Overview

This article provides an overview of the Student Central programme at Maynooth University, while also discussing how the service has advanced since its commencement in 2012. The report focuses on student engagement with the programme in the 2016/2017 academic year, while making comparisons to a previous Student Central evaluation by Gormley & McManus (2013). The report will also highlight the programme's growth and development since its inception in 2012.

Background

Figures from the Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD, 2018), gathered from 25 responding institutions in Ireland indicated that students with disabilities (SWDs) accounted for a total of 12,630 students, 5.7% of the total student population in the 2016/2017 academic year. This represents a substantial increase (12%) in the total SWD population from 2015/2016 (AHEAD, 2018). Of these, 11,619 were undergraduate students and 1,011 were postgraduate students (AHEAD, 2018). In Maynooth University, 702 students registered with the Disability Office in the 2016/2017 academic year, making up 5.7% of the total student population. This was an increase on the previous year (603, 5.5%) for the university.

This upward trend in participation of students with disabilities is very positive, but can present difficulties for support staff. Traditional learning support models do not always meet the requirements of students with diverse needs. The AHEAD (2016) report stated that higher education institutions should respond to diversity with a whole college approach whereby all functions and faculties are inclusive of all students. A recent national study supported by AHEAD and National Learning Network (NLN), which focused on the needs of higher education students with a mental health condition (MHC), also recommended that institutions take a whole campus support approach, in combination with specialised supports (Murphy, 2016). One such specialised support is the Student Central programme at Maynooth University.

Maynooth University and Student Central

In 2012, the Maynooth Access Programme, in partnership with NLN, developed Student Central, an innovative support model for students registered with the Maynooth University Disability Office. Student Central is a psychology-led student support programme, which aims to assist third level students to develop and achieve their academic potential. Students who attend the Student Central programme have a range of complex support needs. It was initially set up to respond specifically to the fluctuating and individual needs of students with mental health conditions, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and attention deficit disorder/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD) ('Student Central at NUI Maynooth', 2013). Originally, one assistant psychologist (AP), under the supervision of an NLN educational psychologist, delivered the programme. The service expanded in 2016 to include two APs in order to meet increasing service demand and a larger student caseload.

Student Central Supports

Student Central uses psychological knowledge, theory and practical techniques to assist students to overcome challenges they may face in developing their academic skills, social skills or maintaining wellbeing. A biopsychosocial model is used to inform the design and delivery of interventions. This ensures that students are supported in a holistic way. Students work collaboratively with the APs to guide the direction of interventions, and they have significant input into deciding the content of sessions, the frequency of appointments, and the involvement of other university services or external professionals. This ensures a person-centred approach within the service. Student Central provides support to students in the following ways:

1. Focused support across four key areas. These are study support, managing activities of daily living, wellness support, and social support.
 - Study support is provided in the form of tailored, goal oriented, one-to-one academic support, aiding development of key skills to succeed and progress at third level (Gormley & McManus, 2013).
 - Managing activities of daily living including supporting students with organisational strategies for getting to and from college and to lectures on time, managing timetables, study time and personal interests, and signposting to other services in relation to financial advice, grants, fees etc.
 - Support to maintain personal wellbeing through the provision of sessions on relaxation techniques, stress management, time management, taking care of self, and teaching evidence-based wellness strategies.
 - Support meeting the social demands of university, including developing self-advocacy skills, conversational skills or knowledge of relationship boundaries.
2. Acting as a link between other support services such as the Maynooth Student Health Centre, Maynooth Student Counselling Service and the student's own external support services.
3. Liaising with academic departments concerning difficulties that students may be facing in their course of study, as a direct result of their disability. This creates a whole college approach, whereby students receive support from both specialised disability services, and from University faculties.

In the 2016/2017 academic year, Student Central APs took on an additional Disability Advisor role, expanding their responsibilities to include evidence of disability reviews, needs assessments, coordinating exam accommodations and disability supports, and managing the Maynooth University student database in relation to the Student Central caseload.

Today, Student Central supports students with a variety of disabilities in addition to the above, including students with neurological disorders, physical disabilities, specific learning difficulties (SLDs), significant ongoing illnesses (SOIs), speech and language disorders, students who are blind/visually impaired, and students who are deaf/ hard of hearing. Students with all types of disabilities can avail of the educational psychological support that Student Central offers, and other Disability Advisors in Maynooth University can refer them to the service.

Student Central Engagement 2016/2017

Attendance

In the 2016/2017 academic year, of the 702 students registered with the Maynooth University Disability Office at the time of analysis, 178 students (25.4%) attended Student Central at least once. In comparison, in 2012/2013, 67 (16.6%) of the 404 students registered with the Disability Office attended Student Central (Gormley & McManus, 2013). Overall, there is a 165.7% increase in the number of individual students attending the programme when the

two academic years are compared, explaining the necessity for the addition of a second AP to the service in 2016.

Gender

There was no significant gender difference in 2016/2017, with males accounting for 49.4% of Student Central attendees. This indicates an almost 50:50 gender split. In contrast, Gormley and McManus (2013) reported that 66.7% of students who requested Student Central support in 2012/2013 were female, and the study attributed this to lower help-seeking behavior in males. The current findings suggest that gender differences in help-seeking behavior, at least when it relates to academic support, may be decreasing. Various factors could explain the more even gender split in help-seeking behaviour seen in Student Central in 2016/2017. It may simply be that the 2016/2017 academic year was unique in terms of help-seeking behaviour among students with disabilities at Maynooth University. However, Mitchell, McMillan and Hagan (2017) highlighted prior experience of helpseeking, and involvement of parents and other adults in the helpseeking process as important facilitators of help-seeking in young people. Students must provide evidence of disability as part of their registration with the Maynooth University Disability Office. Therefore, all students who avail of Student Central have had prior experience of help-seeking and service use. Many of the students have been using other services from a young age. Central to facilitating this is support from family, and often their schools. Research also indicates that young people prefer less formal community based supports (Mitchell, McMillan & Hagan, 2017). Student Central provides an informal support service, embedded within the Maynooth University community. Additional research may shed more light on student helpseeking behaviour.

As expected for a university campus, the majority (76%) of students who attended Student Central in 2016/17 were in the 18-22 age range. Mature students (aged 23 and above when entering undergraduate programme) made up 11.8% of attendees. In the 2012/2013 academic year, 58% of students were aged between 18 and 22, while 42% were mature students, indicating that fewer mature students availed of the service in 2016/17, than when the programme began. It should be noted however that in recent years, the number of mature students in higher education has fallen across the board. While mature students with disabilities represented 12% of the total population of students with disabilities in 2016/2017 (AHEAD, 2018), the Higher Education Authority (2016) reported a 5% overall drop in full-time mature students, and a 7% decrease in part-time mature students in the period between 2010/2011 and 2015/2016. This may explain the reduction in the number of mature students who sought Student Central support in 2016/2017.

Number of Student Central Attendees by Age Range - 2016/2017

18-22	136
23-29	21
30-39	12
40-49	5
50-59	2
60-69	2

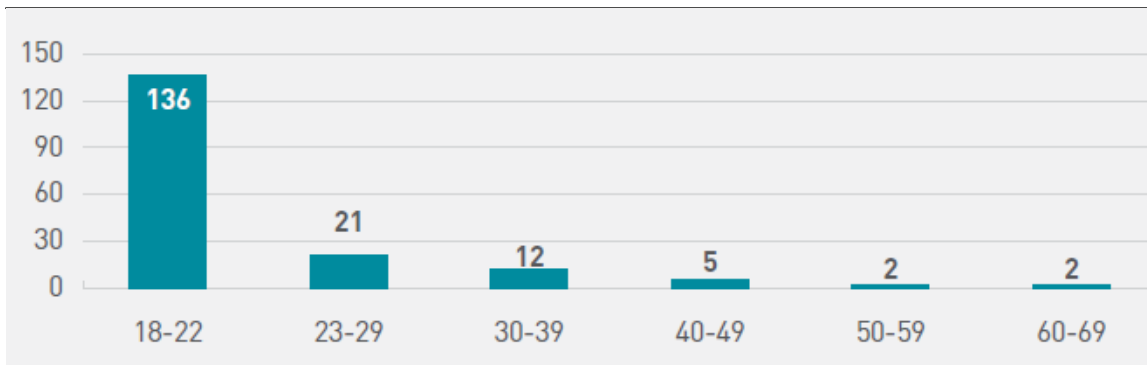


Figure 1: Age

Range of Students

Academic Year

Of note is that first year undergraduate students made up 57.3% of Student Central attendees in 2016/2017, compared to 35.8% of students in 2012/2013. The remaining students in both academic years comprised of returning undergraduate students as well as postgraduate students.

Number of Students by Academic Year - 2016/2017

1st	102
2nd	33
3rd	24
4th	8
1st (Cert)	4
1st (HDip)	2
1st (Postgrad)	4
2nd (Postgrad)	1

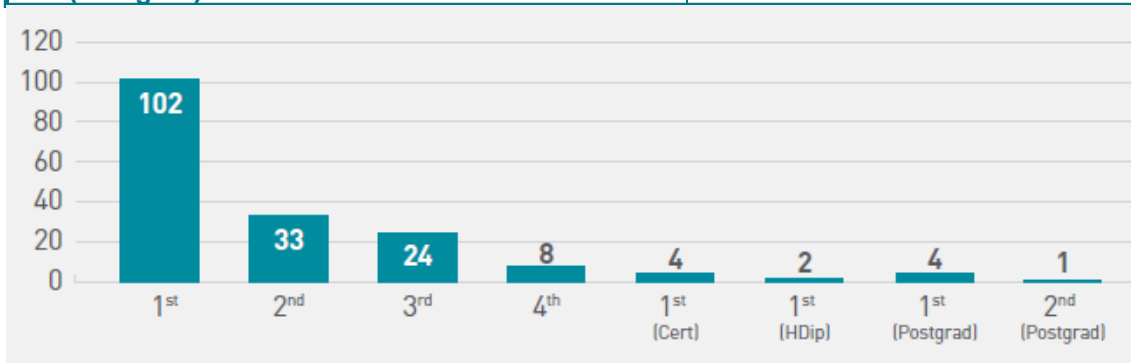


Figure 2:

Academic Year of Students. Note that many Maynooth University undergraduate programmes run for 3 rather than 4 years

Student Enrolment by Faculty

In terms of overall faculty representation, 2.6% of all Arts, Celtic Studies and Philosophy students in Maynooth University attended Student Central in 2016/2017, compared to 2.4% and 1.9% of Science and Engineering and Social Sciences students respectively. The data indicated no significant difference between faculty representation and Student Central attendance. Although not directly comparable, the Gormley and McManus (2013) study reported similar trends, i.e., 62% of Student Central users were attending an Arts programme in 2012/2013, while the second largest cohort were those studying a Science degree.

Admissions Entry Route

The highest percentage (28.3%) of Student Central attendees in 2016/2017 were those students who disclosed a disability post-entry into Maynooth University. This cohort was followed by Disability Access Route To Education

(DARE) students who had On/Above Points Offers (24.3%), and students who were offered DARE Reduced Points places (17.9%) respectively. In 2012/2013 however, DARE Reduced Points students accounted for the largest cohort of first year Student Central attendees (41%), while DARE On/Above Points students only accounted for 17%. Gormley and McManus (2013) also reported that first year Mature students made up 17% of attendees in 2012/2013.

Number of Students by Entry Route - 2016/2017

DARE On/Above	42
DARE Reduced	31
Post Entry Disclosure	49
QQ1	7
CAO	17
HEAR	11
Mature	6
HEAR & DARE	8
Part Time/Postgrad	2

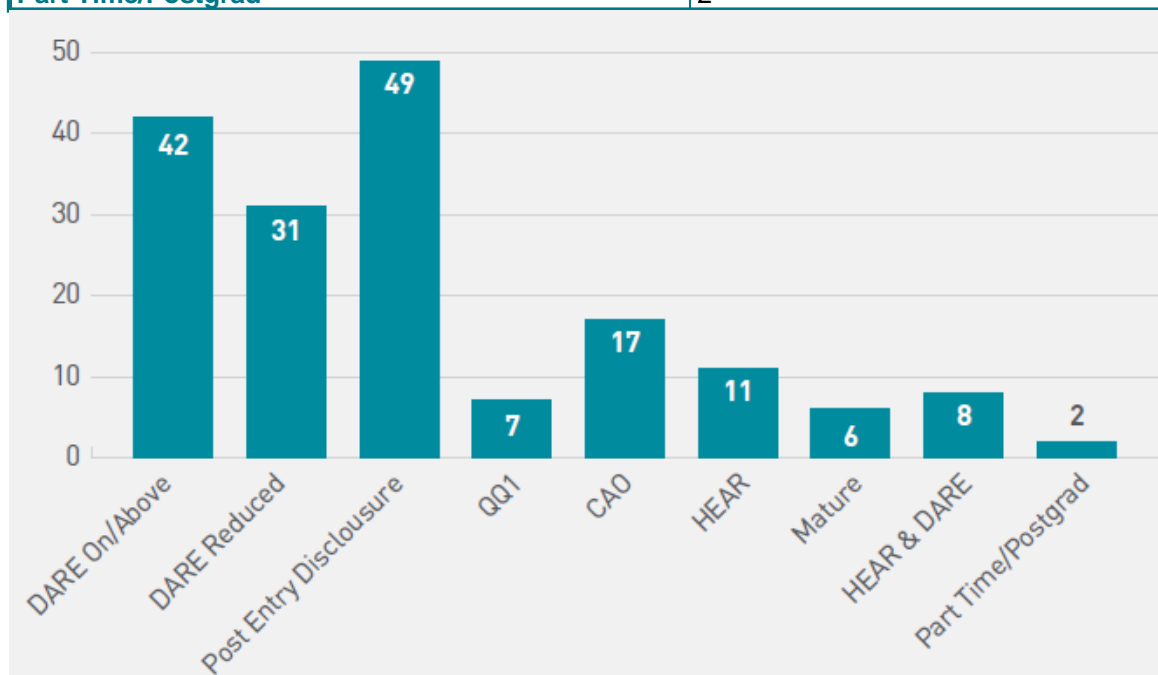


Figure 3: Entry

Route of Students

Disability

Primary Disability

As with their DARE application, when students register with the Maynooth University Disability Office, they are asked to indicate their primary disability. Where students have more than one disability, they are asked to consider their primary disability as the one that has had the greatest impact on their educational experience. Students who registered with a primary disability of ASD made up the largest cohort of Student Central service users in 2016/2017, at 20.8%. Students with a primary disability of depression and anxiety accounted for 19.1% and 12.9% of Student Central attendees respectively, followed by students with ADD/ADHD (9.6%). Although the number of students with ASD in higher education has steadily increased from 3.4% in 2012/2013 (AHEAD, 2013) to 5.4% in 2016/2017 (AHEAD, 2018), this student cohort was still over-represented in Student Central in 2016/2017.

However, given that the primary function of Student Central is to support students with mental health conditions, ASD, and ADD/ADHD, we would expect these students to use the service disproportionately compared to other students with disabilities. A breakdown of students by primary disability was not recorded in the first year of Student

Central (2012/2013) so a comparison is not possible.

Student Central Attendees by Primary Disability (5 Most Prevalent) - 2016/2017

ASD	37
Depression	34
Anxiety	23
ADD/ADHD	17
SLD	9

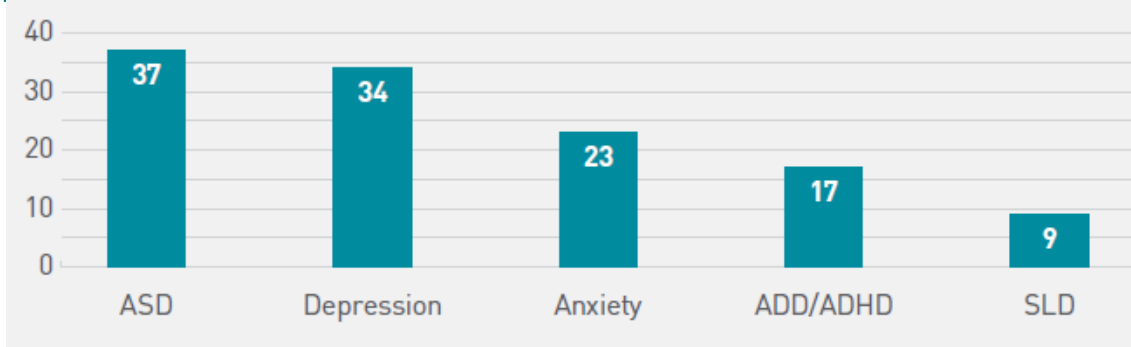


Figure 4: Students and Primary Disability

and Primary Disability

Disability by Category

After grouping related primary disabilities into disability categories where possible (for example, anxiety and depression can both be categorised as a mental health condition), analysis revealed that almost half (47.8%) of students who used Student Central in 2016/2017 had a mental health condition. Students with ASD still represented 20.8% of attendees, followed by those with ADD/ADHD (9.6%) and those with an SLD (5.1%).

% Students by Primary Disability Category

ADD	9.6
ASD	20.8
DCD	3.4
DEAF /HI	0.6
MHC	47.8
NEUR	2.2
PHY	3.4
SLD	5.1
SOI	2.8
SPEE	0.6
BLIND /VI	1.7

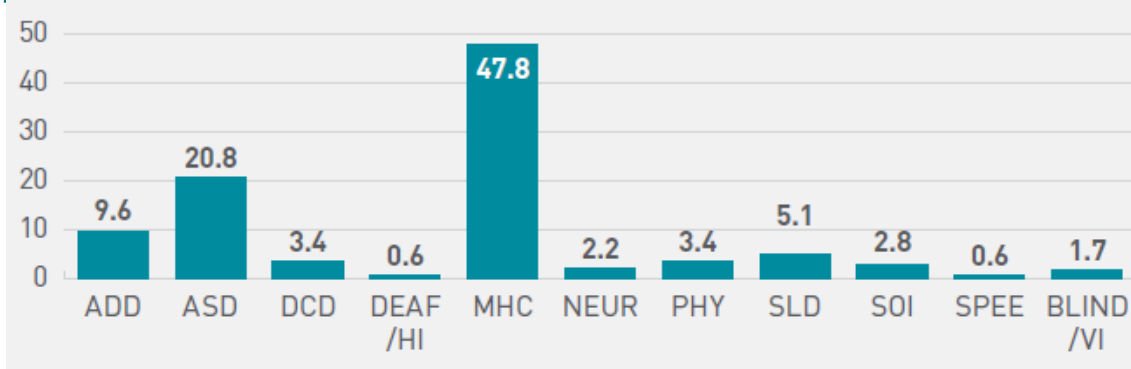


Figure 5: Students and Primary Disability Category. Please refer to Appendix A for list of abbreviations and definitions.

Multiple Disabilities

Fifty-eight percent of students who used Student Central in 2012/2013 had multiple (i.e., two or more) disabilities

(Gormley & McManus, 2013). In 2016/2017, 95 students (53.4%) had multiple disabilities. After grouping students by registered primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary disability (where applicable), the data indicated that students disclosed 63 distinct multiple disability combinations in 2016/2017. This highlights the need for an individualised support service such as Student Central.

Number of Students by Number of Disabilities - 2016/2017

1	83
2	81
3	10
4	4

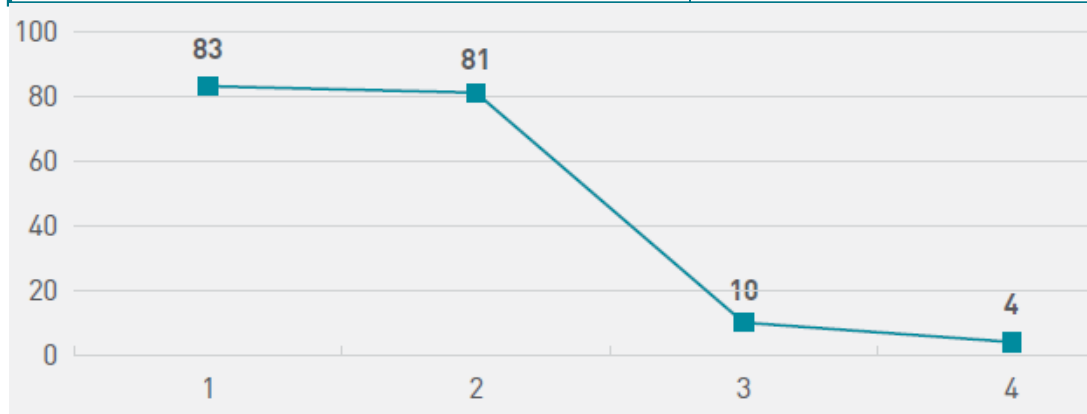


Figure 6: Students

and Number of Disabilities

Appointments and Cancellations

The total number of Student Central appointments offered to students in 2016/2017 was 860. Of these, students attended 678 appointments. November 2016 had the highest number of appointments, while January 2017 had the lowest. The average number of appointments attended by students was 3.8, but this mean was significantly skewed by active engagers of the service. Over half (54.5%) of students had 1 to 2 appointments across the academic year. Interestingly, 6 students had 16+ appointments over the year, accounting for 17.0% of all appointments, and each had either a diagnosis of ASD or Borderline Personality Disorder.

There were 569 appointments offered to students in 2012/2013, with students attending an average of 8.5 appointments, and the majority of students having 5 to 10 appointments (Gormley & McManus, 2013). Three students had only 1 appointment, while 3 others had 20+ appointments (Gormley & McManus, 2013).

The above figures indicate a change in student engagement with Student Central. A higher proportion of students had only 1 or 2 appointments in 2016/2017, which may reflect the fact that many students did not return for academic support following their needs assessment (13% of all appointments). APs conducted needs assessments for the first time in 2016/2017 as part of the disability advisor role.

Number of Appointments and Students by Month - 2016/2017

Month	Appointments	Individual Students
Sep	93	68
Oct	101	67
Nov	106	71
Dec	55	44
Jan	37	22
Feb	95	56
Mar	88	52
Apr	84	52
May	19	19

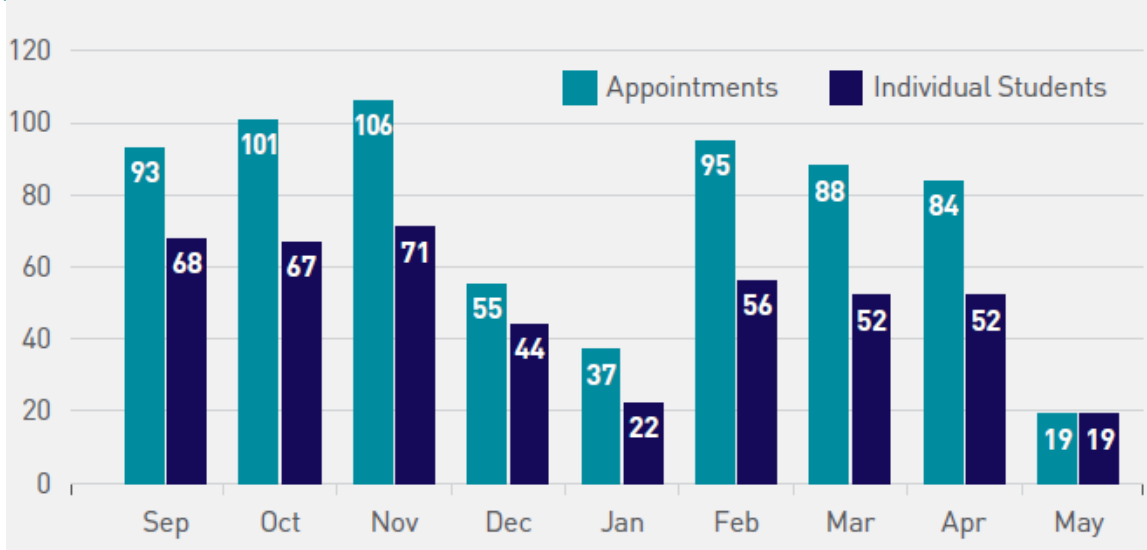


Figure 7: Students and Number of Appointments. Note that May includes data from May 1st to 5th only as this was the end of the academic year.

Types of Support Provided

The most prevalent support session types in 2012/2013 were assignment planning, essay writing skills, time management, exam preparation, and initial meetings. These support types accounted for 58% of all Student Central meetings (Gormley & McManus, 2013).

Study support sessions accounted for the highest number of appointments (38.2%) in 2016/2017. The number of students who requested support with managing activities of daily living was also high (19.3% of sessions), largely because time management and organisation fall under this category. The authors included a category of 'Other' to highlight the support session types that did not fall under the traditional Student Central categories, and to indicate again how service provision has expanded. Support sessions under the category of 'Other' included academic/semester reviews, referrals to internal and external supports, initial meetings, registration advice, and linking students to other university departments. It is also important to note that although wellness support sessions only accounted for 9.4% (see Figure 8) of the total Student Central appointments in 2016/2017, the majority of all appointments had a wellness support element, ranging from wellness self-reports to safety checks with students. This was not reflected in the data because only the primary support session type was recorded by APs for each student meeting in 2016/2017. By recording all elements of a support session, Student Central APs hope to rectify this issue in future academic years.

Number of Appointments by Support Session -2016/2017

Study Support	259
Needs Assessment	88
Daily Living Support	131
Wellness Support	64
Social Support	22
Other	114

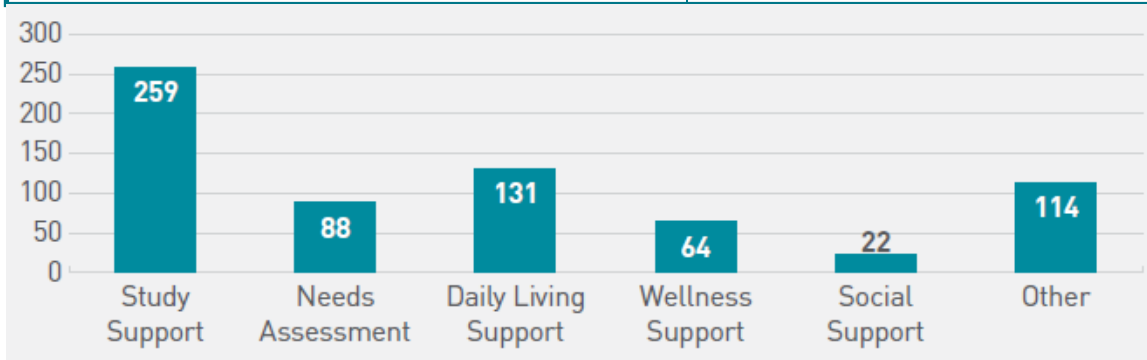


Figure 8:

Support Session Types

Student Central Survey

At the end of the 2016/2017 academic year, students had the opportunity to review the Student Central service by completing a survey. There was a 20.5% response rate. In terms of service accessibility, 93.3% of students found it readily accessible. In addition to the support sessions offered, students also highlighted the importance of 'having someone to talk to about college life', which may explain why 73.1% of respondents stated that Student Central helped them reconsider withdrawing from Maynooth University. Overall, 93.0 % of students gave Student Central an overall rating of Excellent, Very Good, or Good.

I think student central is excellent already. I would improve it by making it more well known so that other students can benefit from the services offered.

Student Central is an excellent service. It really is great having the support there and it has made a big difference in my learning experience in MU over the past number of years.

Having longer drop-in hours

Make meetings a little less formal

I wish I availed of the services more...

I think most students don't know it exists and how easy it is to get help so maybe put the word out there more

Figure 9: Qualitative feedback from Student Central Survey 2016/2017

Conclusion

The aim of this report was to provide an overview of the Student Central programme, and to highlight the importance of this specialised support service to students with disabilities at Maynooth University. Accessible student engagement data from over the course of the 2016/2017 academic year was provided, to illustrate who is

using the service and why. Engagement data from 2016/2017 was contextualised by comparing it to 2012/2013, when the service first commenced. This comparison illustrates the extent to which the service has diversified and expanded in just five years. The number of students with ASD availing of the service continues to grow, with these students now representing the largest primary disability cohort availing of the service. The report also suggests an upward trend in males seeking academic support in third level, which is very positive. Figures from this report also provide further evidence for the nationwide decrease in mature students enrolling in third level, and that many students do not register with a disability until after commencing their course at Maynooth University. Student experience of the service has been extremely positive overall, with Student Central contributing to the retention of students. The Student Central programme continues to grow, and is now an integral part of Maynooth University, providing an essential specialised support service for students with disabilities.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Abbreviations

- ADD Attention Deficit Disorder
- AHEAD Association For Higher Education And Disability
- ASD Autistic Spectrum Disorder
- DARE Disability Access Route To Education
- DCD Developmental Coordination Disorder
- HEA Higher Education Authority
- HI Hearing Impairment
- MHC Mental Health Condition
- NEUR Neurological Condition
- NLN National Learning Network
- PHY Physical Disability
- QQI Quality and Qualifications Ireland
- SLD Specific Learning Difficulty
- SOI Significant Ongoing Illness
- SWD Student With Disability
- SPEE Speech And Language Communication Disorder
- VI Visual Impairment



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