
Personal Assistants in Higher Education: A Crisis Needing Critical Action

Introduction

At the moment, there is a crisis in colleges across the country. Disability Services are unable to source Personal Assistants (hereafter referred to as PAs) for their students. Service providers are in a crisis of their own and cannot find the staff. This has a detrimental impact on students with disabilities. According to figures from the latest National Access Plan 6% of students who accessed disability supports in the academic year 2020/21 have a physical disability. While there is no data on the level of need for a PA amongst this population, the number of individual students may still be very high. Without a PA, many of these students could be forced to rely on their family or friends or, worse yet, be forced to stay at home because of a lack of services. In this article, I am going to outline the role of a Personal Assistant, highlight some of the problems with the current system and offer some solutions. Personal Assistance is an issue that is very important both on a professional basis, working with the Trinity Inclusive Curriculum Project, and on a personal basis as a disability rights activist and member of Independent Living Movement Ireland.

The Role of the PA

To understand the vital role of a Personal Assistant, consider the following scenario: you are a bright, fresh-faced 18-year-old. Having survived the Leaving Cert and with your CAO offer in hand, you are excited to begin college. You are excited to study your dream subject, meet new people and have a range of new and thrilling experiences. College, they tell you, is meant to be the best time of your life.

Except, there's a problem. You are physically disabled and require assistance with certain things. They are small but significant. You need assistance going to the bathroom or getting things out of your bag. You may need assistance getting your lunch or getting a book off a shelf in the library. Of course, none of these are issues in themselves. They are minor quibbles, and annoying inconveniences but nothing major. After all, no one goes to college on the merits of being able to go to the bathroom unassisted. Yet without this support, you are essentially disabled and unable to participate in college life, or if you do, at a massive disadvantage to other students.

This is the problem faced by physically disabled students who need to use the services of Personal Assistant (hereafter referred to as a PA). The role of the Personal Assistant is simple: they are there to act as the student's arms and legs and perform tasks that the disabled student cannot perform themselves. When I was a student, the PA helped me go to the bathroom, they helped me retrieve academic material and they facilitated me going to social events and society gatherings. In short, this allowed me to be a student in the same capacity as my peers. PAs can also act as note takers, help with photocopying, and generally assist students with all aspects of college life

Impact of the current situation on students with disabilities

I was recently talking to a first-year student in UCD who uses a personal assistance service. This service is vital for

her to attend her lectures, gather material from the library, and engage in student life in the college community. Even though she spoke highly of UCD's efforts to find her a PA, she admits that the process was not easy. Initially, it was difficult for UCD to source a PA for her as the agency used by the College had no one who was suitably qualified. Eventually, a PA was found in the form of a newly qualified OT. This only lasted a few months however, as the PA accepted a job abroad. Since then, the student says that it has been particularly difficult for her service to be maintained.

Issues the current system raises

One of the reasons for this crisis, according to this student, lies in the way the role of a PA is perceived. A lot of PAs that come to the job are temporary. Often, they are non-nationals who have just arrived in this country and are looking for a job to help them improve their English or newly qualified medical professionals looking to gain some experience before moving on to a permanent post in their field. Providing PA support is not looked upon as a career. Furthermore, it is badly paid, with hourly remuneration being, on average, slightly better than minimum wage.

Another problem is the way that PAs are recruited. PA support is normally contracted out to local agencies who communicate with college administration, who then communicate with the student. There are several problems with this approach. Firstly, most of these agencies tend to specialise in personal care for the elderly and the sick. As a result, a lot of the PAs coming from these agencies tend to see their role as paternalistic carers, rather than assistants who take instruction from the student. This arrangement reduces the power of the individual student. If any problems arise within the PA relationship, concerns must be relayed through the college administration. As a PA user myself, this always made me feel as if I wasn't in charge of my own service and that I was simply a client, as opposed to my PA's boss.

Lastly, using an outside agency can restrict the availability of the PA. As PAs are shared by the agency's different users, a PA may only be available for a certain amount of time. Another student I spoke to, a mature student in IT Sligo with a visual impairment, told me that his PA was only available for academic support and that he would have liked the PA to be available outside these hours in case he needed assistance with technology outside of class, technology that he needs to participate in the course.

How can the system be improved to provide appropriate support for disabled students?

In my view, there are two solutions that would ameliorate some of the issues discussed here to ensure that PA provision in higher education is more stable:

- make being a Personal Assistant a more attractive career choice so that there will be more people taking up the position and more retention among existing staff.
- allocate additional funding to college disability services so they have the funds to recruit their own in-house personal assistants who will understand the unique college context and be better able to fulfill the needs of their students. It would also cover any shortfall left by outside agencies.

The aim of both solutions is to reduce the amount of turnover amongst the PA population, thereby saving college administration and service providers time in recruiting and hiring PAs. Continuity of service would also benefit

students. They can build a good working relationship with a PA who can become attuned to their individual needs.

Conclusion

This article has given a brief overview of the current crisis regarding PA provision in higher education. Even though the number of students who may require a PA is admittedly quite low overall, the role is vital in ensuring that these students are able to attend higher level education in the same capacity as their peers, a right enshrined under Article 24 of the UNCRPD. It is important to recapitulate that the role of a PA is different from that of a home help carer as a PA works in partnership with the student. As well as providing additional funding for PAs in higher education, awareness must be brought to this vital difference. I have laid out some potential solutions to the crisis which I hope will be considered by Minister Harris and his colleagues in the Department of Higher Education.

Above all, it is important that all stakeholders in PA provision are aware of the bigger picture. A young person's time in college is important and not merely in terms of academia. In college, students have the chance to nurture their interests, make new friends and try to find their place in the world. Personal Assistants are not just about personal care or the odd bit of assistance. They are key in helping students with disabilities discover who they are.



Ross Colman

Graduate Intern, Trinity Inclusive Curriculum Project, TCD

Ross Coleman is the Graduate Intern for the Trinity Inclusive Curriculum Project in Trinity College Dublin. He has previously written about the issue of Personal Assistance for the Irish Times.

This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit www.ahead.ie/journal for more information
