
Outcomes for students with disabilities in Trinity College Dublin

Introduction

This paper focuses on quantitative data on the outcomes for students with disabilities who entered Trinity College Dublin between 2005 and 2013. The outcomes are presented for students who registered with the Disability Service for some or all of their time in Trinity College. As I referred to in a previous AHEAD Journal article on the International literature on the retention of students with disabilities (Reilly, 2018), I have an ongoing interest in this area and this paper shares updated findings on the outcomes for students with disabilities in an Irish context.

The data sets presented here focus on three outcomes; withdrawn students, graduates and current students recorded in January 2019. Additional information provides data on the outcomes by disability type. Those of us interested in the effectiveness of reasonable accommodations and universal design may find this data useful as an objective indicator of the impact and value of access policies, reasonable accommodations and student supports.

Context and description of the data and methods used

Large scale studies in Ireland on student retention and outcomes have almost always excluded students with disabilities. The one exception to date is the Pathways to Education (2010) study which looked at outcomes in 9 HEIs. Of most relevance to this paper is that students with disabilities who entered Trinity in 2005/06 were tracked over a five-year period. The completion rate (captured five years later) of first year students with disabilities entering Trinity in 2005/06 was 93.1% (Pathways, 2010: 34). The Pathways to Education (2010) report also found that students with disabilities were more likely to graduate and were more likely to take longer doing so compared to their non-disabled peers. These findings raised important questions about the link between delayed progression and persistence and whether or not having a disability in some way mitigates against withdrawal.

The outcomes for Trinity students with disabilities entering between 2005 and 2013 deviate somewhat from the finding in the Pathways to Education (2010) study. This is because all students were tracked, not just those who entered as first time first years. This is an important distinction as additional students register for supports post entry and often result in significant disruption to their studies following the onset, for example, of a mental health difficulty. The disruption can also lead to a repeat year or taking a year or more away from study. These factors do increase the likelihood that students will withdraw. Also, students with disabilities in Trinity who withdraw are more likely to do so considerably later than first year. This tendency to withdraw later peaks 4 to 5 years after entering. For students who take additional years to graduate this can be viewed positively, as it shows that students can take advantage of flexibility in the system. However, for those who take additional years before withdrawing, the evaluation of each student journey relies more on the personal reflection of each student. Only each student in their own way can say if the outcome for them was positive, negative or a mixture of the two.

The outcomes also highlight the challenges of making comparisons among different student populations. As the final outcome for 7% of students are still not available, a full comparison is not possible. This is an important caveat; that the journey through higher education for students with disabilities is distinct.

Outcomes by year of entry cohort 2005 - 2013

The outcomes shown in Figure 1 are for students with disabilities per year of entry to Trinity. For comparison purposes, year of entry is determined by student number (05, 06 etc.) and does not distinguish between students who may have deferred entry or registered with the Disability Service after their first year in Trinity. The chart allows for an easily discernible trend of high graduation rates for students with disabilities compared to withdrawals, for all 9 years from 2005 to 2013.

The outcomes are recorded as either withdrawn, graduates or current. The 'current' category includes all students clearly still registered as students and those who may be 'off books' due to medical or personal reasons. As of January 2019, a total of 180 students were still recorded as current students. This represents 7% of the total data set and indicates that students with disabilities in Trinity take longer to graduate than their non-disabled peers.

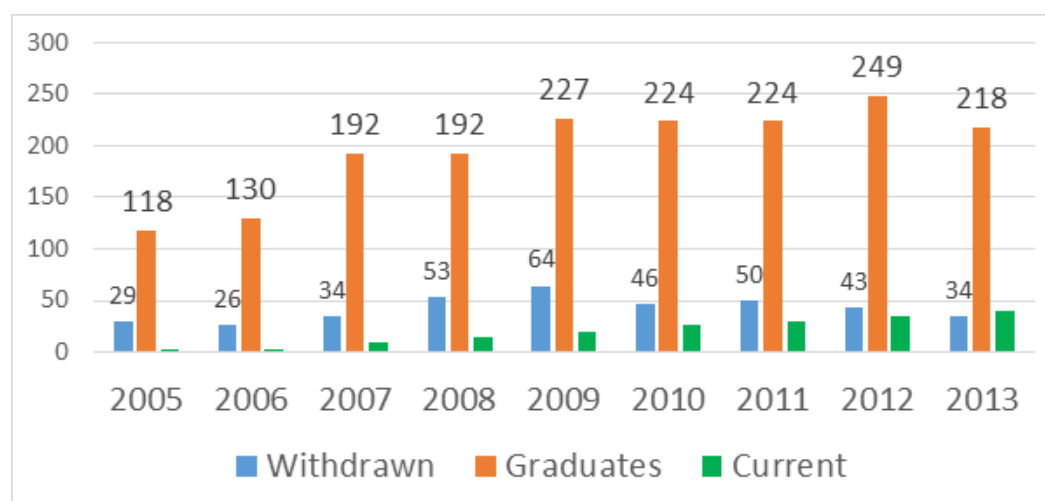


Figure 1. Numbers withdrawn, graduated and current by year of entry 2005 to 2013

Graduates as a percentage of year of entry 2005-2013

The data in Figure 2 shows the percentage of graduates for each entry year from 2005 to 2013. Over a 9 year period, the range of graduation rates varied from 78% to 86% and averages at 82.5%. Using recently published data on student outcomes nationally, this graduate rate can be compared to the general student population for a similar time period (2007-08) where 85% of students on Level 8 courses in Trinity graduated (HEA, 2019: 51). Data from a Trinity College report show a fluctuation of 3% in graduation rates between 2005/06 (17.9%) and in 2006/07 (14.6%) (Senior Lecturer Annual Report 2010/11, 2012 p.38).

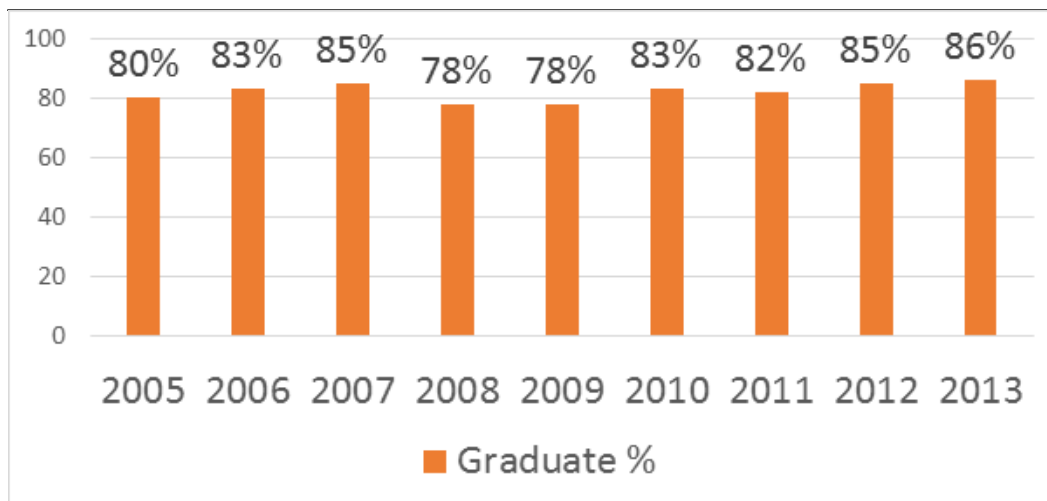


Figure 2: Graduates as a percentage of year of entry 2005 -2013

Numbers and percentages of students withdrawing and graduating by disability type

As disabilities impact students in different ways and the level of support required can vary depending on disability, it is useful to see what impact disability type has on outcomes. Table 1 below lists the numbers of students by disability type who withdrew and who graduated. This data set is for 2,427 students.

The third and fourth columns provide a simple method for calculating the percentage of graduates (where the graduation rate is the percentage of graduates from the total of withdrawn and graduates added). As stated above and shown in Figure 1, there is an additional group of students in the 'current' category who cannot yet be factored into this method.

Disability	Withdrawn (WD)		Graduate (GRD)		Total WD & GRD (TOT)		% GRD of WD & GRD (% TOT)	
ADHD	WD	15	GRD	95	TOT	110	% TOT	86%
ASD	WD	18	GRD	58	TOT	76	% TOT	76%
Blind/VI (visually impaired)	WD	7	GRD	40	TOT	47	% TOT	85%
Deaf/HI (hearing impaired)	WD	28	GRD	81	TOT	109	% TOT	74%
Dyspraxia	WD	5	GRD	49	TOT	54	% TOT	91%
Mental Health	WD	141	GRD	365	TOT	506	% TOT	72%
Neurological	WD	4	GRD	56	TOT	60	% TOT	93%
Physical	WD	27	GRD	159	TOT	186	% TOT	85.5%
SOI (significant ongoing illness)	WD	39	GRD	242	TOT	281	% TOT	85%
SPLD (specific learning difficulty)	WD	131	GRD	867	TOT	998	% TOT	87%
Total	WD	415	GRD	2012	TOT	2427	% TOT	83%

Table 1: Numbers & percentage of students with disabilities withdrawing and graduating by disability type (this data set includes students from 2005 to 2014)

Percentage of students withdrawing by disability type

Figure 3 presents the percentage of students withdrawing by disability type. The average withdrawal rate across all disability types is 17% (83% graduate). 3 disability type groups show withdrawal rates that are considerably higher than this average. Students with Autism (ASD) 24%, those who are Deaf or hearing impaired 26% and students with mental health difficulties 28%. While these student groups are at higher risk of not completing their courses and should be singled out for additional resources, it should also be borne in mind that all three groups have a completion rate above 70%.

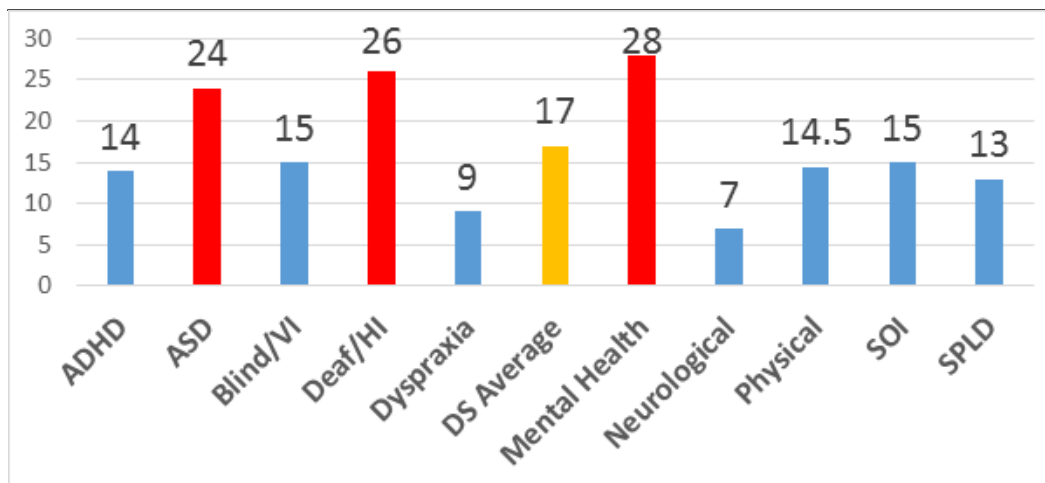


Figure 3: Percentage of students withdrawing by disability type

Final Comments

Outcomes studies for students in higher education are important and students with disabilities should not be excluded from this analysis. The data presented here is a testament to the considerable resilience and persistence that students with disability in Trinity demonstrate. It also provides an evidence base for the efficacy of access policy and programmes, reasonable accommodations and student supports. It is clear that how universities implement policies, practices and procedures matters. Students with disabilities in Trinity are closely aligned to their non-disabled peers in terms of the relatively high rate of graduation of 85%.

Overall this is very encouraging. The outcomes show that a large majority (83%) of students with disabilities successfully transition into, through and from Trinity College. However, a minority do struggle to the point that they withdraw at some point after registration. While all students (having a disability or not) should get the supports they need, where clear data shows that particular groups of students are additionally disadvantaged, supports and resources should be targeted for them. Nine years of data presented here shows that students with a mental health difficulty, students on the autistic spectrum and students who are Deaf or hard of hearing are more likely to withdraw compared to students with other disabilities. As these student groups are at higher risk of not completing their courses they can be identified for additional resources. However, it should also be borne in mind that all three groups have a completion rate above 70%.

An additional challenge in establishing any 'final' rate of graduation for students with disabilities is the fact that any sizeable sample is always incomplete as the student journey is more prone to delay and interruption. It is also difficult to include additional factors such as course type as the data sets are not large enough to determine any pattern in comparison with the general student population.

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