Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2022/23

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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.

Contents

Introduction

AHEAD is an independent, non-profit organisation that strives to work with and for disabled people to shape inclusive and empowering environments in tertiary education and employment. In furtherance of these objectives, our Research and Policy team are active in a broad range of Steering Groups, Sub-Committees and other policy collectives from across the policy landscape. We also continuously conduct further research, predicated on topics relevant to our remit. This helps foster an up to date and credible evidence base that informs our engagement with key stakeholders and pertinent actors from the Irish tertiary education and employment sectors. Our annual *Participation Rate Reports* are central to this work as they provide a robust overview of the engagement of disabled students with Higher Education (HE) Disability Support Services (DSS). These statistics are crucial to much of our engagement with policy makers as we endeavour to stimulate positive outcomes and interventions for disabled people who are accessing HE in Ireland.

AHEAD's ethos and strategy are buttressed by a rights-based, social model of disability approach, underpinned by relevant rights mechanisms and legislation. The *AHEAD Strategy* (AHEAD, 2024) reinforces our firm commitment to promote equity of access and engagement for disabled people in tertiary education and the labour market. Drawing from the principals of the UN CRPD and UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), alongside a range of other national and international rights mechanisms, we aim highlight disabled people as rights holders in the HE space, as opposed to passive recipients of support. To this end, we aim to empower students as rights holders, assist, represent and advocate for the realisation of these rights and enhance the experiences and narratives of disabled students as they access and engage with Higher Education. We also hope that this 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.

Our annual *Participation Rate* reports are the only institutionally verified public statistics from the HE sector in Ireland on engagement with support services and are regularly used to inform academic literature and our own policy objectives at national and institutional level. We also use the statistics and research findings to identify areas for further study and to inform our policy submissions. This research, entitled *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2022/23*, is part of a series of now-annual research reports conducted by AHEAD, tracking participation rates over time through the dual lenses of disability category and area of study. AHEAD first conducted research on the participation rates of students with disabilities in 1993/94 (non-annual), (AHEAD, 1994), 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 tertiary Irish education.

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 Staff (DSS) 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 (DSS) who are being referred to. AHEAD acknowledge that there are many disabled students who are not in receipt of supports and/or do not disclose their disability or register for supports. This has been identified across a broad range of literature and invariably pertains to perceived bias, stigma, discomfort in the disclosure process and a lack of understanding as to what constitutes disability, (AHEAD, 2023a; Meeks et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2021). A partnership approach between disabled students and their institution's DSS can help generate a sense of belonging and well-being among students. By promoting connection, inclusion, support and autonomy as part of normative practice, the process of accessing and engaging with DSS can be improved for disabled students. These four attributes are considered to be paramount for effective interaction between student and support staff member and have been alluded to as the Four Foundations of Belonging, (Jackson, 2022).

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.

319%

rise in the number of disabled students in HE over the last 15 years

Our research for the academic year 2021/22 illustrated that the participation rate of disabled students in HE had increased by 273 percent in the preceding 14 years, with disabled students accounting for 6.9 percent (n=18,097) of the total student body (n=261,902), (AHEAD, 2022). The HEA also published data that reported an increased participation rate of disabled students in HE for 2021/22. Their research, which was informed by a different research methodology to this research, stipulated that 17.8 percent[1] of the student body had anonymously declared at least one disability for the academic year 2021/22 (HEA, 2022a). The *Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education*, colloquially referred to as the *National Access Plan*, continues to be an important driver in the widening of participation for disabled students, (HEA, 2022b). The *Plan* has proved effective in removing barriers and creating accessible pathways into HE for disabled people. As such, our Participation Reports can be employed as a lens through which national policy and funding streams targeted at the disability/education agenda (e.g. PATH Funding Streams, DARE etc.) can be independently evaluated.

This Report also assists us in understanding the experiences and narratives of disabled students as they progress through HE. We also aim to examine the perspectives of DSS in their interaction with students with disabilities. A number of prior *Participation Rate Reports* have identified that these services are both over-burdened and under-resourced, (AHEAD, 2019, 2021b, 2022). The "On the Ground" section of this Report uses qualitative data, collated from responding DSS to analyse this viewpoint. This enables a robust, dichotomous overview of the interaction and partnership between students and support staff in circumstances what are rapidly become more challenging, year-on-year.

It is crucial that the welcome increase in disabled students accessing HE elicits a change in the culture and practices of HEIs, fostering an environment in which disabled students can enjoy equity of experience and progress through their studies in an equitable manner. If this is to occur, HE must become more inclusive, flexible and accessible for disabled students. Moreover, this must be consistently embedded in the culture of HE, as opposed to being framed within policy and practices that are aimed at *access to* HE only. Ease of interaction between disabled students and their support services is a key element in realising this objective.

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

Research Methodology

AHEAD distributed a detailed survey to the disability/access offices of 23 higher education institutions[2] in the Republic of Ireland in 2023, seeking participation rate statistics for the academic year 2022/23. 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 (one exception outlined below). All invited institutions responded, and this Report is informed by this data. 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 meaningful data, as part of our continuous effort to produce more precise, evidence-based findings in response to the changing HE landscape.

Many of the responding HEIs are currently in the process of merging from Institutes of Technology (IT) to Technological Universities (TU) under the auspices of the Technological Universities Act 2018. While these changes have been implemented, a number of respondents submitted their data separately, as opposed to an over-arching data sets under the moniker of individual TUs. The National College of Ireland (NCI), although funded by the Department of Education and Skills, is also included due to its large student population and the fact that the institution offers courses at NFQ levels that are identical to other participating HEIs. As such, the NCI was deemed too significant to omit from our analysis of all disabled students engaging with publicly funded HEIs.

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

It should be noted that this Report is underpinned by data pertaining incidence of disability. Our Report for the academic year 2021/22 marked a point of departure from previous participation rate research which included primary disability as the principal indicator or identifier of each student, (AHEAD, 2022, 2023b). This change enables a more nuanced, precise and accurate overview of both disability category and fields of study, two key elements of these Reports. It was also a direct response to the number of students who reported additional disabilities in past Reports, data which was being omitted from our datasets. However, reported disabilities will not be delineated as primary or additional, rather 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.

Due to a number of HEIs implementing updated assessment accommodations for disabled students, our inquiry into exam accommodations and the implementation of supports are also expanded for the academic year 2023/24. The relevant question has been updated to reflect the changes to current trends in needs assessments and reasonable accommodation provision.

It is also important to note that while the HEA also publish annual participation rate reports predicated upon the disability cohort, there are significant differences in the methodologies used in both reports. While this Report is informed by data from our annual survey which is completed by Disability Support Offices of responding HEIs, the HEA employ the Equal Access Survey[3] to collect the data for their analysis. The Equal Access Survey is disseminated to all first-year undergraduate students at point of access/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 statistics, however the dual datasets can serve to enrich the findings, enabling comparison and an inquiry into disclosure of disability and registration for supports.

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. For example, ATU submitted three different surveys: Sligo, Galway and Letterkenny campuses).

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

Participating Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

With surveys being the instrument employed to gather the data, the findings are quantitative in the vast majority of cases. However, the final question (Survey question 13 A to C) asked responding DSS to:

— Evaluate the implementation of supports and accommodations recommended within needs assessments.
— Comment on the requirement of medical verification as an antecedent to accessing support services.

To prompt meaningful insight, this data will be anonymised and will add a brief qualitative segment to the report's findings. The is explored in the "On the Ground" Section of this Report.

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 (DkKIT)

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)

National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG)

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 (TUD) (formerly Dublin Institute of Technology, IT Tallaght and IT Blanchardstown)

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 with Disabilities

This section of the Report now begins to disaggregate the data collated from all responding HEIs for the academic year 2022/23. From the 23 (inclusive of individual former Institutes of Technology) responding surveys, the data illustrates that 20,351 students were registered with support services in their HEI, representative of 7.4 percent of the total student body (n=276,508) enrolled in participating HEIs. In 2021/22, 6.9 percent (n=18,097) of the student population were registered with support services (AHEAD, 2023b), demonstrating the continued increase in the percentage of disabled students engaged with disability support services. This reflects a 6.5 percent (n=2,254) increase in the rate of participation of disabled students registered with support services in relation to 2021/22 data, (AHEAD, 2023b).

It should be noted that while our data suggests an increase in the total student body, when compared with 2021/22 data that recorded the total student body populace as n=261,902, AHEAD reports are informed by survey responses from "responding institutions". The structural pivot to Technological Universities as a collective of Institutes of Technologies has advanced some challenges for data collection in the last two years. Two important points emanate from this transition. While our numbers retain significance and rigour from a research perspective, the data published by the HEA for 2022/23 indicate a small decrease of 1.6 percent in the total student body.[4] Secondly, this highlights that it is percentages of the student body engaged with support services as opposed to numbers of students that are the most significant indicator of change in this Report.

2021/22's *Participation Rate Report* indicated that 6.9 percent of the student body were registered with their institution's support services (AHEAD, 2023b). Prior AHEAD Reports have consistently illustrated this trend of year-on-year increases, with 6.6 percent (2021/22) and 6.4 percent (2019/20) of all students registered with their DSS, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022). To this end, the 7.4 percent recorded in this Report sustains this perennial increase. It is notable that despite HEA statistics alluding to a slight decline in students enrolled in HEIs for the academic year of 2022/23, the percentage of students engaging with disability supports continues on an ascending trajectory.

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

A more rigorous inquiry into the data accumulated from responding DSS enables a broader overview of the range of percentages of students registered with support services across individual HEIs. This range was reported to be between 2.5 percent (n=142) from the data provided by the National College of Ireland and 12.1 percent (n=282) from the data provided by Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology. Other HEIs that reported high levels of engagement with disability supports include the National College of Art and Design (11.5 percent, n=156) and Trinity College Dublin (10.8 percent, n=2312). The significant differences in percentages of the population engaged with services across participating HEIs is likely underpinned by a broad range of factors which may include the availability of mainstreamed student supports, the signposting of services and other external factors such as the availability of accessible transport links. As such, these statistics are not intended to critique individual HEIs. A breakdown of all HEI data, including participation rates and numerical data is included in Appendix 1.

A meta-analysis of historical AHEAD data demonstrates that there has been a 319 percent increase in the number of students with disabilities accessing HE since the academic year 2008/09[5]. This welcome increase across all HEA funded HEAs is illustrated in Figure 1.

AHEAD have conducted a number of research reports that explore the experiences of disabled students within this space of consistent increases in the disabled student population, (AHEAD, 2020, 2021a, 2023a). In furtherance of our objective to attain a holistic and robust overview of the interaction between disabled students and their institution's DSS, The *Participation Rate Reports* offer a glimpse into the often-unnoticed latent challenges that Support Staff encounter due to being over-burdened by the number of students who currently require these essential supports. For disability supports to develop in Irish HE, it is imperative that both the voices of students, and the experiences of Support Staff members are highlighted.

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5   The academic year of 2008/09 was the inaugural iteration of AHEAD's annual Participation Rate Report.
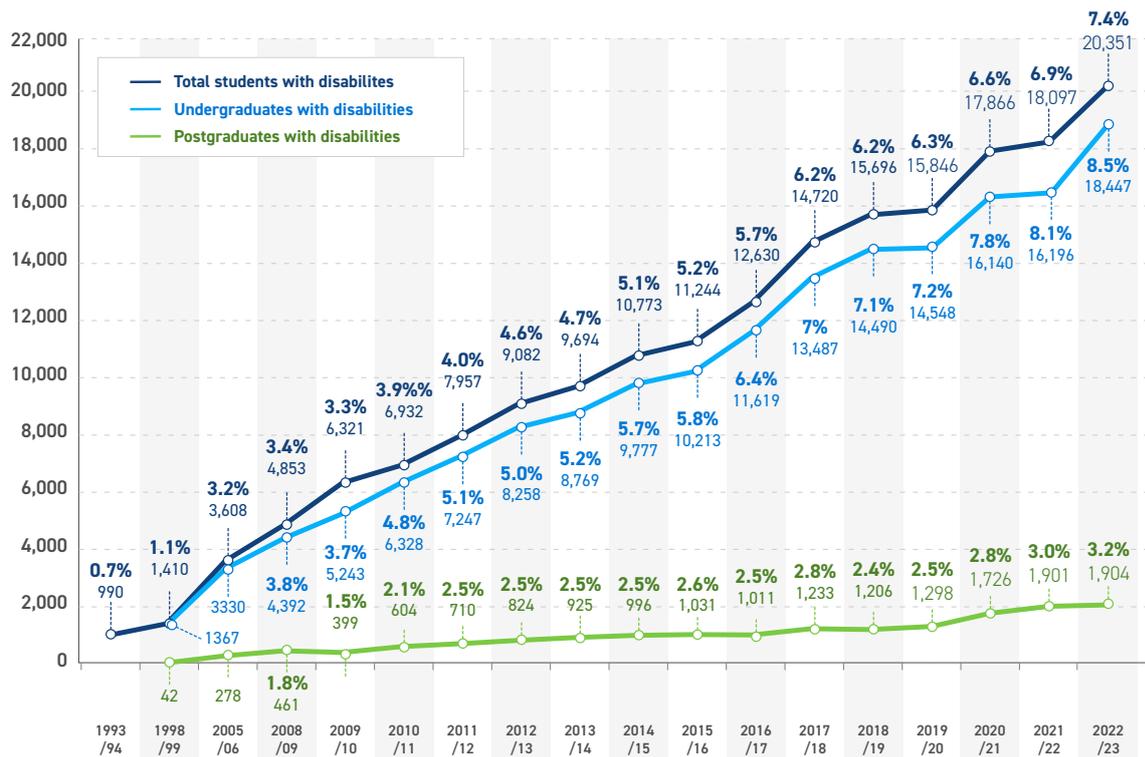
Figure 1. Number of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education and the percentage of the Total Student Population this Represents, 2022/23.

The dramatic increase in the numbers of disabled students engaged with supports is arguably a corollary of a broad range of societal and pedagogical contexts. Notwithstanding this, the development of dedicated access routes such as the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), the introduction of targeted funding streams (for example the four iterations of PATH funds), the efficacy of the *National Access Plan* (HEA, 2022b) and the continued implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) across a number of HEIs, (Healy et al., 2023) have combined to increase access and create a learning space that is more inclusive for disabled students (and other under-represented cohorts).

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. Despite the data indicating that an overall increase in the participation rate of disabled students has again been reiterated, a more in-depth analysis of the undergraduate and postgraduate engagement is required to unpack equal opportunity in HE for students with disabilities.

An annual increase in both cohorts was identified in the 2021/22 Report (AHEAD, 2023b), and this is again demonstrated in the data for 2022/23. While increases in the participation rates of students with disabilities are always welcome, postgraduate participation still remains stubbornly low when compared with undergraduate participation. Postgraduate study is an obvious enabler of high-income employment. To this end, it is imperative that equity of opportunity for disabled students to engage with postgraduate study is promoted, encouraged and fostered in Irish HE.

The HEA recently published research pertaining to graduate outcomes for disabled students which explored employability and pathways to further study. Their study found that 69 percent of disabled graduates were in employment nine months after graduation, in comparison with 74 percent of the general graduate population. Additionally, this figure ranged from 57 percent to 74 percent depending on the nature of the disability, with people with multiple disabilities least likely to be in employment, (O' Shea, 2023). Moreover, the findings suggest that there are more graduates with disabilities situated in the lower salary bands of €20,000-€24,999 when compared with their non-disabled peers, with each band thereafter highlighting a salary gap between disabled students and graduates with no disabilities. Pertaining to further study, it was suggested that disabled students are more likely to engage with further study when compared with their non-disabled peers, (Ibid.).

While AHEAD welcomes the HEA's commitment to examining graduate outcomes and postgraduate study for students with disabilities, there are some potential caveats to these research findings. The HEA's analysis of graduate outcomes for disabled students is in its infancy, thus precluding year-on-year benchmarking, while the findings allude to "further study", as opposed to specific postgraduate engagement. To this end, our research findings that indicate that disabled postgraduates are persistently under-represented across Irish HE retains their validity and rigour.

The data collected from all participating HEIs indicated that 18,447 undergraduate students were registered with disability supports in 2022/23. This represents 8.5 percent of all undergraduate students, and 91 percent of all students engaged with disability support services. When compared with the findings of AHEAD's 2021/22 report, this figure indicates a 5 percent increase in the rate of participation of the disabled undergraduate cohort, (AHEAD, 2023b). An analysis of the postgraduate data from the survey distributed to participating institutions demonstrated that 3.2 percent (n=1904) of all postgraduate students were registered with disability supports, representing 9 percent of all students engaged with disability support services. This represents a 5 percent rise in the rate of participation in comparison with the data from 2021/22, (Ibid.).

The introduction of new, solution focused enablers has been a key recommendation in a number of *Participation Rate Reports* published by AHEAD, (AHEAD, 2019, 2021b, 2022). Furthermore, our work in assisting graduates attain labour capital through AHEAD's WAM programme has engendered an overview of labour market trends that suggest that the attainment of a postgraduate qualification is frequently synonymous with purposeful, meaningful employment. Increased access to postgraduate study is also an important element in dismantling the intersection of poverty and disability that is embedded in contemporary society in Ireland, (EDF, 2020; Indecon, 2022; Watson et al., 2015). The pre-discussed HEA data pertaining to graduate outcomes suggests that more disabled graduates pursue further study in comparison with those who do not have a disability (O' Shea, 2023). However, with AHEAD data collated from participating HEIs demonstrating that only 3.2 percent (n=1904) of all postgraduates were registered with their institution's DSS in 2022/23, further research is essential to fully unpack this marked statistical disparity in order to foster new actions and pathways into postgraduate study for students with disabilities.

In recognition of this, 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, 2022b). 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), AHEAD will continue to explore the experiences of disabled postgraduate students in HE to provide empirical evidence to influence these aims and objectives as part of the LaunchPAD project.

Full-Time and Part-Time Participation Rates

This section of the Report is underpinned by a further disaggregation of the data from participating HEIs to unpack the participation rates of disabled students in both part-time and full-time study. This illustrated that 9 percent (n=19,224) of all full-time students (n=213,361) were registered with disability supports in their institution. Disabled students engaged with disability support services accounted for just 1.8 percent (n=1,124) of the total number of all part-time students (n=63,147).

Our 2021/22 Report illustrated that 8.4 percent (n=17,168) of all full-time students enrolled with their HEI were accessing disability supports. This is indicative of a significant increase of 7.1 percent in the rate of participation of full-time students relative to 2021/22 data, (AHEAD, 2023b). For greater context, our 21/22 Report indicated a 1 percent rise in participation in comparison with the preceding academic year dataset, (Ibid.).

AHEAD's *Participation Rates Report* for the academic year 2021/22 documented a significant increase in disabled students accessing part-time study, (AHEAD, 2023b). Despite this report being a primarily quantitative report, it was suggested that last year's increase was potentially linked to changing preferences in how students with disabilities desired to learn, a finding that was elicited from student centred, qualitative AHEAD research, (AHEAD, 2023a). This research illustrated that disabled students were becoming more competent and comfortable learning from home and educators were now more cognisant of digital accessibility, (AHEAD, 2023a). While part-time learning is not exclusively on-line, these skills are arguably more regularly utilised in part-time programmes. For many disabled students, part-time study can often be a more viable learning pathway, thus enabling greater participation for students who identify with certain disability categories. Consequently, an analysis of part-time participation for 2022/23 is important to examine if this increase has been sustained.

20,351

students with disabilities registered with support services for the academic year 2022/23

110%

rise in the last 10 years

In 2021/22, 1.6 percent (n=930) of all part-time students were engaging with disability supports. While this is illustrative of a significant under-representation of students with disabilities accessing part-time courses, it still highlights a 32 percent increase in the rate of engagement with services when benchmarked with the previous 2021/22 Report, (AHEAD, 2023b). Drawing from the dataset amassed from participating DSS, there has been a 11.1 percent increase in part-time participation for students with disabilities in the academic year of 2022/23. These year-on-year increases are welcomed by AHEAD, as part-time learning is frequently underpinned by greater flexibility, which often resonates with some disabled students.

The under-representation of disabled students in a learning mode that may be more accessible for some requires further analysis by relevant stakeholders. It is a key, tangible illustration of the persistent gaps that preclude equity of opportunity in Ireland's Higher Education landscape for disabled students. It has also been identified as a persistent barrier for the progression of disabled students in a number of AHEAD's *Participation Rate Reports*, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022, 2023b). Figure 2. illustrates this under-representation in part-time HE courses in participating HEIs. The graphic further disaggregates the data by postgraduate and undergraduate status.
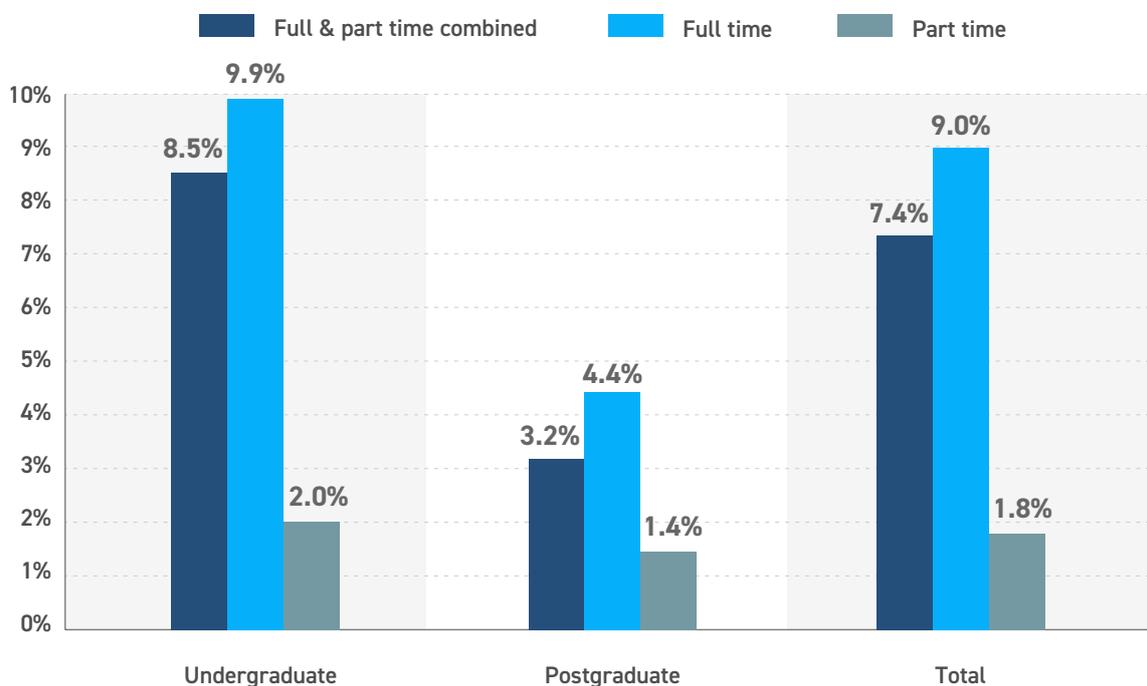
Figure 2. Percentage of students with disabilities in full-time and part-time education as a percentage of the total student population, 2022/23.

A further analysis of the survey data facilitates a nuanced inquiry of part and full-time participation through the lens of undergraduate and postgraduate engagement. In the academic year 2022/23, 9.9 percent (n=19,224) of all full-time undergraduate students were registered with disability support services. In the same time frame, just 2 percent (n= 759) of all part-time undergraduate students were registered with support services. Furthermore, 4.4 percent (n=1536) of full-time postgraduate students and 1.4 percent (n= 365) of part-time postgraduate students have accessed disability supports in 2022/23.

New Entrant Undergraduates with Disabilities

The survey distributed to participating HEIs defines new entrants as a person/student entering a full-time undergraduate programme (year 1) for the first time. An analysis of this dataset indicates that for the academic year 2022/23, 7.8 percent (n=4,773) of all new entrants across all participating institutions (n=60,050) were registered with disability supports in their HEI. In comparison with our 2021/22 Report, which stipulated that 7.2 percent (n=4,359) of new entrants were accessing supports, this represents an increase of 8.3 percent for this cohort.

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. This enables AHEAD to conduct reliable and credible research with the support of support staff in participating HEIs. To this end, our findings emanate from students who have disclosed at least one disability to support staff. This fosters a robust inquiry into exam accommodations, the ratio of support staff to student, a disability breakdown across a range of differing cohorts and a range of other important quantitative findings. This has been identified across several participation reports as an accurate and reliable methodology, which has been developed in partnership with disability support staff from across HEA funded HEIs. However, it is accepted that a significant body of disabled students do not register with supports for an array of reasons, including personal choice and the cost of medical verification required for registration, (AHEAD, 2023b). 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 inhibit socialisation within the student body, (AHEAD, 2023a; Meeks et al., 2021; Meeks et al., 2018).

The HEA employ an alternative research methodology to inform their collation of data. The Equal Access Survey (EAS) is distributed to all first year full-time and part-time students at the point of entry. It is a voluntary commitment that is asked of students at registration and is the primary instrument of data collection that underpins how the Authority identifies makeup of the student body. This informs policy and enables targeted interventions that can help foster a more inclusive HE landscape, (HEA, 2023a). The HEA report that "almost three in four" students engage with the EAS. It could be argued that the confidentiality and accessibility of the EAS structure perpetuates a "safe space" for disclosure for disabled students.

To this end, the HEA routinely report a significantly higher rate of participation for disabled students in comparison with the statistics that are recorded by AHEAD. However, having two data sets enables an analysis of non-disclosure rates, despite the different underlying datasets and methodologies. For the academic year of 2022/23, the HEA reported that 19.4 percent of all students identified as having at least one disability upon registration as per EAS data, (HEA, 2023c). This represents a significant disparity when compared with AHEAD data for the same academic year. In the AHEAD dataset, 7.9 percent (n=4,773) of all new entrant undergraduates (n=60,050) disclosed at least one disability while accessing disability supports. While it is accepted that the alternative underlying datasets may perpetuate some discrepancies, the marked difference in the participation rates statistics for this cohort does suggest that a sizeable number of students with disabilities desist from formally disclosing their disability and accessing DSS in their HEI.

New Registrations

New registrations are students who register with their institution's DSS for the first time. While the majority of disabled students access supports and the point of entry of their course, the survey collated from participating HEIs demonstrates that many do not do so in their initial year of study. In 2022/23, there were 4,773 new registrations with disability support services across all participating HEIs, representative of 23.5 percent of all students registered with DSS (n=20,351). Within this cohort, 2,118 students did not register in their first year of study, representative of 44.4 percent of all new registrations (n=4,773) and 10.4 percent of the total number of students with disabilities across all participating HEIs (n=20,351). With our 2021/22 Report expounding that 26 percent of new registrations were not in their first year of study, the 44.4 percent statistic in this Report is indicative of a significant, 69 percent increase in the number of disabled students engaging with DSS who were not in their first year of study (AHEAD, 2023b).

The reluctance of some students with disabilities to registering with supports is often underpinned by the same factors that inhibit disclosure, namely acceptance, belonging and (perceived) othering, (Meeks et al., 2021; Meeks et al., 2018). However, research suggests that some of the determinants that are synonymous with late registration can also include the late diagnosis of disability (Hart & Healy, 2018), perceived harm to future career prospects (AHEAD, 2023a) and the high cost of obtaining medical verification, which is frequently imposed on disabled students as a prerequisite to engaging with their institution's DSS, (Smith et al., 2021).

The section of the AHEAD survey distributed to participating institutions that examined late registration allowed support staff to insert brief quotes to enable a more comprehensive exploration of late registration. Those that did take the opportunity to contribute qualitative data alluded to significant (often record) increases in students enrolling via the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) programme, and the early withdrawal of students using this pathway. One HEI explicated that their institution had recorded an unexpected and significant rise in students requiring Needs Assessments, further stating that this "exceeded the normal growth pattern" (DSS Member 2). As such, as per disclosure, there appears to be a number of obstacles that impede students from engaging with disability supports. Furthermore, the qualitative data elicited from support staff further infers that the perennial increase in disabled students engaging with HE has precipitated an increased workload that may also play a part in the late registration of disabled students and their decision to disclose.

Mature Students

Current HEA research stipulates that 5.4 percent of the student population across all HEA funded institutions identify as mature students, (HEA, 2023c). A disaggregation of the data collated by AHEAD for the academic year of 2022/23 indicates that 7.4 percent (n=1,500) of all students with disabilities registered with support services (n=20,351) are mature students. Further analysis demonstrates that is equates to 5.7 percent of all mature students who are enrolled across all participating HEIs (n=26,175).

Year on year benchmarking reflects a 4.2 percent increase in the rate of participation of mature students with at least one disability across all institutions.

International Students

Across all participating institutions, the data indicates that there were 1,242 international students who disclosed at least one disability and engaged with disability supports for the academic year 2022/23. This is representative of 3.2 percent of all international students enrolled in HEA funded HEIs (n=38,851) and 6.1 percent of all students with disabilities (n=20,351). Drawing from the statistics published in AHEAD's Participation Rates Report for the preceding academic year (2021/22), year-on-year benchmarking signifies a 31.3 percent increase in the rate of engagement of international students with disability support services, (AHEAD, 2023b).

Apprenticeships

AHEAD's 2021/22 Report was the first participation rate research that analysed the number and rate of participation of disabled students/learners who engaged with apprenticeships in responding HEIs, (Ibid.). AHEAD are currently members of the National Apprenticeship Office Sub-Committee, working to place a renewed emphasis on widening participation for under-represented cohorts who access the apprenticeship framework. Currently, the *Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025* states that just 2.7 percent of apprentices have self-disclosed a disability, (DFHERIS, 2021). To this end, AHEAD intend to continue to monitor participation rates of disabled apprentices to support our engagement with policy stakeholders in the apprenticeship arena. AHEAD represent disabled students and learners as part of our continuous work with *Generation Apprenticeship*[6], with the objective of progressing equitable pathways for disabled people into apprenticeships.

10 of 24 participating HEIs reported data pertaining to apprenticeship, in comparison with 9 from the 2021/22 Report, (AHEAD, 2023b). These datasets demonstrated that there was a total of 7,630 Craft Apprenticeships across all responding HEIs, of which 6.7 percent (n=510) were registered with their institution's DSS. This is indicative of a 19.6 percent increase I the rate of engagement with services in relation to 2021/22 data, (AHEAD, 2023b). Pertaining to all other apprenticeships, survey respondents reported that there were 1,730 students/learners enrolled in participating HEIs, of which 2.3 percent (n=21) were engaging with disability supports, which is the same as of last year's rate of engagement, (Ibid.).

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6   https://apprenticeship.ie/

Students Registered with DSS Who Do Not Access the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD)

While a number of international (UNCRPD, SDGs) and national rights instruments (Public Sector Duty, Disability Act (2005), Equal Status Act) pertain to equity of opportunity for disabled people and could be used to reinforce disabled student's rights to access funding streams from duty bearers, in this case from the HEA though individual HEIs, there are still a number of disabled students who are precluded from accessing the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD). In response to this, AHEAD began collating data on disabled students who do not or cannot access this important funding stream.

To be eligible for support under the FSD, a student on an approved course must:[7]
— have a verifiable disability in one or more of the categories recognised by the HEA.
— meet specific nationality and residency criteria.
— be a participant on a full-time, or part-time (Republic of Ireland only) course.
— have a verified need for specific supports to enable participation on their chosen course.

The data for the academic year 2022/23 indicates that 11.8 percent (n=2,406) of students registered with supports do not receive direct assistance from the FSD, which equates to a 3.5 percent increase in the rate of participation of students who are not supported by the FSD relative to the 2021/22 dataset, (AHEAD, 2023b). A more rigorous overview of the data reflects the wide range in the percentage of students who are not eligible to access the FSD but are registered with disability supports. While some HEIs report that all students that are registered for supports can access the Fund, others show that over 28 percent of disabled students are precluded from accessing this funding stream. As such, the empirical evidence that informs this Report suggests that the FSD is not underpinned by consistent standards and uniformity of application, thus leaving disabled students from certain HEIs at a distinct disadvantage, while there is also qualitative data that indicates that some HEIs do not support students with high needs without access to the FSD. To further unpack this issue, participating support staff had the opportunity to add qualitative, brief quotes to highlight some of the challenges that are embedded in the FSD framework.

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7   https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/fund-for-students-with-disabilities/

"This number (of students not supported by the FSD) has grown since last year, with an increasing number of international students, who will never be eligible for the FSD. (There is) also (an) increase in unsuitable documentation for (access to the) FSD."

"Most of the students not funded are fine to be supported with what we can provide them without funding for them, but there are a number who would be of a much higher need of support who we're unable to support due to FSD restrictions, diagnosis restrictions, etc."

"There is an increasing strain on the service to support students who do not meet FSD funding criteria, we have no ringfenced source of funding for these students, so it is an on-going battle to provide their supports."

The qualitative data illustrates the challenges that are routinely faced by HEIs in their endeavour to offer supports for disabled students without the benefit of the FSD. This is amplified when one considers the diversification of the contemporary student body, including exponential increases in disabled students accessing tertiary education and the over-burdening of DSS, (Flood & Banks, 2021; Healy et al., 2023). This is further reflected upon and discussed in the 'Inside Services' Section of this Report.

Nature of Disability

AHEAD's Participation Reports use identical disability categories to those that inform HEA 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, 2021). 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:

— 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 disability support services. 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 the additional disabilities which students disclose enables a more accurate overview of the incidence of disability across the entire cohort of disabled students (n=20,351).

38.8%

of students who were registered for supports for the academic year 2022/23 reported a Specific Learning Difficulty. This was the most common disability category recorded.

The data elicited from all participating HEIs demonstrates that 18.1 percent (n=3,680) of all students with disabilities have disclosed more than one disability when registered with disability support services. 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 more reliable and credible methodology 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).
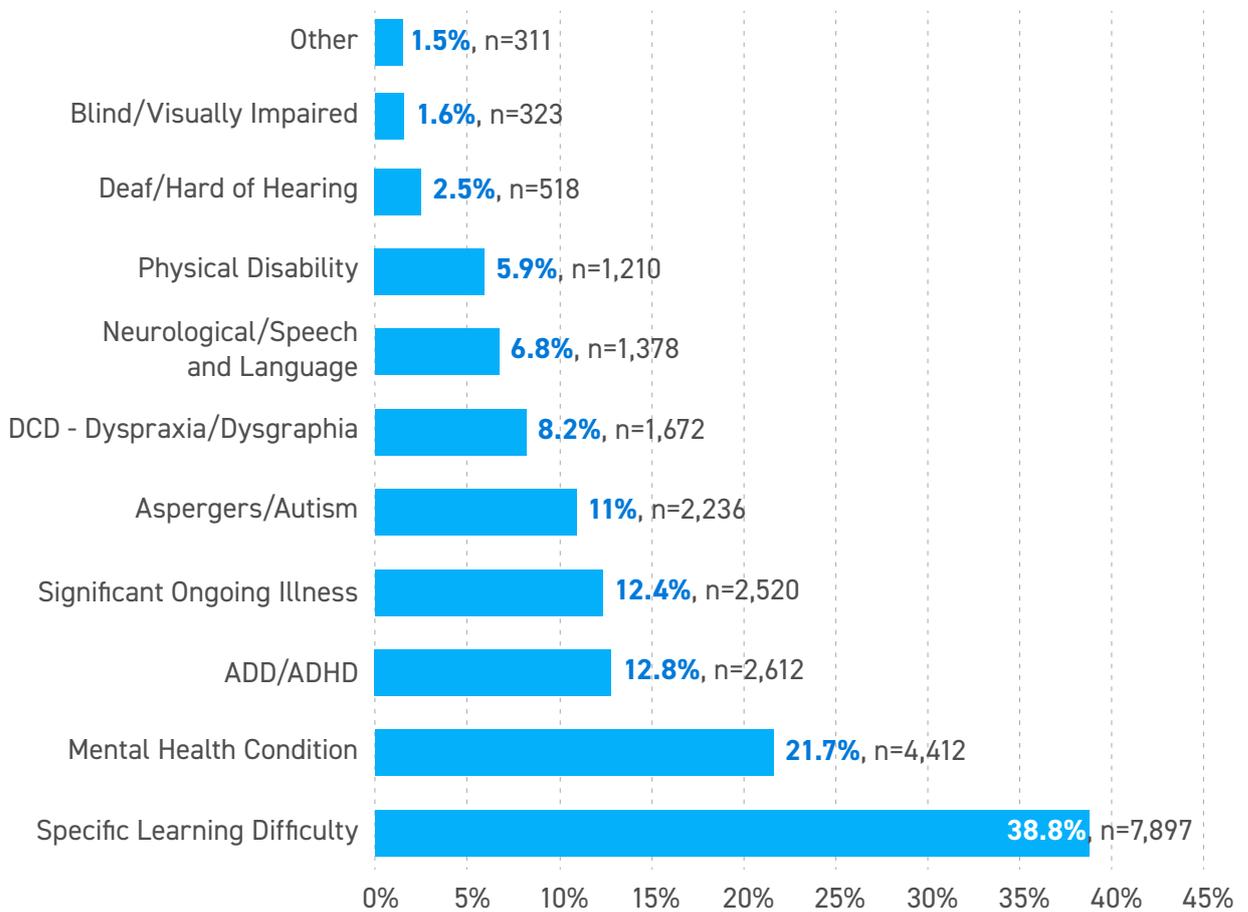
Figure 3. Breakdown of total students (postgraduate and undergraduate) registered with disability support services by category of disability, 2022/23.

As has been the case over a number of iterations of Participation Rate research reports (AHEAD, 2022, 2023b), Specific Learning Difficulty was again the disability category which most of students with disabilities disclosed when registering with disability support services. It was reported, as a primary or additional disability by 38.8 percent (n=7,897) of all students with disabilities. This was followed by Mental Health Condition (21.7 percent, n=4,412), ADD/ADHD (12.8 percent, n=2,612), Significant Ongoing Illness (12.4 percent, n=2,20), Aspergers/Autism (11 percent, n=2,236), DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia (8.2 percent, n=1,672), Neurological/Speech and Language (6.8 percent, n=1,378), Physical Disability (5.9 percent, n=1,210), Deaf/Hard of Hearing (2.5 percent, n=518), Blind/Visually Impaired (1.6 percent, n=323) and Other (1.5 percent, n=311).

Figure 3 indicates that students who disclosed sensory disabilities to DSS are 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, 2022, 2023b). When compared with current census data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO), the under-representation of this cohort requires acknowledgement and solution focussed discussion among key stakeholders and actors from the sector.

The Census 2022 data indicated that 6 percent of the Irish population, and 27 percent of all citizens who stipulated to having "at least one long-lasting condition or difficulty to any extent", identified as blind or visually impaired, (CSO, 2023). An obvious caveat to this frame of reference is alluded to by the CSO, who postulate that the majority of this cohort are over 50 years old, (Ibid.) To this end, it is difficult to make a robust, evidence-based and accurate comparison with those enrolled in participating HEIs. Notwithstanding this, the substantial contrast in the statistics suggests that blind/visually impaired students are notably under-represented in Irish HE. The same CSO census data posits that 5 percent of the population, or 21 percent of those who identify as having "at least one long-lasting condition or difficulty to any extent", self-disclosed as being deaf or hard of hearing. However, similar to the blind/visually impaired cohort, the underlying datasets are not the same. As such, it is the substantial contrast in the statistics that again underpins the analysis, (Ibid.).
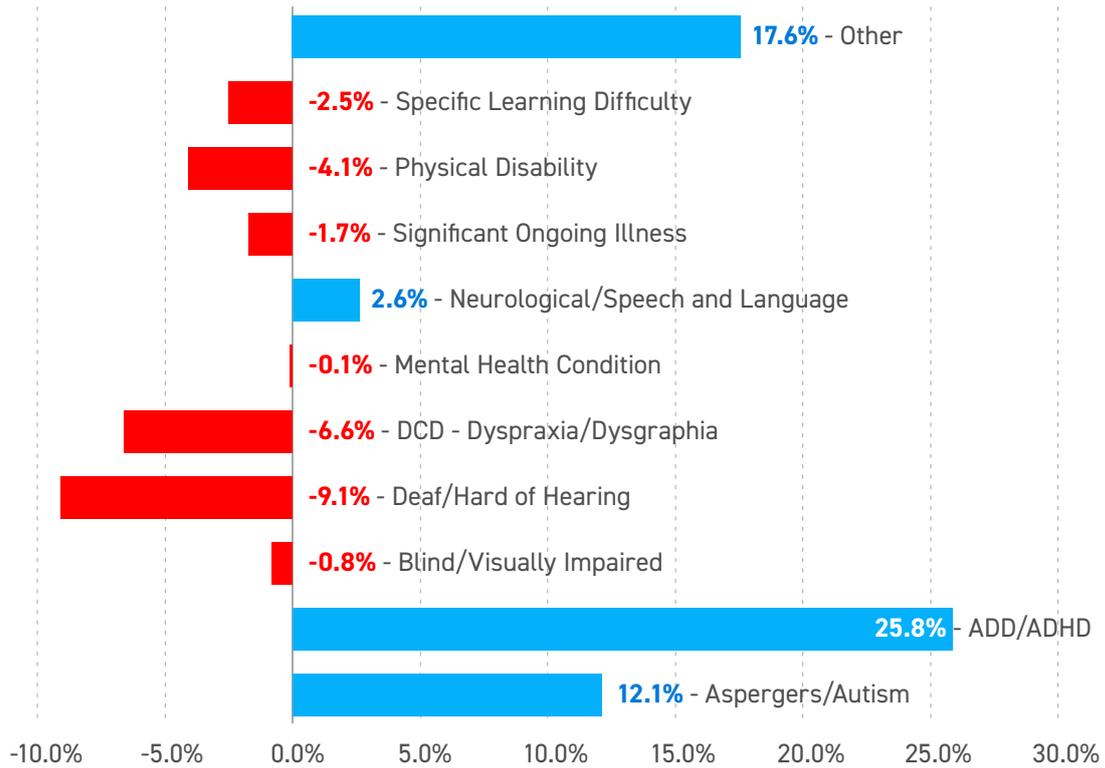
Figure 4. Year-on-Year Change in the Percentage of Students Engaging with DSS, by Disability Category, (21/22 and 22/23).

Figure 4 explicates the year-on-year change in the percentage of students engaging with their institution's DSS, relative to our 21/22 Report, (AHEAD, 2023b). The statistics are disaggregated by category of disability and include postgraduate and undergraduate students. Some of the more notable differences in the percentages of disabled students registered with support services, relative to 2021/22 data include: ADD/ADHD (25.8 percent increase), Other (17.6 percent increase), Aspergers/Autism (12.1 percent increase), Deaf/Hard of Hearing (9.1 percent decrease), DCD-Dyspraxia/ Dysgraphia (6.6 percent decrease) and Physical Disability (4.1 percent decrease). This is the inaugural benchmarking from previous iterations of the Participation Rates Report that explores the disability category breakdown datasets that include the total incidence of each disability category, (AHEAD, 2023b).

New Entrant Disability Breakdown

This section now explores the new entrant undergraduate cohort and disaggregates this dataset by disability category. As discussed, this analyses the cohort of students who are engaging with the first year of their undergraduate studies (n=4,773). Figure 5 shows the percentage of new entrant undergraduates registered with disability support services broken down by students who have disclosed each disability as their primary or additional disability/disabilities.

Pertaining to this cohort, 41.7 percent, (n=1,991) disclosed Specific Learning Difficulty as a primary or additional disability. Following this in order of descent: Mental Health Difficulty (20.4 percent, n=947), ADD/ADHD (14.8 percent, n=708), Aspergers/Autism (14.4 percent, n= 689), Significant Ongoing Illness (10.8 percent, n=514), DCD-Dyspraxia/ Dysgraphia (9.1 percent, n=432), Neurological/Speech and Language (7.3 percent, n=347), Physical Disability (5.9 percent, n=280), Deaf/Hard of Hearing (2.4 percent, n=116), Blind/Visually Impaired (1.6 percent, n=77) and Other (1.6 percent, n=77).
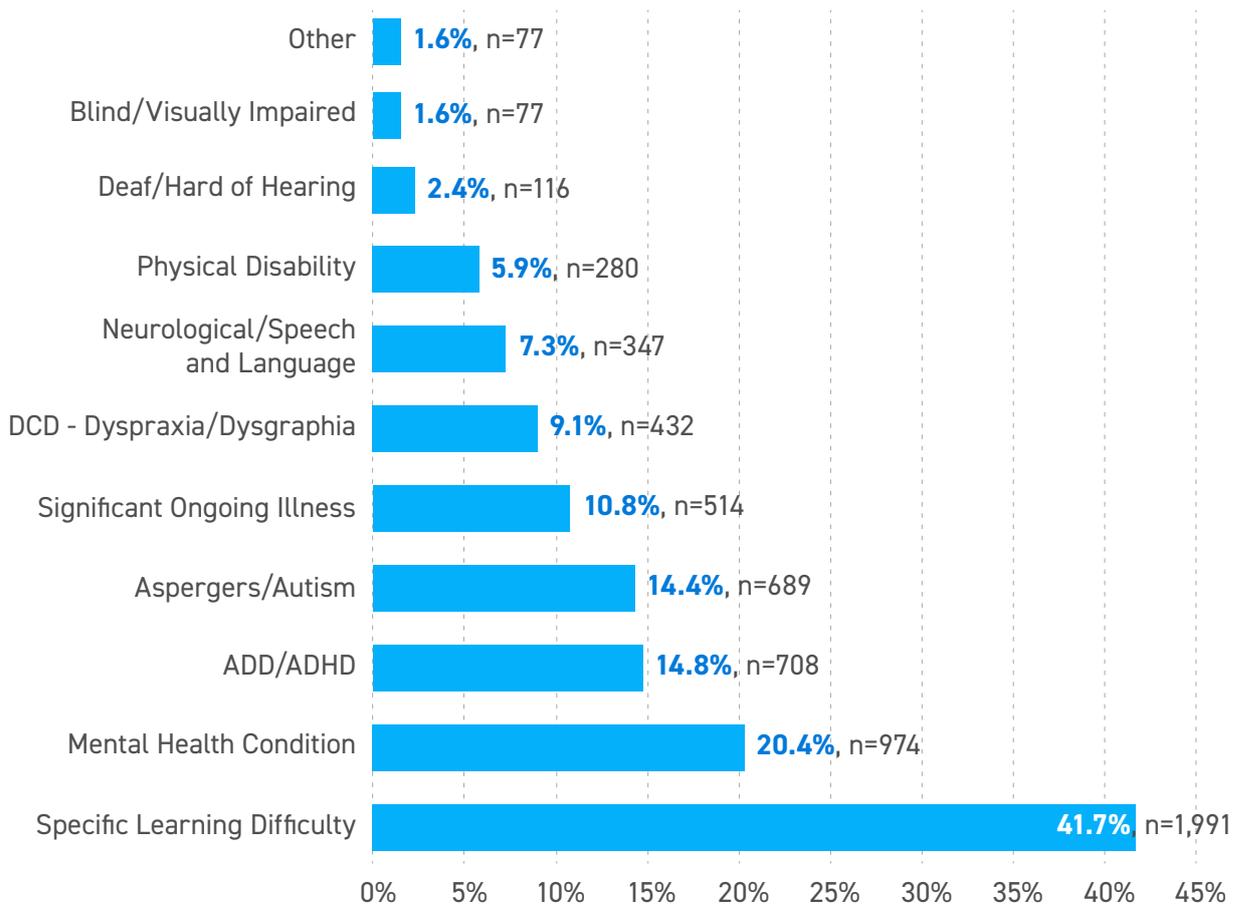
Figure 5. Breakdown of new entrant students registered with disability support services by category of disability 2022/2023.

Undergraduate Disability Breakdown

From the data collated from all participating HEIs, it was documented that there were 18,447 undergraduate students registered with their institutions' DSS for the academic year 2022/23. This is representative of 90.8 percent of all students with disabilities and 8.5 percent of all enrolled undergraduate students. When benchmarked against AHEAD's *Participation Report* findings for the preceding academic year (2021/22), this represents a 5.4 percent increase in the rate of participation of disabled undergraduate students, (AHEAD, 2023b). Furthermore, 23.7 percent of all undergraduate students registered with disability supports disclosed more than one disability (additional disabilities).

Category	Percentage	n
Blind/Visually Impaired	1.5%	n=283
Other	1.6%	n=297
Deaf/Hard of Hearing	2.5%	n=469
Physical Disability	5.7%	n=1,047
Neurological/Speech and Language	6.9%	n=1,273
DCD - Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia	8.4%	n=1,556
Aspergers/Autism	11.1%	n=2,060
Significant Ongoing Illness	12.2%	n=2,260
ADD/ADHD	12.8%	n=2,364
Mental Health Condition	21.8%	n=4,025
Specific Learning Difficulty	39.1%	n=7,225
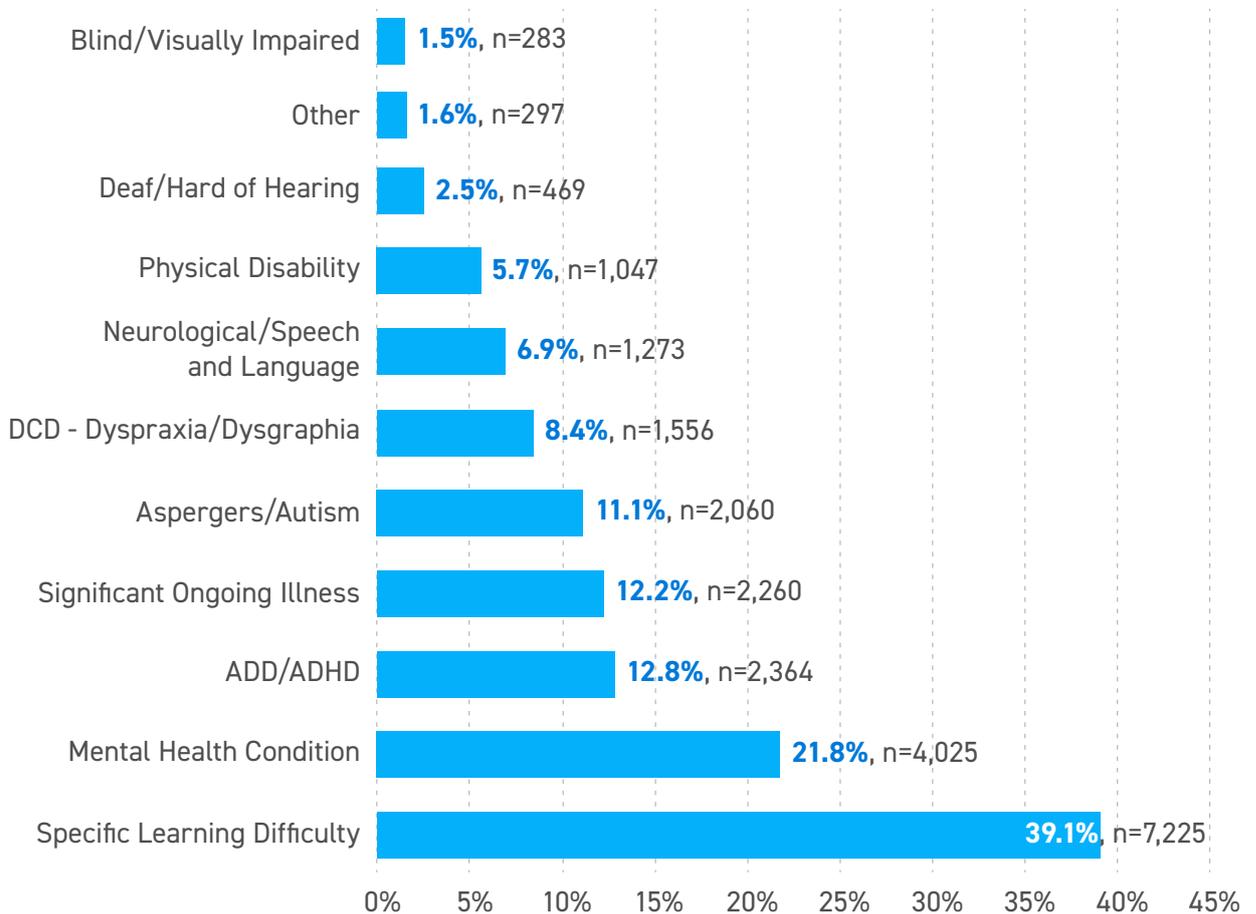
Figure 6. Breakdown of undergraduate students registered with DSS by category of disability 2022/23.

Figure 6 illustrates that the three categories of disability that were disclosed by the highest percentage of undergraduate students were Significant Learning Difficulty (39.1 percent, n=7,225), Mental Health Condition (21.8 percent, n=4,025) and ADD/ADHD (12.8 percent, n=2,364). The three categories disclosed to DSS by the lowest percentage of undergraduate students registered with disability supports were: Blind/Visually Impaired (1.5 percent, n=283), Other (1.6 percent, n=297) and Deaf/Hard of Hearing (2.5 percent, n=469). These statistics are similar to our 2021/22 Report, with some minor changes in the order (ascending and descending), (AHEAD, 2023b). Students who identify as Blind/Visually Impaired are now the smallest cohort of disabled students at undergraduate level, replacing the disability category Other. The category Other has been disclosed by the lowest percentage of disabled undergraduate students in a number of prior AHEAD Reports, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022).
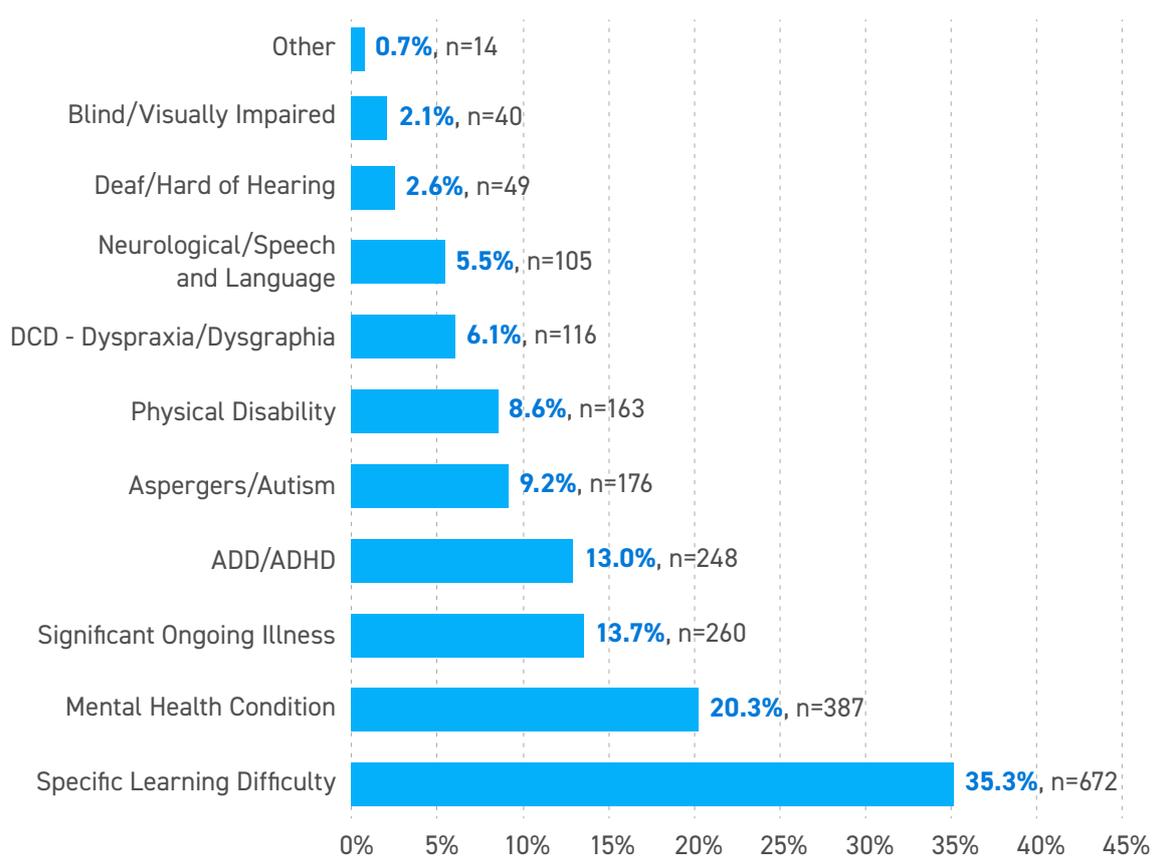
A complete overview of the incidence of disability among the undergraduate cohort also illustrates the following statistics: Physical Disability was disclosed by 5.7 percent (n=1,047) of all undergraduates, Neurological/Speech and Language 6.9 percent (n=1,273), DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia 8.4 percent (n=1,556), Aspergers/Autism 11.1 percent (n=2,060) and Significant Ongoing Illness 12.2 percent (n=2,260). It should be again noted that the survey designed by AHEAD in partnership with participating disability support staff now calculates these percentages using data that includes primary and additional disabilities.

Postgraduate Disability Breakdown

The data from disability support staff who contributed data to inform this Report indicates that disabled postgraduate students have continued to be significantly under-represented in the academic year 2022/23 (3.2 percent of all postgraduate students are accessing DSS in their institution in comparison with 8.5 percent of undergraduate students). Notwithstanding this, it is still important to disaggregate this data as it may assist in understanding potential barriers that inhibit postgraduate participation. This Report for the academic year 2022/23 illustrated that despite the perennial under-representation at this level, the data still demonstrated a 5 percent increase in the rate of participation of disabled postgraduates when compared with 2021/22 data, (AHEAD, 2023b). Figure 7 illustrates the prevalence of each disability category across all postgraduate students registered with disability supports in their HEI.

Figure 7. Postgraduate Breakdown by Disability Category, Incidence of Disability 2022/23.

Figure 7 illustrates the incidence of disability among all postgraduates who are registered for supports in their HEI. An overview of the prevalence of disability categories, according to the 2022/23 dataset demonstrates that the three categories with the highest rates of participation are: Specific Learning Difficulty (35.3 percent, n=672), Mental Health Condition (20.3 percent, n=387) and Significant Ongoing Illness (13.7 percent, n=260). While the numbers and percentages are slightly different when compared to the 2021/22 data, the same three categories were identified as the most prevalent in our 2021/22 Report, (AHEAD, 2023b). The three categories with the lowest participation rate were Other (0.7 percent, n=14), Blind/Visually Impaired (2.1 percent, n=40) and Deaf/Hard of Hearing (2.6 percent, n=49). Again, the disability categories, and the order in which they have been recorded are identical to 2021/22 findings, (Ibid.).

The remaining categories and the percentage of postgraduate students that have disclosed this disability when accessing disability supports are: ADD/ADHD (13 percent, n=248), Aspergers/Autism (9.2 percent, n=176), Physical Disability (8.6 percent, n=163), DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia (6.1 percent, n=116) and Neurological/Speech and Language (5.5 percent, n=105). While AHEAD welcome the incremental, year-on-year increase in disabled students engaging with postgraduate studies, 3.2 percent of all postgraduate students being registered with disability supports is still a significant under-representation. When compared with statistics which indicate that 8.5 percent of all undergraduate students were registered for supports in 2022/23, the under-representation is likely an outcome of a number of barriers that often intersect to restrict disabled students from accessing further study following graduation.

The postgraduate narratives and experiences of disabled students have been explored by Rath (2023), who elucidates that the voice of disabled postgraduates has not been incorporated into decision making and policy initiatives, with a greater focus on the rate of general participation of disabled students in higher education evident. The attainment of a postgraduate qualification is an obvious driver that generates pathways to greater opportunity of employment and therefore a higher standard of living and quality of life. Subsequently, AHEAD have commenced collaboration with the National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee (NDPAC) through the HEA-funded LaunchPAD initiative to foster inclusion and ease of access to postgraduate students to engage with further study.[8]

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

Fields of Study

As a point of departure, this Report now examines the participation rate of disabled students engaged with support services across 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 2022/23 was 20,051, or 7.4 percent of the total student body. 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 survey distributed to responding institutions) compared with the disaggregation of the total student body (drawing from HEA data), (HEA, 2023c). One participating HEI was unable to provide the data pertaining to disability category and field of study (n=998), and this has been taken into account when calculating percentages.
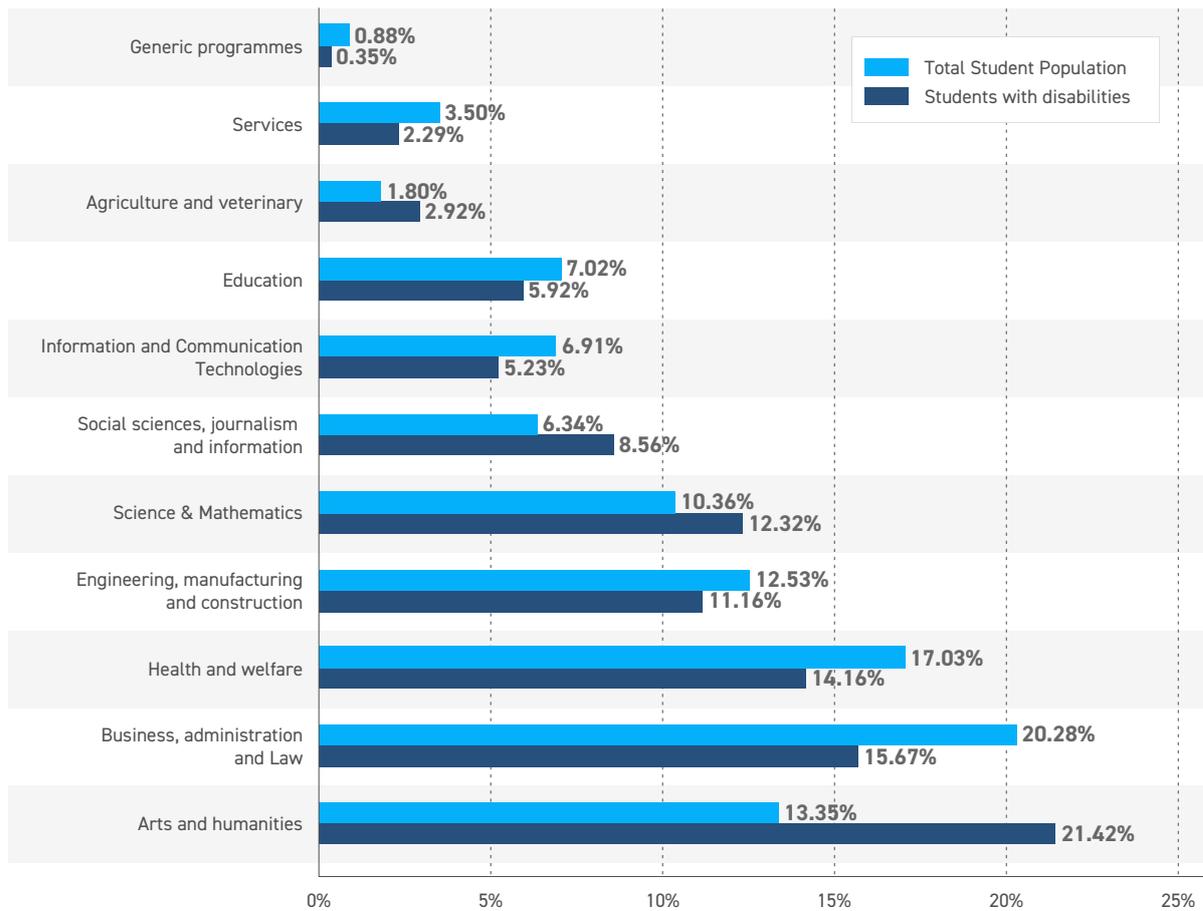
Figure 8. Participation Rates of the total student body and those engaging with DSS in each Field of Study.

Chart data (Total Student Population / Students with disabilities):

Field of Study	Total Student Population	Students with disabilities
Generic programmes	0.88%	0.35%
Services	3.50%	2.29%
Agriculture and veterinary	1.80%	2.92%
Education	7.02%	5.92%
Information and Communication Technologies	6.91%	5.23%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.34%	8.56%
Science & Mathematics	10.36%	12.32%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.53%	11.16%
Health and welfare	17.03%	14.16%
Business, administration and Law	20.28%	15.67%
Arts and humanities	13.35%	21.42%

The three fields of study that were reported to have the highest rate of participation for students with disabilities were Humanities and Arts (21.4 percent, n=4,146, representative of a 6 percent increase in the rate of participation in relation to 21/22), Business, Administration and Law (15.67 percent, n=3,033, representative of a 2.7 percent decrease in the rate of participation in relation to 21/22) and Health and Welfare (14.16 percent, n=2,780, representative of a 0.3 percent decrease in the rate of participation in relation to 21/22). The rates of participation for disabled students in these fields of study are relatively similar to those recorded in 21/22, while the order is identical. The three fields with the lowest rate of participation were General Programmes (0.35 percent, n=67, representative of a 16.7 percent increase in the rate of participation in relation to 21/22), Services (2.29 percent, n=443, representative of a 0.4 percent decrease in the rate of participation in relation to 21/22) and Agriculture and Veterinary (2.92 percent, n=565, representative of a 0.7 percent increase in the rate of participation in relation to 21/22). The remaining fields of study were disaggregated by rate of participation as follows: Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (11.16 percent, n=2,160), Science and Mathematics (12.32 percent, n=2,384), Information & Communication Technologies (5.23 percent, n=1,092, representative of a 6.6 percent decrease in relation to 21/22), Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (8.56 percent, n=1657, representative of a 8.9 percent decrease in relation to 21/22) and Education (5.92 percent, n=1,146, representative of a 11.7 percent increase in relation to 21/22).

In this section of the Report, the HEA data enables an 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, 2021a, 2022, 2023b). 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 (21.4 compared to 13.35 percent of the total student population), other notable disparities include Business, Administration and Law (15.67 percent of students registered with DSS, 20.28 percent of the total student body), Health and Welfare (14.06 percent of students registered with DSS, 17.03 percent of the total student body).

21.4%

Arts and Humanities is the field of the study with the highest number of disabled students across participating institutions (6% increase in the rate of participation in relation to 21/22)

To this end, the continuous trend of Arts and Humanities being the field of study with the highest percentage of disabled students can represent a key barrier that prevents graduates transitioning into employment, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022, 2023b). While there are many complex barriers that inhibit disabled graduates entering the labour market that are beyond the scope of this Report, the HEA report that 48.2 percent of Arts and Humanities graduates were in full-time employment after 9 months, making it the field of study with the lowest rates of employment. Arts and Humanities graduates also more frequently inhabited the lowest salary bands (€20,000 to €24,000 per annum), (HEA, 2023b). Put more succinctly, the field of study with the highest participation rate for disabled students has the poorest graduate outcomes, which does little to help dismantle the poverty/disability intersection and offset the considerable added cost of disability in contemporary Ireland, (Cullinan et al., 2015; Indecon, 2022; Yeo, 2001).

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 (12.5 percent of the student body and 11.2 percent of disabled students) and Education (7 percent of the total student body and 5.9 percent of disabled students).

Considering a number of national policy documents have reiterated the importance of HE to the Irish economy (Department of Further and Higher Education, 2022; Government of Ireland, 2022; Higher Education Strategy Group, 2011), in particular pertaining to research, health and climate change, it is crucial that disabled students are afforded equal opportunity to access fields of study that encompass high impact careers. The reporting of the over and under-representation of disabled students in certain fields of study is also important in terms of Ireland's commitments to The Bologna Convention (which aspires to have an educational landscape reflective of civil society) and The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), where equal access to higher education is enshrined as an entitlement for disabled people.

Fields of Study Breakdown by Disability

The 2022/23 survey completed by responding institutions included data that disaggregated the participation rates of students with disabilities by fields of study and disability categories. This section of the report now examines this data to explore the breakdown of disability category, cross-referenced with field of study.

Separate tables of data that represent each disability category are included to facilitate interpretation of the data. Subsequently, a number of key findings are briefly discussed and compared with the 2021/22 dataset. The disability category "Other" is excluded from this analysis due to the diversity in disabilities included in this category. Again, fields of study are based on the ISCED Classifications, and the disability categories employed by the HEA in their research.

In terms of interpretation of the data in this section, it should be noted that one responding institution was unable to provide a breakdown of students with disabilities by fields of study (n=551 students). To enable accurate analysis, this has been adjusted for in the percentage calculations.

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 key points and comparison with 2021/22 data following each data table.

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.

12.8% 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%[9]	0.3%	8	**0.3%[10]**	11.9%
Education	7.0%	5.9%	69	2.7%	6.0%
Arts and humanities	13.4%	21.4%	622	**24.8%**	15.0%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.3%	8.6%	299	11.9%	18.0%
Business, administration and law	20.3%	15.7%	377	**15.0%**	12.4%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.4%	12.3%	306	12.2%	12.8%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.9%	5.2%	168	6.7%	16.6%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.5%	11.2%	263	10.5%	12.2%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	58	2.3%	10.3%
Health and welfare	17.0%	14.2%	298	11.9%	10.9%
Services	3.5%	2.3%	43	**1.7%**	9.7%
Total			2,511[11]	100.0%	

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

10 Highest and lowest participation rates in each table have been marked with green/red backgrounds for ease of interpretation.

11 The totals in these tables differ from the previously discussed totals as one institution was unable to provide a breakdown of fields of study (n= 998 students).

48%

of Arts and Humanities graduates were in full-time employment after 9 months, making this the field of study with the lowest rates of employment.

— The two fields of study with the highest percentage of students who have identified with the ADD/ADHD disability category were Arts and Humanities (24.8 percent, n=622, representative of an increase of 9.7 percent) and Business, Administration and Law (percent, n=275, representative of an increase of 0.7 percent in relation to 2021/22 data).

— The two fields of study with the lowest rate of participation for this cohort were Services (1.7 percent, n=43, representative of a decrease of 26.1 percent in relation to 2021/22 data) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.3 percent, n=8, representative of a 50 percent increase in relation to 2021/22 data).

— 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. 24.8 percent (n=622) of this cohort were enrolled in this field of study, compared with 13.4 percent 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.

— The majority of the ADD/ADHD participation rate statistics were relatively consistent with the disabled student cohort. Some notable outliers include Education (with 2.7 percent of students disclosing ADD/ADHD, 5.9 percent of all students registered with DSS and 7 percent of all students), and Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (with 11.9 percent of students disclosing ADD/ADHD, 8.6 percent of all students registered with DSS and 6.3 percent of all students).

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.

11.0% 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%	0.3%	12	**0.6%**	17.9%
Education	7.0%	5.9%	58	2.8%	5.1%
Arts and humanities	13.4%	21.4%	686	**32.7%**	16.5%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.3%	8.6%	193	9.2%	11.6%
Business, administration and law	20.3%	15.7%	222	10.6%	7.3%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.4%	12.3%	344	**16.4%**	14.4%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.9%	5.2%	249	11.9%	24.6%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.5%	11.2%	180	8.6%	8.3%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	31	1.5%	5.5%
Health and welfare	17.0%	14.2%	97	4.6%	3.5%
Services	3.5%	2.3%	25	**1.2%**	5.6%
Total			2097	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest rates of participation for this disability category were Arts and Humanities (32.7 percent, n=686, representative of a 5.5 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data) and Natural Sciences, Journalism and Information (16.4 percent, n=344, representative of a 1.8 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data).

— The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation for this cohort were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.6 percent, n=12, representative of a 200 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data) and Services (1.2 percent, n=25, representative of a 40 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 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 (2.8 percent compared to 7 percent of all students) and Health and Welfare (4.6 percent compared to 17 percent of all students).

— Students who disclosed Aspergers/Autism as a primary or additional disability were significantly over-represented in Information, Communication Technologies (11.9 percent compared to 6.9 percent of all students).

— Many of these trends were highlighted in prior iterations of Participation Rate Reports, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022, 2023b).

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.

1.6% 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%	0.3%	2	**0.6%**	3.0%
Education	7.0%	5.9%	15	4.8%	1.5%
Arts and humanities	13.4%	21.4%	68	**21.8%**	1.6%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.3%	8.6%	32	10.3%	1.9%
Business, administration and law	20.3%	15.7%	62	**19.9%**	2.0%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.4%	12.3%	37	11.9%	1.6%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.9%	5.2%	17	5.4%	1.7%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.5%	11.2%	21	6.7%	1.0%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	7	2.2%	1.2%
Health and welfare	17.0%	14.2%	46	14.7%	1.7%
Services	3.5%	2.3%	5	**1.6%**	1.1%
Total			312	100.0%	

— Apart from the disability category "Other", the Blind/Visually Impaired cohort had the lowest rate of participation for the academic year 2022/23. Sensory disabilities (Blind/Visually Impaired and Deaf/Hard of Hearing) are consistently the two disability categories with the lowest rate of participation among all disabled students.

— The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation from the Blind/Visually Impaired cohort were Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.6 percent, n=2, representative of no change in relation to 21/22 data) and Services (1.6 percent, n=5, representative of a 33.3 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data).

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation for this cohort were Arts and Humanities (21.8 percent, n=68, representative of an 8.5 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data) and Business, Administration and Law (19.9 percent, n=92, representative of a 0.8 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data).

— Significant under-representations are reflected in Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (6.7 percent compared with 12.5 percent of all students) and Education (4.8 percent compared with 7 percent of all students).

— The majority of other fields of study were relatively similar when compared with the total student cohort, (apart from the pre-discussed Arts and Humanities 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%	0.3%	1	**0.2%**	1.5%
Education	7.0%	5.9%	28	5.7%	2.4%
Arts and humanities	13.4%	21.4%	96	**19.5%**	2.3%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.3%	8.6%	48	9.8%	2.9%
Business, administration and law	20.3%	15.7%	96	**19.5%**	3.2%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.4%	12.3%	55	11.2%	2.3%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.9%	5.2%	23	4.7%	2.3%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.5%	11.2%	46	9.3%	2.1%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	12	2.4%	2.1%
Health and welfare	17.0%	14.2%	78	15.9%	2.8%
Services	3.5%	2.3%	9	**1.8%**	2.0%
Total			492	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest percentage of students registered as Deaf/Hard of Hearing were Arts and Humanities (19.5 percent, n=96, representative of a .5 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data) and Business, Administration and Law (19.5 percent, n=96, representative of a .5 percent increase in relation to 21/22 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 (0.2 percent, n=1, representative of no change in relation to 21/22 data) and Services (1.8 percent, n=9, representative of an 80 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data).

— Apart from the over-representation in Arts and Humanities that is consistent across all disability categories, Social Sciences, Journalism and Information is the only other field of study with a marked over-representation for this cohort. (9.8 percent of students who identify as Deaf/Hard of Hearing compared with 6.3 percent of all students).

— Other outliers of under-representation include Information, Communication and Technologies (4.7 percent compared to 6.9 percent of all students) and Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction (9.3 percent compared with 12.5 percent 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.

8.2% 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%	0.3%	2	**0.1%**	3.0%
Education	7.0%	5.9%	72	4.6%	6.3%
Arts and humanities	13.4%	21.4%	378	**23.9%**	9.1%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.3%	8.6%	149	9.4%	9.0%
Business, administration and law	20.3%	15.7%	280	**17.7%**	9.2%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.4%	12.3%	188	11.9%	7.9%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.9%	5.2%	122	7.7%	12.1%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.5%	11.2%	188	11.9%	8.7%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	29	**1.8%**	5.1%
Health and welfare	17.0%	14.2%	127	8.0%	4.6%
Services	3.5%	2.3%	45	2.8%	10.2%
Total			1580	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest percentage of students from this disability category were Arts and Humanities (23.9 percent, n=378, representative of a 5.8 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data) and Business, Administration and Law (17.7 percent, n=280, representative of an 8.3 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data).

— The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation for this disability category were Generic Programmes and Qualification (0.1 percent, n=2, representative of 50 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data) and Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Veterinary (1.8 percent, n=29, representative of a 25 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data).

— Significant under-representations are evident in the following fields of study: Health and Welfare (8 percent compared with 17 percent of all students) and Education (4.6 percent in comparison with 7 percent of all students).

— Over-representations occur in the following fields of study: Arts and Humanities (23.9 percent in comparison with 13.4 percent of all students) and Social Sciences, Journalism and Information (9.4 percent in comparison with 6.3 percent 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.

21.7% 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%	0.3%	19	**0.5%**	28.4%
Education	7.0%	5.9%	216	5.1%	18.8%
Arts and humanities	13.4%	21.4%	1161	**27.5%**	28.0%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.3%	8.6%	478	11.3%	28.8%
Business, administration and law	20.3%	15.7%	488	11.6%	16.1%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.4%	12.3%	632	15.0%	26.5%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.9%	5.2%	169	4.0%	16.7%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.5%	11.2%	243	5.8%	11.3%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	94	2.2%	16.6%
Health and welfare	17.0%	14.2%	652	**15.5%**	23.8%
Services	3.5%	2.3%	64	**1.5%**	14.4%
Total			4216	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation for this disability category were Arts and Humanities (27.5 per cent, n=1161, representative of a 5 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data) and Health and Welfare (15.5 percent, n=652, representative of no change in relation to 21/22 data).

— The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation were Services (1.5 percent, n=64, representative of a 6.25 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.5 percent, n=19, representative of no change in relation to 21/22 data).

— Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Engineering, manufacturing and construction (5.8 percent in comparison with 12.5 percent of all students) and Business, administration and law (11.6 percent in comparison with 20.3 percent of all students).

— Significant over-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Social sciences, journalism and information (11.3 percent in comparison with 6.3 percent of all students) and Arts and Humanities (27.5 percent in comparison with 13.4 percent 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%	0.3%	8	**0.6%**	11.9%
Education	7.0%	5.9%	71	5.6%	6.2%
Arts and humanities	13.4%	21.4%	244	**19.3%**	5.9%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.3%	8.6%	107	8.5%	6.5%
Business, administration and law	20.3%	15.7%	215	**17.0%**	7.1%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.4%	12.3%	168	13.3%	7.0%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.9%	5.2%	64	5.1%	6.3%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.5%	11.2%	144	11.4%	6.7%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	28	**2.2%**	5.0%
Health and welfare	17.0%	14.2%	171	13.6%	6.2%
Services	3.5%	2.3%	41	3.3%	9.3%
Total			1261	100.0%	

— The fields of the study with highest rate of participation for this disability cohort were Arts and Humanities (19.3 percent, n=244, representative of a 10.23 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data) and Business Administration and Law (17 percent, n=215, representative of an 8.28 increase in relation to last 21/22 data).

— The fields of study with the lowest rate of participation for this disability cohort were Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary (2.2 percent, n=28, representative of a 21.43 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.6 percent, n=8, representative of a 25 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data).

— Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Health and Welfare (13.6 percent in comparison with 17 percent of all students) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (5.1 percent in comparison with 6.9 percent 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 13.4 percent of all students) and Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics (13.3 percent in comparison with 10.4 percent 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%	0.3%	8	**0.3%**	11.9%
Education	7.0%	5.9%	151	6.5%	13.2%
Arts and humanities	13.4%	21.4%	484	**20.7%**	11.7%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.3%	8.6%	182	7.8%	11.0%
Business, administration and law	20.3%	15.7%	388	16.6%	12.8%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.4%	12.3%	354	15.2%	14.8%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.9%	5.2%	106	4.5%	10.5%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.5%	11.2%	182	7.8%	8.4%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	48	2.1%	8.5%
Health and welfare	17.0%	14.2%	396	**17.0%**	14.5%
Services	3.5%	2.3%	36	**1.5%**	8.1%
Total			2335	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Arts and Humanities (20.7 percent, n=484, representative of a 14.4 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data) and Health and Welfare (17 percent, n=396, representative of a 3 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data).

— The fields of study with the lowest rates of participation for this cohort were Services (1.5 percent, n=36, representative of a 16.7 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.3 percent, n=8, representative of a .33 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data).

— Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Business, administration and law (13.6 percent in comparison with 20.3 percent of all students) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (4.5 percent in comparison with 6.9 percent of all students).

— Significant over-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Arts and Humanities (20.7 percent in comparison with 13.4 percent of all students) and Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics (15.2 percent in comparison with 10.4 percent 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.

5.9% 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%	0.3%	4	**0.4%**	**6.0%**
Education	7.0%	5.9%	59	5.2%	5.1%
Arts and humanities	13.4%	21.4%	245	**21.7%**	**5.9%**
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.3%	8.6%	101	9.0%	6.1%
Business, administration and law	20.3%	15.7%	197	17.5%	**6.5%**
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.4%	12.3%	126	11.2%	5.3%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.9%	5.2%	58	5.1%	5.7%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.5%	11.2%	72	6.4%	3.3%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	35	3.1%	6.2%
Health and welfare	17.0%	14.2%	209	**18.5%**	7.6%
Services	3.5%	2.3%	21	**1.9%**	**4.7%**
Total			1127	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Arts and Humanities (21.7 percent, n=245, representative of a 12.4 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data) and Health and Welfare (18.5 percent, n=209, representative of a 15.6 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data).

— The fields of study with the lowest rates of participation for this cohort were Services (1.9 percent, n=21, representative of a 13.6 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.4 percent, n=4, representative of a 20 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data).

— Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Engineering, manufacturing and construction (6.4 percent in comparison with 12.5 percent of all students) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (5.1 percent in comparison with 6.9 percent of all students).

— Significant over-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Arts and Humanities (21.7 percent in comparison with 13.4 percent of all students) and Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics (11.2 percent in comparison with 10.4 percent of all students).

— The remaining fields of study were relatively consistent when the participation rates for this cohort were compared with the those from all students enrolled in these disciplines.

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%	0.3%	20	**0.3%**	29.9%
Education	7.0%	5.9%	482	6.5%	42.1%
Arts and humanities	13.4%	21.4%	1135	15.2%	27.4%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.3%	8.6%	564	7.6%	34.0%
Business, administration and law	20.3%	15.7%	1317	**17.7%**	43.4%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.4%	12.3%	675	9.1%	28.3%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.9%	5.2%	319	4.3%	31.5%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.5%	11.2%	1278	**17.2%**	59.2%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	316	4.2%	55.9%
Health and welfare	17.0%	14.2%	1071	14.4%	39.1%
Services	3.5%	2.3%	271	**3.6%**	61.2%
Total			7448	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Business, administration and law (17.7 percent, n=1317, representative of a 1.6 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data) and Engineering, manufacturing and construction (17.2 percent, n=1278, representative of a 9.55 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data).

— The fields of study with the lowest rates of participation for this cohort were Services (3.6 percent, n=271, representative of a 9 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.3 percent, n=20, representative of a 50 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data).

— Significant under-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Business, administration and law (17.7 percent in comparison with 20.3 percent of all students) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (4.3 percent in comparison with 6.9 percent of all students).

— Significant over-representations for this cohort were identified in the following fields of study: Engineering, manufacturing and construction (17.2 percent in comparison with 12.5 percent of all students) and Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary (4.2 percent in comparison with 1.8 percent of all students).

— This cohort comprises of 38.8 percent (n=7897) of all disabled students accessing supports in HE. 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%	0.3%	1	**0.3%**	1.5%
Education	7.0%	5.9%	38	**12.5%**	3.3%
Arts and humanities	13.4%	21.4%	34	11.1%	0.8%
Social sciences, journalism and information	6.3%	8.6%	26	8.5%	1.6%
Business, administration and law	20.3%	15.7%	37	12.1%	1.2%
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	10.4%	12.3%	31	10.2%	1.3%
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	6.9%	5.2%	17	**5.6%**	1.7%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	12.5%	11.2%	37	**12.1%**	1.7%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	1.8%	2.9%	17	**5.6%**	3.0%
Health and welfare	17.0%	14.2%	50	**16.4%**	1.8%
Services	3.5%	2.3%	17	**5.6%**	3.8%
Total			305	100.0%	

— The fields of study with the highest rate of participation were Health and Welfare (16.4 percent, n=50, representative of a 7.9 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data) and Education (12.5 percent, n=38, representative of a 229 percent increase in relation to 21/22 data). This significant increase in students engaging with Education represents an unusual year-on-year disparity that may be explained by this disability category being very small in number. Therefore, it may not be a notable outlier, considering the potential ambiguity that is synonymous with Other being non-specific sample.

— 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) (5.6 percent, n= 17) and Generic Programmes and Qualifications (0.3 percent, n=1, representative of a 25 percent decrease in relation to 21/22 data).

— The Other category encompasses a range on non-specific disabilities and was reported to be notably larger than the 21/22 cohort. As such, any comparison will not elicit any meaningful findings.

Examination Accommodations

As a point of departure, this section now examines the provision of exam accommodations that foster an environment in which disabled students are facilitated to represent their learning in a more equitable manner. Current pedagogical discourse now recognises that the traditional exam format does not always foster equality and equitability, (O'Neill, 2017; O'Neill & Padden, 2021). AHEAD are presently engaging with a number of key stakeholders, including the QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) to explore inclusive approaches to assessment and alternatives to traditional examinations as the dominant mode of assessment. This work has been further complimented by the ALTITUDE Charter (the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education), which was recently published with the remit of strategically embedding a universal design approach in Irish Tertiary Education. The Charter is accompanied by an Implementation Toolkit and a Technical Report, and its development emanated from strategic dialogue between further and higher education institutions and national stakeholders[12] as an outcome of the PATH (Programme for Access to Higher Education) 4 funding stream.

Despite these welcome collaborations aimed at changing mainstream practices to be more inclusive for all students, exam accommodations will always be required for certain students. However, the current models for propagating equity in assessment are unsustainable, (Healy et al., 2023). The continuous rise in disabled students engaging with Irish HE has led to many Access Offices and Support Staff being severely over-burdened and under-resourced, which engenders frustration and anxiety among some students who require these services, (AHEAD, 2023a). As will be discussed, the exponential increase in students engaging with supports has not led to a simultaneous, tantamount rise in DSS numbers.

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12   Fifteen higher education (HE) institutions and six Education and Training Board (ETB) collaborated to produce the ALTITUDE Charter.

94%

DCD-Dyspraxia was the category of disability with the highest percentage of students who reported they were in receipt of Exam Accommodations

To this end, the process of assessment via mass examinations is not just unsustainable from a resourcing perspective, it is also very challenging for many disabled students to navigate, (Ibid.). Quantitative AHEAD research has highlighted that just 60 percent of students in receipt of accommodations were satisfied with the exam supports and accommodations that were recommended by supports staff, (Ibid.). As opposed to being a critique, this analysis is intended to unpack the Exam Accommodations framework from the perspectives of disillusioned students *and* support staff with challenging workloads.

The existing body of literature pertaining to accommodations suggests that exam accommodations are often ineffective in providing equity of opportunity for disabled students, (Brett, 2016; Tai, 2023). The intersection of this and the pre-discussed unsustainability of exam accommodations inform this Report's partnership approach to gathering data. AHEAD engage with participating HEIs to identify a purposeful methodology to evaluate this crucial process and provide an evidence base for our recommendations that will conclude this Report.

Participating institutions reported that 87.9 percent (n=17,890) of all students engaging with disability supports had received at least one exam accommodation in the academic year 2022/23. This represents a 9.7 percent increase in the rate disabled students in receipt of exam accommodations in relation to 21/22 data, (AHEAD, 2023b).

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. The percentages have been adapted to take into account that one participating HEI was unable to provide a breakdown of exam accommodations by disability category (n=980).
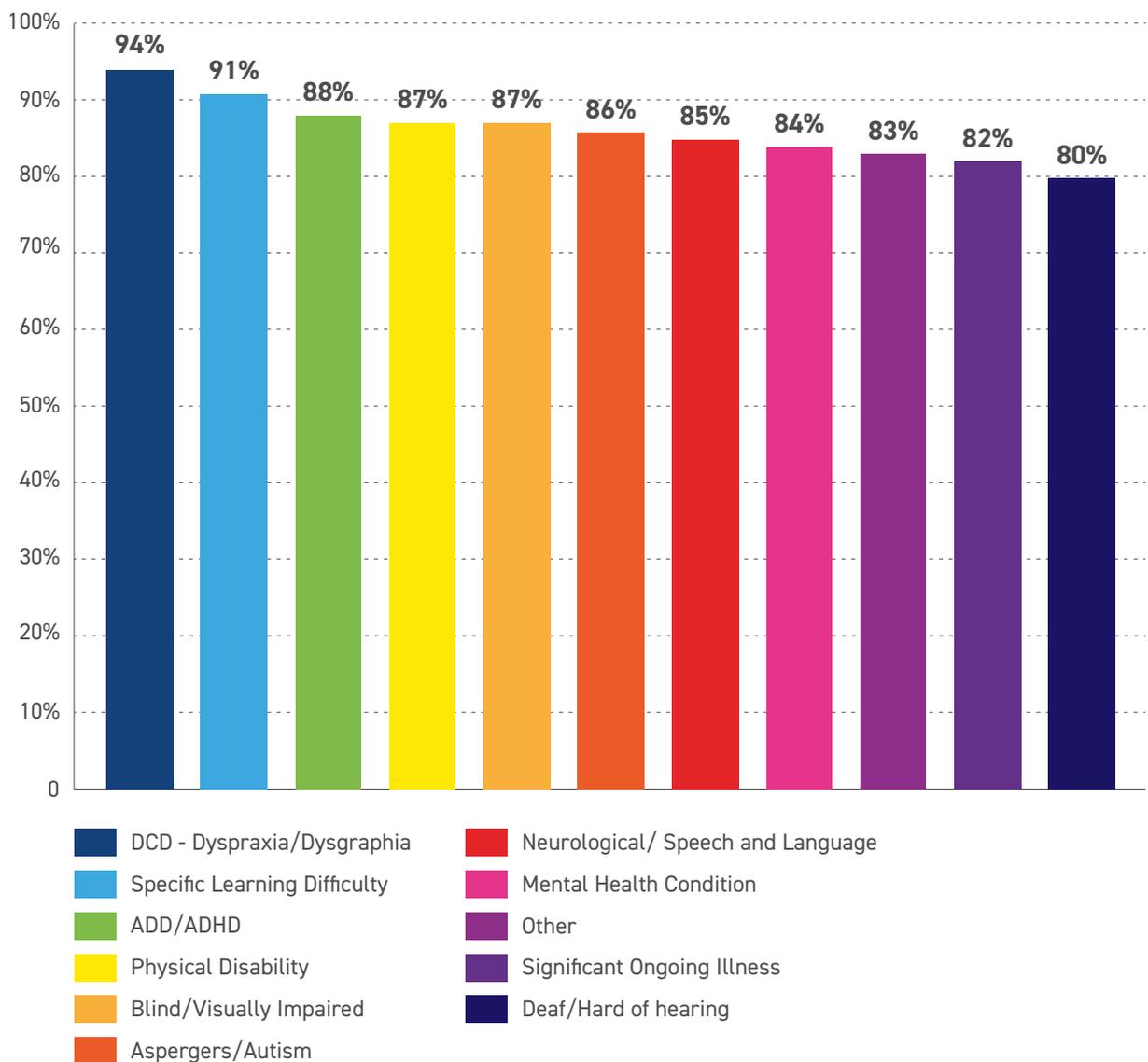
Figure 9. Breakdown of Exam Accommodations recommended by Disability Category 2022/23 (Primary and Additional Disabilities included)

The disability categories with the highest percentage of students in receipt of accommodations were DCD-Dyspraxia, Dysgraphia (94 percent, n=1610), Specific Learning Difficulty (91 percent, n=7605) and ADD/ADHD (88 percent, n=2534). The disability categories with the lowest percentage rates of students in receipt of exam accommodations were Deaf/Hard of Hearing (80 percent, n=504), Significant Ongoing Illness (82 percent, n=2390) and Other (83 percent, n=311).

The remaining categories of disability were calculated thusly: Physical Disability (87 percent, n=1153), Blind/Visually Impaired (87 percent, n=314), Aspergers/Autism (86 percent, n=2112), Neurological/Speech and Language (85 percent, n=1290) and Mental Health Condition (84 percent, n=4268).

AHEAD understand anecdotally[13] that a small number of students who have been recommended Exam Accommodations during their Needs Assessment process frequently experience resistance from educators when implementing exam accommodations. These challenges are often pivoted around perceived "core competencies" that certain courses require. For example, a student studying a foreign language may experience difficulties despite being granted a "grammar waiver", considering the writing skills are often perceived to be essential if a student is to be accredited. While AHEAD espouse a rights-based, social model of disability framework, it is recognised that this issue requires all stakeholders to engage in dialogue to engender an effective, consistent and coherent provision of supports for these students, ensuring standards are maintained, but adopting flexibility to foster inclusion.
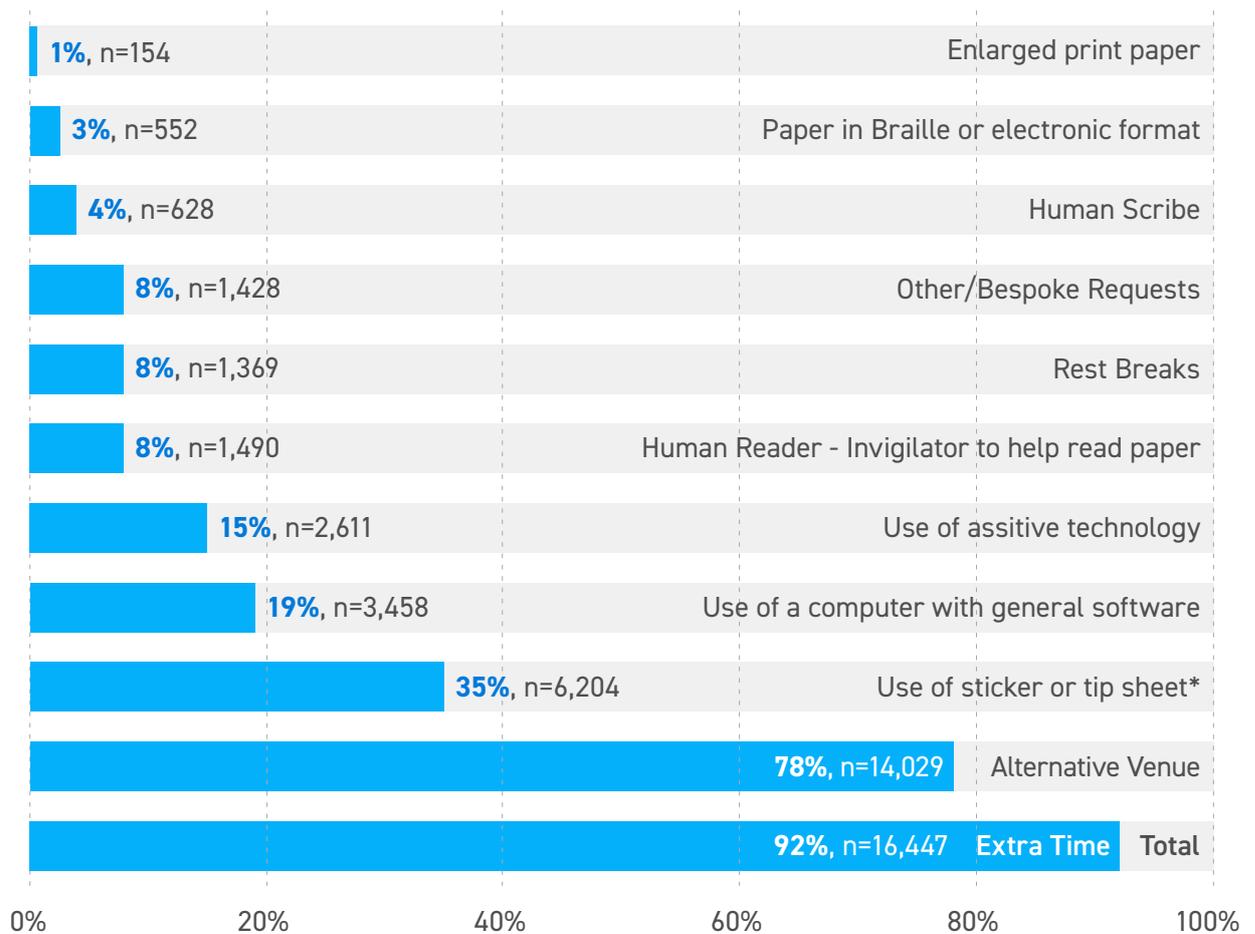
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13 The dichotomy between core competency and accommodations has been alluded to in Changing Landscapes interviews and is often queried by students and DSS when they engage with AHEAD's Information Line. It has also been highlighted in the USI/AHEAD Student Engagement Group (AHEAD, 2023a).

Examination Accommodation by Type

Responding institutions were asked to provide data regarding the type of exam accommodations that were approved for students registered with support services in their respective HEI. The Participation Report for 21/22 employed a more rigorous analysis of accommodations when compared with prior Reports, (AHEAD, 2022, 2023b).

This approach is again utilized in this Report, with the following accommodations included in the survey distributed to HEIs for the 2021/22 Report: 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 (name). Figure 10 is a graphic disaggregation of the data that was collated from responding HEIs concerning the types of accommodations provided/recommended.

1%, n=154	Enlarged print paper
3%, n=552	Paper in Braille or electronic format
4%, n=628	Human Scribe
8%, n=1,428	Other/Bespoke Requests
8%, n=1,369	Rest Breaks
8%, n=1,490	Human Reader - Invigilator to help read paper
15%, n=2,611	Use of assitive technology
19%, n=3,458	Use of a computer with general software
35%, n=6,204	Use of sticker or tip sheet*
78%, n=14,029	Alternative Venue
92%, n=16,447	Extra Time — Total

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

* Refers to examiners using marking guidelines for students with a Specific Learning Difficulty or who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

Figure 10. Breakdown of recommended accommodations by Accommodation Type 2022/23. (As a percentage of all disabled students in receipt of accommodations).

Figure 10 explicates the percentage of students in receipt of specific accommodations as a percentage of all students who were granted at least one accommodation (n=18,094). The most common accommodation was the different variations of extra time per hour for the duration of the exam. While this is generally demarcated by the time (ranging from 5 minutes per hour to over 20 mins per hour in five-minute increments), this granular 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 facilitate a broader overview of individualised assessment supports.

Participating institutions indicated that:

— 92 percent (n=16,447) of all students in receipt of supports were recommended extra time to complete their exam.
— 78 percent (n=14,029) of this cohort were recommended an alternative venue and 35 percent (n=6,204) of disabled students were approved the use of a sticker or tip sheet to refer examiners to marking guidelines for students with a specific learning difficulty.
— 19 percent (n=3,458) used a computer with general software.
— 15 percent (n=2,611) used Assistive Technology.
— 8 percent (n=1,490) were recommended a human reader (assistance in reading the exam paper).
— 8 percent (n=1,428) were in receipt of bespoke accommodations (see below).
— 8 percent (n=1,369) had rest breaks during exam time.
— 4 percent (n=628) had the use of a human scribe.
— 3 percent (n=552) engaged with their exam using paper in Braille or electronic format.
— 1 percent (n=154) used enlarged print paper during 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 survey distributed by AHEAD asked those participating to define the Bespoke Requests option. The following were added to the quantitative data to fully clarify this option:

— Students were recommended the use of:
— Height adjustable desk and adjustable chair.
— Noise cancelling headphones, particular furniture, iPad, coloured paper, food and drink.
— Furniture.
— PA in attendance.
— Noise Cancelling headphones.
— Laptops with VR software or screen magnifier.
— Heat pack during the exam.
— Food and drink during the exam.
— Standing table.
— Prescribed medication during the exam.
— Standing table.
— Foreign language dictionary.

— Spelling and grammar waiver when not a core requirement.
— The use of Loop/Flare ear plugs.
— Bathroom breaks.
— White noise.
— Sign Language.
— Coloured paper/notepad.

Many of these innovative and individualised accommodations have not been reported in previous Participation Rate Reports, and are testament to the work, effort and dedication of DSS. However, AHEAD maintain that the choice embedded in a Universal Design for Learning approach to assessment can reduce the need for some accommodations. Furthermore, the provision and implementation of up-to-date and progressive accommodations is still an obligation that many students are entitled to. From a rights-based perspective, HEIs as Duty Bearers, are required to implement timely and effective exam supports for disabled students. Exam supports and accommodations are also recognised as key enablers that facilitate retention and completion for disabled students, (Thomas, 2016) . However, as discussed, within the existing body of AHEAD research, the inefficacy of exam accommodations is frequently alluded to by disabled students, (AHEAD, 2023a; Brett, 2016). This is but one issue that is underpinning AHEAD's current collaboration with the QQI and DAWN (Disability Advisors Working Network) that aims to rethink assessment to foster equitability and "fairness" for students by placing a greater focus on more inclusive modes of assessment, while simultaneously sustaining academic rigour and integrity[14].

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14 https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2024-02/call-for-case-studies-rethinking-assessment-inclusive-assessment-standards-26.02.24.pdf. "Rethinking Assessment: Inclusive Assessment & Standards in a Dynamic and Changing World" was the theme of a recent conference hosted by this collaboration, April 17th 2024.

Inside Services

Attention is now turned to an examination of the number of support staff directly working to support students with disabilities in each responding institution. The rationale for this question is to ascertain the number of staff members employed by responding institutions with responsibility for providing support to students with disabilities, and to then use this data to calculate the number of students per staff member.[15] It has been elicited from previous *Participation Rate Reports* that there is a significant under-resourcing of DSS in responding HEIs, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022, 2023b). This issue is of particular importance in light of the exponential and continual increase in disabled students engaging with HE since the 2011/12 academic year, which exhibits no sign of abating in an ever-diversifying society and a strong State commitment to reflecting Irish society within the student body, (HEA, 2023d; Healy et al., 2023).

Drawing from 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 421 students per Learning Support Staff member (Figure 11), 208 students per Disability Support Staff member (Figure 12) and a combined 139 students per Support Staff member (a combination of disability and learning support staff members) for the academic year 2022/23 (Figure 13).

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15   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.
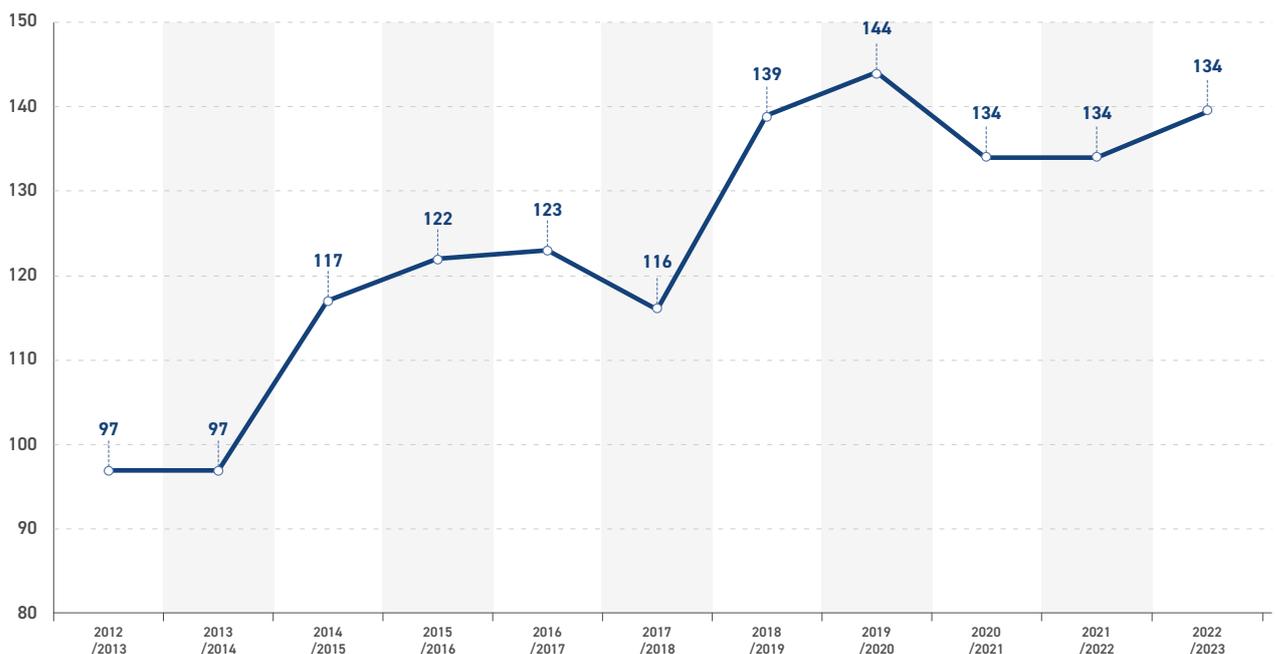
Figure 11. Students per Learning Support Staff Members for the academic years 2011/12 to 2022/23.

Figure 11 explicates that there were 421 disabled students for every Learning Support Staff member across all participating HEIs in the academic year 2022/23. This equates to a decrease of 8 percent (n=37) in comparison with 2021/22 data, (AHEAD, 2023b) and represents an increase of 32 percent increase (n=102) since AHEAD commenced collecting data pertaining to support staff student ratios in 2011/12.
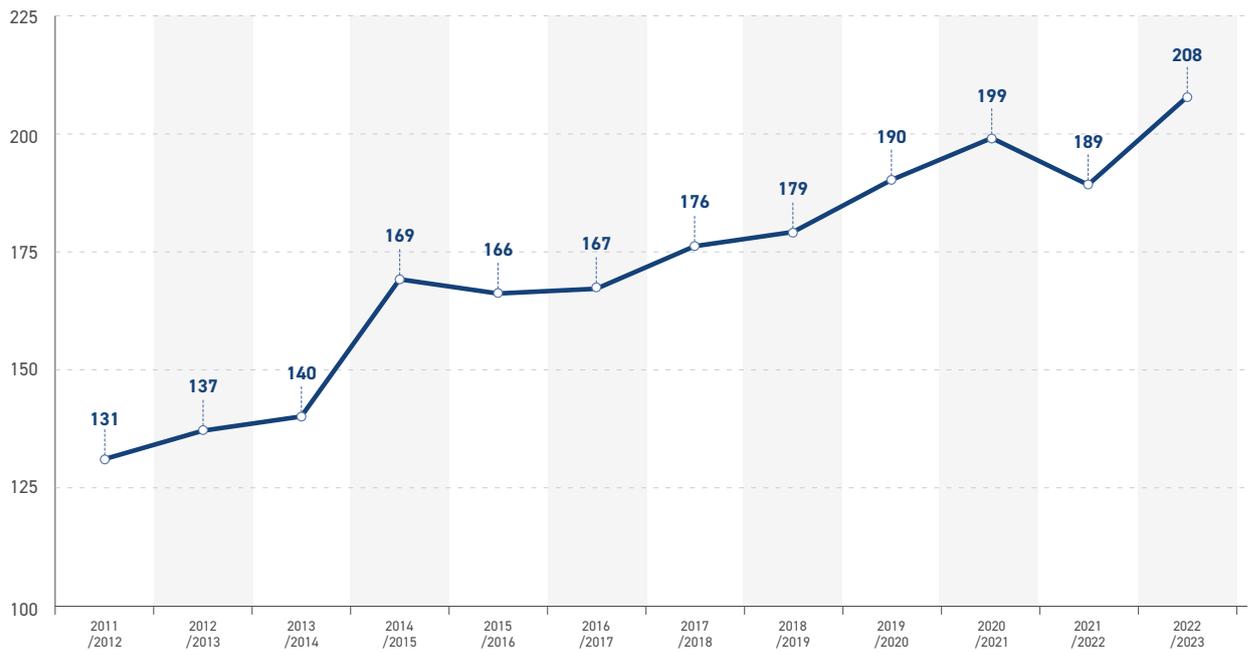
Figure 12. Students with Disabilities Per Disability Support Staff Member 2011/12 - 2022/23.

The number of disabled students per Disability Support Staff member is perhaps the most important statistic in the "Inside Services" section of the Reports, considering it pertains most directly to the Needs Assessment and Accommodations processes. Figure 12 indicates that for the academic year 2022/23, there were 208 students per DSS member. This represents an increase of 10 percent (n=19) in relation to 2021/22 data, (AHEAD, 2023b). A meta-analysis of year-on-year data over time illustrates a 59 percent increase (n=77) since the academic year 2011/12. Following the decrease recorded in the 2022/23 Report, the return to an ascending trajectory is an increasing concern for AHEAD, (Ibid.).

Figure 13. Students per Support Staff Member - 2012/13 to 2022/23.

Figure 13 delineates 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 139 students per support staff member for the academic year 2022/23. This is indicative of a 4 percent increase (n=5) in relation to 2022/23 data, (AHEAD, 2023b), while demonstrating a 43 percent (n=42) increase since the academic year 2012/13.

On overview of all three datasets further highlights the importance of both the Inclusive Assessment and Standards (AHEAD/QQI/DAWN) and ALTITUDE Charter collaborations that AHEAD have been in partnership with over the 2023/24 period. Both have the potential to be key enablers of a more inclusive, universally designed approach for disabled students to engage with all aspects of HE, thus easing the pressure on overburdened support services, (QQI, 2021). Considering equitable education is enshrined in both international (e.g. UN CRPD, European Pillar of Social Rights) and national (Equal Status Act, 2000-2018, Disability Act, 2005) rights instruments, the entitlement to quality supports should be a standard obligation across all HEIs. As rights holders, students are entitled to engage with their education in an equitable manner. A coherent, monitored and strategic action that responds to the perennial low ratio of support staff member to student should be implemented as part of further stakeholder policy commitments that seek to facilitate access to HE for disabled people, (HEA, 2022b).

The addressing of under-resourced support services should be accompanied by a significantly greater effort to embed a universally designed approach, which seeks to implement an 'inclusion is everyone's business' perspective. While research shows pockets of quality and evidence-based practice across a number of HEIs to progress the universal design agenda, a lack of commitment at the strategic level of HEIs has been identified, (Flood & Banks, 2021; Healy et al., 2023). The ALTITUDE Charter seeks to implement and embed uniform, UD informed practices in the HE space, (ALTITUDE_Project, 2024). By recognising diversity in the student body and planning for variability in the student body as the norm, the Charter can assist Support Staff in embracing and facilitating inclusion in HE for disabled students. As an arena from which contemporary discourse often emerges, HE should be an environment in which *all* students are accepted and treated equally, (Arduini, 2020). Alongside the Inclusive Assessment and Standards project, disability supports services will now have two key resources to help progress inclusion and equity for students.

On the Ground-Opinion

While AHEAD's *Participation Rate Reports* are primarily quantitative in nature, this section of the research is derived from qualitative data predicated upon current research, findings and discursive trends drawn from the timeframe, or academic year, synonymous with this Report. The data is elicited from the final question (13A, B and C) of the survey distributed to participating HEIs. It should be noted that despite this data being collated anonymously, it is optional, and participating DSS can decline to answer. Previous iterations of this section of the Report usually consist of two or three sub-questions, enabling a more tangible glance into the "on the ground" landscape of disability support provision.

For the year 2022/23, this question comprised of three sub-questions, one of which required a yes/no response with additional comments, and two of which consisted of Lickert Scale (1-5) "scoring" in response to a statement, again with an option for further comments. Across the master dataset, 15 HEIs responded to this question, facilitating a meaningful analysis of issues that encompassed the self-disclosure of disability, the verification of disability, and the quality and uniformity of support implementation by educators (in response to recommendations by DSS). To enable a meaningful comparison, the Lickert Scale questions (B and C) addressed similar topics from the student perspective in recent AHEAD research, (AHEAD, 2023a). The objective is to capture the perspective of DSS alongside the current student narrative of engaging with supports, thus exploring interaction in the disability support service space. Both datasets, that of the student and staff member, can then be compared to facilitate a more complete analysis of support service provision. The sub questions that were asked of DSS were:

— A. In your opinion, should institutions accept self-disclosure and non-medical forms of evidence (e.g. school letters, personal descriptions of how a disability affects them) as evidence of disability required to register for support? (Comment).

— B. Using a scale of 1. Strongly Agree, 2. Agree, 3. Neither Agree or Disagree, 4. Disagree, and 5. Strongly Disagree, please respond to the following statement: *"In my opinion, the supports recommended by the service are generally fully implemented for students"*. (Comment).

— Using the same Lickert Scale, please respond to the following statement: *"In my opinion, different teachers/lecturers apply the supports we recommend for students in a similar way"*. (Comment).

Section A - Self-Disclosure and Non-Medical Evidence

Sub-question A, which explores the requirement of disabled students to provide medical evidence prior to engaging with DSS has been included here as it has been a core recommendation of a number of prior *Participation Rate Reports* to examine ways to reduce this barrier to accessing services , (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022). AHEAD's *Changing Landscapes* Report also explicated that 31 percent of participants who were unregistered postulated that they did engage with support services due to not having "a formal diagnosis" of their disability, (AHEAD, 2023a, p. 130). The often costly nature of required medical evidence and the accepted intersection of disability and poverty (Indecon, 2022) reinforces the need to examine this practice, considering it has been incorporated into the registration process with DSS across all participating HEIs. Drawing from our co-facilitation of the USI/AHEAD Student with Disabilities Advisory Group, AHEAD understand that this is often a tangible barrier to accessing this essential service for disabled students. This anecdotal evidence has been corroborated by the research findings of *Changing Landscapes* (AHEAD, 2023a), which examined the narratives of disabled students accessing (or otherwise) their institution's DSS in Irish HE, (AHEAD, 2023a).

Some of the other barriers that inhibit disabled students from accessing supports include perceived bias, stigma and the magnification of "difference" in what is often perceived in the literature as an ableist environment, (Bartolo et al., 2023). Notwithstanding these obstacles, it is the financial implications of obtaining the often-costly medical verification of disability that is being explored here. As such, it is suggested that "self-disclosure and non-medical forms of evidence" would foster a less invasive and financially viable avenue for some students to engage with their HEI's DSS.
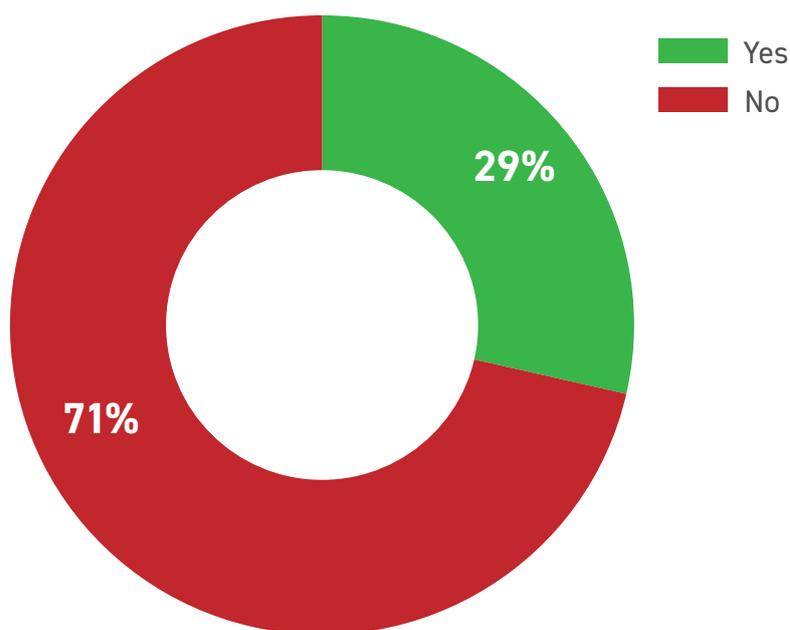
Figure 14. Percentage of DSS who opine that non-medical forms of verification should be accepted.

Figure 14 illustrates that 71 percent (n=10) of responding DSS postulate that medical verification should be a prerequisite to availing of disability support services. 29 percent (n=4) of respondents answered "no" to the same question. As quantitative data, this statistic is caveated by the fact that our survey is completed and submitted by one representative of each HEI's DSS and therefore may not reflect the opinions of all support staff. Notwithstanding this, the accompanying qualitative comments retain value and suggest that the rhetoric underpinning responding DSS's opinions is linked to the *Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) Guidelines* and framework, (HEA, 2021), concerns about not being able to meet increased demand because of staff shortages, "fairness" and the financial implications for HEIs if, or when they support students who cannot access this Fund.

Almost all responding DSS who answered no (that is that medical evidence should be retained as part of the criteria for accessing DSS), proposed that any change would need to be supplemented by a restructuring of the FSD model and practices. Put succinctly, there was a consensus among the majority of respondents that self-disclosure, in particular, was not conducive with FSD Guidelines and structure.

"..while I understand that for various reasons documentation may not be available, there has to be a way to maintain academic integrity of programmes so that all other students are not disadvantaged. The FSD model of required documentation has to be updated in line with legislation in order to support all students fairly. Requesting 'evidence' as we currently do helps manage the requests for support from the Disability Service with support at a general level being given to those without formal diagnosis". (DSS Member 7).

Many of the comments indicate that DSS are aware and do empathise with the challenges students experience disclosing and requesting disability supports. Moreover, they would prefer to offer support to students who could not provide medical verification. However, many suggested that the provision of supports for these students would severely impact budgets and overload already over-burdened services. In this way, their comments are intrinsically linked to fears that providing support for students who cannot provide medical verification may impact on students who *have* provided medical evidence.

"We will always do what we can for our students however, if students cannot offer verified documentation from a professional source and supports required have a financial implication, this can have a critical impact on our budgets. Also, the number of students who are registering (or) are registered with our service is significantly increasing, which is impacting upon the amount of available resources, including staff, supporting a growing cohort". (DSS Member 5).

"Due to being under resourced, we cannot always guarantee students get what they need when they need it. We also have no AT officer which is a large gap in the services students receive. In general, other staff in the college are receptive to disability office recommendations, but there are still battles at times to get students what they need and are entitled to. (DSS Member 9).

The comment option also demonstrated that some responding DSS believed that while self-disclosure should not be sufficient to access disability supports, non-medical forms of verification should be accepted. Furthermore, evidence from second-level schools should, or could also be accepted for ease of transition to tertiary education, without the need for further, repeated assessment.

"I do not think we should accept self-disclosure without some form of documentation, but I do think we should accept letters from other professionals with some details as to how a disability impacts them". (DSS Member 6).

"In relation to documentation, many students are now presenting with clear evidence from schools in relation to literacy and numeracy scores (deficits) and ongoing supports that have been provided to students so that student's academic skills can be improved. We really need to be able to continue to support these students at third level. Likewise with clear evidence of mental health issues, from counsellors /GPs we need to provide support to students". (DSS Member 4).

Some of the respondent's comments were more nuanced, suggesting that certain disabilities should have alternative verification requirements, with others alluding to the challenges of keeping the procedure aligned to their institution's Reasonable Accommodation Policy. Changes to the Disability Access Routes to Education (DARE) eligibility criteria were also mentioned as difficult to implement alongside the current rigid structure of the FSD Guidelines.

"GP letters should be accepted for FSD for certain disabilities, or at least give partial funding for students if they provide a GP letter. Letters from counsellors and therapists should be accepted for partial funding as well. There should also be no age limit on mental health condition reports". (DSS Member 8).

"Only where the disability has been verified by an appropriate professional and this is documented in the HEIs RA Policy, should support be provided. However, recent changes in DARE eligibility and required documents mean that we will now have to accept documents signed by school(s) as evidence of literacy difficulties, which I hope is reflected by a change in FSD guidelines". (DSS Member 5).

The qualitative data also exhibits an element of frustration among some DSS pertaining to supporting students without FSD resources. While some respondents could support 'non-verified' students, others stated that doing so was simply not possible due to resources and staff numbers. Despite many DSS recognising that some students were clearly in need of support, nationals and institutional guidelines restricted them from doing so.

"FSD funding guidelines rely too heavily on specialist/consultant-based diagnosis - this is not in line with statutory responsibility to support students who wish to register for supports. There are students with evidence from schools/GPs who are clearly in need of support, most DSS support them but are doing so without the requisite funding. We should be trusted to verify evidence and be funded for all students who register. (DSS Member 12).

"It would be great to be able to provide supports to students without evidence. (But) No, because evidence needs to be provided in order for the university to apply for funding in order to be able to pay for the supports". (DSS Member 14).

Furthermore, there were some elements that the FSD Guidelines are open to the interpretation of individual institutional practices and procedure. While there are a number of rights instruments that situate disabled students as rights holders within the service provision dynamic, some respondents alluded to engaging with students regardless of whether medical verification was provided. As such, these comments were underpinned by the legal obligation of HEIs, as Duty Bearers, to provide disability supports to students who require them.

"There are students attending UG/PG programmes who do not meet the FSD criteria however, we still have a legal obligation to offer support to these students". (DSS Member 12).

The data that informs sub question A demonstrates an element of ambivalence in the student/disability support staff dynamic across HEIs who responded to this sub question (n=15). While a majority reported that they were inhibited from providing supports to those who do not meet the stringent eligibility criteria of the FSD Guidelines, others afforded primacy to the legislation and provided support regardless. This dichotomy of differing systemic norms of practices could further disadvantage some disabled students, if the quality of support is linked to how the FSD Guidelines and legal obligations are perceived and understood by individual support staff. As a point of departure, sub questions B and C now explore the quality and uniformity of supports within individual institutions.

Section B and C - Exploring the Implementation of Supports

Sub questions B and C both relate to the implementation of recommended supports within individual, participating HEIs. Responding DSS were asked to give their opinions concerning the quality and uniformity of how recommended supports are applied by educators. As discussed, this data is examined alongside related research findings that employed similar questions to explore the student narrative regarding the implementation of recommended disability supports in the teaching and learning space. To this end, the data collected from students in our *Changing Landscapes* report is retained to enable a meaningful comparison and robust exploration of the process of disability support provision and its translation into practice, (AHEAD, 2023a). *Changing Landscapes* delineated the experiences of disabled students as they engaged, accessed, and liaised with supports in their institution. More importantly, it analysed if supports recommended through the needs assessment conducted by DSS were viewed by students as having been fully applied in practice by teaching staff.

Full implementation of Recommended Supports (Student Experience) from Changing Landscapes, students asked to respond to the statement: "the disability supports my college/centre recommended have been fully applied"

Full implementation of Recommended Supports (DSS Perspective): "In my opinion, the supports recommended by the service are generally fully implemented for students"

Positive response   Neutral response   Negative response
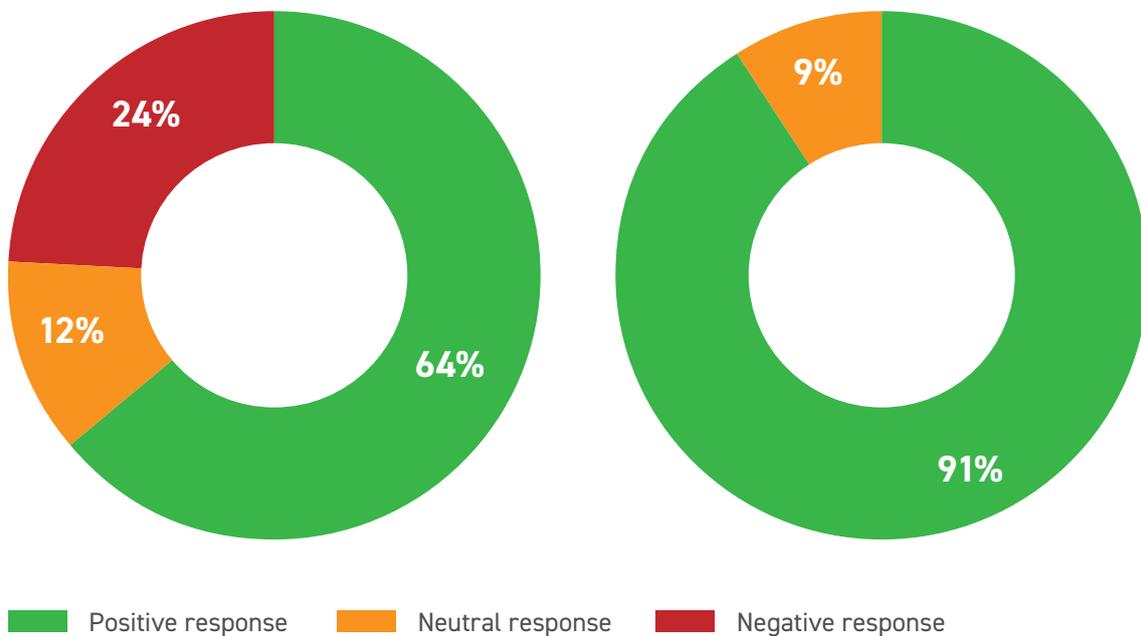
Figure 15. Student Ratings and DSS Perspectives on the Full Implementation of Recommended Supports. (Student Perspectives from Changing Landscapes (AHEAD, 2023a)).

Figure 15 illustrates how students and responding DSS rated the application of recommended supports by teaching staff. In *Changing Landscapes* (AHEAD, 2023a), participating students (n=169) were asked a range of questions, however just two were used in the On the Ground section of the survey distributed to participating DSS. Regarding the quality of support implementation, 64 percent of students reacted positively (agreed or strongly agreed), 12 percent neutrally and 24 percent negatively (disagreed or strongly disagreed) when asked if their recommended disability supports had been "fully applied". The rationale for concentrating on students who reacted negatively is to capture and examine the voices of students who are encountering barriers in the disability support process of their HEI.

Figure 15 also indicates that when participating DSS were asked to respond (using an identical Lickert Scale to that used in *Changing Landscapes* and in sub question B) to the statement "in my opinion, the supports recommended by services are generally fully implemented for students", 91 percent of DSS respondents reacted positively, 9 percent responded neutrally, and none (0 percent) responded negatively. By comparing both datasets, the student experience is notably different to the opinions of DSS when both cohorts were asked to rate the application ("applied in full")[16] of recommended supports. Students were significantly less likely to respond positively (64 percent), when compared with responding DSS opinions (91 percent), when asked to rate if recommended supports had been applied in full by educators in participating HEIs.

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16   Changing Landscapes asked students to respond to the statement: "the disability supports my college/centre recommended have been fully applied". The distributed survey asked DSS to respond to the statement: "In my opinion, the supports recommended by the service are generally fully implemented for students".

Recommended Supports applied in a
similar way (Student Experience)

Recommended Supports applied in a similar
way (DSS Perspective)

29%

45%

26%

21%

37%

42%

Positive response   Neutral response   Negative response
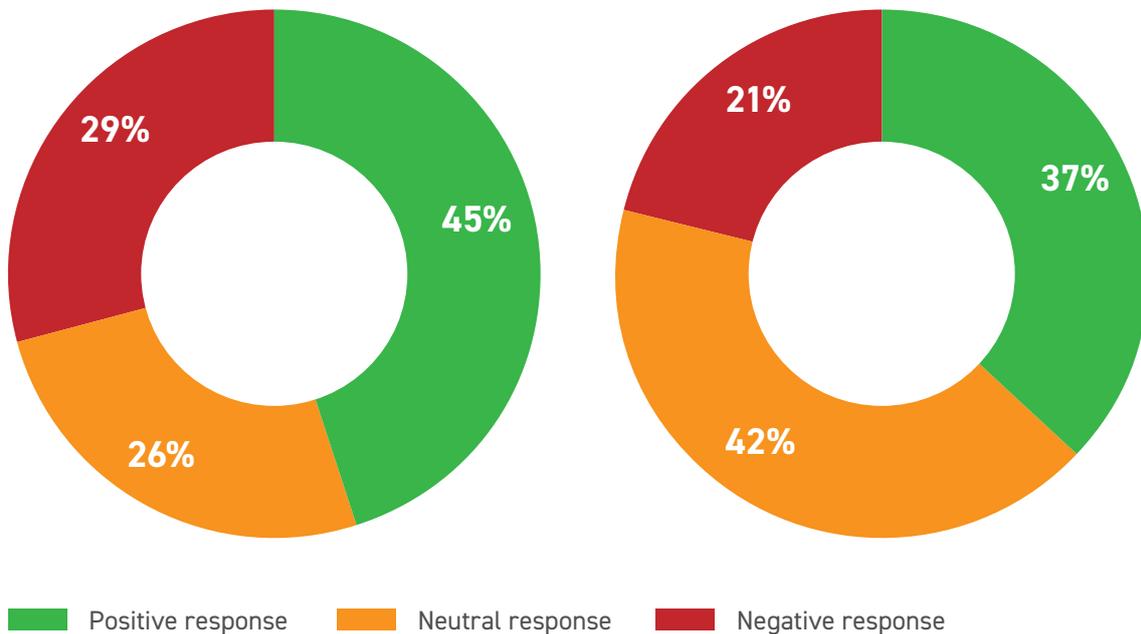
Figure 16. Student Ratings and DSS Perspectives on the Uniformity of How Recommended Supports are applied. (Student Perspectives from Changing Landscapes (AHEAD, 2023a)).

Figure 16 informs an analysis of the uniformity of how recommended supports are implemented by teaching staff, by again employing the dual lenses of student perspective and disability support staff opinion. 45 percent of students reacted positively, 26 percent neutrally and 29 percent negatively when asked to rate the consistency of how their supports were transferred in the teaching and learning space. As such, over half (55 percent) did not react positively (that is they applied a score 1 or 2 out of 5) when asked to rate the uniformity of implementation of disability supports. Conversely, when participating DSS were asked to respond to the statement "In my opinion, different teachers/lecturers apply the supports we recommend in a similar way", 37 percent reacted positively, 42 percent reacted neutrally, and 21 percent reacted negatively.

This all-encompassing overview demonstrates that the majority of both cohorts (55 percent of participating students and 63 percent of responding DSS) did not react positively when asked to rate the uniformity of recommended supports in the lecture hall. As such, a consolidation of the data explicates that recommended supports do not appear to be implemented with consistency in teaching practice and learning activities in participating HEIs. As a point of departure, this section now consolidates and examines the qualitative data collated from both sub questions.

The qualitative data infers that monitoring how recommended supports are implemented may be beyond the scope of most DSS's workload. To risk labouring on a point, this is likely additional tangible evidence that Disability Support Services and associated funding streams require additional resources, both financially through an increase in the FSD and through increased staffing of DSS. The challenges to assuring quality and overseeing how supports are implemented are directly alluded to below:

> *"Due to being under resourced, we cannot always guarantee students get what they need when they need it". (DSS Member 10).*

> *"...other staff in the college are receptive to disability office recommendations, but there are still battles at times to get students what they need and are entitled to". (DSS Member 9).*

Another comment highlighted some disparities in how different recommended accommodations were implemented.

> *"We see a very good level of implementation from all lecturers but there may be differences in lecture slide quality and giving lecture recordings". (DSS Member 1).*

Drawing from the qualitative data for this question, one could again deduce that the student experience is not aligned with the DSS perspective. That is, a portion of students are not experiencing high standard, uniformly applied accommodations drawing from the percentage of students who reacted negatively to both questions and DSS data pertaining to how recommended supports are applied. It should also be noted that 31 percent of students who did not register for supports cited that they "did not see any benefit" from doing so in our *Changing Landscapes* Report, (AHEAD, 2023a, p. 130). Some of the qualitative comments from the same report further illustrate the challenges that are often encountered when recommended accommodations do not seamlessly translate into tangible support in the learning space.

*"... there is little to no coordination between the access office and the academic staff. Students often have to remind lectures of their accommodations in a public way in front of other students". – **Student from Changing Landscapes,** (AHEAD, 2023a, p. 134).*

*"I do (think communication with lecturers and needs assessments needs to be better). And I felt that it was put on me to explain to the lecturers what I needed instead of the disabilities (sic) support liaising with my lecturer and constantly having to disclose very personal and sensitive information (was difficult). In a way that's like almost having to justify myself at every turn... My main advice to colleges would be to just listen and accommodate. That's the basic things. I shouldn't have to keep proving myself". **Tara,** (AHEAD, 2023a, p. 133)*

One respondent highlighted what is becoming a common issue in AHEAD's work of late (as discussed in the Examination Accommodations section of this Report). Core competencies are specific skillsets that are required if a student is to be accredited for their studies in certain fields or disciplines of study. As such, they are deemed essential if the student is to be meet the criteria for course completion. For this reason, educators are often averse to implementing any recommended accommodations that are perceived to exempt students from learning activities that pertain to how these skills are assessed.
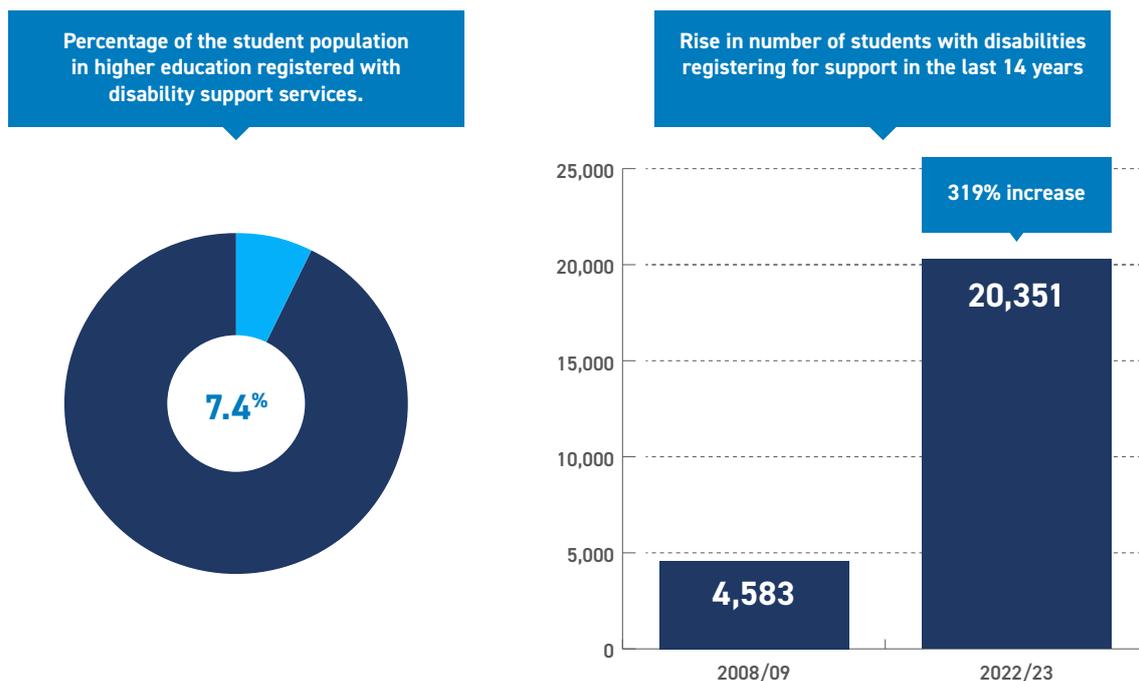
"Academic staff are in general extremely supportive of students' special requirements, but increasingly, students expect to be exempted from certain aspects of their course (for example, group projects, presentations), and while these can be accommodated to a certain extent, where they are an integral part of the course, students are expected to meet the learning outcomes. Lecturers will where possible, accommodate students' needs, but sometimes students struggle to meet these outcomes, often having been exempted previously in school". (DSS Member 9).

The application of supports is crucial to all students with disabilities and has obvious implications on well-being, academic achievement and retention, (Darmody et al., 2020; Kilpatrick et al., 2017). Disability supports also play an important role in developing belonging, involvement, purpose and self-determination, all of which are considered to be prerequisites for the retention and progress for disabled students, (Rath, 2020; Wessel et al., 2009).

To this end, it is important that they are applied consistently and are facilitating disabled students to engage in their studies equitably. However, the On the Ground section suggests that an element of oversight, monitoring and evaluation of support implementation is required. With increases in the disability cohort engaging with HE likely to continue in ascendence, AHEAD recognise that over-burdened support staff may not be in a position to do this. The current National Access Plan and PATH, DARE and HEAR funding streams have combined to reduce many of the traditional barriers that impeded students with disabilities accessing education. Notwithstanding this, the unintended negative outcomes of overworked DSS on the experience of disabled students is evident in this section of the Report. It is imperative that key stakeholders within this policy landscape respond to this persistent issue. Enabling pathways to engage with HE should consider the challenges that this under-resourcing can perpetuate, thus combining interventions at the point of entry with further engagement as disabled students progress through tertiary education.

Summary

Following the detailed analysis of the data collected from responding institutions, the key findings are synopsised here for ease of access. This section contains a brief summary of the Report for the academic year 2022/23:

Percentage of the student population in higher education registered with disability support services.

7.4%

Rise in number of students with disabilities registering for support in the last 14 years

319% increase

	2008/09	2022/23
	4,583	20,351

— **7.4 percent of all students enrolled were registered with disability support services in 2022/23.** 20,351 students were registered with support services in their HEI, representative of 7.4 percent of the total student body (n=276,508) attending participating HEIs. In 2021/22, 6.9 percent (n=18,097) of the student population were registered with support services (AHEAD, 2023b), demonstrating the continued increase in the percentage of students engaged with disability services in Higher Education in Ireland. This reflects a 6.5 percent (n=2,254) increase in the rate of participation in relation to 2021/22 data, (AHEAD, 2023b).

— **319 percent rise in number of students with disabilities registering for support in the last 14 years.** A meta-analysis of historical AHEAD data demonstrates that there has been a 319 percent increase in the number of students with disabilities accessing HE since the academic year 2008/09 (the inaugural annual report published by AHEAD).

— **A significant percentage of new entrant students have a disability but do not disclose and register for support.** In 2022/23, data from the HEA Equal Access Survey explicates that 19.4 percent of the new entrant undergraduate population who responded have disclosed at least one disability through the survey. The data from this Report demonstrates that just 7.8 percent (n=4,773) of new entrant undergraduates have registered with their HEI's support services. The significant disparity between the figures, despite their calculation emanated from two different underlying datasets, 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 supports. AHEAD acknowledge that disclosure is a complex issue. Our *Changing Landscapes* research indicated that some of the barriers or factors that informed non-disclosure included fears about career prospects, the cost of medical evidence required for registration, stigma, and a lack of awareness of support services, (AHEAD, 2023a).

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 3.2% of the total postgraduate cohort.
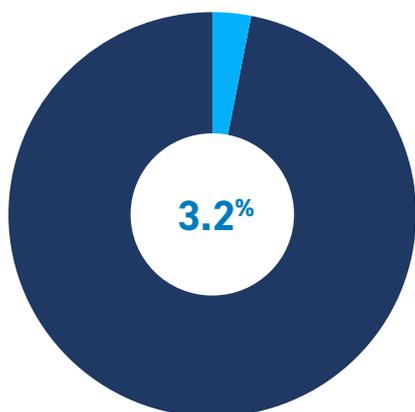
— **Postgraduate participation rate rising steadily, but students with disabilities remain significantly underrepresented in postgraduate study.** The participation rate of postgraduate students registered with disability support services remained low at 3.2 percent (n=1,904), despite increasing from 3 percent in 2021/22. The trend of a persistently a low postgraduate participation rate compared to the 8.5 percent (n=18,447) undergraduate participation rate for disabled students is a consistent finding in previous AHEAD reports,(AHEAD, 2022, 2023b).

— **Almost 1 in 8 students registered with services not eligible for the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).** Responding HEIs reported that 11.8 percent (n=2,406) of students registered for supports were not eligible for any funding from the FSD to help provide support services. A closer look at the data shows a huge range in the percentage of students registered with disability support services who are not FSD eligible, ranging from no students in some institutions, to over 28 percent of students registered with services in one institution. While the many potential causes for this non-eligibility are beyond the scope of this Report, it certainly warrants further analysis, considering the combination of international and national equality legislation and obligations that are linked to the provision of the relevant supports for disabled students. This is of particular importance considering the increasing ratios of students to DSS support staff member and the continued rise in disabled students engaging with HE, (Healy et al., 2023).

> **More than 1 in 8 students (11.8%) registered with services not eligible for the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).**

> **Nearly half (n=2,118) of new registrations with disability support services were not in their first year of study.**
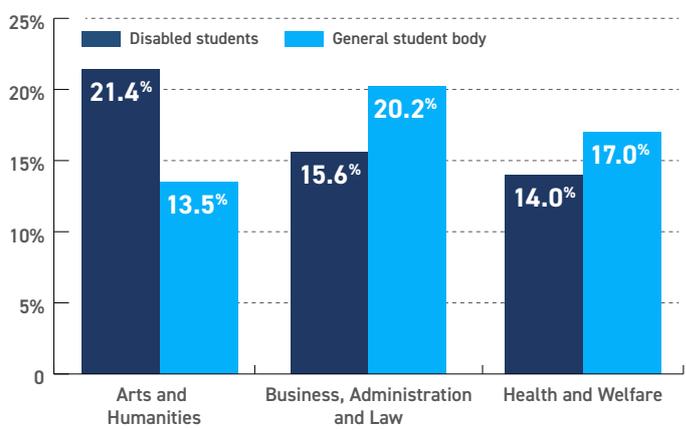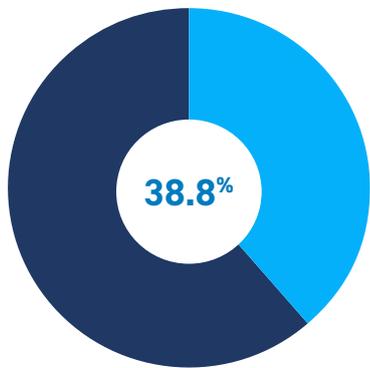

45%
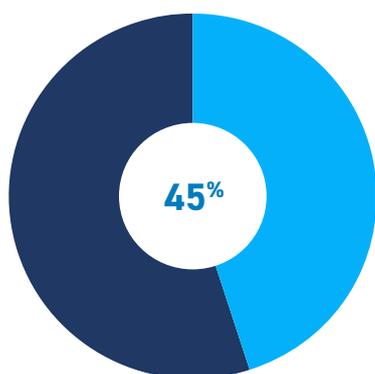
— **Approx. 45 percent of new registrations with disability support services were not in their first year of study**. In 2022/23, there were 4,773 new registrations with disability support services across all participating HEIs, representative of 23.5 percent of all students registered with DSS (n=20,351). Within this cohort, 2,118 students did not register in their first year of study, representative of 44.4 percent of all new registrations (n=4,773) and 10.4 percent of the total number of students with disabilities across all participating HEIs (n=20,351). This represents a sizable 69 percent increase in the number of disabled students engaging with DSS who were not in their first year of study.

11.8%

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

— **Specific Learning Difficulties remains the most common category of disability.** As has been the case over a number of iterations of Participation Rate research reports (AHEAD, 2022, 2023b), Specific Learning Difficulty was again the disability category which most of students with disabilities disclosed when registering with disability support services. It was reported, as a primary or additional disability by 38.8 percent (n=7,897) of all students with disabilities.

This was followed by Mental Health Condition (21.7 percent, n=4,412), ADD/ADHD (12.8 percent, n=2,612), Significant Ongoing Illness (12.4 percent, n=2,20), Aspergers/Autism (11 percent, n=2,236), DCD-Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia (8.2 percent, n=1,672), Neurological/Speech and Language (6.8 percent, n=1,378), Physical Disability (5.9 percent, n=1,210), Deaf/Hard of Hearing (2.5 percent, n=518), Blind/Visually Impaired (1.6 percent, n=323) and Other (1.5 percent, n=311).


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.

— **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, 2021b, 2022). Furthermore, it is also the field of study with the greatest disparity between the participation rate of disabled students (21.4 percent, n=4,146) compared to that of the general student body (13.5 percent). other notable disparities include Business, Administration and Law (15.67 percent of students registered with DSS, 20.28 percent of the total student body), and Health and Welfare (14.06 percent of students registered with DSS, 17.03 percent of the total student body).

— **Vast majority of students with disabilities were recommended exam accommodations as part of their needs assessment.** Participating institutions reported that 87.9 percent (n=17,890) of all students engaging with disability supports had received at least one exam accommodation in the academic year 2022/23. This represents a 9.7 percent increase in the rate of disabled student engagement with exam accommodations in relation to 21/22 data, (AHEAD, 2023b).

87.9% of students with disabilities were recommended one or more exam accommodations in 2022/23

87.9%
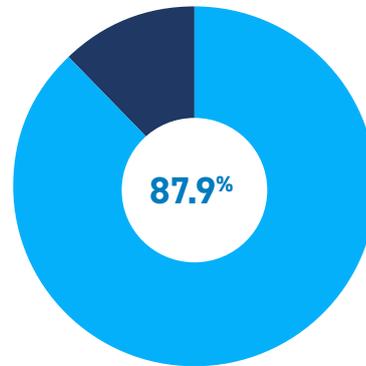
— **The ratios of students to DSS staff members continues to rise.** Drawing from the data submitted by responding institutions, we were able to calculate the number of students per support worker, including learning support officer, disability support service staff member and disability support staff member (disability and learning support combined). An analysis of this data indicates that there were 421 students per Learning Support Staff member (Figure 11), 208 students per Disability Support Staff member (Figure 12) and 139 students per Support Staff member (a combination of disability and learning support staff members) for the academic year 2022/23 (Figure 13).

In 2012/13 there was 97 students per support staff member. In 2021/22, there were 139 students with disabilities per support staff member.

2012/13

2022/23
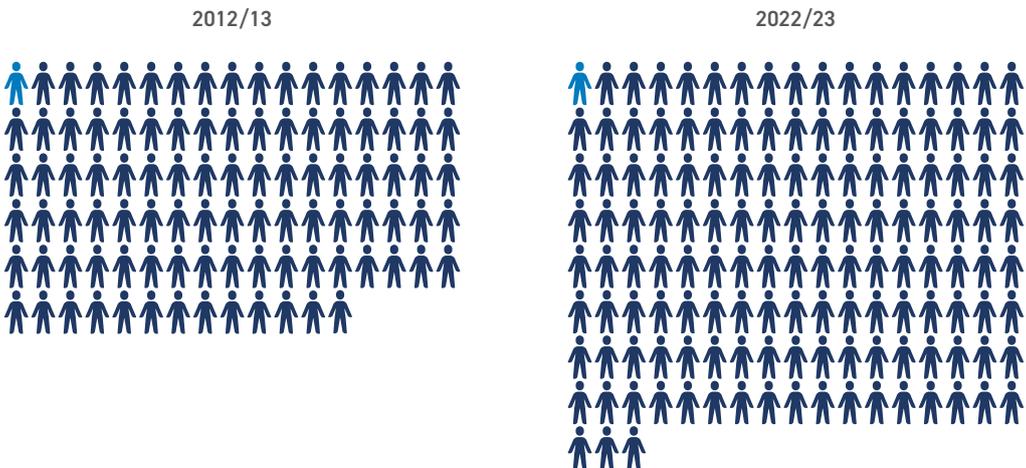
— **The vast majority of responding DSS believe that self-disclosure should not be an accepted form of evidence to access disability support.** 71 percent (n=10) of responding DSS are of the opinion that medical verification should be a prerequisite to availing of disability support services, however several highlighted that criteria of acceptable evidence should be widened significantly. 29 percent (n=4) of respondents answered "yes" to the same question. Their views were linked to the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) Guidelines and framework, (HEA, 2021), staff shortages, "fairness" and the financial cost for HEIs if or when they support students who cannot access this Fund.

— **Many DSS believe that certain forms of non-medical evidence should be sufficient to register for disability supports.** While most DSS did not agree that self-disclosure was acceptable for access to supports, many were of the opinion that non-medical evidence (e.g. from secondary schools and other professionals) should be considered adequate evidence of disability to engage with support services.

— **Many DSS are unable to oversee the quality and uniformity of the implementation of registered supports due to heavy workloads and being under-resourced.** Prior AHEAD research indicated that 36 percent of students did not react positively when asked about the quality of support implementation, with 55 percent reacting in a similar way when asked to rate the uniformity of support implementation by educators. When DSS were asked to provide comments for the same questions, the data suggested that many were unable to oversee how supports were implemented. The challenges to monitoring the quality of how supports are implemented were alluded to include FSD Guidelines and difficulties with workloads and resources.

— **Number of students with sensory disabilities growing at significantly slower rate than other disability categories.** As was the case with previous reports, sensory disabilities (Blind/Visually Impaired, 1.6 percent of all disabled students, n=323; Deaf/Hard of Hearing, 2.5 percent of all disabled students, n=518) were again significantly under-represented in comparison to other disability categories. This has been a consistent finding in a number of prior *Participation Rate Reports*.

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.), further research and any collaborations that AHEAD took part in during the academic year being analysed (2022/23) and shortly thereafter. (For context, during 2023 and 2024, AHEAD have advocated for disabled students in a variety of Sub-Committees, Advisory Groups and Steering Groups). The format of this section marks a point of departure from previous *Participation Rate Reports.* We now include 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, 2021b, 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. 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.

Increase DSS Staffing

DFHEIRS, the HEA and HEIs should jointly commit to increasing the number of DSS staff through ring-fenced funding increases and strategic recruitment drives in line with the 317% rise in disabled students engaging with support services since 2008/09 and increasing numbers of late registrations. This currently stands at 208 students per DSS member.

Time Scale: Short Term/Ongoing
Stakeholder(s): DFHERIS, HEA, HEIs

Review FSD Guidelines & Increase the Fund to Reduce Barriers to Progression

Overarching guidelines for the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) should be revised to ease access and reduce barriers. The FSD should be increased to meet the rapidly rising demand for supports. HEIs should consider accepting some forms of non-medical verification from secondary schools, and medical evidence from a wider pool of professionals to streamline the process.

Time Scale: Short term
Stakeholder(s): DFHERIS, HEA, HEIs

Support Universal Design (UD) Practices

Advocate for the integration of Universal Design practices at all levels of higher education to promote student success, equity, and inclusion. Utilize the Altitude Charter (comprising of pillars such as Learning Teaching and Assessment, Supports, Services & Social Engagement, the Physical Environment, and the Digital Environment) as a key vehicle to support a long term strategic and sustainable approach to UD implementation. Increase ring-fenced HEI core funding to facilitate the embedding of UD approaches. Monitor the efficacy of Path 4 Phase 1.

Implementation: Short term/medium term.
Objective: Ongoing/Long term.
Stakeholder(s): DFHERIS, HEA (PATH 4-- Phase 1), HEIs

Develop and Support Implementation of Inclusive Assessment Standards

Develop and support the implementation of national principles on inclusive assessment to reduce the rising need for exam accommodations and provide students with alternative assessment options. Consider how flexible approaches to demonstrating core competencies can be promoted through the principles.

Time Scale: Medium term
Stakeholder(s): QQI, HEA, HEIs, DFHERIS, Professional Bodies

Address Disparities in Fields of Study with Poor Employability Outcomes Following Graduation

Develop targeted national commitments, strategies, and actions to address the over-representation of students with disabilities in fields of study with lower graduate outcomes and the under-representation in fields with higher outcomes. Focus particularly on the Arts and Humanities area, where 22.3% of students with disabilities are enrolled compared to 13.8% in the general student population, despite lower graduate employment rates and lower salaries.

Time Scale: Medium term

Stakeholder(s): HEA, ICG- (Life- Long Guidance), DFHERIS, DoE

Include Intellectual Disability (ID) as a Standalone Disability Category within the FSD

Advocate for the inclusion of Intellectual Disability (ID) as a standalone category within the *Fund for Students with Disabilities* (FSD). As AHEAD align the categories of disability with the FSD, this will facilitate research into the effectiveness of PATH4 (Phase 2) funding streams and allow for a comprehensive examination of the experiences and narratives of students with Intellectual Disabilities as they access, engage, and progress through the new courses that target this cohort in participating HEIs.

Time Scale: Short term. Ongoing.

Stakeholder(s): HEA

Some of our prior recommendations that have been continuously reiterated in previous reports include the under-representation of students who have disclosed sensory disabilities (i.e. Blind/Visually Impaired and Deaf/Hard of Hearing), and the under-representation of disabled students engaging with postgraduate study across all participating HEIs. AHEAD's work with the *National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee* (NDPAC) embodies our commitment to responding to repeated annual recommendations. The Launchpad community, which aims to combine the collective experiences of disabled postgraduate students and early researchers, is an outcome of this collaborative effort to foster equity of access and participation in postgraduate study. This has been articulated under the inclusivity goal within the Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022 – 2028, (HEA, 2022b). The Launchpad project encompasses both education and employment, two key facets of the current AHEAD Strategy, (AHEAD, 2024).

AHEAD commit to responding to repeated recommendations (from prior Reports) in this manner and using these recommendation to inform our engagement with key actors and stakeholders from the HE landscape. 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 (2023/24).

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Appendices

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

Institution Name	Total Students with Disabilities	Students with Disabilities as a % of Total Institution Population
ATU (Glaway/Mayo)	815	9%
ATU (Sligo Campus)	446	4%
ATU (Donegal Campus)	496	10.3%
DCU	1069	5.8%
DkIT	302	5.9%
DLIADT	282	12.1%
MIC	238	4.7%
MIE	116	8.5%
MTU	1382	8.4%
MU	1067	7.4%
NCAD	156	11.5%
NCI	142	2.5%
University of Galway	1599	8.2%
RCSI	253	6.6%
SETU (Carlow Campus)	356	4.1%
SETU (Waterford Campus)	741	8.5%
St Angela's	148	9.2%
TCD	2312	10.8%
TUD	1798	6.8%
TUS	998	6.9%
UCC	2032	8.3%
UCD	2569	7.6%
UL	1034	5.6%

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.

Generic programmes and qualifications
— Basic programmes and qualifications
— Literacy and numeracy
— Personal skills

Education
— Education not further defined or elsewhere classified.
— Education science.
— Training for pre-school teachers.
— Teacher training without subject specialisation.
— Teacher training with subject specialisation.
— Inter-disciplinary programmes and qualifications involving education.

Inter-disciplinary programmes and qualifications to which the greatest intended learning time is devoted to education.

Disability Category

The disabilities that fall under the categories used in this Report are drawn from HEA data and the DARE (Disability Access Routes to Education) program classifications. Further details can be found here.

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