

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

Summary of Findings  
and Recommendations



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**Research: Dr Richard Healy and Dara Ryder**

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East Hall  
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**Tel: (01) 7164396**  
**Email: [ahead@ahead.ie](mailto:ahead@ahead.ie)**

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# Summary

This document provides a summary of the key findings and recommendations from AHEAD's annual research: *Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2022/23*. The Report is available in its entirety on the AHEAD website (AHEAD.ie). All Disability Support Services (DSS) from the 23 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) who were requested to submit a survey responded to the call for institutional data. However, it should be noted that some Technological Universities submitted their surveys under the auspices of their former Institute of Technology status. This is primarily due to the complexities of merging data across institutions.

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

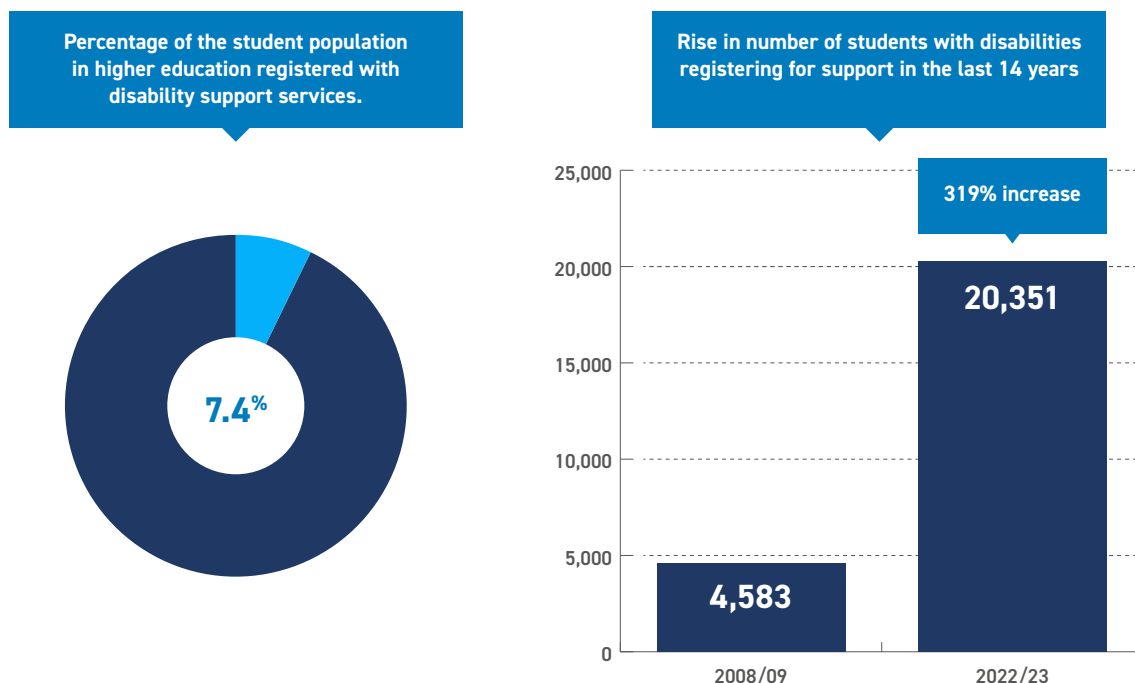
Some of the core findings that emanate from these reports advance a better understanding of the disability narrative in HE. The data enables AHEAD to:

- Calculate the percentage of the student body that are registered with disability supports in their institution (and across all participating HEIs).
- Compare the participation rates of disabled students at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Compare this data with previous reports.
- Further disaggregate the data through the dual lenses of disability category and field of study.
- Explore the process of examinations and associated accommodations that are intended to promote equity of opportunity for disabled students.
- Carry out year on year, continued analysis of the number of students per Support Staff member in HE.

- Use data from prior reports for year-on-year benchmarking and comparison.
- Recommend solution focussed interventions through the identification of barriers and contribute to a more equitable tertiary education sector for disabled students through the meaningful expression of the student voice.
- Conduct a qualitative exploration of DSS's perceptions regarding the need to provide medical evidence of disability prior to accessing support services and the efficacy of implemented supports, post recommendation.
- Recommend solution focussed interventions through the identification of barriers and contribute to a more equitable tertiary education sector for disabled students through the meaningful expression of the student voice and the perspectives and working environment of DSS.

Furthermore, much like our 21/22 Report it is the incidence of disability, as opposed to using primary disability as a sole indicator) to unpack a more accurate overview of the disability breakdown of students registered with their institution's DSS. the Report for 2022/23 also explores Exam Accommodations in more detail in line with the increasing number of bespoke supports now being implemented by DSS.

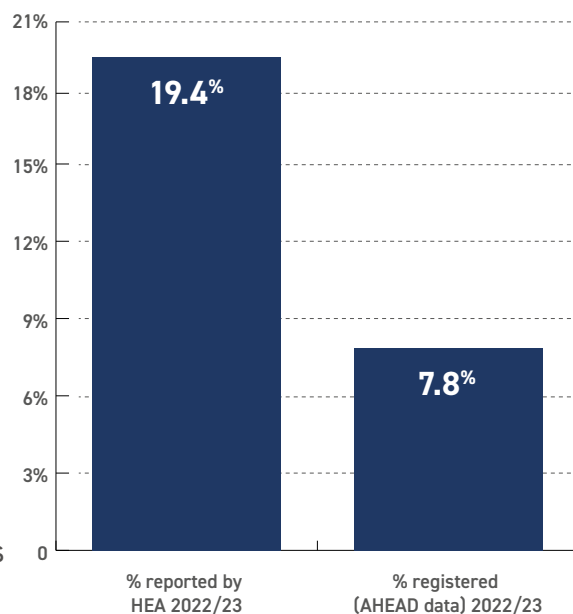
Following a detailed analysis and reporting of the data from the 23 responding institutions, we here present a summary of the key findings and contributions for the academic year 2022/23:



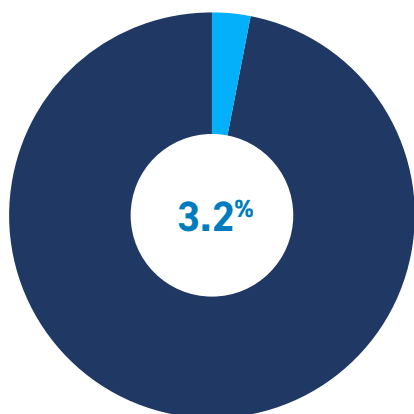
- **7.4 percent of all students enrolled were registered with disability support services in 2022/23.** 20,351 students were registered with support services in their HEI, representative of 7.4 percent of the total student body (n=276,508) attending participating HEIs. In 2021/22, 6.9 percent (n=18,097) 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).

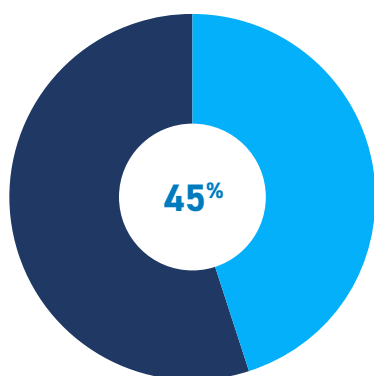
— **Almost 1 in 8 students registered with services not eligible for the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).**

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).



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

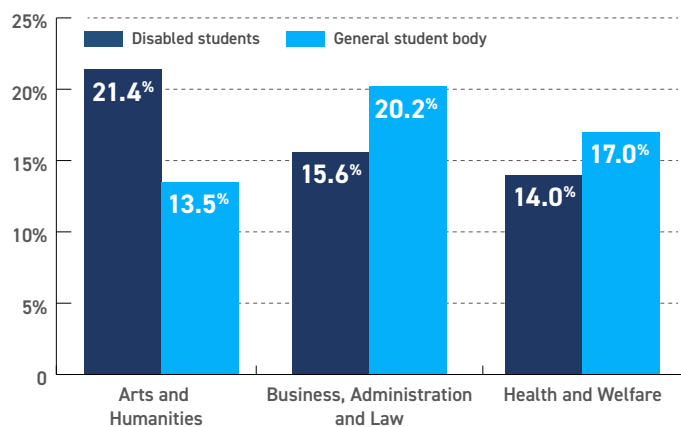
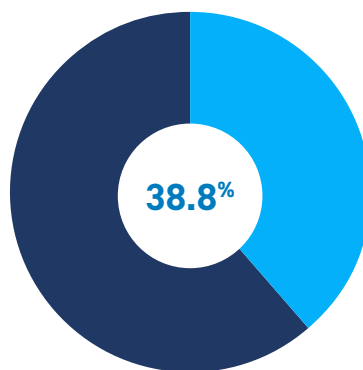


— **Approx. 45 percent of new registrations with disability support services were not in their first year of study.** In 2022/23, there were 4,773 new registrations with disability support services across all participating HEIs, representative of 23.5 percent of all students registered with DSS (n=20,351). 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.



— **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).

The most commonly reported disability category of students were those in the Specific Learning Difficulty category, at 38.8%



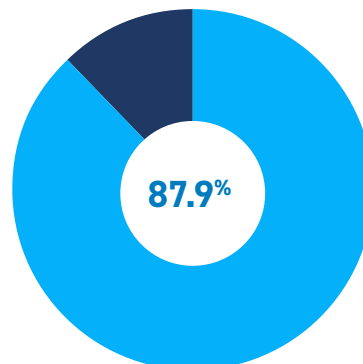
Arts and Humanities is once again the field of the study with the highest number of disabled students. It is also the field of study with the greatest disparity between the participation rate of disabled students compared to that of the general student body. Other notable disparities include Business, 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).

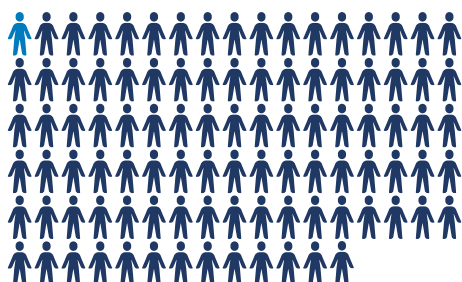
87.9% of students with disabilities were recommended one or more exam accommodations in 2022/23



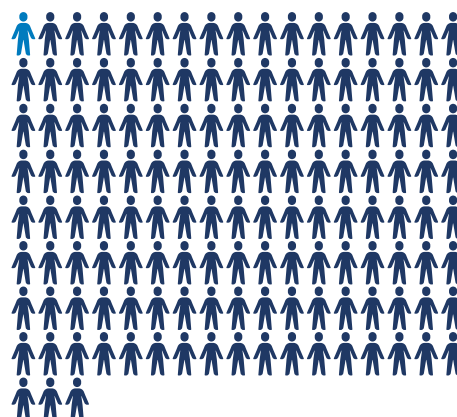
— **The ratios of students to DSS staff members continues to rise.** Drawing from the data submitted by responding institutions, we were able to calculate the number of students per support worker, including learning support officer, disability support service staff member and disability support staff 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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