

# Social Engagement Experiences of Disabled Students in Higher Education



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The social engagement of students in higher education leads to the development of a sense of belonging, resulting in greater student retention. Internationally, disabled students have been found to face additional barriers to their social engagement. This article presents the author's PhD research on the social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland. It summarises the findings and reflects on their significance in the new Covid-19 environment.

Little did I know, when I began higher education (HE), that I was among only 1% of the student population with a disability (AHEAD, 2019) and the only student in my secondary school to attend university that year. I was an outgoing student, but the impact of my disability and the barriers I faced made attending HE an isolating experience.

That all began to change in my second year in college, when my brother began, and we lived together on campus with another disabled student. I got to know more disabled and non-disabled peers on the residence, and we formed a community. We drank tea, and lived, loved, and learned together. My confidence grew, and although the impact of my disability and the structural barriers I faced never changed, it did not seem to matter as much.

Together we established a student disability peer group and a wheelchair basketball team. I represented my class, and eventually the entire student body, as Students' Union welfare officer. As a group, we brought about change in our institution. Despite this, there were many other significantly disabled students who could not participate due to a lack of supports. We were unable to remove all the barriers to enable our peers to engage fully.

Following my master's dissertation on the employment of disabled graduates, I learnt that the impact of the barriers to the social engagement of disabled students in HE had a longer-term effect on their employment opportunities. I learnt that disabled students struggle to transition to HE due to similar barriers that I and others had faced. I realised there was very little focus on the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE (Papasotiriou & Windle, 2012). I wanted to develop a greater understanding of these experiences in Ireland.

My doctoral research explores the social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland (Rath, 2020). It focuses on the barriers and enablers to their engagement, students' sense of belonging in HE, and how national policies and institutional-level policies and practices foster or impede the process of social engagement.

Transition to and participation in HE have been identified with greater quality of life and as a major precondition for accessing employment and, correspondingly, social inclusion (Ebersold, 2012). Historically, disabled students have been under-represented in HE. Greater progression rates have resulted from a combination of national policies, through the widening participation agenda, supported by resources, and the establishment of a structure to support disabled students in HE (AHEAD, 2019).

During the transition, and once students progress to HE, they face additional challenges, including attitudinal, structural, and academic barriers that their peers do not face (McGuckin et al., 2013). A successful transition and full engagement have been found to be critical to student success and greater retention (Thomas, 2012). Engagement has been identified as especially beneficial for students least prepared for the transition or those from under-represented groups (Trowler & Trowler, 2011). Although many international higher education institutes (HEIs) have made progress towards creating accessible academic programmes for disabled students and providing academic supports, co-curricular aspects of campus life have received significantly less attention (Quaye & Harper, 2014).

Engaging socially, both in and outside the class, allows students to develop social and cultural capital, graduate attributes, and skills that will be essential upon progressing to employment (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). It helps students to develop the leadership skills to have their voice heard. Creating a climate in HEIs that enables the amplification of diverse voices is critical to implementing the widening participation agenda.

Social engagement helps to create a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012). Those who feel like they belong report higher levels of enjoyment, enthusiasm, happiness, and interest and are more confident in engaging with learning activities (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Internationally, disabled students have been found to face barriers to their social engagement (Papasotiriou & Windle, 2012), impacting upon their sense of community and belonging. In Ireland, disabled people face barriers to their wider social participation (Watson & Nolan, 2011). In the literature there has been little focus on the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE in Ireland.

My research combined a transformative approach with the bioecological model. The philosophical assumptions of the transformative paradigm offered me a framework to directly engage disabled people, and the bioecological model allowed me to examine the barriers and enablers to their engagement in the system around them. I developed a four-phased, sequential, and concurrent qualitative data collection research design. A range of qualitative methodologies enabled the removal of barriers to participation.

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The sampling strategy brought together data from sixty-five participants, with representatives from nineteen HEIs across Ireland. By capturing a diverse range of data from diverse sources (Walton, 2014), including current students, disabled graduates, full-time student union officers, senior managers, and disability support personnel, the research provided the integral knowledge for transformational research (Mertens, 2017) while viewing the many layers of the system in which the student was embedded (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This approach yielded a lot of extremely rich data, which was analysed using a thematic approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Four superordinate themes were identified: transitions, engagement, college climate, and structures. The key research findings were then synthesised and discussed.

The findings demonstrated the value that disabled students place on their social engagement and its contribution to their sense of belonging. Most disabled students considered themselves to be socially engaged and to have a positive student experience. However, almost all disabled students and graduates spoke of barriers to their social engagement, with some having very limited or no social engagement. Social engagement was recognised as vital to the formation of connections that lead to a sense of belonging.

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Most students reported feeling a sense of belonging in their institution, but students reported being uncertain about their in-class sense of belonging. Half of all disabled students believed there was no disability awareness in their college and that their non-disabled peers were less aware of disability than the staff. Hearing the student voice, participants said, was critical to engagement and to the creation of a sense of belonging. Most senior managers were unaware of any disabled student in senior leadership positions in their institutions.

The research found that persistent barriers had a major impact on students' sense of value; ability to maintain friendships; ability to develop a sense of belonging, including in class; and engagement with leadership opportunities. There was little evidence of a strategic approach to disabled students' social engagement, or knowledge of how to achieve it. Disability support staff and senior managers reported that in a competitive EDI (equality, diversity, and inclusion) environment, disability can fall down the list of priorities.

The research shows that developing effective policy in relation to disabled students in HE requires a clear understanding of their lived experience. It highlights the need to implement national and institutional-level policy, structures, support, and resources to enable the social engagement of all disabled students, and a mechanism to ensure their voice is heard in HEI.

Since completing the research, I've reflected on my own college experience and questioned what has changed. There have been clear improvements: the number of disabled students attending HE has increased, and academic supports have improved. Current disabled students evidently face similar barriers to their social engagement that I experienced when I began. Disabled students continue to face systemic barriers, and the principles of student engagement (HEA, 2016) are not being universally implemented

with them in mind. The social engagement of disabled students needs to be seen as a priority, and the fundamental elements need to be addressed: to create a college climate in which disabled students can socially engage, have their voice heard, are valued, and feel like they belong.

The relevance of this research is in its groundbreaking nature, but it is particularly significant in Ireland in 2020, when the delivery of HE has had to undergo a rapid metamorphosis due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It appears that how students engage socially with their HEI and with each other will change permanently. There has been an appreciation among the general public of the impact of social isolation, something disabled people face on a daily basis.

We must consider how we create a sense of belonging for those who are not in the room, those who do not have a place at the decision-making table. These changes, in the context of the ratified UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), offer an opportunity to reimagine how we support and engage all students. Now, more than ever, it is essential that we include the voice of disabled students in this process and ensure that they have a seat at the decision-making table.

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### Check your facts and challenge your sources, An Taoiseach urges students



Speaking at the UCC Conferings of the class of 2020, the Fianna Fáil leader and Cork native Micheál Martin urged the almost 5,000 new graduates to use their education to determine the trustworthiness of information.

"In the current era of change, disruption and threat, the need to challenge, question and verify facts has never been more important. Use your education, and the confidence and opportunity it gives you, to always check facts and challenge where they come from. Your communities and your society will be relying on you," he said.