

Autistic Students' Engagement and Participation in Higher Education

An exploration through research, observations, and experiential evidence

Introduction

Significantly fewer autistic students engage in Ireland's higher education system compared with other disability types (AHEAD, 2021). Autistic students are eligible for disability and learning support services in higher education institutions, but the level or type of support allocated does not always meet their needs. Diagnosis of a specific learning disability, such as dyslexia, is more clear-cut when providing reasonable accommodations for a student. They can then avail of supports such as assistive technology, additional time with assignments, or a scribe for examinations (ibid.).

Around one-third of autistic people present with an intellectual disability (AsIAm, 2021). Autistic students without a specific learning difficulty may therefore be ineligible for traditional learning supports. The challenges they experience are often due to executive dysfunction or impaired social development (White et al., 2016). With this in mind, we need to ask: Are disability and learning services the appropriate route for autistic students to access accommodations, or do higher-education support systems need to evolve to meet the more diverse needs of autistic students?

Autism spectrum disorder in Ireland

In 2013, 1% of Irish people were reported to be autistic (Boilson et al., 2013; DCU, 2013). In 2023 that figure was approximately 3.3% (AsIAm, 2023). This represents an increase of 120,000 autistic people in Ireland over the 10-year period to today. In a recent study by AsIAm (2023), Ireland's national autism charity, examining the life experiences of 1,603 autistic adults and children, 61%



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This article gives a brief overview of autistic student engagement in mainstream higher education: the challenges they experience and the support they receive. Are autistic students receiving the support they need? Is it enough? Anecdotal and observational evidence indicates that autistic students do not feel fully supported, which impacts on their learning experience.

said they did not find the education system to be inclusive or accessible. A concerning 86% believe they do not have the same chance in Irish society as their non-autistic peers. This suggests that as a nation we still have a long way to go before we can claim to be truly inclusive.

Autism spectrum disorder in higher education

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A historic review of students with disabilities attending higher-education settings revealed a lower number of autistic students than any other disability type (AHEAD, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). But in 2022, AHEAD's annual report for the 2021/22 academic year showed an increase in the number of autistic students attending higher education.

The graph below, extracted from AHEAD's (2023) statistical data, shows that in 2007 autistic students represented 1.3% of students with disabilities in higher education, but that by 2020 this had increased significantly to 7.6%. With increasing numbers of autistic people in Ireland, it is essential that their experiences, engagement, and progression in higher education be adequately supported.

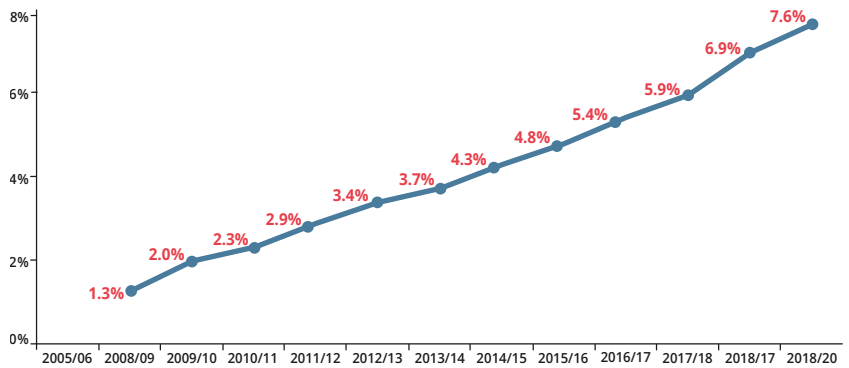


Figure: Percentage of students with autism within the disabled student population, 2006/07–2019/20

Disability and learning support services

Discussions about diversity, students' needs, and disability type have become a more integrated part of the higher-education landscape today. Neurodiversity has become a buzzword for how humans are all different and learn in unique ways. Disability and learning support services have a responsibility to students with certain disability types, with a focus on academic needs.

For a student with intellectual or learning difficulties, the allocation of support is more straightforward, as it is generally learning- and teaching-related (AHEAD, 2021). For a student with a physical disability, supports are made through ensuring accessibility to the built environment. For an autistic student, identifying what is needed to allow them to experience higher education is not always apparent, and the provision of support is often difficult to measure and allocate. Academically the student may be intellectually able, and they may not have a specific physical disability. This places them outside the remit for traditional disability and learning support services.

Challenges for students with autism spectrum disorder

From personal experience as an autistic person, a higher-education lecturer, and a PhD student, the challenges of navigating day-to-day academic life are much more than what disability and learning support services can provide. Before an autistic person can even begin to engage with learning, there are many barriers to overcome, such as sensory overload, poor executive functioning, and unaccommodating built environments (White et al., 2016).

Higher education provides a space for students to become independent learners (McKendry & Boyd, 2012). Academic progression is evident through learning, teaching, and assessment, and as students become integrated into the higher-education system, they continue with social and personal development as young adults. For autistic students, the expectation to become an independent learner is not as definite as with their neurotypical peers.

Unfortunately, there is minimal research available on how autistic students experience higher education, but from an observational perspective, the struggle is evident. The lower rates of autistic and neurodiverse students attending higher education indicates an underlying issue, which needs further investigation. There is also a lower rate of progression to postgraduate level for this cohort (AHEAD, 2021). Working with autistic students, my understanding is that challenges are less academic and more concerned with day-to-day functioning amid the chaos of academic life.

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What needs to change

Evidentially there is a research gap related to students with autism spectrum disorder in higher education, and a more concerning absence of studies carried out with autistic participants. To get an authentic perspective on the lives of autistic students in higher education, we need to ask them about their experiences. For too long, preconceived ideas have led the way in policy development for disability and learning support services. It is time to ask

autistic students what supports they need, so that they can become fully immersed in all aspects of higher-education life, both academic and social.

I acknowledge that some the anecdotal sources in this paper are only one perspective, my own. However, this is all evidence based on my work with autistic students, asking questions and listening. I hear their anxieties and stresses regarding timetables, deadlines, misplacing assignments. It all sounds so familiar to my own experiences.

If a supportive environment is created, in consultation with autistic people and students, there is huge potential for higher-education institutions to take on board and further develop the work carried out by Dublin City University when it became Ireland's first autism-friendly campus (Sweeney et al., 2018). Policy needs to change, because societal needs change. With increasing numbers of autistic and neurodiverse students attending higher education, embedding accessibility and inclusion in higher-education policies is essential to ensure an equitable, engaging, and enhanced learning experience for all.

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