

**The Social Engagement  
Experiences of Disabled Students  
in Higher Education in Ireland.**

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**Vivian Rath**

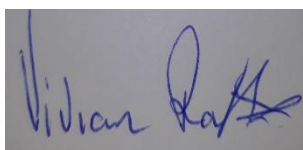
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Doctor in Philosophy in Education.

2021



## Declaration

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Vivian Rath 26.09.2020

## Summary

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

Transition to, and engagement in higher education is seen as a major precondition for accessing employment, and correspondingly, to social inclusion (Ebersold, 2012, 2011). The number of disabled students attending HE in Ireland has increased (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 2019) in response to national policy promoting a widening participation agenda. Disabled students have been found to face greater challenges transitioning than their non-disabled peers due to a range of societal barriers (McGuckin, Shevlin, Bell, & Devecchi, 2013). Early and ongoing engagement of students has been identified as particularly beneficial for students least prepared, or those from under-represented groups (L. Thomas, 2012; Trowler & Trowler, 2011). Many international higher education institutes (HEI) have made progress toward creating accessible academic programs for disabled students and providing academic supports, cocurricular aspects of campus life have received significantly less focus (Quaye & Harper, 2014). Disabled students, similar to their non-disabled peers need both academic and social engagement to enhance their development and success. Engaging in social networks both in and outside class allows students to develop social and cultural capital (Strayhorn, 2010), graduate attributes (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019a) and skills that will be essential upon progressing to employment (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Social engagement has been identified as contributing to creating a sense of belonging (L. Thomas, 2012) and those who feel like they belong report higher levels of enjoyment 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 belonging. In Ireland, it is recognised that disabled people face barriers to their wider social participation (Watson & Nolan, 2011), and students face barriers to their transition to and participation on entering HE (McGuckin et al., 2013). Despite the recognised value of social engagement, there is a significant gap in the literature relating to the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE in Ireland.

This research adopted a framework which combined a transformative approach with the bio-ecological model. As a person with a disability with a human rights perspective, the philosophical assumptions of the transformative paradigm offered the researcher a framework to directly engage disabled people, and through the bioecological model permitted the examination of the barriers and enablers to their engagement in the system around them. The researcher developed a four-phased, sequential, and concurrent qualitative data collection research design. A diverse range of qualitative methodology enabled the removal of barriers to participant involvement. The sampling strategy brought together data from 65 participants, with representatives from 19 HEIs across Ireland. By capturing a diverse range of data from diverse sources (Walton, 2014), including current students, disabled graduates, students union full time officers, senior managers, and disability support personnel, the research provided the integral knowledge for transformational research (Mertens, 2017) whilst viewing the many layers of the system within which the student was embedded (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

This approach yielded a large quantity of extremely rich data. This was analysed using a thematic approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Through this process four superordinate themes were identified: transitions, engagement, college climate and structures and the key findings were synthesised and discussed.

The research findings demonstrated the value disabled students place on their social engagement and its contribution to their sense of belonging. The majority of 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 a cohort having very limited or no social engagement. Social engagement was recognised as being vital to the formation of connections that lead to a sense of belonging. The research found that persistent barriers had a major impact on students' sense of value, ability to maintain friendships, 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. The research demonstrates that the development of effective policy in relation to disabled students in HE requires a clear understanding of the lived experiences of disabled students. It highlights the need for the implementation of policy, structures, and support to enable the social engagement of all disabled students along with a mechanism to ensure their voice is heard within HEI. The findings of this research must be used to inform research, policy, and practice and makes a valuable contribution in the public policy context.

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## **Acronyms and Abbreviations**

Ahead: Association for Higher Education Access and Disability

ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder

CAO: Central Applications Office

CRPD: Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Compact: Performance Compacts

DAC: Disability Advisory Committee

DARE: Disability Access Route to Education

DES: Department of Education and Science

DSP: Disability Support Personnel

DSS: Disability Support Services

EDI: Equality Diversity and Inclusion

EU: European Union

FSD: Fund for Students with Disabilities

GDPR: General Data Protection Regulation

HEA: Higher Education Authority

HEAR: Higher Education Access Route

HE: Higher Education

HEI: Higher Education Institute

HSE: Health Service Executive

IEP: Individual Education Plan

IHREC: Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission

ILM: Independent Living Movement

IoT: Institute of Technology

ISSE: Irish Survey of Student Engagement

IUA: Irish Universities Association

KPI: Key Performance Indicators

NAO: National Access Office

NDA: National Disability Authority  
NDIS: The National Disability Inclusion Strategy  
NESF: The National Economic and Social Forum  
NFTL: National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning  
NLN: National Learning Network  
NSSE: National Survey of Student Engagement  
NStEP: National Student Engagement Programme  
PA: Personal Assistant  
PA: Performance Agreements  
PATH: Programme for Access to Higher Education  
PLC: Post Leaving Certificate  
QQI: Quality and Qualifications Ireland  
SEN: Special Educational Needs  
SNA: Special Needs Assistant  
SU: Students' Union  
SUFTO: Students' Union Full Time Officer  
THEA: Technological Higher Education Association  
TU: Technology University  
T&L: Teaching and Learning  
UD: Universal Design  
UDL: Universal Design for Learning  
UN CRPD: United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities  
UN: United Nations  
UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation  
USI: Union of Students' of Ireland



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# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

Chapter One will present a reflection on the positioning of the researcher, the rationale for the research, the research questions, the theoretical framework for the research and will conclude with the order of the thesis. The reflective piece examines the identity of the researcher in an effort to 'position' the researcher in relation to the research. A rationale for the research identifies the significant gap in the literature relating to the social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education (HE) in Ireland. The research aim and questions are outlined, as informed by the literature review, which will guide the research methodology for the study. The theoretical framework for the research will be presented and finally Chapter One will conclude with the chapter sequence.

## 1.2 Reflection

The act of reflexivity is the process of a "continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of the researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome" (Berger, 2013, p. 220). I begin my Ph.D., whilst working full time in the largest university in Ireland in the areas of the student experience and transitions, in the Office of the Vice President. In my role, I have developed an understanding of the management of the student experience and how the different layers of a higher education institution (HEI) interact to create a certain culture and structure, which may impact upon the student experience. I lead an active lifestyle, I'm a disability rights advocate, a member of many disability advocacy organisations, Chair of Student Affairs Ireland (SAI), Director of the Board of Ahead and I have a physical disability.

Although my current positionality is important, I was conscious of the necessity to reflect on the impact of my own experiences as an undergraduate student and its contribution to my thinking. I was the first in my family to attend higher education (HE), the only student in my secondary school to attend university that year. Little did I know that at the time I was also among only 1% of the student population with a disability (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 2015). I was an outgoing student but the impact

of my disability and the barriers I faced made attending HE an isolating experience. That all changed 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 faced never changed, it did not seem to matter as much. Together we established a student disability peer group, a wheelchair basketball team, and I represented my class, and eventually the entire student body, as Students' Union Welfare Officer. As a group, we brought about change to 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 the barriers to enable our peers to engage fully socially. 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 (Ebersold, 2012). I learnt that disabled students struggle to transition to HE due to similar barriers that myself and others had faced (Shevlin, Kenny, & McNeela, 2004; Tinklin & Hall, 1999). I realised that 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 the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE in Ireland.

I was conscious that my experiences as a disabled undergraduate student had shaped my view of social engagement. I was aware that I could be seen as both an insider and a member of the marginalised group engaged in the research (Mertens, 2017). I was cognisant of the need to work with disabled people to present their lived experiences to enable change, whilst ensuring that my own experiences did not cloud the data. As a result, engaging in a continual process of reflexivity, ethical considerations and controlling for bias played a major role in this research. Further details of the steps I took to counteract this issue will be presented in Chapter Four and Chapter Eight.

### **1.3 Rationale for the Research**

Historically, disabled people have faced deep-seated structures of inequality both in Ireland (Lynch, Baker, & Cantillon, 2001) and abroad. A range of societal barriers mean that they face deprivation and marginalisation with unequal access to education, employment and social participation (Gannon & Nolan, 2005). These inequalities have been expressed and proliferated in the culture and language used to define and describe disability, with disabled people being forced to the margins with little input to decisions relating to them (Shah & Priestley, 2011). The medical model which emphasised an in-person deficit, has medicalised, classified, and labelled their impairments and they have been segregated from society. An international awakening to the inalienable human rights of disabled people, combined with the growth of the disabled rights movement and the evolution of the social model of disability (Barnes, 2000; Oliver, 1990), resulted in a greater awareness of the barriers society created to the full engagement of disabled people. Disabled people demanded to be included in education, employment, and all aspects of society. The adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons' (UNCRPD) in 2006 signalled the acceptance of the human rights model of disability and placed the disabled person at the centre of decisions relating to them. In Ireland, these international and EU (European Commission, 2010), developments allied with a recognition of a moral and societal obligation to ensure a more equal society. This resulted in a range of legislative developments to promote greater inclusion of disabled people in all aspects of society including education. The widening participation agenda has been embedded into national education policies and strategy (Hunt, 2011), with the intention of ensuring that the diversity of education is representative of the society we live in.

Transition to, and participation in, higher education has been identified with greater quality of life and as a major pre-condition for accessing employment, and correspondingly, to social inclusion (Ebersold, 2012, 2011). In Ireland, 65% of school leavers attend HE (Higher Education Authority, 2018d), and it is identified as an important marker in the transition to adulthood (Ebersold, 2016). Historically, disabled students have been under-represented in HE (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 1994). A combination of national policies, supported by resources (Higher Education Authority, 2018a), and the establishment of a structure to support students in HE has resulted in greater progression rates (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 2019). During the transition process, and once students' progress to HE,

they face a range of additional challenges that their peers do not (McGuckin et al., 2013) including attitudinal, structural and academic barriers (Hong, 2015; Shevlin et al., 2004). These barriers have demonstrated a negative impact upon students' transition experience (Doyle, 2015; Hewett, Douglas, McLinden, & Keil, 2016). A successful transition and the full engagement of students has been found critical to student success and it results in greater retention of students (Department of Education and Skills, 2013b; National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019b; L. Thomas, 2012). Engagement has been identified as especially beneficial for students least prepared for the transition, or those from under-represented groups (L. Thomas, 2012; Trowler & Trowler, 2011). In Ireland, this has been recognised by an increased focus on student engagement through initiatives such as the *National Student Engagement Programme* (N-StEP) and the *Irish Survey of Student Engagement* (ISSE) and civic engagement. Although many international higher education institutes (HEI) have made progress toward creating accessible academic programs for disabled students and providing academic supports, cocurricular aspects of campus life have received significantly less focus (Quaye & Harper, 2014).

Attending HE constitutes an important step for many students in the process of forming an independent personal and social identity (Goode, 2007). Similar to the entire student body, disabled students need both academic and cocurricular engagement to enhance their development and success (Quaye & Harper, 2014). Engaging in social networks both in, and outside, class allows students to develop social and cultural capital (Strayhorn, 2010), graduate attributes (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019a) and skills that will be essential upon progressing to employment (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). It assists students to develop the leadership skills to have their voice heard. Creating a climate which enables the amplification of a range of diverse voices is critical to implementing the widening participation agenda. Social engagement has been identified as contributing to creating a sense of belonging (L. Thomas, 2012). Those who feel like they belong report higher levels of enjoyment, enthusiasm, happiness, 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, it is recognised that disabled people face barriers to their wider social participation (Watson & Nolan, 2011). Students face barriers to their transition to and participation on entering HE (McGuckin et al., 2013). There has been little focus on the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE in Ireland,

despite the recognition of the importance of social engagement in creating a sense of belonging and corresponding student success (L. Thomas, 2012).

This research intends to address the gap in the literature by identifying the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE in Ireland. To do that, a number of questions were prepared.

## **1.4 Research Questions**

Following a comprehensive review of the national and international literature, the researcher arrived at the following aim and research questions for the Ph.D. thesis. These research questions acted to guide the research methodology, as detailed in Chapter Four.

The overarching aim of this study was to determine the social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland.

Four main questions were addressed to realise this aim:

1. What are the barriers and/or enablers to the social engagement of disabled students in higher education?
2. Do disabled students feel like they belong within higher education?
3. How do national and/or institutional level policies foster/impede the social engagement of disabled students in higher education?
4. What, if any, institutional practices are being implemented to promote the social engagement of disabled students in higher education?

## 1.5 Theoretical Framework

When undertaking this research, I was conscious of the need to lay out a clear theoretical framework for the study. The researcher began by acknowledging his transformative worldview. The transformative approach, developed by Mertens (2003), sees both the researcher and the participants working together for personal and social transformation. The basic tenet of transformative research is a “belief that ethics is defined in terms of the furtherance of human rights, the pursuit of social justice, the importance of cultural respect, and the need for reciprocity in the researcher participant relationship” (Mertens, Sullivan, & Stace, 2011, p. 230). This approach is supported across the research through the use of the definition of a person with a disability as defined in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*:

Persons with disabilities to include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2006 Article 1).

This also allows the researcher to fully utilise the language and terminology of the human rights approach. For further details on the human rights model see Chapter Two. The researchers transformative worldview ensured that the voice of disabled students remained at the forefront of the research when identifying a suitable methodology (Mertens et al., 2011). Further details of the transformative approach and the research methodology can be found in Chapter Four.

In addition to the transformative approach, the researcher used the bioecological model of development. The Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development (BST) was conceptualised by Urie Bronfenbrenner and was further developed over the lifetime of his career (1975–2005). Bronfenbrenner developed upon earlier theories of development including the work of Lewin (1951). One criticism of these earlier theories was their failure to consider the context within which student development takes place. Bronfenbrenner’s response was to consider the ecology of human development. The theory offered a mechanism through which to explore the development of the child. It provided a “conceptualisation of the child’s environment as a multi-layered set of nested and interconnected environmental systems, all of whose ‘agents’ influence the development of the child, but with varying degrees of directness” (McGuckin & Minton, 2014). His earliest models (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979) consisted of four interrelated systems which impact upon the child’s development, (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) this was



later increased to include the Chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The five systems as applied to this research, see Figure 1, are:

**Macrosystem:** Represents the cultural context within which the other systems are situated, reflected in the attitudes and ideologies of the culture, includes factors external to the HEI.

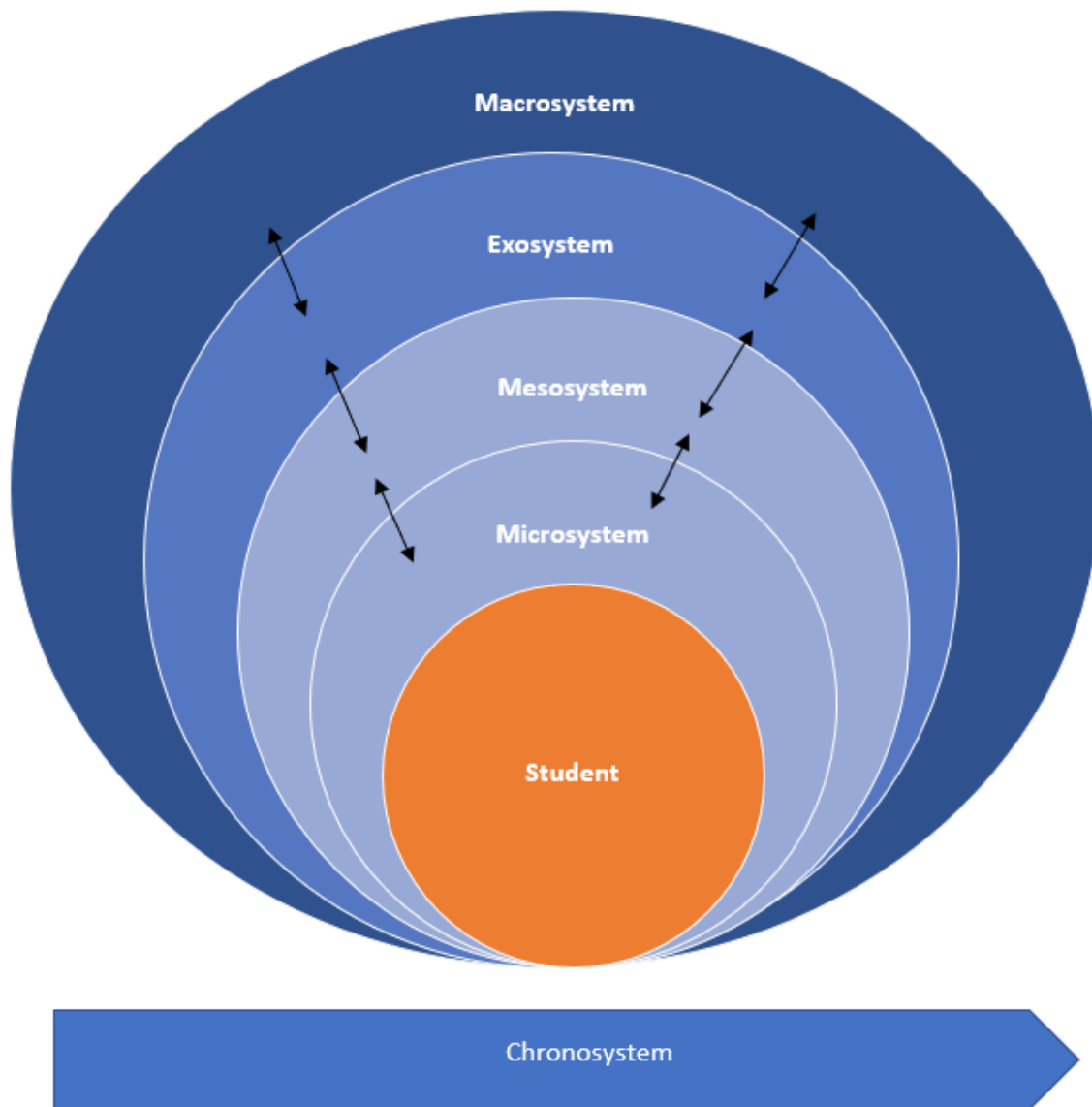
**Exosystem:** Experiences of systems in a social setting in which the student is not directly engaged, e.g. inclusion policies, political structures. These are influenced by the macrosystem.

**Mesosystem:** Interactions between 'actors' and connections between 'contexts', the relationship between college and home relationships. The stronger and more diverse the links, the greater the power of the influence on development.

**Microsystem:** Immediate or face to face, social context including family, friends, lecturers. This also includes the setting and physical environment. Bronfenbrenner noted that increasing the number and type of interaction in a child's microsystem generates more reciprocal relationships and increasing the size of the system will boost child development.

**Chronosystem:** Life events across time which impact upon a student's development, including changing socio-historical life conditions, resulting in different cohorts.

The model was enlarged to include four defining interrelated properties (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006): 'Process', (the development of the human through the various interactions around them); the 'Person', (the personal characteristics of the individual that impact upon development, e.g. age, skills, resilience, identity); the 'Context' (includes the environment in which the individual lives) and the fourth element is 'Time', (the time in which the process of development occurs), (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). Although the earlier models focused on the influence of the person's environment later versions placed greater emphasis on the role individuals play in their own development (Tudge et al., 2009). Human development is identified as occurring through these proximal processes of interactions between the developing person and his/her environment and with other people in that environment. These developmental changes depend on the number and type of interactions and must occur on a relatively regular basis over an extended period (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This framework allows the researcher to investigate the many factors that impact upon a student's development over time.



**Figure 1.** *Bioecological Model as adapted from Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006).*

There have been criticisms of the model and to fully use and operationalise all aspects of it presents a challenge to researchers (J. Williams et al., 2009). Bronfenbrenner's model has been identified as offering a comprehensive model of environmental influences on development, although it may fail to adequately account for biological and cognitive processes combined with individual differences. Sontag (1996) critiqued Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1992) regarding the development of children with disabilities. She recommended a more comprehensive approach to the study of development and change in children with disabilities, and a need to reconceptualise the interaction between them and their environment.

Bronfenbrenner's framework is primarily a psychological framework that can be easily adapted or used in combination with other frameworks (J. Williams et al., 2009), and it can be used with a choice of methodology. This allows the researcher to choose a methodology to suit the participants' needs. This theory can equally be applied to the development of young adults in higher education, although it originated in child development (Hewett et al., 2016; Pinder-Amaker, 2014). The bioecological model has been successfully used by various researchers to investigate the experiences of disabled students in HE, including Doyle (2015), Hewett et al. (2016) and Pinder-Amaker (2014). Anderson, Boyle, and Deppeler (2014) contend that the ecological systems theory offers an "invaluable framework within which to organise the environmental factors and understand their influence on inclusivity by placing the learner at the centre" with each contributory factor "located in relation to the learner's educational ecosystem" (p. 28). Hewett et al. (2016) found the bioecological model a useful "lens" through which to analyse data from their research on vision impaired students. They assert that the model "provides a valuable framework with which to examine the experiences of the participants in HE through a holistic view" and by adopting this perspective it was possible to identify "a range of potential barriers to inclusion in HE" (p.15). It has also been a useful model to describe the layers of influence operating in a given situation (May & Bridger, 2010). By understanding the 'levels' of the environment, and what is taking place within them, it is possible to attempt to change aspects that have a negative impact on disabled students' engagement.

The philosophical assumptions of the transformative paradigm combined with the bioecological model provides a framework to directly engage disabled students. It is an ideal structure to maintain the student voice at the centre, whilst investigating the many factors within the system surrounding them that impact upon their social engagement. It also facilitates hearing of the voice of other 'key informants' across the HE system, allowing the researcher to take account of the dynamic, interconnected nature of the system surrounding the student and providing a lens through which to view their experiences and providing a 'whole-of-college' approach.

## 1.6 Order of Presentation

This research is presented over eight chapters:

Chapter Two presents part one of the literature review. It critically reviews the literature concerning the historical and social context of disability, along with the models of disability and definitions currently in use. It identifies the model and definition of disability in use in this research, the human rights model of disability. It interrogates the literature on the national and international laws and policies that have impacted upon the inclusion of disabled students in HE in Ireland. Through the review of the literature it became apparent that disabled people face deep seated structures of inequality which have resulted in marginalisation, deprivation, and significant societal barriers to their wider engagement. The review exposes gaps in the literature relating to disabled peoples' social engagement experiences.

Chapter Three presents part two of the literature review. It delves into the literature relating to disabled students' transition to, engagement with, and sense of belonging to HE in Ireland. Through a comprehensive review of the literature it demonstrates the contribution of social engagement to the creation of a sense of belonging, retention, and student success. Through this review it unearths significant gaps in the literature in Ireland relating to the social engagement experiences of disabled students, their sense of belonging, the policy and practices being implemented and the barriers and enablers to social engagement. The literature review presents a strong rationale for the research questions and the methodology that followed.

Chapter Four details how the research questions were addressed. It outlines the transformative, four-phased, sequential, and concurrent qualitative data collection research design that was developed for this research. It explores the philosophical underpinnings of the research and the researcher's transformative viewpoint. The research included 65 participants from across 19 HEI in Ireland. It offers a clear rationale for the qualitative research design chosen along with the data analysis methods. The chapter concludes with a review of the ethical considerations of the research.

Chapter Five and Six present the research findings. Chapter Five presents the 'student voice'. This included current disabled students, recently graduated disabled students, and students' union full time officers. Chapter Six presents the 'college response', this

included senior managers and disability support personnel (DSP). The data within these chapters is presented under the four main themes identified during the thematic data analysis: transitions, engagement, college climate and structures.

Chapter Seven discusses the main research findings in relation to the national and international literature, theories, and policies. It provides a detailed presentation of the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE in Ireland.

The final chapter, Chapter Eight, brings the research to a conclusion. It begins with a reflection by the researcher on the transformative nature of the research. It highlights the significance of the research and the contribution it makes to the international literature on the topic. It outlines the main research findings and conclusions drawn in response to the initial research questions. The limitations of the study are acknowledged and areas for future research were identified.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

Chapter One, the introductory chapter presented a reflection on the positionality of the researcher, the rationale for the research, the research questions and the theoretical framework, and the order of the thesis. The chapter sought to position the researcher in relation to the research through a reflective process. A context and rationale for the research was presented, with reference to the significant gap in the literature relating to the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE in Ireland. The research aims and questions were detailed along with the theoretical framework adopted for the study. The chapter concluded with the order of the presentation for the thesis.

Chapter Two follows with part one of the literature review.

## **Chapter Two: Historical, Social, Legislative and Policy Context of Disability**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Chapter Two presents the first of two parts of the literature review. It will detail the historical position of disabled people in society and their educational opportunities. To develop an appreciation of the environmental and social context in which students exist it was first necessary to undertake a review of the literature relating to the wider social system in which disabled people are situated. This is followed by a review of the models of disability. It will critically examine the literature pertaining to domestic and international policy and legislation, with specific emphasis on access, transfer, and progression to HE.

### **2.2 Historical Context of Disability**

History is often considered the missing piece of the jigsaw in disability studies. Whereas the disability studies field has been identified as expanding from its origins in “social theory and social policy to include politics, culture, leisure and the media, historical perspectives across the entire range of disabled people’s experiences are virtually non-existent” (Borsay, 2002, p. 98). Much of what has been written about the lives of disabled people originates from those in positions of power, medical or educational professionals, religious groups and the elite or the ‘experts’ (Barnes & Mercer, 2010; McDonnell, 2007). These accounts are coloured by the cultural and social norms of the time, and the voice of the disabled has been noticeably absent.

Griffin and Shevlin (2007) note that early Irish society, circa 4<sup>th</sup> century, recognised a difference between insanity and general learning disability and offered protection to disabled people under the Brehon Laws. They contend that much of the derogatory connotations around disability appeared around the time of the introduction of formal education, see Table 1. Barnes and Mercer (2010) believed that identifying where and when a societal negativity towards the disabled began is almost impossible. Some researchers and disabled people have looked towards culture, economic, affective and power domains (Lynch et al., 2001; McDonnell, 2007; Oliver, 1990) but there has been

a long-standing and systemic prejudice towards the disabled people (Finkelstein, 1980; Tremain, 2005).

From the 1800s, researchers have pointed toward the change's industrialisation brought to Europe and the UK. This resulted in the reorganisation of work and a focus on the individual's contribution and worth (McDonnell, 2007). There was an "increased categorisation of 'sick and infirm' people as a social problem – marginalised by the economic system and socially dependent" (Barnes & Mercer, 2010, p. 16). This resulted in an extension of the poor laws in countries such as the UK and Ireland, and an increased reliance on segregation and institutionalisation. Reasons for institutionalisation became highly reliant on medical evidence or scientific knowledge and "the consolidation of an orthodox, state-legitimated medical profession, with a distinctive scientific knowledge and practice, based in residential sites ranging from hospital to asylums", and so was born the medical or the individual model of disability (Barnes & Mercer, 2010, p. 18). McDonnell (2007) notes that the development of an ideology of individualism paved the way for the "foundation of the social construction of able-bodied and able-minded individuals who were assumed to have the capacities to operate the new machines and cope with the disciplines of factory life" (p. 299). Disabled people were identified as "others" and words such as "mad, cripple, handicap, freaks, idiot" were widely used (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). Disabled people were considered dangerous and threatening, a social problem, to be committed to institutions (Oliver, 1990) to undergo medical treatment or forced sterilisation (Carlson, Taylor, & Wilson, 2000; Park & Radford, 1998).

Educational opportunities for disabled young people were very limited or non-existent. However, pioneers did exist, and Belfast native Manson developed a school for children with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties in 1755. His classes were based on encouragement and reward in which children were helped to enjoy learning. The first school for the deaf and dumb, 'The National Institution for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb' (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007) was established by Orpen in Ireland in 1816, following his experiences of the progress made by a young deaf boy he had adopted. Table 1, taken from Griffin and Shevlin (2007, p. 30) outlines the legal, cultural and educational developments that shaped education provision for disabled children and adults in Ireland up to 2005. This has been updated to take into consideration some other developments up to 2018 (Conroy, 2020).

**Table 1.** *Historical timeline of developments related to education for disabled people.*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Ireland</b>	<b>Influences</b>
<b>c.1200</b>	Brehon Laws	English law
<b>1775</b>	Manson of Belfast	Rousseau/Enlightenment
<b>1816</b>	Claremont Institute	Pestalozzi/Deaf Education
<b>1831</b>	National schools	Industrial Age/Basic literacy
<b>1868</b>	Stewart's Institute	Medical philanthropy: Education as well as care
<b>1870s</b>	Compulsory schooling	Standards in education
<b>1900</b>	New programme; Primary schools	Practical handwork; Kindergarten/infant education
<b>1922</b>	Irish independence. Small number of special institutions	Gaelicisation programme: Charitable/religious Independence in education/care
<b>1947</b>	Recognition of special schools Primary Certificate	1944 Education Act in UK post-World War II development, Certification of basic education for all
<b>1952</b>	INTO reaction	Concern for 'failing children'
<b>1955</b>	Patricia Farrell, Declan Costello	Parent demands for special education
<b>1960</b>	St Michael's House	Independent special education services
<b>1962</b>	White Paper: 'Problem of Mental Handicap'	Department of Health
<b>1965</b>	Commission Report policy document	Department of Health
<b>1967</b>	'Free' secondary education	Investment in Education report
<b>1970</b>	Special schools: Commission report New primary school curriculum	Child-centered education, Abolition of Primary Certificate
<b>1973</b>	Remedial teachers	'Free' secondary education learning difficulties
<b>1978</b>	Integration	Warnock Report UK, European Union membership
<b>1987</b>	EU Ministers' declaration on integration policy	European Union
<b>1993</b>	Special Education Review Committee (SERC) Report	Warnock Report UK and 1981, Education Act UK, Parental/teacher demands to resource system
<b>1993</b>	O'Donoghue judgment	Parental concerns/rights
<b>1994</b>	Inclusion	UNESCO Salamanca Statement
<b>1998</b>	Education Act	Ireland
<b>2004</b>	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act	Ireland
<b>2005</b>	Disability Act	Ireland
<b>2007</b>	Signing of UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	United Nations Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)
<b>2016</b>	Appointment of Minister of State for Disability Issues	Ireland
<b>2017</b>	Irish Sign Language recognised into law	Ireland
<b>2018</b>	Ratification of UNCRPD by Irish Government but Optional Protocol not ratified.	UN CRPD



A national system of education was established in Ireland in 1831 and compulsory education was introduced during the middle of the 1800s. Schooling for children, who accessed it, was a difficult experience but for disabled students it was a source of violence, humiliation and shame (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). The individual economic worth and medicalisation of disability which prevailed in the industrial revolution impacted on the school model being implemented. This led to an ever-increasing dominance of the medical and scientific profession and their techniques of classification (Foucault, 2002). Griffin and Shevlin (2007) point out that the move from a dedicated medical model based on care, categorisation, treatment and possible 'cure' to an emerging social and educational model which recognised human strengths and potential with an aim towards independence and autonomy began in the nineteenth century and was significantly pioneered in Ireland (p. 34). Despite this educational pioneering work, it was not until the 1960s that special education became an established service in Ireland (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007).

### 2.2.1 Summary of historical context of disability

This section presented the historical context of disability. The review demonstrates that disabled people have faced a history of barriers to their societal participation including access to education. This has contributed to the marginalisation of disabled people in society and the stigmatising of disability.

## 2.3 Models of Disability

This section will give an overview of the predominant models of disability, it will review the medical, social, and human rights models and critically assess the contribution of each to the lives of disabled people.

### 2.3.1 Medical model

The medical or individual model of disability has had an overarching dominance on the lives of disabled people. The discourse has been one in which disability is widely recognised as an individual failing and a personal tragedy (Oliver, 1990). Shah and Priestley (2011) highlight the impact the medical profession and institutions have had on the life trajectories and future life decision making of disabled people. This medicalisation has tended to influence both social interactions, such as attending higher education and

social policies (Barnes & Mercer, 2010) with disabled people being commonly characterised as being useless, unproductive, helpless, and dependent (Lodge & Lynch, 2004).

Priestley, Shah and Oliver caution that it is important not to demonise the contribution of medicine. Oliver (1996) reminds us that, “doctors can have a role to play in the lives of disabled people...The problem arises when doctors try to treat disability rather than illness” (1996, pp. 35-36). He separates the medical aspect from the model when he states:

the individual model for me encompassed a whole range of issues and was underpinned by what I called the personal tragedy theory of disability. But it also included psychological and medical aspects of disability....In short, for me, there is no such thing as the medical model of disability, there is instead, an individual model of disability of which medicalisation is one significant component (1996, p. 31).

However, the medical model has been the dominant method of controlling and categorising the lives of disabled people for the last 150 years (Oliver, 1996; Tremain, 2005).

### 2.3.2 Social model

The 1960s was a time of increased civil rights and disabled people began demanding better treatment. They had been excluded from mainstream social rights and “traditionally their issues had been relegated to social development, to charity, to dispensation, and to the determination of their assumed best interests” (Barton, Barnes, & Oliver, 2002, p. 14). The goal of these campaigns was to, move public and policy attention away from its over-whelming preoccupation with individual ‘incapacity’ as the source of their dependency and marginalisation (Barnes & Mercer, 2010). The plan was to focus attention, “onto the role of ‘disabling barriers’ in excluding disabled people from participation in mainstream society and denying their citizenship rights” (Barnes & Mercer, 2010, p. 1; DeJong, 1981; Finkelstein, 1980). In the US, the formation of the Independent Living Movement (ILM) resulted in greater recognition of the rights of disabled people. The mantra of the organisation “Nothing about us, without us” (Charlton, 2000) became used by disabled people across the world. In Ireland, the awakening to the rights of disabled people resulted in the foundation, by disabled people, of the Irish Wheelchair Association in 1960, with many organisations and campaigns to follow.

Internationally, the late 1970s witnessed a trend towards rethinking disability and what it meant to be disabled or have an impairment (Barnes & Mercer, 2010) and the “denial of a causal link between impairment and disability...become the hallmark of the social model” (C. Thomas, 2004, p. 25). These discussions in the UK led to furtherance of the development of the social model of disability. The Fundamental Principles of Disability published by UPIAS (1976), was a powerful signal that disabled people wanted to have their voice heard: “In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society” (UPIAS, 1976). It offered a social explanation for disability, placing a strong emphasis on the disabling effects of the environment and its effects in marginalising those with impairments (Barton et al., 2002; Lynch, Baker, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2009; Oliver, 1996).

These actions were complemented by international rights organisations such as the United Nations World Health Organisation, who declared 1981 the ‘International Year of Disabled Persons’. The term ‘disablism’ originated during this time, describing discrimination against disabled people as comparable to other forms of oppression such as racism or feminism (McDonnell, 2007).

The social model has not been without its critics. Concerns have been expressed about the model’s failure to have greater consideration for the experiences of impairment (Shakespeare, 2006), the body and questions of difference in relation to gender, ethnicity, sexuality and social class (Morris, 1989; Shah & Priestley, 2011). Critics maintained there has been an over-emphasis on the effects of capitalism, which tended to over simplify the ideologies and systems impacting on those with impairments (Barton et al., 2002). Despite these criticisms the impact of the social model on public policy development and perceptions of disability has been significant (McDonnell, 2007). Oliver (1996) reminds users of the model that:

firstly, we must not assume that models in general and the social model in particular can do everything; that it can explain disability in totality. It is not a social theory of disability and it cannot do the work of social theory. Secondly, because it cannot explain everything, we should neither seek to expose inadequacies, which are more a product of the way we use it, nor abandon it before its usefulness has been fully exploited (p. 41).

At an educational level, the model has been influential in reshaping the policy thinking in relation to schooling and has seen a move away from segregation of those with special

educational needs to a more inclusive school environment. As noted by Oliver and Barnes (2010):

The disabled child in education may well have an impairment but his or her participation in school is restricted by an inaccessible curriculum, negative staff attitudes and physical barriers to getting around. This is clearly evident with reference to the fact that the social model of disability, as it is now called, is now widely recognised at both the national and international levels as the key to understanding and explaining the economic, political and social barriers encountered by disabled people (p. 552).

The academic community have been slow to recognise the views of disabled people. Sociologists have “historically shown little interest in the issue of disability” and “have tended to accept the dominant hegemony with regard to viewing disability in medical and psychological terms” (Oliver & Barnes, 2010, p. 548). The emergence of disability studies within academia, and an increase in the inclusion of the voice of disabled people resulted in the methodology of ‘emancipatory disability research’ (Oliver, 2007). This form of research had the aim of benefitting disabled people, but the researcher was seen to have an emancipatory role. Disabled people have tended to be more subjects of research rather than active researchers. The greater recognition of the need to include disabled people in the process resulted in the development of the ‘transformative approach’ to disability research (Oliver & Barnes, 2010). This moved the focus away from the view of the researcher acting as an emancipator of the marginalised to a methodology, which sees the researcher working together with the participants to result in transformative change (Mertens et al., 2011).

### 2.3.3 Human rights model

The adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006 has seen a rapid growth in the acceptance of the human rights-based model of disability (Degener, 2017; Lawson & Beckett, 2020). The purpose of the CRPD was to “promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity”. It takes a wider categorisation of persons with disabilities to include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”(Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016, Article 1). It takes cognisance of the interaction between the wider societal barriers within the environment and a person’s impairment. Through this historic

paradigm shift, the *Convention* forges new ground and requires new thinking (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2010). The human rights model of disability focuses on the inherent dignity of the human being and subsequently, but only if necessary, on the person's medical characteristics. It places the individual centre stage in all decisions affecting him/her and, most importantly, locates the main 'problem' outside the person and in society (Quinn & Degener, 2001; Quinn et al., 2014, p. 14). The underlying equality concept can be categorised as transformative equality both in terms of the individual and/or the group (Degener, 2016). Ultimately, the model can act to reposition disability as an inclusive concept embracing disability as a universal human variation rather than an aberration (Stein, 2007).

The human rights model of disability is particularly relevant to this research. It places the voice of the disabled student at the centre of the research, taking a transformative approach to hearing that voice, and tackling the barriers to the social engagement of disabled students by looking at the whole system in which the student is embedded.

Recently there has been a greater focus on critiquing the human rights model in relation to the social model of disability. Degener (2017) offers six propositions as to how the human rights model differs from the social model of disability:

- (a) The social model assists people in appreciating the underlying social factors that shape our understanding of disability, while the human rights model moves beyond explanation, offering a theoretical framework for disability policy that emphasises the human dignity of disabled people (p. 43).
- (b) The first- and second-generation human rights model encompasses civil, political, as well as economic and cultural rights (p. 44).
- (c) The social model is considered as failing to account for the pain and suffering in the lives of some disabled people, while the human rights model acknowledges the varying experience of impairment and the impact of differing environmental factors, acknowledging that such factors should be taken into account in social justice theories (p. 47).
- (d) The rights model, unlike the social model, offers greater significance to the issue of identity politics (p. 49).
- (e) The rights model recognises the possible role of properly formulated public health policies in the prevention of impairment, and conceivably as an instance of human rights protection (p. 52). The social model, however, is predominantly critical of public health policy.

- (f) The human rights model offers policy guidance on positive improvements in the lives of disabled people, whereas the social model acts only to explain the societal barriers faced by disabled people.

Degener (2017) concludes by arguing that the human rights model of disability acts to improve upon the social model of disability. Lawson and Beckett (2020) argue against this view, they contend that the focus of the rights model is not on the concept of disability but rather offers guidance on policy response to disability (p. 17) and as such should not be viewed as a model of disability. The “human rights model provides a detailed road map for the development of human rights consistent law and policy, as well as systems and frameworks for monitoring progress” (p. 24). They advocate for a complementary approach and believe that the human rights model builds upon the social model and complements it in that way.

#### 2.3.4 Summary of models of disability

This section presented three of the main models of disability and the connection of the human rights model to this research. The development of different models has prompted increased discussion and a never-ending debate on which model should be used at any one time. Barnes (2000) warns of the dangers of all these models, which he believes only act to change the focus of the debate. This may lead to an endless variety of competing and ever-changing discourses which inevitably cloud the true meaning of disability and its impact on the economic, political, and social lives of disabled people. Despite the introduction of new models of disability, which have been supported by disabled people (Barnes, 2000; Oliver, 2013), the medical model continues to have a significant impact on their lives (Shevlin et al., 2004).

## 2.4 Social Context of Disability

Following an examination of the history and models of disability, it is necessary to take a deeper look at the inequalities faced by disabled people in society. McDonnell (2007), identified that “any attempt to understand and deal with these inequalities requires an exploration of what we can call the deep structures of the relationship between disability and society – the underlying and often taken-for-granted beliefs, ideas and values that shape that relationship” (p. 2). Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, and Walsh (2009) describe a social system as a set of relationships organised around a certain set of social processes

and outcomes (p. 61-69). The higher education system is strongly integrated into society, thus we cannot expect equality in education, without progress towards equality in the four key domains embedded in that system, *economic, cultural, affective and political* (Lynch & Baker, 2005, p. 154). There is wide-ranging discussion as to which of these four domains are the most significant contributor to inequality for disabled people (Barnes & Mercer, 1996; Lynch et al., 2009; McDonnell, 2007; Oliver, 1990). However, they are also interlinked, and inequality in one domain may result in inequality in some or all of the others (Lynch et al., 2001).

The *economic* domain has been identified by many researchers and disabled people as a contributor to inequality (Barnes & Mercer, 1996; Oliver, 1990), with an impact on access to education (Lynch & Baker, 2005; Watson, Banks, & Lyons, 2015; Watson & Nolan, 2011). In Ireland, previous research has shown that people reporting chronic illness or disability fare worse than others in terms of employment, income, education, and social participation (Cullinan, Gannon, & Lyons, 2008; Gannon & Nolan, 2005), with disabled people being found to face a 'cost of disability' (Cullinan, Gannon, & Lyons, 2011). Labour force participation is seen as the main route out of poverty and economic disadvantage (Watson & Nolan, 2011). Despite successive policies and legislation to increase the employment of disabled people (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017, 2019; 2005), they are found to be far less likely to be in employment than their abled body counterparts (Watson & Nolan, 2011). Attending higher education has long been identified as essential to longer-term income equality (Ebersold, 2012, 2011). It is widely accepted that the resources available to disabled people and their families are often dependent on the resources made available by the State. The policies being implemented (Oliver, 1990) and policy narrative surrounding disability, is that 'disability costs' (Quinn, 2015).

The *cultural* domain plays a significant role in the lives of disabled people. Anthropological evidence supports the idea that culturally embedded discourses construct the dominant experience of disability within a given culture, time or social context (Barnes & Mercer, 1996; Corker, 1998; Shakespeare, 2006). Social practices and structures in schools and other institutions (Baker et al., 2009, p. 59) reinforce, validate and underpin inequalities and stereotypes of helplessness and otherness that are often internalised by disabled people themselves (Shakespeare, 2006). The experiences and values of the dominant group are universalised through language and become the norm because this group has access to, and control of the language, and the means of communication and interpretation (Barton et al., 2002; Corbett, 1999;

McDonnell, 2010). Disablist language used in the daily interactions of life within educational institutions, legitimises barriers to participation and dignity, which are proliferated within the next generation and disseminated throughout society (Vlachou, 1997), placing a distance between disabled and non-disabled peers. The dominant cultural perceptions of the ability, or perceived lack of it in some cases, can act as barriers to full participation in society. Morris (1991) refers to this as the “tyranny of normality” (p. 16) and the continued use of this language is reflective of a professional ownership where medical and educational definitions dominate the conversation (Corbett, 1999).

A national survey of attitudes to disability in Ireland found a hardening of attitudes across all types of impairments, with less positive attitudes towards disabled children in mainstream education (National Disability Authority, 2011, 2017). The reason given for this was that children with special education needs (SEN) were perceived as draining class resources. The findings also demonstrated that where someone knows a disabled person, they are generally more likely to have positive attitudes to disability (NDA, 2011). The research found that when compared with non-disabled respondents, those with disabilities were classified as at significantly higher risk of social isolation, specifically from friends and family. This is not surprising considering their exclusion from everyday social and cultural activities (Baker et al., 2009). This highlights the importance of promoting and enabling active participation of disabled people in the mainstream community (Watson & Nolan, 2011) in which social activities take place. Educationalists too can play an important part in the academic and personal development of students with whom they interact, although this is in part governed by the institutional culture. This may be empowering or disempowering to them and the local and wider communities they serve (Duckworth, 2011, p. 312). Transformation of the culture in education institutions requires a focus by the entire institutional community, enabling change within and outside the institution, where environmental circumstances may negatively impact upon the students learning journey (Duckworth, 2011; L. Thomas, 2011).

The *affective* domain, is concerned with providing and sustaining relationships of love, care and solidarity between human beings (Lynch et al., 2001). It refers to the socio-emotional relations that give people a sense of value and belonging (McCashin, O'Sullivan, & Brennan, 2002). Inequality in the affective domain takes two primary forms: “when people have unequal access to meaningful loving and caring relationships, and when there is inequality in the distribution of the emotional and other work that produces and sustains such relationships” (McCashin et al., 2002, p. 60). Many more children with



'severe' and 'complex' physical impairments have lived into adulthood and participated in society (Shah and Priestley, 2011). This has been achieved through investment in greater supports in the mainstream and this has brought new negotiations of self-identity and personal relationships (Shah & Priestley, 2011, p. 180). Disabled people, and those around them, are now having to consider forming relationships, reproduction, and greater sexual expression. Negative perceptions and outdated thinking may impact upon this. Shah and Priestley (2011) investigation into the life course stories of disabled people offers an insight into the challenges faced by disabled people in the affective domain. These stories show that disabled people can have a very different family experience than other children including their siblings. Relationships are grounded within connections of dependency and interdependence. There has been a tendency to focus on impairments, 'vulnerability', the 'burden' of presumed dependency, and the use of services, at the expense of a more nuanced account of everyday lives and identities (Corker, 1998). These views of 'vulnerability' and dependency often begin within the family as children. Many with disabilities are infantilised (Shakespeare, 1996; Shakespeare & Watson, 1996) and are viewed as never growing up or making the transition to youth and adulthood (Shah & Priestley, 2011). Research highlighted many factors impacting on young people forming relationships. Barriers such as social attitudes towards disability, over-protective parents (Shah & Priestley, 2010), the reaction of parents to a relationship (Parker, 1999), a lack of privacy, and a dependence on others for care, all impact upon forming relationships. Inaccessible homes and meeting places also interfere with the ability of young people to make friends and make these important transitions within the affective domain (McCabe & Taleporos, 2003).

The fourth and final domain is the *political domain*. Although the economic and cultural domains are often seen as of greater importance, theorists such as Foucault have drawn attention to the significance of the *power* and *political* domain in education (Deleuze & Foucault, 1977; Foucault, 2014). Power relations play an important role in every social institution and are at the centre of these exercises of power (Mansbridge, 1999). Within the democratic model dominant groups still use the power to sustain their own self-interests, while the subordinate group are left to exercise whatever power or influence, they can manage to assert (Lynch et al., 2009, p. 59). The *political* sphere is where power is enacted, including the decision-making and policy-making procedures within all types of organisations and institutions, , and decision making within political life generally (McCashin et al., 2002, p. 52). Political equality therefore is about empowering those who are currently marginalised in terms of political influence and ensuring there is an equal distribution of power (McCashin et al., 2002). Disabled people have been left

powerless and oppressed with little or no influence at the decision making table within society (McDonnell, 2007). They face a number of obstacles to real empowerment; one is their exclusion from some of the key decision-making processes. Another is the danger of incorporation into consensus politics that weaken the independence and passion of advocates of change. The fact that existing political structures are designed to suit the lifestyles and culture of those who currently occupy them, and so need to be restructured to accommodate the needs of those currently excluded, poses a barrier (McCashin et al., 2002). One of the ways in which non-disabled people exert oppressive power over disabled people is through the power of the 'expert' (Oliver, 1990). The voice of the 'expert' has been given primacy over the voice of disabled people and has had a significant influence on their life trajectories (Shah & Priestley, 2010). The education system is an environment in which many have their first experiences of inequality and difference is magnified (Slee, 2010). Students may be divided up into classes based on ability or 'inability', with some being separated from their cohort to join 'special classes' (Banks et al., 2016; Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O'Raw, 2010; Shevlin, Kenny, & Loxley, 2008). Individual assessments mask the inequalities produced by disabling relationships between individuals and their environments (Oliver, 1990; McDonnell, 2007). These decisions are often taken upon the advice of, or in consultation with an 'expert'. Students are classified and categorised, with the 'problem' identified as being located within the individual, necessitating the intervention of various professional agencies' (Barton, 1998, p. 59). In Ireland, students have been found to consider labelling an injustice (Lynch & Lodge, 2002), and it is recommended that HEI should avoid using medical labels to identify learning needs and develop inclusive teaching strategies instead (C. K. Matthews & Harrington, 2000).

#### 2.4.1 Summary of social context of disability

This section presented the social context for disability in relation to the wider social system that encompasses HE. It examined the four domains of a social system, economic, cultural, affective, and political and provided an insight into the literature relating to disabled peoples' interaction with these domains and the inequalities they face. As noted previously the HE system is situated within society, thus we cannot expect equality in education without progress towards equality in the four key domains of the social system within HE. The next section will examine the legislation and policy relating to disabled people and their educational opportunities both nationally and internationally.

## 2.5 Laws, Legislation and Policy

Oliver (1990) pointed out that, fundamentally, disability is defined by public policy. In other words, disability is whatever policy says it is (p. 79). The resources available, the cultural representations and perceptions of disabled people are all reflected in the laws and policies being implemented. This may result in the proliferation of cultural views and perceptions of disabled people in society (McDonnell, 2007; Quin & Redmond, 2003). These policies may offer independence, or as is the experience of many disabled people, lead to a greater dependency. The review of the literature relating to legislation and policies will critically examine the international laws, and domestic legislation and policies central to the access, transfer, and progression of disabled students in education in Ireland.

### 2.5.1 International policy context

On the international stage, the last forty years has seen a range of policy measures in the form of conventions and agreements being implemented (Shah & Priestley, 2011) to improve the lives of disabled people. International human rights initiatives have played an important role in conceptualising the right to education for disabled people (Schoonheim & Ruebain, 2005). The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948*, the *Salamanca Statement 1994*, *United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (2000)*, and the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006*, were important international policies implemented to further the rights of disabled people within education (Shah & Priestley, 2011).

The right to higher education has been protected since the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of the *United Nations General Assembly (1948)*. Article 26 (1) made specific reference to the right to access higher education and the need to prevent discrimination (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2000; United Nations General Assembly, 1948). However, it was many years before the aspirations of this document would be realised. The *1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, of which Ireland was a signatory; "...incorporated the rights of children with disabilities to an appropriate high-quality education suited to their learning needs" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p. 44). Although this applied to all children, including those with disabilities, it did not extend to HE. The *UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations: Department of Economic and

Social Affairs, 1993), put 'Education for all' to the forefront of disability rights education policy by urging states to ensure "that the education of persons with disabilities is an integral part of the education system" (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994, p. viii). This was later reaffirmed by the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994). The statement had a rights based approach and signalled a move from 'integrated' to 'inclusive' education (McCarthy, 2013). Ireland adopted it and the subsequent *Framework* in 1994. *The Statement and Framework* had "a profound effect on policy and practice in many countries" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p. 81), especially in relation to the promotion of inclusive education for disabled students (Priestley, 2001). It recommended that "necessary provision should be made for ensuring inclusion of youth and adults with "special needs" in secondary and higher education as well as in training programmes" (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994, p. 18). Article 56 makes specific reference to the importance of supporting access, transfer, and progression of disabled students. The *Salamanca Statement* highlighted the importance of transition planning for students with special educational needs (SEN) and that this should begin early in their educational career (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994). The *UNESCO 2000* reaffirmed these ideals through a focus on the promotion "of access, transfer and progression opportunities in education for people with disabilities and/or SEN" (McGuckin et al., 2013, p. 15) and recommended the development of partnerships, "between school teachers, families, communities, civil society, employers, voluntary bodies, social services and political authorities" (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2000, p. 66).

As identified in Section 2.3.3 the UNCRPD (2006) was a significant step in the advancement of the rights of disabled people. It affirmed their rights to full participation in all aspects of societal life, including the right to higher education. Although Ireland signed it in 2007, it was the last EU state to ratify it in 2018. This ratification did not include the signing of the *Optional Protocol*, which allows disabled people to report breaches of their rights to the UN (2006). A failure to sign the optional protocol acts to take away the power from disabled people, and demonstrates a further lack of commitment to disabled people's human rights (Quinn, 2009). This may be a failure of such conventions, in that although countries may in principle be supportive of the rights of disabled people, in practice they are not willing to take the necessary steps, such as ratifying the *Optional Protocol* in the *CRPD*. It has been suggested "that such a Treaty is of limited use. Even if it is adopted there is no guarantee – mechanism – to ensure strict domestic compliance", which is a significant disadvantage (Quinn, 2009, p. 246).

Article 24 of the CRPD focused on the right to access tertiary education and states that:

Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016, Article 24:5).

It requires 'reasonable accommodation' in "general as well as within many of the more specific areas" such as in education (Quinn, 2009, p. 247). It notes that "supports may need to be individualised, and that educational inclusion is linked between 'academic and social development', "which is an important part of the access, transfer and progression process" (McGuckin et al., 2013, p. 16).

The role of the CRPD (2006) is wider than Article 24's focus on education, and if utilised as planned, it provides a 'whole of institution' or state, framework for its implementation (Lord & Stein, 2018). Many of the Articles contained in the convention have direct or indirect impact on the ability of disabled people to fully engage in higher education. Article 19, for instance addresses *the right to live independently and being included in the community*, and Article 30, deals with the *participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure, and sport*. These Articles are all central to guaranteeing and enabling a student's wider engagement in college life (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016, Articles 19, 30) including social engagement. Article 4 of the convention prioritises the experience of disabled people and affirms the need for disabled people or disabled peoples' organisations to be involved in the decision-making process. It provides a holistic template to advance the societal inclusion of disabled people (Lord & Stein, 2018).

At an EU level, the introduction of the *Bologna Process* has seen the implementation of measures to make learning more inclusive, increase student mobility and provide uniform systems and structures across 29 countries (Mernagh, 2010). This has promoted a degree of flexibility, allowing students the opportunity to spread modules and complete them within their own time, combined with the introduction of new learning techniques. This flexibility has been welcomed by students, including those with disabilities, particularly in relation to examination and assessment methods (Brandt, 2011; McGuckin et al., 2013). Despite this increased flexibility "part time students with disabilities in Ireland have been found to be grossly under-represented" (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 2015, p. 3).

The CPRD was the first human rights convention to which the EU became a party and it came into force in 2011. It is reflected in the *European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 and “combines anti-discrimination, equal opportunities and active inclusion”* (European Commission, 2010, p. 1). This identifies eight priority areas, one of which is ‘*Education and Training*’. The main objective of this strategy is to promote inclusive education and lifelong learning for disabled students. It asserts “that equal access to quality education and lifelong learning enables disabled people to participate fully in society and improve their quality of life” (European Commission, 2010).

This literature review demonstrates that internationally there has been a wider recognition of the contribution disabled people can make to society once the barriers to participation in education and employment have been removed (World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011). They have been increasingly recognised as development stakeholders in international development programs including the Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs] (Lord & Stein, 2018; United Nations, 2016). This has occurred because international organisations such as the UN and WHO have raised the profile of disability as a global priority, and reconfirmed disability as a human rights issue (Quinn et al., 2014; Reilly, 2016).

### 2.5.2 Irish legislation and policy

In Ireland, the 25 years (1990–2015) have witnessed a range of successive government commitments in the form of legislation and policy designed to increase access and participation in society of socially disadvantaged groups (Christie, Munro, & Wager, 2005).

As outlined, this has been influenced by, “...international demands for a more equitable education system that recognises diversity and considers how schools might address the needs of pupils who have been previously marginalised” (Rose et al., 2010, p. 359). In the UK, the launch of the influential “Warnock Report” Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People (1978) provided a certain degree of impetus for action in Ireland.

In Ireland, parental litigation and reports such as *The Report of the Special Education Review Committee 1993* (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007), acted as a catalyst for reform. This report made several significant recommendations and provided a foundation for the

future development of special education, and its influence is still imprinted in current Irish policy decisions (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007; McCarthy, 2013). Government followed the recommendations and legislation introduced that impacted either directly or indirectly upon the transition of disabled people to HE has included multiple acts (Government of Ireland, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2004, 2005).

The *EPSEN Act*, *Disability Act 2005* and the *Citizens Information Act 2007* formed part of an overall National Disability Strategy (NDS) which was launched in 2004. These legislative measures have been important in supporting disabled people achieve their rights to:

- Access an appropriate education for people with disabilities,
- Be heard and have fair representation,
- To conduct appeals,
- To receive fair and equitable assessment and resources (Christie et al., 2005).

The *Universities Act, 1997* mandated each university to prepare statements of policies with regard to access to “university and to university education by economically or socially disadvantaged people, by people who have a disability and by people from sections of society significantly underrepresented in the student body” (1997 Section 36:1) cited in McGuckin et al. (2013). This Act established the access agenda within higher education and signalled the intention to provide for students who were underrepresented (Clancy, 1999). The sectors’ interest in engaging with the access issue was apparent in its initiation of the Action Group on Access to Third Level, this group prepared the *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education 2001* (Department of Education and Science, 2001).

The *Education Act, 1998*, was “Ireland’s first comprehensive education act” and made provision for “post-primary, adult and continuing education and vocational education and training” (1998; Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p. 45). The Act aimed to “promote equality of access to and participation in higher education. Although the Act was a significant piece of legislation and provided for the first legal definition of disability this definition was “primarily a medical definition of disability adopted which ignored critical environmental and contextual issues” and located the source of “educational difficulties within the child” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p. 58). The *Quality and Qualifications Framework* (Government of Ireland, 1999) established a standard national framework of qualifications within education. It allowed for the recognition of a qualification across the system facilitating easier access, transfer and progression and enhancing the aim of lifelong learning. This

would also have relevance to disabled students entering through alternative entry routes to HE.

The *Equal Status Acts, 2000-2012* prohibits “discrimination in the provision of goods and services, accommodation and education on nine grounds, including disabilities” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p. 58). Whilst broadening the scope of the then existing legislation to include higher education, the *Equal Status Acts, 2000-2012* required ‘educational establishments’ to make ‘reasonable accommodations’ for ‘persons with disabilities’ and “do all that is reasonable to accommodate the needs of a person with a disability”, this may involve providing special treatment or facilities (2000, Section 7). The *Equal Status Acts, 2000-2012* includes the caveat that goods and service providers including education establishments, “are not obliged to provide special facilities or treatment when this costs more than what is termed a nominal cost” (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2015, p. 10). Therefore, should a student’s support needs be deemed to be more than ‘reasonable’ or greater than a ‘nominal cost’ they may not be entitled to those supports. The definition of disability in the *Equal Status Act’s* is the same as that used in the *Education Act, 1998*, according to Reilly (2016) and links disability to individual deficit and impairment models.

The *Equal Status Act (2000)* was identified as “an important landmark in education legislation provision for pupils with special educational needs” (McCarthy, 2013, p. 11). The definitions of disability and SEN within the Act were a development from the *Education Act 1998*. The definition used “...does not focus exclusively on within-child deficits and recognised that difficulties in learning are relative rather than all-embracing” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p. 59). However, a criticism of the definitions of disability used in Irish legislation is that they have been decontextualised, focusing on a deficit model of disability and pathology (Reilly, 2016, p. 54). The preamble to the *Equal Status Act* makes reference to providing children with the skills to succeed after school, “....to assist children with special educational needs to leave school with the skills necessary to participate to the level of their capacity in an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives” *EPSEN (2004)*. This is significant as it looked to future possibilities for disabled students, including the possibility to attend higher education. The Act required “schools to implement individual educational plans (IEP) for children and young people with special education needs” (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p. 2). However, the IEP’s, a significant element of the Act, were not implemented due to funding constraints. It has been identified that failures to enact



the provisions regarding IEP's has lessened the impact of the *Equal Status Act* (Rose, Shevlin, Winter, O'Raw, & Zhao, 2012).

The *Disability Act (2005)* was seen as being designed to advance and underpin the participation of disabled people in society, by supporting the provision of disability specific services and improving access to mainstream public services. The *Disability Act 2005* requires public bodies and by extension, HEIs, to ensure that all buildings and services are accessible to disabled people. In an educational context this was significant because many higher education institutes are located in buildings which could be deemed inaccessible, with disabled students reporting variable access experiences within higher education (Shevlin et al., 2004, p. 15). The *Disability Act 2005* set a target of 3% for the employment of disabled people in public sector organisations. It also aimed to establish a Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. The Centre is charged with developing best practice guidance on how to design, build and manage buildings and spaces so that they can be readily accessed and used by everyone, regardless of age, size, ability, or disability. This was established under the National Disability Authority (NDA).

The Disability Act 2005 defined disability:

In relation to a person, means a substantial restriction in the capacity of the person to carry on a profession, business or occupation in the State or to participate in social or cultural life in the State by reason of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairment (2005, Section 2:1).

This definition fundamentally differs to the one outlined in the *Equal Status Act 2000-2012*. It signals beginning of a move from the medical model approach to a definition with greater alignment to the social model. This change in approach can be illustrated by the recognition of the person's engagement with "profession, business or occupation" or to "participate in social or cultural life". This is particularly important for disabled students, who may want to engage in the wider social experience of their HEI, or work experience. Unfortunately, the definition goes on to locate the "substantial restriction in the capacity" within the person and so reverts to a medical and in-person deficit model. Implementation of *Part 2* of the *Equal Status Act 2000 - 2012, Assessment of Need, Service Statements and Redress* was postponed because of economic constraints. The failure to provide this assessment and any resulting supports to which these children may have been entitled, is likely to have a significant impact on their ability to compete with their classmates and progress to HE. It was also anticipated that the implementation

of this act would result in improvements to access, but its full implementation remains an ongoing concern. This legislation was supported by policy, and some of the main policy developments will be outlined next.

### 2.5.3 Policy and reports

The policy landscape, similar to the legislative one, has changed dramatically due to “an increased recognition that Ireland should strive to develop a more inclusive society which involves greater participation for people with disabilities and/or SEN within society” (McGuckin et al., 2013, p. 16). The ultimate aim of policy in HE over recent decades has been to ensure that the student cohort is representative of the diversity of Ireland’s population (Hannon, 2017). Previously there were very low levels of participation by disabled students (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 1994, 2019).

The *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education 2001* recommended:

- That existing supports should be strengthened through the development of the *Department of Education and Sciences’ Special Fund for Students with Disabilities* into an entitlement scheme,
- That each university and IoT should have a minimum of one full-time permanent Disability Officer post,
- The establishment of a National Office for Equity of Access (NAO) to Higher Education,
- The establishment of national targets for increased participation by disabled students (Department of Education and Science, 2001, p. 8).

The NAO was established in 2003 and its work has included the development of national plans for equity of access (Higher Education Authority, 2004a, 2008, 2015a), and the allocation of the *Fund for Students with Disabilities* in further and higher education. These recommendations have formed the basis for the development of an infrastructure around the support of the access, transfer and progression of disabled students within HE that is still in existence (McGuckin et al., 2013). This has seen targets being set for the attendance of disabled students and a more strategic approach to the widening participation agenda including the launching of national plans (Higher Education Authority, 2004a, 2004b).

The *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013* aimed to act as a template for action on equity of access to HE and it is guided by the commitments outlined in the current partnership agreement *Towards 2016* (Higher Education Authority, 2008, p. 16). The plan set out a strong rationale for widening access to HE, recognising its importance for both individual and personal development and for the economic stability and social cohesion of a society. It acknowledged, that mainstreaming the access agenda in HE will mean changing practices and implementing new and innovative teaching and learning practice on an institution-wide basis.

HEIs were encouraged to:

- Make lecture material available in alternate formats,
- Provide more flexible approaches to learning and examinations,
- Increase training in disability awareness.

The primary need identified was to place access initiatives to the forefront of institutional policy and practice (Higher Education Authority, 2008). This plan was deemed a success, and resulted in an increase in the number of disabled students attending HE (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 2016). It has since been updated with the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019* (Higher Education Authority, 2015a). A progress review of this plan notes high increases for disabled students, and increased focus on 'student success' including the development of student success strategies within institutions. A number of challenges were identified including a misunderstanding within institutions as to what constitutes 'mainstreaming', communication of information on supports, a lack of flexibility within at a system level ensuring student success (Higher Education Authority, 2018c, pp. 11-15).

The Hunt (2011) *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* sets out the development of Ireland's HE system to 2030. It recommends the "widening access to higher education by people from lower socio-economic backgrounds or other under-represented groups (by additional weighting)" (p. 25), that routes of progression should be flexible into, within and across higher education institutions (Hunt, 2011, p. 17). Flexible routes of progression are critical for the access, transfer and progression of disabled students especially those whose education may be delayed due to illness or disability and those entering through alternative entry routes (Ebersold, 2012). It is critical to the realisation of this recommendation that there are the funds to carry out the activities. To this end, it recommends, "public investment in higher education must be

aligned with national policy priorities, including widening of access, enhanced performance outcomes, and greater flexibility in provision”. It is important to note that the Strategy also recommends “a reducing reliance on exchequer funding” (Hunt, 2011, p. 24). A reduction in exchequer support whilst increasing the number of disabled students may prove a challenging aim for HEI. The Strategy recognises that funding and operational autonomy must have a corresponding level of accountability for performance, against clear expectations (Department of Education and Skills, 2020, p. 2). *The Department of Education and Skills Higher Education System Performance Framework, 2014-2016*, and since updated by the *System Performance Framework, 2018-2020*, sets out the high level system indicators to assess and measure the higher education system’s performance (Department of Education and Skills, 2013a, 2020) whilst aiming to create a more coherent system of HEI, working as a system to deliver on stated national objectives. Equity of access to higher education remains a national priority as does student success (Department of Education and Skills, 2020, p. 15). Identifying these as system Key Performance Indicators (KPI’s) demonstrates their importance and puts access to the forefront of the management agenda within HE.

The National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 (NDIS) is a whole-of-government approach to improving the lives of disabled persons (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017). In relation to HE it aims to “promote participation in third level education by persons with disabilities” and focuses on “guidance on transitions for parents and schools” (pp. 22-23). However, since the ratification of the UNCRPD disability rights activists, including members of the Disability Stakeholders Group (DSG), who have a role in monitoring its implementation, have expressed concerns that the NDIS does not go far enough. Indeed, it is recognised by the NDA, that many of the actions in the current strategy would need to be expanded and built on over time to cover all the Articles, and to ensure continued progress. They consider that the NDIS has the potential to provide a framework for progressing implementation of the Articles of the UNCRPD (2017, pp. 7,8).

#### 2.5.4 Summary of laws, legislation and policy

It is evident from the review that both, internationally and nationally, the last decade of the twentieth century witnessed the unfolding of major educational initiatives that shaped the organisation and delivery of educational provision (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p. 47), for the transfer and progression of disabled students to higher education (McGuckin et al.,

2013, p. 15). In Ireland these developments have resulted in the development of equality legislation and the establishment of bodies such as the *Equality Authority*, the *Equality Tribunal*, and the *National Disability Authority* (Russell, Quinn, King O’Riain, & McGinnity, 2008). Efforts have been made to define disability and the review of the literature identifies that there are several different definitions of disability (1998, 2004, 2005). These different definitions have an impact on disabled people attending HE in Ireland (Reilly, 2016). Despite the legislative improvements introduced, many of the Acts stop short of being fully rights based due to their inclusion of caveats such as ‘having regard to the resources available’ or as ‘resources permit’ (Drudy & Kinsella, 2009; McCarthy, 2013; Shevlin et al., 2008). Irish legislation and policy have been slow to fully adopt a human rights approach to disability. There has been very little in the way of adequately resourced policy in relation to the wider societal engagement of disabled people. They are seen to rely heavily on the in-person deficit, medical model of disability, acting to dismiss the views of disabled people (McDonnell, 2007). The failure to have one over-arching definition of disability formulated and based on a human rights approach (United Nations, 2006) safeguarding and guaranteeing the rights of disabled people may result in confusion surrounding entitlements to support. This confusion may create significant issues when it comes to what constitutes an appropriate education for young people with special educational needs (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p. 3) and how their progression can be supported; albeit that The literature evidences a concerted effort to link policies and align goals across the system through the development of the NDIS, or the establishment of the NAO. The report of the NDA (2017), however, highlights that there is much to be done to ensure a coherent system to deliver the rights of disabled people. This results in a conflict in policy strategies being implemented which is impeding the success of disabled students (Doyle, McGuckin, & Shevlin, 2017; Ebersold, 2011; McCoy, Shevlin, & Rose, 2020; McGuckin et al., 2013). It points to legislative and policy developments that merely produce an acceptable surface, while disabling structures remain unchallenged and unexposed. Medical definitions of disability continue to exert the most powerful influence on social and cultural practices in Ireland, and it is clear that invisibility and a lack of respect towards disabled people have characterised institutional and administrative structures and practices (McDonnell, 2007; Tremain, 2005). Many of the policies relating to disabled students and HE have focused on increasing the number of disabled students and providing for their academic supports. There is little demonstratable policy provision evident for their wider social engagement within HE.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

Chapter Two, part one of the literature review, critically examined the historical, social legislative and policy context of disability. It summarised the barriers to participation faced by disabled people in society and within the education system. Chapter Two presented the historical developments in education provision that have taken place in response to the growth of the disability rights movement and the amplification of the 'voice' of disabled people. It provided an overview of the main models of disability including the human rights model which is the model of disability used throughout this research. It presented the main international, and domestic legislation and policy relating to disabled people with a focus on HE. Chapter Two showed little identifiable domestic policy provision for disabled people's wider social engagement in society. This is despite the ratification of the UNCRPD. There is a similar lack of national policy provision for disabled students' social engagement in HE.

Chapter Three will present the second part of the literature review and will examine the literature relating to disabled students and higher education in Ireland.

## Chapter Three: Higher Education

### 3.1 Introduction

Chapter Three presents the second part of the literature review. It will examine the transition to, engagement in, and belonging experiences of disabled students in HE. When considering these issues it is important to recognise that the education system's function in the context of wider inequalities in society, and those inequalities that we observe at different points in HE are the result of, "a cumulative process of disadvantages which first manifest themselves much earlier in the educational cycle" (Department of Education and Science, 2001, p. 34). These education systems function within socio-political contexts that vary across time, location and culture (Doyle, 2015).

### 3.2 Transition to Higher Education

Access, transfer and progression are defined in law under the *Qualifications (Education and Training) Act* (1999) and recognised in several EU and national policy documents. There has been a growing awareness of the importance of the transition process (McCoy et al., 2020; McCoy, Smyth, Watson, & Darmody, 2014). This has culminated in greater collaboration between partners, with the aim of ensuring that the different levels of the system connect seamlessly and guaranteeing that students transfer successfully (Ebersold, 2012, 2016, 2011; Higher Education Authority, 2011, 2015b). When considering the transition, it is necessary to look at the pathways and the many other actors involved (Ebersold, 2012). The literature demonstrates that disabled students face greater challenges to transitioning due to barriers they face (Doyle, 2015; Ebersold, 2012; McGuckin et al., 2013); therefore the review focussed on these progressions.

#### 3.2.1 Transition planning

In Ireland, there has been an increase in the number of students at primary and second level in receipt of SEN supports with most recent estimates of students with SEN at 25% (McCoy, Banks, & Shevlin, 2012; Smyth, Banks, & Calvert, 2011). There has been a shift towards more 'inclusive schooling' with disabled students participating in class or as part of special classes in a mainstream setting with their non-disabled peers (Rose,

Shevlin, Winter, & O'Raw, 2015; Rose et al., 2010). It has been found that 72% of disabled children attend mainstream schools, 13% attend special classes in mainstream schools and 15% attend special schools (Banks, Bertrand, & McCoy, 2015). Students attending 'special classes' have reported this impacting upon their school community engagement and belonging (Banks et al., 2016). This is in contrast to other EU countries such as Sweden where 'a school for all' approach is in operation and almost all students attend mainstream schools (Fletcher-Campbell, Pijl, Meijer, Dyson, & Parrish, 2003). Educational professionals have an important role in determining whether a student will progress to HE or not, and can become gatekeepers to opportunities or steer a young person in a certain direction (V. Williams, Marriott, & Townsley, 2008). It is therefore important for education professionals to have high expectations for disabled students, and that these students are well informed about the pathways offered and the opportunities they may present them in the future (McCoy et al., 2014).

In the US transition planning is legislated for under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) (U.S. Congress, 1990). The *US National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)* has documented the experiences of a national sample of disabled students transitioning from school to adulthood (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009), showing positive outcomes. In the UK, transition planning is facilitated by a government code of practice (Department for Education and Skills (UK), 2001) allowing for greater pupil participation in the decision-making process, greater partnerships with parents and outside agencies and the preparation of a transition plan for each student from the age of nine. However, despite these efforts there has been some evidence of shortcomings (Dewson, Aston, Bates, Ritchie, & Dyson, 2004).

In Ireland according to *EPSEN* (2004), Individual Education Plans (IEPs) were supposed to prepare students for the transition (Government of Ireland, 2004). However, large parts of *EPSEN* were not enacted due to funding constraints. McGuckin et al. (2013) explored the access and progression experiences of SEN students moving from compulsory education to FE and HE. They found that although there was evidence of links between schools, FE and HEI, these links were not features of the transition process. They identified a benefit for students in establishing contact with FE and HE institutions before transitioning. Even more significant was the establishment of direct personal contact between the two. This acted to allay students transition fears. Parents in Ireland are found to play an important role in the transition process (McCoy et al., 2014).



However, parents of students with SEN identified; disparate levels and quality of support and guidance, fissures in communication channels between parents and schools, insufficient awareness and understanding of the interplay between disability and successful post-school outcomes, and high levels of stress, anxiety and frustration experiences by students, parents and carers (Doyle et al., 2017, p. 274) during the transition from secondary school.

The literature highlights that transition planning should take place early in the student's education and should be an integrated aspect of their ongoing education (Winn & Hay, 2009). It is important that transition planning evolves as students' progress through their school years and takes into account the needs and abilities of the student (Cameto et al., 2004). In the US, UK, EU, and Ireland studies have identified elements which are considered critical to a disabled student transition planning process, including:

- Information on course choice and progression pathways,
- Information and supports on finance, accommodation, transport, support needs, and discussion of issues surrounding new relationships,
- Discussion on disclosure of a disability,
- Moving away from home,
- Career advice and employment options including further study (Ebersold, 2012, 2011; McGuckin et al., 2013; Newman et al., 2009).

### 3.2.2 Pathways to higher education

The majority of students continue to gain entry to HE through the Central Applications Office (CAO) points system (Higher Education Authority, 2018b; Hyland, 2011; McCoy et al., 2014). The CAO was established by the HEI to process applications to undergraduate courses in a fair and comprehensive manner. Students are awarded a place based on points awarded in their top six chosen subjects in their leaving certificate (LC) (Hyland, 2011). Students undertake the LC in sixth year of secondary school. The main aim of the LC is to continue the student's personal development and prepare students for the challenges that life presents in FE, HE, and in the working world. The HEI maintain control of setting the entry criteria and these may change from year to year (Government of Ireland, 1997). Applicants to HE are obliged to meet the minimum entry requirements for their chosen course, except those entering through supplementary entry routes (McGuckin et al., 2013) in which case alternative entry requirements may

be set. The high stakes nature along with the structure of the admission process may act as a barrier to some students including those with disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds (D. Byrne, Doris, Sweetman, Casey, & Raffe, 2013). Greater consolidation in the range of current transition pathways to higher education for young adults is viewed as a pressing issue for the sector (D. Byrne et al., 2013).

There has been an increased focus on providing alternative pathways to HE (Higher Education Authority, 2015a). These pathways have been developed to assist students to overcome societal barriers to their progression and are in line with inclusive policies (European Commission, 2010; Higher Education Authority, 2015a; Hunt, 2011). These routes are focused on helping mature, disabled students, students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, and a number of other target groups (Higher Education Authority, 2018c) and those with QQI qualifications (Hyland, 2011; McCoy et al., 2014; McGuckin et al., 2013). Quotas are set by each institution and as many as 10,866 students or 24% of the total CAO cohort accepted places through these routes in 2010 (Irish Universities Association, 2011). An infrastructure has grown up around such access initiatives and students receive additional targeted supports in the form of financial aid, extra guidance and mentoring, among other supports (Reilly, 2016; Shevlin et al., 2008). Although, it has been found that the type and level of support may vary significantly between institutions (McGuckin et al., 2013). A mature entrant is an individual aged 23 years or over on the 1st January of the year they are applying (this may vary for each institution). Mature new undergraduates accounted for 8% of new entrants in 2017/18 (Higher Education Authority, 2018b). This figure has dropped in recent years, which has led to some cause for concern. An increasing number of HEI offer purposefully designed 'access courses' for school leavers who wish to enter HE, but may not have achieved the minimum admission requirements due to barriers to entry (Doyle, 2015). These courses prepare students for entry to HE; those who successfully complete an access course may choose to apply through a HE entry pathway.

### 3.2.3 Further education

The interface between further and higher education is of particular interest in the promotion of greater access and lifelong learning. The *Leaving School in Ireland Study* found that 22% of students continued to do a PLC course or apprenticeship training (McCoy et al., 2014). Increasing numbers of students are using FE such as Post Leaving Certificate Courses (PLC's) as a stepping stone to HE courses through the Higher

Education Links Scheme [HELS], (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2014). HELS has provided progression opportunities for learners wishing to apply to HE through the CAO and alternative routes. Such pathways have facilitated an increased progression, particularly among mature learners, who have been progressing from level 5 and 6 level Post Leaving Certificate courses (PLC's). Research has identified that further education courses boost students' chances of graduating from HE.

### 3.2.4 DARE

Disabled students may also enter HE through the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme. There are currently 25 HEI participating in the scheme. The DARE scheme offers reduced points places to school leavers who, as a result of having a disability, have experienced additional educational challenges in second level education (Nic Fhlannchadha, 2018, p. 13). This is supported by research which shows that disabled students face barriers to accessing information and guidance when investigating transition options in Ireland (Doyle, 2015; McGuckin et al., 2013; Squires, Kalambouka, & Bragg, 2016). Applications to the scheme have increased year on year, as have the number of successful applicants (D. Byrne et al., 2013; Nic Fhlannchadha, 2018). In addition to reduced entry points eligible students may also receive extra supports upon entering HE. Both HEAR and DARE eligible applicants have been found to make a successful transition to HE relative to other applicants (D. Byrne et al., 2013). This demonstrates the success of the supports offered by the scheme and the link between effective, targeted support and successful transition to HE.

An evaluation of the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and DARE supplementary admission routes to higher education was carried out in 2013. It found that eligibility criteria largely depended on the provision of medical reports identifying the extent of a primary disability and was critical of the failure of the scheme to take into account the effect of multiple disabilities (D. Byrne et al., 2013). Applying these eligibility criteria could be a rather simplistic approach that fails to take account of the academic impact and cost of multiple disabilities. The National Disability Survey 2006 found that over two thirds of disabled people have multiple disabilities (Central Statistics Office, 2008). It has also been found that the greater the number of disabilities or level of disablement the greater the cost (Cullinan et al., 2011; Watson & Nolan, 2011). Students were found to struggle to provide up to date evidence of disability due to cost and long waiting lists to attend medical professionals. The eligibility criteria applied by HEAR and DARE points

to a medical model focus as opposed to the social model or human rights models of disability and may disadvantage particular cohorts of disabled students.

There was considerable variation across education institutions in terms of the range of access activities on offer, the pre-entry, post-entry and post-HE transitions (D. Byrne et al., 2013, p. 13). The review group found that if institutional targets could not be met to fill places in the scheme, they substituted across non-traditional groups including mature entrants. With different numbers of places, and varying entry criteria to each, the net effect could be the creation of a system which intends to be supportive being difficult to navigate for students. Following this report there was a redefinition of DARE for new entrants from 2016. The aim was to address the identified bias towards applicants with greater resources who could afford to pay privately for documentation. It acted to widen the eligibility criteria to include an Educational Impact Statement completed by the school and medical evidence by a GP. It was also intended to reduce the number of students entering with a late diagnosis (Reilly, 2016).

This report was followed by the *DARE HEAR Facts and Figures 2017-2018 Summary Report* (Nic Fhlannchadha, 2018). This found evidence that disabled students were doubly disadvantaged by experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage (p. 7). It found that applicants from “other” schools (the majority of which are fee-paying schools) remain somewhat more likely to be deemed eligible for DARE (p. 6). Although the first report (D. Byrne et al., 2013) was deemed to have, ‘resulted in significant changes to the operation of the HEAR and DARE’ (Access College, 2020), there were similar findings found in the second report, both in relation to socio-economic disadvantage and disability, and access to medical reports (D. Byrne et al., 2013; Nic Fhlannchadha, 2018). McGuckin et al. (2013) recommended coordinating and developing national policy advice on transitions from school to FE and HE for students with SEN. The development of a uniform access pathway for all HEI combined with a comprehensive transition planning process would further enhance the progression pathway. The failure to do so may cause difficulties for both administrators and students.

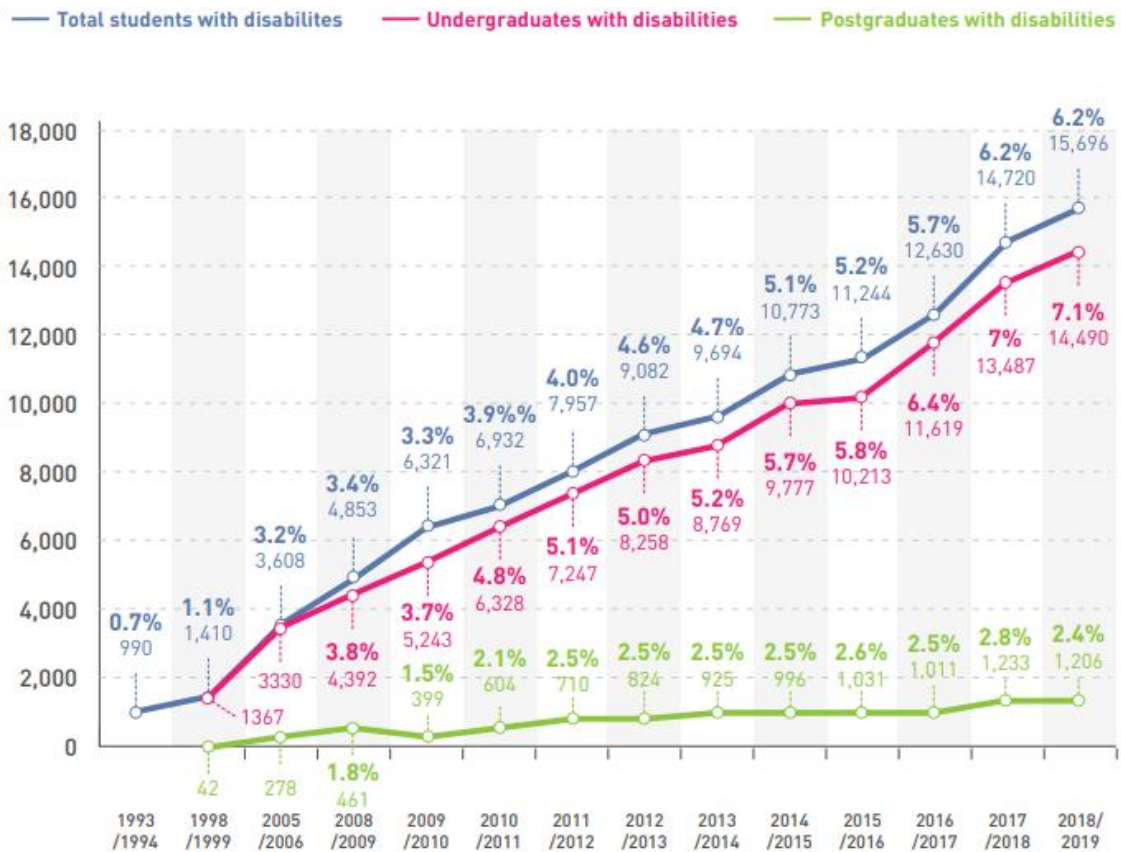
### 3.2.5 Progression to higher education

The total number of students attending HE has increased with over 231,710 full time, part time and remote students enrolled (Higher Education Authority, 2018b). The Department of Education and Skills projections expect the demand for full time education

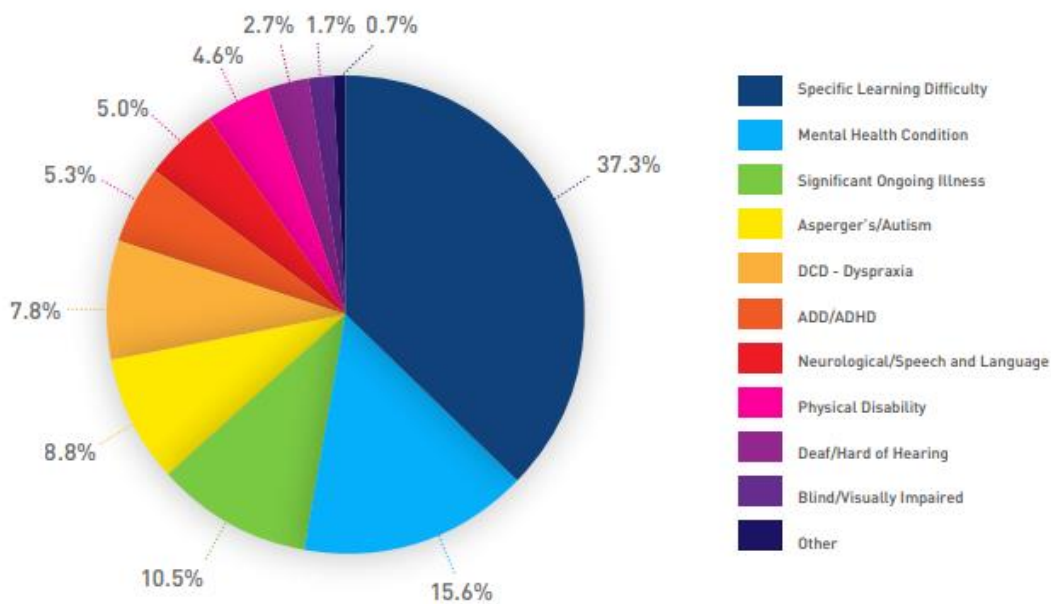
to reach 211,709 by 2028 (Department of Education and Skills, 2014). Coinciding with this increase, the widening participation agenda (2005; Higher Education Authority, 2008, 2015a, 2018c) has resulted in an increase in the number of students from non-traditional target groups (Higher Education Authority, 2018c). This increased participation has resulted in a change in the student profile (Hyland, 2011) and increased social and cultural advantages (Hunt, 2011).

Ahead have identified that the number of disabled new entrants has grown from 0.7% in 1994 to 6.2% in 2019 (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 1994, 2019). Historically the number of disabled students participating in HE has been low (Higher Education Authority, 2008). This was as a result of low expectations, poor second level outcomes and a shortage of information culminating in a failure to qualify for HE (Hunt, 2011; McCoy et al., 2020; McCoy et al., 2014; Shevlin et al., 2004). Despite this increase, disabled students are still found to have lower participation rates in HE than their non-disabled peers (Ebersold, 2011; McCoy et al., 2014).

Ahead was established in Ireland in 1988 by a number of disabled students and Professor Kelly in University College Dublin. It is a not for profit organisation that promotes access and participation of disabled students in FE, HE, and employment. They have published annual statistics on the participation rates of disabled students in HEIs in Ireland registered with disability support services in college since 1994. The Association for Higher Education Access & Disability (2019) report showed there has been a year on year increase of students within the institutions that participate in their survey, see Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Number of disabled students in higher education (and percentage of total student population they represent) since 1993/1994 taken from Association for Higher Education Access & Disability (2019, p. 8).



**Figure 3.** Breakdown of new entrant students by category of disability in 2018/19 taken from Association for Higher Education Access & Disability (2019, p. 16).

It can be seen that the largest category of disability registered with disability support services was 'specific learning difficulty', the second largest category was 'mental health condition'. The increase in the total number of students suggests these figures represent a positive endorsement of the policies and practices implemented. However they mask a level of social inequality with a large degree of under-representation still persisting throughout the system (McCoy et al., 2014). It can be seen from Figure 3 that there are significant differences in the entry rates of individual categories, and it is acknowledged that the participation of students who are blind and visually impaired was growing at the "slowest rate" (Higher Education Authority, 2018c). This is despite the fact that this has been one of the target groups as part of successive *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education* (Higher Education Authority, 2015a). Ahead point to barriers to transition at school level and recommend a greater focus by stakeholders and Government Departments.

### 3.2.6 Entry to higher education

Students making the transition to HE undergo what Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified as an ecological transition. Students are faced with learning to adjust intellectually and socially to this new setting (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993). Social transitions, such as moving to college, can cause distress due to the breaking of bonds, physical separation and emotional detachment from significant others in their community (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). Students have been found to be unprepared for the transition to HE (Daly et al., 2016; Doyle, 2015; Doyle et al., 2017). The *Leaving School in Ireland Study* indicated that the ten items relating to transition difficulties reflected two dimensions, academic and social difficulties. Academic difficulties included course difficulty, knowing what standard is expected, completing coursework on time, study costs, juggling work and study commitments, and care commitments. Social difficulties included balancing personal relationships with study commitments, fitting in with other students, finding time for other interests and coping with long breaks between term times (McCoy et al., 2014, p. 140).

Disabled students are forced to negotiate the same challenges as other students, but also have to consider issues surrounding their disability (Goode, 2007; Shevlin et al., 2004). Tinklin and Hall (1999) identified five obstacles to participation in HE for disabled students: the physical environment, access to information, entrance to higher education, assumptions of 'normality' and levels of awareness. Despite the progress that has been

made during the last decade, disabled students still face a harder and bumpier transition to HE (Doyle, 2015; Ebersold, 2012, 2011; McCoy et al., 2014; Redpath et al., 2013). This may be compounded by having to negotiate these difficulties with a degree of autonomy not experienced before (Goode, 2007). Students leave secondary school having relied on family, community supports and friends to provide and navigate accommodations (Evans, Broido, Brown, & Wilke, 2017; Hadley, 2011). However, there is an expectation within institutions that disabled students are ready to take responsibility for disclosing their disability and articulating their accommodation needs in an environment that is new (Adams & Proctor, 2010; Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger, & Lan, 2010; Hewett et al., 2016; Hong, 2015). Despite these added challenges disabled students were found to relish the opportunity to form a new identity and to become independent upon entering HE (Leese, 2010).

A support infrastructure has developed in response to an increased number of disabled students entering HE and a demand for greater institutional preparedness (Goode, 2007; McGuckin et al., 2013; V. Williams et al., 2008). A comprehensive orientation / induction programme should alleviate students' concerns relating to social and academic difficulties and should educate them on the benefits of engaging with all levels and services within HE. Students should be encouraged and facilitated to engage in appropriate opportunities and given the necessary skills to do so (L. Thomas, 2010).

Induction should continue into the academic term of first year covering a range of topics relevant to the time of the year (Leese, 2010). The literature points to the effectiveness of targeted orientation for disabled students, with several subpopulations benefitting (Evans et al., 2017, p. 424; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012) including those who struggle with the social demands of transitioning to college (Doyle et al., 2017; McCarthy, 2013). Key elements to this are building upon prior learning and skills, identified as absent in some students transitioning to HE (Hyland, 2011), and supporting disabled students in developing the skills to allow them to become more independent (McCoy et al., 2014). It is recommended that institutions undertake a reflective process with students upon entry to help them identify their needs. This process should be complemented by an ongoing process of advocacy skills development (Evans et al., 2017). This can be challenging in an environment where a student has not disclosed or has disclosed but is not fully aware of their support needs. This is understandable as they have never experienced this environment before. Student perceptions and expectations of HE are often different to the reality (Goode, 2007; McGuckin et al., 2013).



It is accepted that the transition is facilitated through, the positive impact of friendships, peer-support networks, significant education contacts and studying within an environment where the culture and related education practices understand and promote diverse learning styles (Gibson, 2012, p. 366). The development and type of relationships can act to buffer the negative effects of course efficacy and social support satisfaction (Lombardi, Murray, & Kowitt, 2016). It is widely recommended that institutional faculty and staff need to be aware of the wider issue of social adjustment and the development of feelings of belonging and institutional affiliation within the institution (Adams & Proctor, 2010; L. Thomas, 2012). The campus climate created within the institution (Harbour & Greenberg, 2017; Murray, Lombardi, & Kosty, 2014) and the visibility of diverse groups including disabled students has also been identified as a predictor of student adaptation (Adams & Proctor, 2010, p. 178) and students success (Evans et al., 2017; L. Thomas, 2012).

### 3.2.7 Supports upon entry

*The OECD report on the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Tertiary Education and Employment* (Ebersold, 2011), found evidence that HEI had designed an admissions and support structure for disabled students. These supports included the creation of links with housing and transport providers. At admissions level students are encouraged to be responsible for themselves and detail the extent of their educational needs. An educational plan is often set out for the student detailing the aims and objectives and the supports required. The OECD reports highlighted that the quality of the transition process for disabled students is dependent on the promotion of an inclusive ethos throughout the university community (Ebersold, 2011).

In Ireland, the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD), managed by the NAO, aims to provide a range of supports to disabled students upon transition to HE and is currently supported by the European Social Fund (ESF). HEI make applications on behalf of students for a range of supports including academic, IT, personal support, and transport through the disability support services. There has been criticism of the fund over the years, due to delays in the processing of applications. The funding model was reviewed, and a new model was implemented in 2010. The result was a single per-capita allocation now applies to all approved disabled students in HE. This has enabled greater clarity for institutions and allows them to plan much earlier in the year. Other complaints related to the failure of the fund to support disabled students in part-time education. This too has

recently been improved and the fund has been extended to support these students (Higher Education Authority, 2017, 2019a). The failure to increase the budget of the FSD in line with the increased number of disabled students in HE however is a major cause for concern.

The role of the disability support service in HE now extends beyond just supporting the students' academic needs including support in pre-entry, progression through college and into employment. Implementing an "integrated model of academic and pastoral support that enables all students to achieve their potential" is the best approach (L. Thomas et al., 2005, p. 108). Such a model may be viewed as shifting from the deficit discourse, and embracing a philosophy of partnership, with structures, roles, processes and ways of working to match, moves us towards a widening participation strategy based on inclusivity, diversity and transformation (Duckworth, 2011, p. 313). The disability support service officers have a professional organisation, Disability Advisors Working Network, (DAWN), which provides professional development opportunities for staff working in the area. It facilitates the sharing of best practice examples of supporting students (Disability Advisors Working Network, 2019). The level and type of supports offered to students vary across institutions (McGuckin et al., 2013) and the literature exposes a notable absence of supports for the wider social engagement of disabled students. This resonates with international research where disabled students have been left without proper academic supports, and delays in delivery saw parents and family members being forced to fill the gap (Brandt, 2011; Goode, 2007; Hewett et al., 2016; Hong, 2015; Redpath et al., 2013). The literature identifies a lack of awareness among staff and students of the supports available, and perceptions among students of lecturer suspicion of their specialised supports (Redpath et al., 2013). Students have reported requiring extra support in approaching academic staff, particularly in first year (Christie et al., 2005). These delays placed the student under increased pressure, preventing them from transitioning successfully and impacting on their ability to embed both socially and academically (Brandt, 2011). Students found having to manage access to teaching and learning through personal approaches to lecturers (Goode, 2007), and the constant battle for support, exhausting (McGuckin et al., 2013). A successful transition requires responsive teaching staff who have a clear understanding of their role in engaging with disabled students (Nevill & Rhodes, 2004). The implementation of flexible teaching and examination methods, and departmental understanding (Ebersold, 2012; Fuller, Bradley, & Healey, 2004; Leese, 2010; National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019b; L. Thomas, 2010; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010), and a network of communication is required among all stakeholders, and greater staff development to

improve awareness is needed (Redpath et al., 2013). Notwithstanding the reported difficulties disabled students were found to value the opportunity to communicate and collaborate with staff and enjoyed the multi-mode assessments used (McGuckin et al., 2013). However, it has been found that within HE academic staff need to do more to support disabled students (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 2015; Mullins & Preyde, 2013) and move away from individual 'reasonable accommodations' to 'inclusive education for all' (Redpath et al., 2013).

### 3.2.8 Disclosure of a disability

For disabled students to avail of supports in HE, they must first disclose their disability. They may choose to do this upon completion of their CAO application, when joining the DARE scheme or when they enter the institution. National and international data has repeatedly shown that it is a complex issue, and a significant proportion of students choose not to disclose their disability upon entry (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 2019, p. 13; Cameto et al., 2004; Newman et al., 2009). This failure to disclose has been found to be as a result of perceptions of negative attitudes and past experiences of social isolation (Harbour & Greenberg, 2017; Wiseman, Emry, & Morgan, 1988) or due to students having had prior coping strategies (Fuller et al., 2004; Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Students have identified feeling pressure to identify, and being uncertain as to which identity to choose (Almog, 2018; Goode, 2007; Greyling & Swart, 2011), especially where colleges have failed to allay students' concerns about stigma (Avellone & Scott, 2017, p. 14). They simply wanted to be treated like every other student and meet the common expectations of a traditional student (Hong, 2015). A student's failure to disclose may have an impact on the institute's ability to provide for their needs. Those who do not disclose at application are encouraged to do so later in the academic year (Borland & James, 1999). Indeed in Ireland it was found a large number of students register with their disability support service after their first year (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 2019). Of course, not all students struggle with this issue (McGuckin et al., 2013). Some students disclose and there are still many examples of these students arriving in to HEI and not receiving timely supports (Brandt, 2011; Redpath et al., 2013). It is apparent from the literature that the world of student disclosure is challenging and there is a significant split in students' minds about whether to disclose or not. The adoption of the identity of a disabled person in HE is far from straightforward, in part because of the conflicting discourses surrounding disability which are encountered (Fordyce, Riddell, O'Neill, & Weedon,

2013; Riddell, 2015). Institutions need to create an environment that encourages disclosure (Ebersold, 2011), be clear on the benefits of disclosing, and ensure that students feel that they are disclosing in a confidential environment (Cox et al., 2017; Tinklin & Hall, 1999).

This section has presented the literature on the transition of disabled students to higher education. It has considered the many factors involved including the pathways, the progression rates, the supports, and other students' considerations upon entry including disclosure of a disability. From the literature it is evident that although policies and practices have resulted in increased numbers of students transitioning to, HE disabled students clearly still face greater challenges than their non-disabled peers. The literature identifies many factors critical to the successful transition of disabled students including the development of inclusive climate, friendships, and engagement in the wider social sphere of the campus. Although there is a strong literature base on the transition of disabled students in Ireland there is very little focus on their wider social engagement transition experiences. This is despite the acknowledgment across the literature of the role of the wider social engagement and significance of creating a sense of belonging (L. Thomas, 2012).

### 3.2.9 Retention of students

An increased student population has brought about a greater international recognition of the importance of student retention. Resulting in robust research carried out on the factors significant in the successful completion of HE by students (Astin, 1975, 1984; L. Thomas, 2010). This has been identified as an urgent issue in the context of the widening participation agenda, including for disabled students (L. Thomas, 2019) and retention has become a key performance indicator across HE sector worldwide (Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009). As well as the personal impact and loss of life chances for students, non-completion has financial implications for students, their families, and the wider economy (Crosling et al., 2009). In the US, disabled students have been identified as a group that have low retention rates (Parette & McMahan, 2002).

In Ireland, the proportion of new entrants who did not progress is 14% across all sectors and NFQ levels (Higher Education Authority, 2018d). By international standards Ireland has very high retention rates (Higher Education Authority, 2018d; Reilly, 2016). Decreasing completion rates combined with the loss of resources that accrued as a

result have driven an economic imperative to improve retention rates among HEI. First year has been identified as crucial in the retention of all students and *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* notes “A positive first-year student experience is crucial to achieving the goals of higher education; failure to address the challenges encountered by students in their first year contributes to high drop out and failure rates, with personal and system wide implications” (Higher Education Authority, 2015a; Hunt, 2011, p. 55). One of the actions identified in the *National Access Plan* is to address the issue of non-completion of programmes particularly for those in under-represented target groups (Higher Education Authority, 2008). The *Pathways to Education Project* tracked the progress of disabled students who entered HE institutes in 2005. The study found differences in the entry rates of different categories of disabled students and that certain cohorts had lower retention rates. Students with mental health difficulties had the lowest retention rates. This corresponds to the findings of Reilly (2016) who found that deaf students and students with mental health difficulties had lower retention rates. The highest rate of withdrawals was similar to those without disabilities and takes place in first year (Christie et al., 2005). However, unlike their peers disabled students gave reasons for leaving such as difficulties accessing appropriate technologies, settling into a more diverse physical and learning environment and struggling to develop social networks (Christie et al., 2005). Blaney and Mulkeen (2008) found that students entering through access routes had lower or similar non-completion rates to the general student body.

The findings from the Christie et al. (2005) study contrast with the findings of Kilpatrick et al. (2016) study in Australia. They found that although the numbers of disabled students had increased, retention rates were lower than in the general student body. Wessel, Jones, Markle, and Westfall (2009) concluded that the retention and graduation rates for all students, regardless of the presence or absence of a disability, were similar. Disabled students were found to have taken longer to graduate, particularly those with severe disabilities. Yorke (2016) researched the ‘sense of belongingness’ and self-confidence of first year students in UK institutions. He found that for students with a ‘declared disability’, personal health was most regularly identified as an influence on their non-progression. There was also a higher rate of disabled students citing a lack of support from staff and students and showing a greater tendency to identify large class sizes as an issue. The literature shows that successful completion has been found to be over dependent on the resourcefulness of the student and the student’s family. This may adversely affect students from disadvantaged backgrounds or with more severe disabilities (Ebersold, 2011). It has been found that many disabled students, once they

make a successful transition and have a culture of support, usually stay the course (Christie et al., 2005; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Evans et al., 2017; Reilly, 2016; Wessel et al., 2009). However, this has been found to vary depending on disability type (Reilly, 2016). It is essential that institutions develop an early warning mechanism to identify students who are struggling to secure both social and academic integration, and thus increase retention rates (Nevill & Rhodes, 2004).

In the UK the *What works? Programme* aimed to generate evidence about the most effective strategies to ensure high continuation and completion rates within HE (L. Thomas, 2012). This research study found that a significant minority of students consider withdrawal, with students particularly likely to consider leaving, after Christmas and during the first semester. A range of factors have been identified as contributing to poor success and retention in HE in the UK and Ireland, including poor choice of programme; lack of personal commitment to study; teaching quality; lack of contact with academic staff; inadequate academic progress; and finance as major influences on non-continuation (Redmond, Quin, Devitt, & Archbold, 2011; Yorke & Longden, 2008). However, the *What Works? Programme* research would suggest that the key to successful student retention does not lie in one individual intervention such as orientation, peer mentoring, personal tutoring but stems from an established set of key characteristics, which underpin principles and a wider institutional culture, all intended to foster student belonging (p. 7). For an institution to increase the chance of students success and to contribute to good student retention, there must be an institutional commitment to student learning and hence to student engagement; proactive management of the students' transition; curriculum issues such as treating learning as an academic and social milieu (Krause & Armitage, 2014; Yorke & Longden, 2008). However, one of the greatest barriers identified to the implementation of 'inclusive practices' for disabled students, is resistance to change by staff (Redpath et al., 2013) as they may see it as an added burden (Damiani & Harbour, 2015; Hong, 2015).

Engstrom and Tinto (2008); and Tinto (1993) contend that an individual's own perceptions of their social and academic integration are the predominant influences on their decision to stay or leave higher education. He advocates that academic integration includes academic performance, self-perceptions, academic progress, and belief that integration includes self-esteem and the quality of relationships established with teaching and staff and peers. Creating a sense of belonging has been found to be an important factor affecting retention for college students with apparent and nonapparent disabilities (Belch, 2004; Coates, 2010; Graham-Smith & Lafayette, 2004).

In essence, the literature demonstrates varying data on the retention rates of disabled students. In Ireland, the HEA student progression reports do not disaggregate the data in relation to disabled students progressing in HE in Ireland (Higher Education Authority, 2018d). As such it can be difficult to obtain a national picture of their retention rates. This may signify an overt focus on increasing the number transitioning rather than a necessary focus on their success and wider experience. Higher education must accept that the “implications of offering access to non-traditional students do not end, but rather begin, at the point of entry” (Bamber & Tett, 2001, p. 15). It is clear from the literature that there are a range of factors involved in the retention of all students. What is most apparent is that students who feel part of an institution and are engaged are more likely to succeed, than those who do not. The creation of a sense of belonging is critical to retention, and this can be developed through social engagement. This is particularly evident for disabled students who despite many barriers show positive progression rates and commitment. However, the literature does leave questions regarding these students’ social engagement and sense of belonging experiences in HE in Ireland.

### 3.2.10 Summary of transition

Section 3.2 sought to provide insight into the literature relating to the transition, progression, and retention experiences of disabled students in HE. Policy efforts, supported by resources, practices and structures have been successful in increasing the number of disabled students progressing to HE. There have been increased entry routes to HE, which have acted to support non-traditional students, including disabled students. There also has been an increased literature base on their transition experiences and the many barriers they still routinely face. Including the challenges students face disclosing their disability and the need to create an institutional climate that facilitates this process. Although, there is some information on their retention levels, there is still much work to be done to develop a national picture of the overall retention of disabled students in HE. The following section, ‘Engagement’, will focus on the engagement experiences, once students enter, HE. There will be a focus on their social engagement experiences.

### 3.3 Engagement in Higher Education

There have been very few published studies on the engagement experiences of disabled students in HE in Ireland. Those that exist, mostly focus on the progression and transition experience (Doyle, 2015; Doyle, Reilly, & Treanor, 2013; McCarthy, 2013; McGuckin et al., 2013), the barriers to engagement in higher education (Shevlin et al., 2004), and retention (Christie et al., 2005; Reilly, 2016). This has occurred at the expense of a focus on their wider social engagement experiences. The policy has been to increase the number of disabled students progressing and there is no specific focus on their social engagement experiences with funding only being provided for academic supports (Higher Education Authority, 2019a). However, there is a significant international body of knowledge on student engagement, particularly in the US and Australia dating back many years (Krause & Armitage, 2014) but there has been a very limited literature pertaining to the social engagement experiences of disabled students in. It is evident from the literature review that there is still much to be done, both nationally and internationally to form a complete picture and there is an obvious paucity of research on the topic. As a result, this literature review relies heavily on international studies.

The development of the concept of the 'student experience' occurred in the US and spread rapidly (Loxley, Seery, & Walsh, 2014) and, the term 'student experience' has become elided with the term 'student engagement' (A. Murphy, 2014, p. 159). Trowler and Trowler (2010) undertook an extensive review of the literature relating to student engagement and identified that much of the early work has been influenced by student involvement research carried out by Astin (1984), this was widened to include earlier aspects including 'quality of work' (C. R Pace, 1980, 1984) and time-on-task. This in part may have been driven by the need to retain students and would have been influenced by Tinto (1975) work on student retention theories. This was followed by work on effective practices in teaching and learning, (C Robert Pace, 1990), and Chickering and Gamson (1987) seven principles of good practice in HE. This eventually began to emerge as 'student engagement' (Kuh, 2001, 2003). Many benefits of engagement have been identified including learning, appreciation of diversity, developing transferable skills, and developing a sense of connection and belonging (Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2019; Kuh, 2003; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; L. Thomas, 2010). What is now without question is that student engagement improves outcomes (Trowler & Trowler, 2010).



There are multiple definitions of engagement (Trowler & Trowler, 2011) and it is complex and multifaceted (Kahu, 2013; Krause & Armitage, 2014). Kahu (2013) identified four approaches to engagement across the literature:

- Behavioural foregrounds student behaviour and institutional practice,
- Psychological defines engagement as an individual psycho-social process,
- Socio-cultural takes account of the wider socio-cultural landscape,
- Holistic perspective takes a broader more universal view of engagement (p. 758).

They believed that many of the definitions were poorly defined with a lack of distinction between the state of engagement, factors that influence student engagement and the immediate and longer-term consequences of engaging. They were critical of an overt focus on the relationship between cognition and behaviour at the expense of the wider student experience, including the sense of belonging (p. 758). Many of these definitions fail to consider the experiences of a diverse groups. Tinto (2005) acknowledged this of his own model, "it did not, in its initial formulation, speak to the experience of students in other types of institutions, students of different gender, race, ethnicity, income and orientation". Disabled students too can be added to this list.

Engagement has been identified as particularly beneficial for groups least prepared for HE (L. Thomas, 2012; Trowler & Trowler, 2011). In Australia, Krause and Armitage (2014) comment that a large portion of the student engagement literature focuses on diversity. It recognises the need for HEI to be cognisant of a student's background and as such be responsive to the type of supports required. The literature notes that for some of these students, including first in family, disabled students (Nichols & Quaye, 2009), and other non-traditional groups, engagement may be a battle and a challenge rather than a fulfilling experience (Krause & Armitage, 2014; Trowler & Trowler, 2011). It may involve confronting some students' sense of identity, as well as familiar ways of knowing, thinking, and behaving (Krause, 2005; Krause & Armitage, 2014). It has been noted that despite the uncontested value of engagement within the literature, there is "very little" research demonstrating clearly where students have been engaged in issues beyond their own learning, as individuals, in a direct way (Trowler & Trowler, 2011, p. n.p).

### 3.3.1 Engagement in Irish higher education

In Ireland, recent years has seen a greater focus on formalising the structures around students' engagement in HE. This has occurred in response to its recognised contribution to student success (A. Murphy, 2014; National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019b), retention (Higher Education Authority, 2018d), graduate attributes (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019a) and the widening participation agenda (Higher Education Authority, 2015a; Hunt, 2011). This has been reflected in HEI strategies where student engagement has been shown to have an ever-greater presence, with initiatives being undertaken to deepen engagement with the decision making structures in institutions and greater civic engagement with outside communities (A. Murphy, 2014; National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019b).

National initiatives to promote wider college engagement have included, *Campus Engage*, which was founded in 2007 (<http://www.campusengage.ie/>). The project has grown, and in June 2014, the leaders of HEI across Ireland signed the Campus Engage Charter for Civic and Community Engagement (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019b). Point four of the charter is especially relevant to the enhancement of student engagement. Institutions have since come together to agree a Framework to measure civic and community engagement across the sector. The '*National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*' asserts the importance of wider social engagement, "For students, the informal side of higher education – drama – sport, debating, meeting different people – is a vital dimension of college life that enriches their experience and the quality of their learning environment", (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p. 41). It placed "engaging with the wider society" as one of three interconnected core roles in the Strategy. It sees this "engagement" as "taking on civic responsibilities and cooperating with needs of the community that sustains higher education...including the "community and voluntary sectors" (Hunt, 2011, p. 74).

In 2014, the HEA established a working group to explore best practice in relation to student engagement in HE. They published the report '*Enhancing student engagement in Decision Making: Report from the Working Group on Student Engagement in Irish Higher Education*'. It used the Trowler and Trowler (2011) definition of engagement:

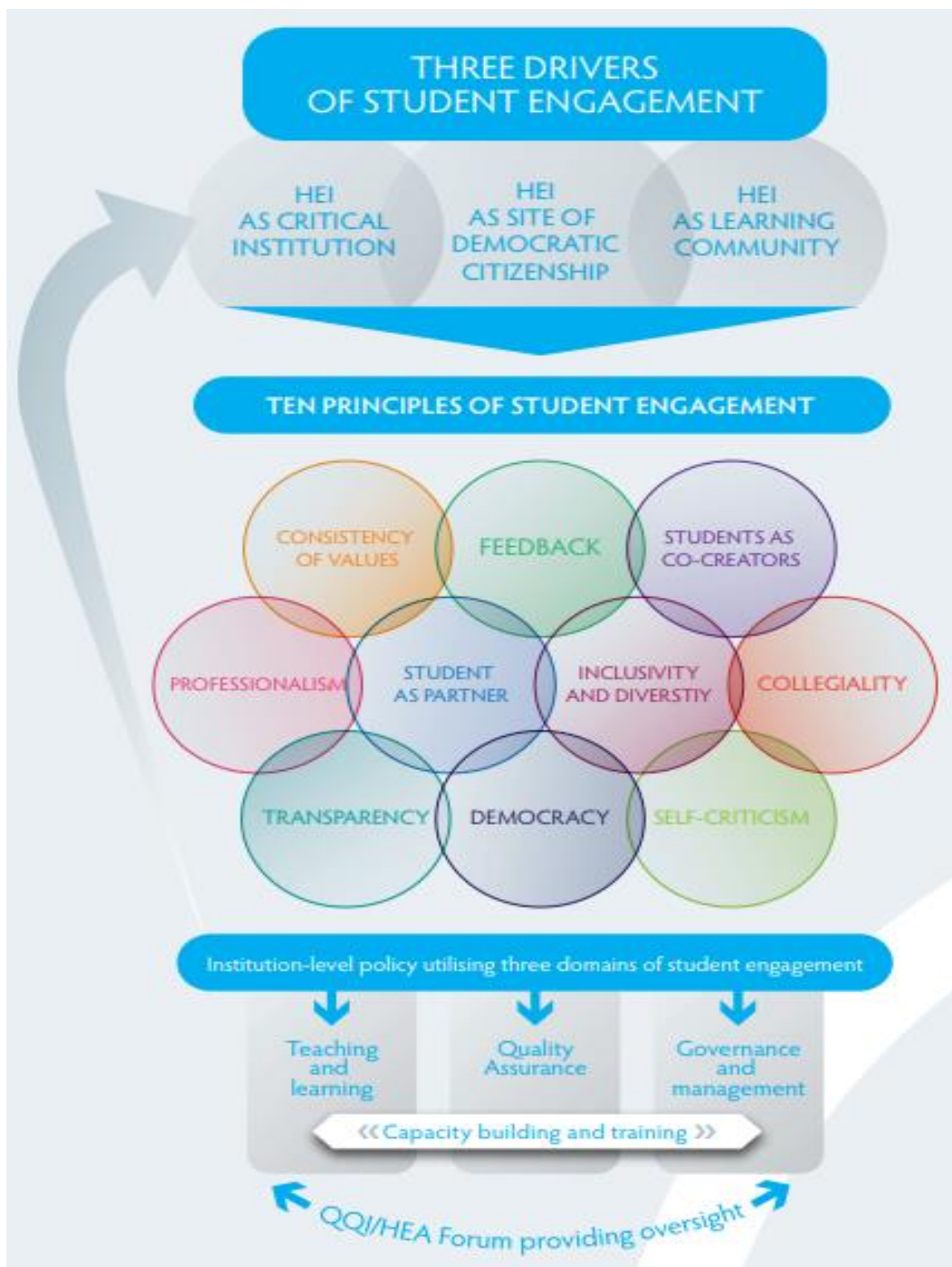
the investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning

outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution (p. 3)

Student engagement is seen to be a two-way process between the student and the institution in which effort and conditions need to be right (Higher Education Authority, 2016a). However, such definitions fail to adequately recognise that some students, including disabled students, may have to put in greater effort, to overcome societal or institutional barriers to meet the demands of their studies (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011; Shevlin et al., 2004).

The report identifies students as 'co-creators' of their own learning and partners and stakeholders in the process in which students contribute to the success of their institution (Higher Education Authority, 2016a, p. viii). It aligns the concept of student engagement with students' involvement in the decision making within institutions. Irish HE has had a long history of students engaged in governance through local student representative bodies such as Students' Unions' and nationally through the Union of Students' Ireland (USI). Their representation in institutional level governance and management is legislated for nationally (Carey, 2013) through the *Universities Act* (1997) and the *Institutes of Technology Act* (2006). Research has concentrated on 'Student Voice' as having a possible transformative power in HEIs (Canning, 2017; Klemenčič, 2012). The implementation of the widening participation agenda (Higher Education Authority, 2015a) gives even greater impetus for institutions to hear the 'voice' of a diverse student body, including disabled students. For institutions to understand their needs they must assist these students to have their voice heard (Hurst, 1999). However the challenge has been shown to be, how to give voice to this difference (Sellar & Gale, 2011) and how to enable them to have meaningful engagement in the decision making process (Klemenčič, 2012).

The report concludes by presenting a set of principles to assist institutions in developing a culture of engagement to embed in the decision-making process. Those principles are referred to as the pillars of engagement. A visualisation of the principles, the three domains which may be used to embed them, and the cross-cutting theme of capacity building and training can be seen in Figure 4. It is envisaged that by embedding these principles, the HEI will in turn, strengthen the three drivers of student engagement (Higher Education Authority, 2016a).



**Figure 4.** Visualisation of student engagement, taken from Higher Education Authority (2016a, p. 33)

The inclusion of the principle of “Inclusivity and Diversity” was a welcome development and a recognition of the national objectives to promote greater diversity within institutions. Upon further examination, it can be seen that the report lists “possible challenges to student engagement”, but fails to consider the barriers disabled student may face such, as inaccessible college campus or lack of appropriate and timely supports (McGuckin et al., 2013), lack of awareness or outdated perceptions (Hong, 2015) or an ineffectual culture of engagement of disabled students (Harbour & Greenberg, 2017). Possible benefits to the student and institutions were identified as, “A culture of engagement at this level can foster a sense of satisfaction among students and staff, and develop chances for engagement further up the scale”, and “Students leave the institution with a sense of belonging” (Higher Education Authority, 2016a, p. 57). If a student is unable to engage due to barriers, then they are unlikely to reap these benefits. This failure to recognise the wider social engagement of disabled students and the barriers they may face to that engagement would appear to be evident in many of the policy documents identified. This is despite, as noted by Krause and Armitage (2014) an increasing international literature which highlights the relationship between the students characteristics, the environment, and levels of engagement that may impede on that students success (p. 7)

The establishment of the *National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in 2012*, (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019b) demonstrated a commitment to teaching and learning in HE. Indeed, *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education* recognises the role that teachers have in supporting non-traditional student groups to adapt to HE and dedicates recommendations to teaching and learning (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019b). The forum has prepared a range of resources to support teaching and learning, including reports on student success, why students leave, and student transitions.

The *National Student Engagement Programme* (N-StEP) was established in 2016, with the aim of developing a national vision for enhancing and embedding student engagement in Irish HE. It planned to do this by bringing students and staff together with the aim of developing a culture of meaningful participation, enabling collaboration and capacity building and to identify and share best practice across the sector ([www.studentfinance.ie](http://www.studentfinance.ie)). It was a collaboration between the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), the Higher Education Authority (HEA), and the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). There are two key strands to the programme: a national student training

programme, and developing institutional capacity (<https://hea.ie/skills-engagement/engagement/>).

The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) was established in response to the acceptance internationally that HEI should not make judgements about the effectiveness of their policies and practices in the absence of student engagement data (Kuh, 2003). The survey undertakes research on the engagement experiences of students in higher education nationally (Yorke, 2016) and is based on similar studies internationally such as the *Australian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE)*. The survey identifies engagement as reflecting two key elements. The first is the amount of time and effort that students put into their studies and other educationally beneficial activities. The second is how the institutions deploy resources and organise curriculum and learning opportunities to encourage students to participate in meaningful activities linked to learning (Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2019, pp. 2-3). Borrowing heavily from Kuh (2001) it has been noted that such surveys focus on collecting data about students' involvement in activities relevant to their studies, often at the expense of a more relational approach (Krause & Armitage, 2014). Such surveys may fail to take into account the wider environmental aspects impacting upon a student's engagement, such as the barriers disabled students face in HE. Finally, they 'obscure' the voice of participants, with no opportunity for inclusion of a perspective that does not fit the predefined questions (Kahu, 2013). Solomonides (2013) believes that there is a need for a greater focus on the lived experiences of students, to include the affective dimensions, to take into consideration belonging experiences, and to include the diversity of student experience, (Kahu, 2013), including disabled students. It is currently not possible to identify the experiences of disabled students from the ISSE data. This makes it impossible to develop a national picture of their student engagement experiences. Kahu (2013) would recommend the use of qualitative methodologies to capture this diversity of experience. Krause and Armitage (2014) believed that when engagement is framed within a combination of interrelated physical, social, cognitive, and psychological dimensions, the concepts and patterns of student belonging, retention, and success are measures and indicators of engagement.

Engagement is viewed as taking place across the institution from the classroom to the courtyard to the debating chamber in many studies (Astin, 1984; Krause & Armitage, 2014; L. Thomas, 2012) and responsibility is shared across the institution (L. Thomas, 2010; Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Engagement can be broadly divided into academic and social engagement. The literature shows, that previously there was a greater research

focus on engagement in the academic sphere rather than taking a more relational approach (Krause & Armitage, 2014, p. 16). There is now a greater recognition of the students' wider experiences, in the affective domains as lived by the student (Coates, 2010; Solomonides, 2013).

This Ph.D. research focuses on the social engagement of disabled students in higher education. Thus, the remainder of this section will focus on the literature relating to their social engagement. Despite the number of positive outcomes identified from engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and the imperative to retain and create a sense of belonging for non-traditional students (Krause & Armitage, 2014; L. Thomas, 2012), there is very little published research on the social engagement experience and sense of belonging of disabled students (Padgett et al., 2012). This is also the case in HE in Ireland so there will be a focus on a combination of international and Irish literature.

### 3.3.2 Social engagement

Social engagement is difficult to define, and different terminologies are currently in use (Van Den Wijngaard, Beausaert, Segers, & Gijssels, 2015). In higher education campuses, the words 'engagement' and 'involvement' are often used in multiple ways to mean the same thing creating some challenges (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009).

Tinto (1975, 1993) theory of student departure identified that a successful transition, and student persistence, is determined by a student's ability to integrate into an institution's academic and social systems. Students' social engagement / involvement has been found to play a critical role in this (Astin, 1975; L. Thomas, 2012). In essence, the more students are academically and socially involved / engaged, the more likely they are to succeed, persist, and graduate (Astin et al., 2012; Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Kuh, 2009; L. Thomas, 2019; Tinto, 2005).

L. Thomas (2012) in the *What Works* programme identified 'social engagement' as:

Social engagement can be seen to create a sense of belonging and offer informal support through interaction with friends and peers. Social engagement takes place in the social sphere of the institution, including social spaces, clubs and societies, the students' union, in student accommodation and through shared living arrangements (p. 14).

The programme found that, students who find it more difficult to make friends had a more negative student experience, and students who think about leaving feel less like they fit

into and belong in their academic programme (p. 49). These connections have been found to be particularly important during times of student stress (L. Thomas, 2010). However, just being part of a club or society does not necessarily convey a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

A significant body of literature exists on the contribution of social and environmental factors to students' persistence in HE (Astin, 1975). Yet, for disabled students there is far more attention focused on their academic support than their social engagement (A. R. Fleming, Oertle, Plotner, & Hakun, 2017, p. 215; Papatotiriou & Windle, 2012). This is reflected in the literature by the paucity of research on the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE. Many campuses have made progress toward creating accessible academic programs and providing academic supports, but cocurricular aspects of campus life have received significantly less focus (D Johnson, 2000).

It has been reported that some disabled students found challenges fitting in during the transition process with some students dropping out completely (Adams & Proctor, 2010). Developing friends contributes to a positive first year experience, reducing social isolation, creating a sense of belonging, and a greater commitment to the institution (Eivers, Flanagan, & Morgan, 2002; L. Thomas, 2012; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2008). Through these engaging relationships students develop social and cultural capital facilitating access and inclusion into the dominant society (Bourdieu, 1986). Disabled students reported finding it difficult to develop social attachments and develop connections (Papatotiriou & Windle, 2012) due to a range of barriers. In Ireland, McGuckin et al. (2013) reported that students enjoyed orientation events and appreciated the chance to meet new people. Activities such as 'ice-breakers' within class groupings ensured that they had opportunities for a 'fresh start' and to meet their peer groups within a supportive environment.

Papatotiriou and Windle (2012) examined the social experiences of physically disabled students attending HE in Australia. They found that limited ability to socialise at university should be considered one of the socially imposed restrictions affecting disabled students. They found a lack of awareness among non-disabled peers, and disabled students acting to protect themselves against the potential for disparaging remarks. A further investigation of the literature found that nondisabled students had false beliefs about disabled students already being socially engaged, exacerbating the potential for them to feel socially alienated, which in turn affected motivation to persist (Avellone &



Scott, 2017; Hong, 2015). A lack of awareness among non-disabled peers can often be a more subtle barrier, not widely recognised (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). It is recommended that institutions should be implementing policies and programmes that aim to foster understanding between disabled students and their non-disabled peers. Institutions need to engage in a cultural shift to create a more open and positive climate within institutions (Harbour & Greenberg, 2017; Strange, 2003) for disabled people.

In the UK, a number of research reports and papers including, *Improving the experiences of disabled students in higher education* (Jacklin, Robinson, O'Meara, & Harris, 2007), the *Strategic approaches to disabled student engagement* (May & Felsing, 2010), and *Developing and embedding inclusive policy and practice in higher education* (May & Bridger, 2010) have acted to inform and guide change.

*Jacklin et al. (2007)* found that the majority of respondents reported that overall, their learning and social experiences of HE was positive (p. 43). They found that 12.5% were not happy with their social experiences (p. 43). Their research outlined a number of "issues affecting degree of happiness with social and learning experiences". These included, "teaching and learning, resources, tutors and other students, and informal and formal structures of academic supports". Many of the negative experiences cited by disabled students were not related specifically to impairment but were more general student concerns (p. 6).

These reports provided the data on the experiences of disabled students (Jacklin et al., 2007), highlighting the importance of developing an evidenced based approach on their engagement experiences (May & Bridger, 2010), was followed by a practical focus for higher education institutions wishing to develop more effective ways of engaging and involving disabled students. It was noted, that HEI in the UK are slowly but increasingly recognising the importance of student engagement (May & Felsing, 2010). A type of engagement that goes beyond their legal obligation, bringing benefits to student learning, and harnesses the contribution of students to maintaining and enhancing the quality of HE. These reports have been supported by the contribution of the *What Works Programme* on student engagement and belonging (L. Thomas, 2012), and other reports which highlight the contribution social engagement makes towards developing a sense of belonging. This acts to further the widening participation agenda (L. Thomas, 2018, 2019).

Students with certain types of disability may have greater difficulties adapting to the social demands of HE (Adams & Proctor, 2010; Doyle, 2015; Pathways to Education, 2010). Disabled students with visible impairments were less likely to engage in cocurricular activities than were students with invisible impairments (K. Brown & Broido, 2015). Many research studies show that those with physical disabilities (Papasotiriou & Windle, 2012), blind (Hewett et al., 2016), deaf (Tsai & Fung, 2005), mental health (Carette, De Schauwer, & Van Hove, 2018) or neuro-diverse disabilities (Madriaga, 2010; Megivern, Pellerito, & Mowbray, 2003) can face barriers to social engagement. As well as managing their disability, these difficulties often centred around a lack of awareness, negative attitudes, stigma and barriers within the physical infrastructure (Carette et al., 2018; Madriaga, 2010; Papasotiriou & Windle, 2012). Athletic and recreational activities are helpful to all students since they enhance quality of life, offer stress relief and contribute to a sense of community (Tsai & Fung, 2005). Beauchamp-Pryor (2013) found that a quarter of the students with disabilities surveyed reported that they had not been able to participate in student activities as much as they would have liked.

Physical spaces have been found to be important in supporting the full engagement of all students (Keppell, Souter, & Riddle, 2011; K. E. Matthews, Andrews, & Adams, 2011). Students who spend more time on campus involved in educationally purposeful activities and engaging with the campus community are more likely to persist (Astin, 1984; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010; Tinto, 2005). Disabled students face structural barriers to the learning and social environments of HE (Shevlin et al., 2004; Tinklin & Hall, 1999), impacting upon their social engagement experience (Devine, 2016; Hewett et al., 2016; Papasotiriou & Windle, 2012). Kitchin (1998) argued that inaccessible spaces are a means to control disabled people and are an expression of disablist power relations within society. Strange (2003) was adamant that HE leaders must prioritise the physical human aggregate, organisational, and constructed aspects of campus and that there is a need to give equal attention to social spaces as to learning spaces (Jacklin et al., 2007, p. 50).

The academic sphere has been identified as the most important site for developing and nurturing engagement (Kuh, 2001; L. Thomas, 2012; Yorke & Longden, 2008). Academic engagement offers students the opportunity to connect with staff and students, forming a community. High-quality student centred learning and teaching must be a primary focus for student retention and success (L. Thomas, 2012). Krause (2011) extended the notion of academic engagement by arguing that learning occurs in a range

of settings, both within and beyond the formal curriculum. It involves developing social connections within the institution and building on existing knowledge, allied with learning that occurs in the wider social environment. Engaging in social networks in and outside the class allows students to develop social and cultural capital, a sense of identity and skills that will be essential upon progressing from HE (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Denhart, 2008; Greyling & Swart, 2011). Tinto (2005) felt that the classroom is, for many students, “the one place, perhaps only place, where they meet each other and the faculty. If involvement does not occur there it is unlikely to occur anywhere.” (p. 4). This may be the case for disabled students who face many internal and external environmental barriers to their full engagement (Borland & James, 1999; Goode, 2007) including the impact of disability, inaccessible physical environments (Hong, 2015), lecturing techniques, perceptions (Damiani & Harbour, 2015; Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002; Hong, 2015), the failure to deliver timely and appropriate supports (Hewett et al., 2016; McGuckin et al., 2013) and academic systems (Parker, 1999). Students having to spend additional time getting to and from their studies or on their work (Shevlin et al., 2004) detracting from available time establishing networks within college resulting in increased isolation (Jacklin et al., 2007; Sachs & Schreuer, 2011). A positive relationship with one staff member can often be the difference in a student deciding to persist (Evans et al., 2017; Schur, Kruse, & Blanck, 2013). In-class activities, such as group work, has been found to help students build greater team working and communication skills, acting to support them build relationships and contributes to enhanced self-esteem (Higbee, 2009; David Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

Implementing a universal design approach has also been found to benefit students. The National Disability Authority (NDA) identify universal design (UD) as the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability (National Disability Authority, 2020). UD and universal design for learning (UDL) offers an approach that ensures the provision of inclusive, flexible, and supportive learning environments for all students (Evans et al., 2017). Developing a range of universally designed spaces which facilitate social engagement and learning activities has been identified as extremely important for the creation of a sense of belonging (Morieson, Carlin, Clarke, Lukas, & Wilson, 2013). UD and UDL in association with the facilitation of equity and communication by teachers support an inclusive process across the institution (Forslund Frykedal & Hammar Chiriack, 2018). The development of local relationship between students, their tutors and senior students has been found to be vital to a student’s engagement (Carey, 2013; Coates & McCormick, 2014). However, the

research has highlighted that institutional staff can be resistant to implementing change and faculty may perceive inclusive pedagogical strategies and accommodations as a burden, a threat to academic freedom, or as a dreaded problem that students should work to overcome (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 2015; Damiani & Harbour, 2015; Hong, 2015).

The development of communities of disabled students, such as disabled peoples organisations (DPOs) (United Nations, 2006), or peer or equity groups can provide them with supports in building identity, developing coping strategies, sharing experiences and advocating for themselves (Avellone & Scott, 2017; Denhart, 2008; Evans et al., 2017). Wessel et al. (2009) found that there was greater student success where there is a noted culture of disabled students becoming “actively engaged” in college life, with a funded group for disabled students. The authors felt that these steps combined with a range of other measures may have been a contributory factor affecting retention and graduation. Not all disabled students want to be associated with disabled peer groups and colleges must be cognizant of the fact that disabled students are not a homogenous group (Hong, 2015). The development of friendships between disabled and non-disabled students, leads to a feeling of togetherness and community (Taylor & Palfreman-Kay, 2000). Beauchamp-Pryor (2013) found that non-disabled friends acted as an essential support when college services let disabled students down. Some students were found to prefer the informal assistance of friends and relatives as being of better quality and more flexible (Parker, 1999, p. 499). Jenny Morris (1989), disability activist, believed that having a parent as an assistant was not a suitable form of help for young people in higher education (p. 42). However, it has also been found that having the service of a personal assistant does not necessarily result in full engagement in the HE environment and students face a range of other barriers (Parker, 1999, p. 499).

There has been an increased focus on civic engagement, leadership development, student voice, and volunteering in Ireland in response to national strategic objectives (Hunt, 2011).

Trowler and Trowler (2011) prepared a *Student Engagement Toolkit of Leaders*, and they comment that there has been little research on leadership and student engagement in a HE context internationally. There has been a focus on governance by leaderships rather than direct involvement of students in the process (n.p). Central to student leadership and civic engagement is student agency. It is seen to encompass notions of agentic possibility (“power”) and agentic orientation (“will”). It is intrinsically relational

and social, and situated in structural, cultural and socio-economic-political contexts of action (Klemenčič, 2015, p. 11). Van Den Wijngaard et al. (2015) note that the terms 'social engagement' and 'civic engagement' are often used interchangeably and that 'civic engagement' can be considered a form of social engagement. They identified two factors that play an influential role in the process. Firstly, a sense of agency, defined in terms of self-efficacy at the individual and group levels, and secondly, an 'opportunity structure or a climate within which engagement is nurtured' (p. 706). They defined social engagement as "an attitude of responsibility, rather than a specific act or knowledge, which will take the form of applying one or more capabilities to the benefit of the collective, beyond individual gain" (p. 706).

Trowler and Trowler (2011) identified what defines leaders is having followers:

formal line of management responsibility for a team, a unit, a department or an institution, or may represent a sector (such as "students", or "staff") either through a formally recognised body (such as the Students' Union or an employees' union) or by public acclamation where they are recognised to be speaking on behalf of a constituency which may not be formally organised, such as "staff with disabilities". While leaders of the latter, informal, type are typically not included in formal governance structures or consultations, their constituencies can nevertheless exert considerable influence in matters in which they have an interest, and their role should not be disregarded (p. 9).

Hearing the student voice has been identified as essential for continuous development and a shared partnership approach. It offers institutions a window to the lived experiences of a diverse group including the barriers faced by disabled students (Brandt, 2011; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). There have been a number of cited failures to include their voice at the decision making table and disabled people have historically been left out of this process (McDonnell, 2007). Resulting in failures in the delivery of support and a lack of awareness (Redpath et al., 2013; Shevlin et al., 2004) or contribution to policy (Oliver & Barnes, 2010). It deprives disabled students of the opportunity to develop essential leadership skills for life outside of HE and fails to act upon a legal obligation to include the student voice. The literature has shown that disabled students lack self-determination and self-advocacy skills (Greyling & Swart, 2011; Hong, 2015). However, other studies have shown that they are required to be assertive far and above what is expected of the traditional student (Avellone & Scott, 2017; Greyling & Swart, 2011; Shevlin et al., 2004). Students report having learnt to be self-determined not through formal training but rather through informal routes, such as trial and error or from the guidance of parents, peers and or mentors (Getzel, 2008). Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, and Newman (2015, p. 673). Key components of self-advocacy are knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, ability to communicate, and ability to be a leader.

As important as it is to include the student voice, it is even more important that these views are accurately reflected and bring about change (L. Thomas, 2011). It is critical that these students are not just used as part of a quality control mechanism (Trowler & Trowler, 2010), but a feedback loop is included (Redpath et al., 2013) and that students develop the skills to lead. The literature identifies that there is a need for HEI to develop a system whereby students see the value of feedback and feel empowered to advocate their views (May & Felsinger, 2010; L. Thomas, 2011).

### 3.3.3 Summary of engagement

Section 3.3 reviewed the literature relating to student engagement, its definition, and contribution to student success and a sense of belonging. From the review, it can be seen that there is very little published literature on the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE in Ireland. It is apparent that the definitions used, do not capture the wider experience of disability and the environmental barriers faced by disabled students to this engagement. It gave an overview of the policy and initiatives recently undertaken in Ireland to promote greater student engagement in HE. It pinpointed areas where disability has not been adequately considered. The section then concentrated on social engagement of disabled students and the many areas where it takes place, and the barriers faced by disabled students to this engagement. It outlined the important contribution social engagement makes towards students' transition, progression, success, and retention. It is evident that there is a significant gap in the literature in relation to the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE in Ireland.

### **3.4 Belonging in Higher Education**

Creating a sense of belonging has been linked to engagement and transition and identified as central to student success and retention in higher education (Astin et al., 2012; Kuh et al., 2010; National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019b; L. Thomas, 2012; L. Thomas & Jones, 2017). The following section examines literature relating to belonging, how it is theoretically conceptualised, and definitions of belonging in HE. It will give an overview of the international and national literature and focus on the significance of sense of belonging experiences of disabled students through the student transition, its impact on academic achievement, community engagement, and retention of students.

It is recognised that the key to understanding and enabling students success in Irish HE is that institutions, wishing “to fully embrace student success must take effective steps to maximise the engagement and integration of all students who feel that they do not belong” (L. Thomas, 2019).

#### **3.4.1 Conceptualising belonging**

Human beings are social creatures who seek out and have an attachment or connection to others (Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayashi, & Cummins, 2008). They form social bonds easily and people in every society on earth belong to small primary groups that mainly involve face-to-face interactions (Leary, 2010). This has been referred to as affiliation motivation (McClelland, 1987), the need for relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 1991; Vallerand, 2000) or the sense of community (Osterman, 2000), a feeling of emotional attachment, of feeling ‘at home’ and of ‘feeling safe’ (Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran, & Vieten, 2006). The idea of belonging was identified by theorists such as Maslow (1954, 1962) as important and he placed it above the needs of self-esteem and self-actualisation on his hierarchy of human needs.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed the “belongingness hypothesis”, which put forth the idea that humans have a need to form interpersonal relationships, which was driven by a number of motivations, and it identified some important aspects, namely, the cognitive and affective elements of belonging. Belonging is complex and individuals vary in their level of need to belong, and there are a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). A person may

have a large group of friends and find themselves lonely (Mellor, Stokes, Firth, Hayashi & Cummins, 2008), or a “an individual may feel a sense of belonging to more than one relationship, group, system or entity simultaneously with each situation encompassing a sense of belonging that is unique to that relationship” (Mahar, Cobigo, & Stuart, 2013, p. 1029). The failure to satisfy the need to belong can lead to emotional distress, causing feelings of unhappiness, loneliness and anxiety (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Whereas the satisfaction of the need to belong leads to positive emotions such as joy and happiness (Cashmore et al., 2014).

A sense of belonging among students of all ages has a positive effect on motivation, perseverance, anxiety, relationships, engagement, and identity and demonstrates greater participation in school/college activities (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Osterman, 2000). Hurtado and Carter (1997) developed a definition that focused on ‘marginalised groups’ including students from differing racial backgrounds. In terms of higher education, Strayhorn (2012) developed a specific definition, he identified it as:

students perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers) (p. 17).

His definition relies on an understanding of belonging as a “basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behaviour” (p. 3), and would appear to have been influenced by the thinking of Maslow and Baumeister and Leary’s work (Wilson, 2016). However, it may fail to account for the wider environmental barriers that students may face when engaging in HE

What is apparent from the literature is that there have been many definitions offered for a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012), with some believing it has been vaguely defined and ill theorised (Antonsich, 2010). Definitions failed to consider the environmental barriers within society that may negatively impact upon disabled students’ sense of belonging. In an effort to define belonging, Mahar et al. (2013) conducted an extensive review of the literature of qualitative studies relating to definitions of belonging. They found some characteristics were common among all definitions, such as “feeling needed, important, integral, valued, respected, or feeling in harmony with the group or system” (p. 1029). It was noted that in some cases attributes of the definition were discipline or context related, examples of such were student teacher support in education. The qualitative studies reviewed, identified a “multiplicity of belonging, conflict of belonging,



the role of identity, the role of choice, and the role of power” (p. 1029). They developed a transdisciplinary, conceptualisation of social belonging that considered the experiences of disabled people and the environment around them. They defined a sense of belonging as:

a positive feeling of value and respect derived from a reciprocal relationship to an external referent that is built on a foundation of shared experiences, beliefs, or personal characteristics. These feelings of external connectedness are grounded to the context or referent group, to whom one chooses, wants, and feels permission to belong. This dynamic phenomenon may be either hindered or promoted by complex interactions between environmental and personal factors (Mahar et al., 2013, p. 1026)

The influence of different factors including the environment in which the student is located was identified as important, especially to this research. They identified five elements that they considered central to an understanding of ‘sense of belonging’: subjectivity, groundedness, reciprocity, dynamism and self- determination (Mahar et al., 2013).

Björnsdóttir (2016) later went on to use the Mahar et al. (2013) conceptualisation of belonging to examine the experiences of disabled students attending higher education in Iceland. Yorke (2016) notes that there has been “no instrument in general use for identifying ‘belongingness” in higher education” (p. 155). He has offered a ‘short instrument’ that can identify changes in students’ sense of belongingness over time.

### 3.4.2 Belonging and higher education

Internationally, there is an established body of knowledge and recommendations relating to HE and the development of a sense of belonging. However, critical aspects of how this process is developed are often left to chance (Krause & Armitage, 2014). Creating a sense of belonging has been identified as important for all students but particularly for at-risk or non-traditional students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn, Bie, Dorime-Williams, & Williams, 2016). It is acknowledged, that very little is known about how disabled college students develop a sense of belonging as they transition to post-secondary education (Vaccaro et al., 2015). Disabled students face many extra challenges when entering HE (McGuckin et al., 2013) with the added disadvantage that they do not always share similar characteristics with the dominant group (Jones, 1996). Students may struggle with cultural perceptions, unable to identify with students because of a lack of role models within HE, which

impacts upon their sense of place (Belch, 2004). This may result in a greater risk of withdrawal (O’Keeffe, 2013; Schreiner, Noel, & Cantwell, 2011) and it is increasingly recognised that placement alone does not automatically provide a sense of belonging (Björnsdóttir, 2016). It is widely understood that the psychosocial experience of disability has been associated with social exclusion, stigma and discrimination (Watson & Nolan, 2011; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011), and creating a sense of belonging to the community in which one is in, is a central dimension of social inclusion of disabled people.

Developing a sense of belonging early in the transition has been found to be a contributor to student progression. Kane, Chalcraft, and Volpe (2014) noted that among the general student population most seem to develop a sense of belonging by week seven of semester one. However, a significant minority did not. They concluded that active participation in curricular activity strongly correlated with a higher sense of belonging and that a lack of social integration is a factor in leaving education. A sense of belonging to the institution stems from perceptions of “valued involvement” in the collegiate. This perception of “valued involvement” appears predicated on: 1) establishing functional supportive peer relationships – “functional” in terms of the ability of the relationship(s) to directly aid students in meeting the challenges and changes of their new environment; and 2) the belief that faculty are compassionate and that the student is more than just another face in the crowd (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002, p. 251).

Vaccaro et al. (2015) examined the sense of belonging among first year disabled students. Analysis of the student narratives revealed three themes that contributed to a sense of belonging (p. 670). These three themes and belonging were interdependent and influenced each other. It was found that students’ sense of belonging was tied to their ability to self-advocate and master the student role. The final aspect students spoke of was the importance of supportive relationships (p. 677). Their research also highlighted the significant role of positive connections with “encouraging faculty and staff” in the development of a sense of belonging. They recommend that in order for institutions to “promote a sense of belonging among disabled students, professionals should emphasise and celebrate student strengths and engage in intentional advising and programmatic efforts to support students in their quest to master the student role” (2015, p. 684).

Although most of the literature relating to HE focuses on transition and belonging (Krause, 2011) there is an increasing body of material focusing on the entire student

lifecycle, in which transition is seen as a process rather than an event (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). The '*Belonging Project*' in Australia proved that it was possible to embed an ethos of belonging into formal and informal curriculum activities and re-affirmed the importance of belonging in the early college experience, but also advocated the need to ensure it is embedded in the whole student lifecycle. Developing robust discipline and professional social connections whilst at university are vital life skills that contemporary institutions are well positioned to develop (Morieson et al., 2013).

In the US, Strayhorn (2012) found that student belonging is not fixed but changes depending on time and the environmental factors. Experiences of personal acceptance, or having a rightful valued place in a particular social context tend to stabilise and consistently influence one's commitments and behaviours. Huger (2011) found similar results in relation to disabled students', suggesting that their sense of belonging 'waxes and wanes' and this can vary greatly by department. She suggested that there is a need to foster a disability friendly climate across the institution to enable disabled students feel a sense of belonging.

In the UK, a review of the literature found that the concept of belonging drew heavily on both psychological and sociological traditions (Cashmore et al., 2014). The '*What Works?*' model of student engagement placed student engagement and belonging at the heart of strategies for success (L. Thomas, 2012). Belonging was found to be achieved through supportive peer relations; meaningful interactions between staff and students; developing knowledge confidence and identity as successful HE learners, and HE experiences relevant to students' interests and future goals. The programme identified the academic sphere as the most important site for nurturing participation of the type which engenders a sense of belonging and that it should cater for a diversity of learners. It emerged that in order to increase student success among a diverse student population, it was more important to nurture a culture of belonging across the whole of the institution than focus on individual interventions (L. Thomas, 2012; Wilson, 2016).

Developing a student's sense of belonging can lead to Increases in students' positive behavioural, psychological, and social outcomes such as achievement motivation, self-esteem, self-efficacy, academic and social intrinsic motivation (Cashmore et al., 2014; Walton, 2014). Walton (2014) contends that "the mere sense of social connectedness" works to enhance students' motivation to achieve, as they respond to and quickly adopt the goals of others as their own within a group environment (p. 529). Indeed, the relational nature of belonging to a learning community also requires that interactions

between peers, support staff and, in particular, teachers provide spaces for engagement (Krause & Armitage, 2014). Disabled students satisfaction with faculty and peers in the classroom was found to be facilitated by small class size, sharing multiple classes, and connecting with one another (Pichon, 2016).

Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen (2007) examined undergraduate students' sense of belonging through a college wide survey. They found associations between:

- a) students' sense of university-level belonging and their sense of social acceptance
- b) students' sense of class-level belonging and their academic self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and task value
- c) students' sense of class-level belonging and their perceptions of instructors' warmth and openness, encouragement of student participation, and organisation.

L. Thomas (2012) found that "students are most likely to feel like they belong to their programme, with a sense of belonging generally decreasing at departmental, school and institutional levels" (p. 6). Reason and Rankin (2006) examined campus climate, as reported in Evans et al, (2017). They found students felt more comfortable on campus, slightly less comfortable in their department, and least comfortable in their class (pp. 265-268). Disabled students felt less comfortable than nondisabled students. They also reported 33.7% of disabled students experienced "exclusionary, intimidating, offensive, or hostile experiences on campus" in comparison to 17.1% of their non-disabled peers (p. 267). It has been found that when disabled students experienced a negative atmosphere in the learning environment they struggled with the social threat of being judged, or treated differently by their peers and their instructors (Madriaga, 2007).

Lombardi, Murray, and Gerdes (2011) identified that a combination of factors contributes to student success for disabled students including, perceptions of the campus environment, involvement in social activities and attitudes of staff.

Peer support is considered a marker of a sense of belonging across the literature (Björnsdóttir, 2016; Hoffman et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2008). For students to provide support to each other they must develop relationships and have positive interactions with their peers. Friendships developed in class were found to transfer to more social aspects of university life (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Tinto, 2005). Among disabled students in HE, the development of social connections were found to be more than vehicles for general social integration and that they formed only one part of the belonging puzzle (Vaccaro et al., 2015, p. 683). Björnsdóttir (2016) found that academic and social support from

senior undergraduate student mentors proved valuable in expanding incoming students' social networks and contributed to a sense of belonging. They note that despite attitudinal and structural hindrances, students undertaking the diploma belonged and were part of the college community. For students to engage with peers, they must also be able to access the wider physical environment.

Physical spaces have been identified as an important factor contributing to the creation of a sense of belonging for students (Krause & Armitage, 2014). Disabled students have found barriers to engagement in physical spaces both inside and outside of class (Papasotiriou & Windle, 2012; Shevlin et al., 2004; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Many authors have discussed the need to reduce the social barriers within the student ecosystem to ensure the institution is serving their needs and thus providing the student with a greater opportunity to engage (Nutter & Ringgenberg, 1993; Wessel et al., 2009). Social learning spaces have been found to be central in facilitating students' sense of belonging (Krause & Armitage, 2014). Strange (2000) believed that a sense of belonging for disabled students resulted from physical spaces with psychological features that engendered a sense of safety, that included physical features that are embodied in typical representations of inclusion (e.g. dipped curbs, universally designed buildings, and universal design for learning).

### 3.4.3 Summary of belonging

This section examined the conceptualisation of belonging and its importance to all human lives. It identified the impact of failing to satisfy the need to belong. It acknowledged the presence of the many definitions of belonging and these were often context related (Mahar et al., 2013). It is evident that these definitions have not been reflective of the experiences of disabled students and the societal barriers they face. Mahar et al. (2013) developed a definition that takes this into consideration, and it was successfully used within the HE environment to present the belonging experiences of disabled students. However, it is clear that there is still much work to be done to develop a universally accepted conceptualisation and measure of belonging.

From the literature review it can be seen that a sense of belonging has been engendered in college through campus involvement and engagement, the creation of supportive relationships and a sense of purpose (Astin, 1984; Krause & Armitage, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012). It has been identified that this must occur in combination with positive interactions

and perceived support from college faculty all working to increase students' sense of belonging (L. Thomas, 2012). A student's sense of belonging is developed commensurate with their level of participation and integration into academic culture (Tinto, 2005). It has been found to be critical to embedding the widening participation agenda and the retention of disabled students (O'Keeffe, 2013). However, many disabled students report not feeling included within the cultural setting of the university (Reason & Rankin, 2006), and are unable to access the physical environment (Redpath et al., 2013). This generates questions as to how these students then engage with the wider social experience, develop friends, and develop a sense of belonging.

From the review, it is evident that there have been many studies focusing on the concept of belonging to promote student success, retention and engagement within the US, UK and Australia. It is noticeable that the main focus of the research has been on discrete marginal cohorts, often based on ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status or first year transitioning status (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012; Strayhorn et al., 2016; L. Thomas, 2012). The review demonstrates that in Ireland, students' sense of belonging in higher education remains understudied and there is a dearth of information in relation to the belonging experiences of disabled students in HE. This may be partly due to the fact that the attendance of disabled students in HE is a relatively new phenomenon. It would appear that there is a significant gap in the literature relating to the belonging experiences of disabled students in higher education in Irish higher education.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Chapter Three presented the second part of the literature review. The literature synthesis conceptualises transitions, engagement, and belonging, as integrated parts of a complex system rather than a linear process. This approach is supported by Horstmanshof and Zimitat (2007) who describes engagement as a construct that should be understood systemically and holistically. As outlined at the beginning of the chapter these events are impacted upon by events in the wider system in which they interact and are shaped relationally (Krause & Armitage, 2014, p. 4). The literature indicates that disabled students face a range of barriers when transitioning to higher education in Ireland. The international literature suggests that disabled students also face barriers to their wider social engagement, and sense of belonging which may affect their retention. It is clear from the review that there are significant gaps in the literature in relation to the social engagement and sense of belonging experiences of disabled students in higher

education in Ireland. This provides a clear context and rationale for the study's chosen research questions. The research methodology will now be presented in Chapter Four. This is aimed at addressing a range of these research gaps.

## Chapter Four: Research Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

Chapter Four begins by restating the aim and research questions of this research. It will provide an overview of the research design, followed by the philosophical perspective that guides the research design, including the methodologies employed. Chapter Four will finish by presenting the ethical considerations involved when undertaking the study.

The overarching aim of this research was to determine the social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland.

Four main questions were addressed to realise this aim:

1. What are the barriers and/or enablers to the social engagement of disabled students in higher education?
2. Do disabled students feel like they belong within higher education?
3. How do national and/or institutional level policies foster/impede the social engagement of disabled students in higher education?
4. What, if any, institutional practices are being implemented to promote the social engagement of disabled students in higher education?



## 4.2 Overview of Research Design

A transformative, four-phased, sequential, and concurrent qualitative data collection research design was developed for this research, Figure 5. Utilising a purposive sampling strategy, the research design brought together data from 65 participants, with representatives from 19 HEIs across Ireland. By capturing a diverse range of data from diverse sources (Walton, 2014) the research provides the integral knowledge for transformational research (Mertens, 2017) whilst viewing the many layers of the system within which the student was embedded (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

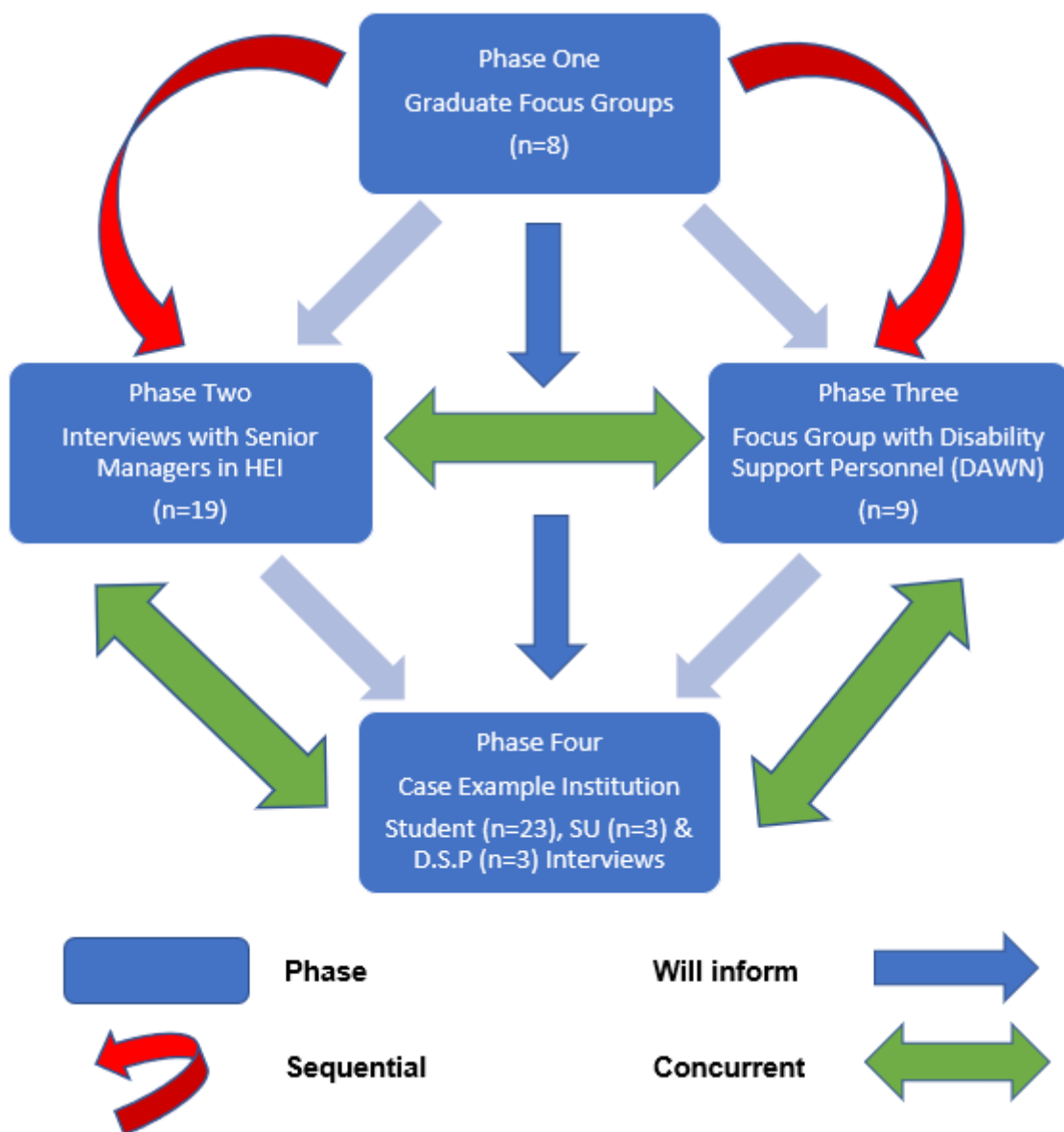


Figure 5. Overview of the four-phase research design.

### 4.3 Transformative Framework

The positioning, beliefs, and values that the researcher brings to the study need to be considered when undertaking research. Guba (1990) defines this as, “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (p. 17). These principles of ontology, epistemology, and methodological perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), in combination, are referred to as a paradigm (Guba, 1990). It is important to be cognisant that the researcher’s view “is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19). Mertens (2008) identified four dominant paradigms in educational and psychological research: *post-positivism*, *constructivism*, *pragmatism* and *transformative*. The transformative paradigm originally known as the ‘emancipatory’ paradigm was developed by Mertens following concerns raised by marginalised groups in society that research was not accurately reflecting their experiences and that there was a need to emphasise “the agency role for the people involved in the research” (p. 2).

As a disabled person and a disability rights activist, the philosophical assumptions of the transformative paradigm offered the researcher a framework to directly engage members of a diverse group of disabled people and those in the system around them, with a focus on increased social justice (Mertens, 2008). Rather than being “emancipated” by the researcher, it sees both the researcher and the participants working together for personal and social transformation.

The basic axiological tenet of transformative research is a “belief that ethics is defined in terms of the furtherance of human rights, the pursuit of social justice, the importance of cultural respect, and the need for reciprocity in the researcher participant relationship” (Mertens et al., 2011, p. 230). The researcher needs to have a grounding in the culture and the communities in which they are researching. The transformative paradigm most closely parallels the sociocultural perspective on disability, a view which is shared by disabled activists through the social model of disability (Oliver, 2013). It identifies the category of diversity as being socially constructed such that its meaning is derived from society’s response to individuals who deviate from cultural standards. The researcher must also recognise the limitations of their groundings to conduct research that is credible and beneficial to members of the community. This necessitates developing a greater self-awareness and questioning (Walton, 2014), recognising the communities’ strengths, and consciously addressing inequalities.

Ontology concerns how one assumes the nature of reality and what can be known about it (Bryman, 2012). Through a transformative ontological perspective, one believes there to be multiple views of what is real, and these are influenced by various factors (Mertens, 2014). These versions of reality are influenced by differing societal positionalities associated with privilege such as disability and economic status. When undertaking transformational research, the researcher must be prepared to undergo self-transformation. Particularly in their appreciation for other realities outside their own and the consequences of accepting one version of reality over another (Mertens, 2017). An awareness of the research context was central to this research's approach, whereby each level of the ecological context, including policy, were seen to impact the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE. A transformative epistemological approach centres on a meaning to knowledge (Bryman, 2012) as seen through many cultural lenses, the significance of power inequalities and the recognition of what is considered to be legitimate knowledge (Mertens, 2017, p. 22). The transformative framework recognises that knowledge is not neutral and it reflects the power and social relationships within society, and thus the purpose of knowledge construction is to aid people to improve society (Creswell, 2013, p. 26). Working within this paradigm the researcher seeks to challenge the status quo of an oppressive, hegemonic system in order to bring about a more equitable society (Mertens et al., 2011, p. 230). In the case where the researcher comes from the same marginalised group, they can support the voice of those who have been silenced, raising awareness and empowering those who have been marginalised (A. Byrne, 2000). However, as noted by the disability activist Mike Oliver (1996), empowerment is not something that can be given as a gift by the powerful. It is something that people do for themselves.

Methodologically, the transformative assumption does not insist on a particular methodological approach (Mertens, 2017). However, there are a number of key aspects including: ensuring that the voice of the marginalised group remains to the forefront of the research and is engaged in meaningful ways; that the researcher considers who needs to be included and how that can be done; and that pathways for action are considered for both personal and social transformation (Mertens et al., 2011). The transformative research approach involves taking a position and being sensitive to the needs of the population being studied (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008). It has a wide applicability to people, such as disabled people, who face discrimination, oppression, or marginalisation, allowing for the study of power structures that result in social inequality. Based on these factors the transformative approach was selected at the appropriate paradigmatic approach to achieve the aim of this research.

## 4.4 Reflective Process

It is widely recognised that it is very difficult, if not almost impossible, for a researcher to enter the research field completely value free (Bryman, 2012). It is recommended that researchers acknowledge their position, recognise any potential biases they may have and how their philosophy may impact upon the research (Chesney, 2000). In Chapter One, I reflected on how my past experiences as a student may have contributed to my current positionality. The research approach requires a constant process of self-awareness and introspection (Berger, 2013). This is particularly important as one's view can change during the research process and hidden biases can come to the fore (Bryman, 2012). To that end it was necessary for me to consider my role as the researcher.

Berger (2013) recommended three strategies to maintain a balance between the researcher's own experience and that of the participants. He recommended the use of a log, repeated review, and seeking peer consultation. Using this strategy, this personal reflexivity took the form of a personal diary (log) which was essential in ensuring the validity of this research. I reflected on my position pre-and post-interviews and focus groups and consulted regularly with my colleagues. This process allowed me to enhance the quality of the research by considering the ways in which who I am may both assist and hinder the research and the process of co-constructing meaning (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2016).

I considered my role as the researcher in relation to the research. I was conscious that it would be difficult to remain completely detached, as a researcher, from my own experiences of oppression and discrimination but also from my position as one who may have implemented policy, in other roles, which may have been considered oppressive. Hammersley (1995) noted the often-blurred line between oppressor and oppressed by highlighting that the world cannot be neatly divided, as many could be classified as both. I was aware of the many debates that have taken place in relation to the use of disabled people for the purpose of research, rather than as active participants or as researchers. Barton (2005) highlighted the fundamental importance of the researchers' role in empowerment, and how in the struggle for inclusivity research can be an empowering and enabling force in the lives of disabled people (p. 371). Disabled people have identified the need to change the social relations of research production to move the control from the researcher to the researched. As a researcher my position was clear,

that I would work with participants to bring about transformational change through the research and research process. However, I was also an insider in five ways: I am a Ph.D. student; a former HE employee; a disability rights activist; and a member of many disability advocacy organisations, and finally I have a physical disability and am a member of the marginalised group being researched. The disadvantages of being an insider centre around concerns of bias, and imposing one's own values, beliefs and perceptions (Drake, 2010) on the research.

There is also a potential to shape the research due to the development of a 'dual identity', as a researcher and a member of the community being studied (Chaudhry, 1997). Berger (2013) cautions the researcher to remain vigilant to avoid projecting their own experience and using it as the lens to view and understand participants' experience. An insider understanding can also have its advantages as it facilitates a more in-depth appreciation of participant's perception and interpretation of their lived experience in a way that is impossible in the absence of having been through it (p. 230).

In summary, I was aware that it was important as the researcher, to be cognisant of my position as a disabled researcher. It necessitated being transparent about issues of anonymity and confidentiality and identifying my position as an advocate, a professional, a student, and my transformative stance. The following will discuss some other noteworthy points, identified through the reflexive process, that may impact upon the research.

#### **4.5 Disclosure, Rapport, and Reciprocity**

Following a reflective process, a number of areas were identified that could potentially impact upon this research. Using the strategy outlined by Berger (2013) I considered how the disclosure of my disability could affect the research. I also reviewed the importance of rapport building, reciprocity, and the role of gatekeepers.

I was concerned about the potential impact that 'disclosure' of a disability could have on the participants' perceptions of me as a researcher, its impact on their responses to the questions, and the power dynamic of the relationship (Berger, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The positive effect of disclosing one's disability and own personal stories has also been recognised, and can be seen as key to the development of the research (Shah & Priestley, 2011, p. 210), in acting as a gateway to potential

participants, building rapport with participants, and may result in participants being more forthcoming (McCarthy, 2013).

Developing a sense of reciprocity through a shared learning was an important element of this research. Indeed, the sharing of experiences through interviews and focus groups can be an important and often cathartic process for participants' experiences. Notwithstanding the value of empathising with participants it was also important to maintain a professional distance throughout.

Developing a good rapport with participants is an important aspect of the transformative framework. Oliver (1996) argued that, there is a necessity for the establishment and maintenance of "trust and respect and participation and reciprocity" between all stakeholders (p. 106). However, there is also a danger of developing friendships, something Atkinson (2005), cautioned against, as it may block hearing other voices (Cloke, Cooke, Cursons, Milbourne, & Widdowfield, 2010). As a researcher I built a rapport by adopting a conversational tone, using an ice-breaker before the interviews, ensuring the voice of disabled participants was heard, and by earning participants' trust (McDonnell, 2007).

Gatekeepers working in HEI may influence the research by limiting conditions of entry, by defining the problem area of study, "by limiting access to data and respondents, by restricting the scope of analysis, and by retaining prerogatives with respect to publication"(Broadhead & Rist, 1976, p. 325). Bryman (2012) recommends researchers should leave plenty of time, as gaining access to participants through 'gatekeepers' can often take a lot longer than anticipated. This may be especially relevant if there have been changes in personnel, or there may be several layers of unanticipated 'gatekeepers'. Maxwell (2005) believes that the development of relationships with gatekeepers in your study is critical and forms an essential part of your methods. How you initiate and negotiate these relationships is a key design decision (p. 82). The researcher developed these relationships by attending meetings of professional bodies such as the *DAWN*, *Student Affairs Ireland (SAI)*, the HEA, the *Department of Education*, *Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)*, *Irish Universities Association (IUA)* and informing them that the research was taking place.

## 4.6 Research Design

A principle of transformative research is that the researcher develops a design that answers their research questions (Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) whilst promoting social justice (Mertens, 2017). The following section will present the qualitative methodology and the research instruments used, the sampling strategy, and the pilot study.

### 4.6.1 Qualitative methodology

A qualitative approach was chosen for this research. Qualitative studies have been widely used in the social sciences and fields of education (Borg & Gall, 1989) and 'qualitative' is an umbrella term that covers a variety of styles (Denscombe, 2003). In the field of disability research, qualitative methodologies have been among the most important tools in understanding the complexities of disability in its social context (O'Day & Killeen, 2002, p. 9). Pugach (2001) believed that qualitative research had an important role to play in ensuring the voice of oppressed or disenfranchised groups within education emerged. These approaches have been used successfully in transformative research over the years to investigate social issues relating to disabled people (Mertens, 2014).

A qualitative approach was considered critical for this research as it gives voice to the experiences of disabled students in higher education, a marginalised group who normally have little opportunity to have their voice heard (Fuller et al., 2004; Shah, 2006). This qualitative approach acted to establish a dialogue between the researchers and the community members (Mertens, Holmes, & Harris, 2009). One of the great strengths of qualitative methodology is its capacity to explain 'what is going on' in complex situations involving interdependent individuals, institutions, groups, and systems (O'Day & Killeen, 2002). The exploration of the narratives of participants in this research facilitated the realisation of the central aim of this study, by the researcher, which was to determine the barriers and enablers to the social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education. This involved: (a) reviewing the policy and practices surrounding disabled students in higher education, (b) observing the cause and effects of interactions between the student and their environment across the micro, meso, exo, macro and chronosystems whilst (c) considering the views of senior managers and disability support

personnel working to support disabled students (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Josselson & Lieblich, 1993).

#### 4.6.2 Research instruments

A selection of qualitative data collection instruments was used to collect data to answer the research questions. These instruments included focus groups, semistructured interviews, a biographical data collection instrument, and the identification of case example institutions. A rationale will now be presented for each of the chosen instruments.

##### *4.6.2.1 Focus group instruments*

Bryman (2012) defines a focus group as a form of group interview in which there are several participants; there is an emphasis in the questioning on a particular defined topic; and the emphasis is upon interaction within the group and joint construction of meaning (p. 712). Focus groups allowed the researcher to undertake an in-depth exploration of the topic and to obtain valuable additional information especially on the reasons, rationalisations and arguments behind views being expressed by participants. Focus groups have been found to be a very useful instrument for hearing the 'voice' of those who otherwise would not have been heard. Focus groups can also offer an extra layer of protection for participants by making exploitation of the group of participants less likely, and possibly reducing an unequal power relationship between the researcher and the participants (Wilkinson, 2014, p. 185). Group interactions can have certain disadvantages also, such as a particularly vocal person taking over the group or a shy person not speaking. However, the researcher believed the instrument offered an opportunity to access realistic accounts of what people think and feel (Bryman, 2012). Focus groups were used in phases one, three, and four of the research. The focus groups were structured based on previous research carried out in educational settings, such as in E. Murphy (2016), McGuckin et al. (2013) and Morieson et al. (2013). See Appendices G, N, and S for semistructured focus group questions.

##### *4.6.2.2 Semistructured interview instruments*

Semistructured interviews were an important data collection method of this research and have been identified as one of the most common data collection methods used



(Sarantakos, 2013). The researcher had a set of predetermined questions, but the order could be modified based upon the interviewer's perception of what seemed most appropriate. Question wording can be changed and explanations given; particular questions which seem inappropriate with a particular interviewee can be omitted, or additional ones included according to Robson and McCartan (2016, p. 284). The researcher chose this method for a number of reasons. Firstly for its flexibility, secondly it allowed participants who didn't feel comfortable voicing their experiences openly to discuss them in a private setting (Robson & McCartan, 2016), and finally, it allowed participants to give a more in depth account of their own personal views without interruption. However, there are a number of limitations associated with interviewing. Creswell (2013) highlighted that this type of research provides data in a designated place rather than the natural field setting, that the researchers presence may bias responses and that not all people are equally articulate. The researcher addressed this by allowing the participants to choose the location of their interviews and applying a conversational tone to build rapport with the participant. This research utilised a semistructured interviewing technique during phases three and four of the research. The structure and design of the instruments drew upon existing research such as Rose et al. (2015), E. Murphy (2016), McGuckin et al. (2013), and Beauchamp-Pryor (2013). See Appendices K, S, T, and U respectively for semistructured interview questions.

#### *4.6.2.3 Biographical data collection instrument*

The researcher collected basic demographic and background data from participants to form a complete picture of the sample and to provide greater context. This data was collected using a simple data collection instrument, see Appendix D. It was developed based on similar instruments in other educational studies such as, McGuckin et al. (2013), Rose et al. (2015) and was completed by participants in phase one, and four of the research.

#### *4.6.2.4 Case study instrument*

Case study research is deemed to be one of the most challenging of research techniques within the social sciences (Yin, 2004). It can offer greater depth to a study and offer a greater understanding of the context. The researcher engaged four 'representative or typical case example' institutions (Bryman, 2012) as part of phase four. It has been argued that the use of multiple case studies serves to explore the research questions

across several settings (Stake, 2013). It allows the comparison between similarities and differences (Stake, 2013) within different environments. The criterion used for choosing the case will be outlined in section 4.7.4.1. In line with the research framework adopted for the research the primary motivation was to hear the voice of disabled students. The researcher undertook interviews and held a focus group with students and some key members of staff within these institutions. It had been hoped to undertake a full case study element in relation to phase four of the research. However, due to an extremely successful participant recruitment process and the vast amount of rich data generated, the researcher deemed that there was more than sufficient data to address the research questions and it was not necessary to undertake a full case study.

#### *4.6.2.5 Pilot study instrument*

Pilot studies are useful for trying out different strategies and may also buttress the argument and rationale for a genre and strategy (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Pilot studies have been identified as a particularly useful technique in identifying any potential problems of qualitative methodology and can foreshadow research problems (Sampson, 2016). The purpose of the pilot study in this research was to test the semistructured interviews and focus group instruments. It also acted as a method to test the biographical information form, the organisation of the sessions and the researcher's organisational and field notetaking skills. During the pilot, the researcher maintained a record of the methodological observations. In addition, feedback was requested from the participants, for the purpose of improving the research instruments. Those participants engaged in the pilot study were not part of the research sample.

Changes were required to the biographical information sheet and the number and type of questions for the graduate focus groups and student interviews. The pilot study gave the researcher the opportunity to consider how the data collection process would benefit the community, and to ensure the methods used were fully accessible to all participants. It resulted in identifying personal or structural barriers in the environment to engaging with the research. Following the pilot study, more ways of engaging with the research were offered to participants. These included online interviews, phone interviews, a choice of taking part in a focus group or an interview, or of having the researcher come to meet them in their chosen location. In addition, questions were sent to participants in advance in a different format, with the researcher being available to discuss any concerns. The pilot study acted to improve the research and data-gathering process.

### 4.6.3 Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used during this research. This is a non-probability type of sampling, based on the fundamental principle that participants should be selected according to their ability to contribute to the research. It placed the researcher's questions at the forefront of the sampling in order to develop answers (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Goodson and Sikes (2001) note that sampling can be purposive in that the research is concerned with some specific characteristic or attribute or experience and consequently the informants are 'selected' as a result of this (p. 24). This research had a very clear focus which was to determine the social engagement experiences of disabled students. The adequacy of the data is not purely based upon quantity but rather upon the richness of the data and the nature of the aspect of life being investigated. This is in keeping with the researcher's transformative worldview, the aim of the study, and the research questions. This sampling strategy was chosen as it allowed the researcher to improve the inclusivity of the sample, to capture the voice of different members of the HE system, and to empower disabled participants by having their voice heard. This involved ensuring that marginalised groups were fully represented. Collection methods were sensitive to the group and disabled students, and participants were communicated with regularly through email (Creswell, 2007). Berger (2013), cautions researchers who are close to their research group that a personal familiarity with the experience of the participants may potentially impact upon their recruitment, the collection of data via interviews and/or observations, the analysis and meaning making of the data, and drawing conclusions (p. 229). As the researcher is a known disability activist it was important to continuously reflect on any potential sampling or recruitment bias.

Identifying the sample size can be challenging where theoretical considerations guide selection (Bryman, 2012). The broader the scope of the research the greater the need to hear many voices over an entire system which requires a more extensive number of interviews (Bryman, 2012). Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) note, that in qualitative research the sample should not be so small as to make it difficult to achieve data saturation, theoretical saturation, or informational redundancy. Equally, the sample should not be so large that it is difficult to undertake a deep, case-orientated analysis (p. 289). Mason (2010) examined qualitative doctoral research and found that the mean sample size was 31. The right focus group number and size can be challenging to determine and there is quite a range and variety in the literature (Bryman, 2012). Factors such as time and resources need to be taken into consideration. It is recommended by

some researchers that once the moderator is reasonably confident that they can accurately predict what the next focus group is going to report, then he/she has completed enough focus groups (Calder, 1977). Case study sampling is criticised on the basis that the findings cannot be generalised. However, researchers would argue that this is not necessarily the focus of the research. Institutions were chosen based on the fact that they exemplified a broader category of which the institution was a member (Bryman, 2012). It also offered the researcher the opportunity to examine key social processes.

## **4.7 Data Collection Procedure**

This section will outline the data collection procedure for each of the four phases, see Figure 5, of the research. It will describe the timeframe, the sample size, the recruitment process, and the data collection instruments used.

Data collection took place following receipt of *Ethical Approval* on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February 2018, see Appendix B, and was completed on 20<sup>th</sup> December 2018. All participants were identified by a pseudonym given to them in advance of their participation in the research, see Section 4.9 for ethical considerations.

### **4.7.1 Phase one – Graduate focus groups**

Phase one took place in February 2018 and involved hearing the voice of disabled graduates through two focus groups. Phase one took place in advance of phases two and three. Data from phase one informed phases two, three, and four of the research.

#### *4.7.1.1 Phase one sample*

Eight disabled graduates participated in phase one of the research. The pseudonym, gender and disability of participants is represented in Table 2.

**Table 2.***Phase One- Focus group participant overview*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Disability</b>
Donal	Male	Neurological disability
Kevin	Male	Physical disability
Larry	Male	Mental Health condition
Lorcan	Male	Physical disability
Nora	Female	Deaf / Hard of Hearing
Ophelia	Female	Specific Learning Difficulties, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia
Stephen	Male	Physical Disability, Specific Learning Difficulties, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Mental Health Condition
Zena	Female	Mental Health Condition

The criteria for inclusion of graduates in the sample was developed following an extensive review of the literature on the criteria used internationally within HEI for “Graduate Surveys”. The literature identified huge variation in terms of the timescales used to undertake research on graduate students of HEI. Frawley and Harvey (2015) reviewed graduate surveys to identify best practice. They found that longitudinal follow up was commonly held one, two and five years after graduation. Some jurisdictions outside of Ireland undertake qualitative interviews with a subset of graduates, altering the design to focus on specific topics of interest depending on societal need. This research takes a similar approach and focuses on the social engagement experiences of disabled students. The literature also suggests that it can take longer for disabled graduates to establish themselves and to process the range of experiences, after leaving college (Hewett et al., 2016; Purcell et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2012). Based on the literature the criteria for selection were as follows.

Participants were included:

- Who had graduated from an undergraduate course within 1–5 years,
- Who identified as having a disability, and
- The researcher ensured the diversity of the sample by seeking to include a variety of disability and age.

In this context, disabled graduates were graduates who had disclosed their disability, or who declared themselves as having previously been registered with their disability

support service or access office, who had responded to an invitation to participate and who had graduated from HE within the last five years (Frawley & Harvey, 2015; Purcell et al., 2009). The category of disability was based on the eligibility criteria and categories outlined by the HEA under the *Fund for Students with Disabilities* (2018).

#### 4.7.1.2 Phase one recruitment

The researcher contacted Ahead (<https://www.ahead.ie/>), an organisation recognised for supporting the employment of disabled graduates, for the purposes of recruitment. An invitation was forwarded by Ahead to their graduate database, see Appendix E. Those interested in participating were invited to contact the researcher with their contact details. Thirty graduates expressed an interest in participating.

Following assessment against the eligibility criteria, 17 candidates were eligible to participate, of which 12 were interested in participating, see Table 3 The researcher kept in regular contact, via email with the 12 candidates that were interested in participating in order to develop a relationship with them (Bryman, 2012).

**Table 3.**

*Phase One- Breakdown of the number interested in participating, eligible and the final chosen sample.*

Processing participants	Number	Explanation
Recruited	30	Ahead email
Eligible	17	Met eligibility criteria
Interested	12	In participating
Unable to attend	4	Due to personal and societal barriers
<b>Focus group attendees</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>Participated</b>

Two focus group dates were offered to participants, a mid-week evening and a mid-morning weekend slot. This was to facilitate those who might be working or travelling. Four participants of the 12 were unable to participate due to barriers they faced such as inaccessible transport, lack of resources, and/or the stress associated with getting to and from the focus group. As a result, two focus groups took place with four participants in each.

#### *4.7.1.3 Phase one focus group*

Data was generated through two focus groups. A series of semistructured questions were developed based on identified themes within the literature including: belonging, identity, making friends, and barriers and enablers to students' social engagement (Hewett et al., 2016; Martin, 2017; Morieson et al., 2013; L. Thomas, 2012; Trowler & Trowler, 2011; Wilcox et al., 2005), see Appendix G.

Focus groups were held in a HEI in a Dublin city centre location. This location was chosen due to its accessibility to transport links. Focus groups lasted approximately 1 hour. After the second focus group, it became apparent that there were common themes arising and it was not necessary to undertake a third focus group.

Following the focus group, participants were emailed to thank them for their participation, to invite them to give feedback and to advise them of what would happen next. A number of the participants responded, thanking the researcher for giving them the opportunity to share their experiences, for creating such a relaxed atmosphere, and seeking to be kept updated on the research progress. The researcher also learned a lot about the barriers that disabled students faced in participating in the research. These learnings informed the organisation of future interviews and focus groups in phases two, three and four.

#### *4.7.2 Phase two – Senior manager interviews*

Phase two took place from July to December 2018 and involved hearing the views of 'key informants', senior managers, within HEI (Rose et al., 2015).

##### *4.7.2.1 Phase two sample*

A total of 19 senior managers from 17 HEI participated in phase two of the research, Table 4. Purposive sampling was used for this phase, see Table 5 for the number of participants and gender of those participating.

The sample size was reached following an email invitation to participate being sent to senior managers in 26 HEI. They were chosen from the list of institutions who are in receipt of core public funding and with whom the HEA works under statute (Higher Education Authority, 2020a), see Appendix H. These included Universities, Institutes of

Technology (IoT) and a number of “other” institutions”. For the purposes of this research, senior managers included: Registrars, Vice-President for Academic Affairs, Vice-President for Students, Dean of Students, Vice-Provost, Director of Academic Affairs and Vice-President for Equality, as their respective briefs were considered to include the engagement of all students in their institution.

The title and gender of individual senior managers has been omitted to protect the anonymity of the participants.

**Table 4.**

*Phase Two - Number of HEI in sample vs. Number of HEI that participated*

Higher Education Institutions	
HEI Sample contacted	No. HEI Participated
(n=26)	(n=17)

**Table 5.**

*Phase Two - Number of individual senior manager participants and gender breakdown*

Senior Manager Participant Sample		
Interview Sample	Male	Female
(n=19)	13	6

#### 4.7.2.2 Phase two recruitment

Recruitment began in late summer 2018. A letter of invitation to participate and a participant information sheet was posted to senior management in 26 HEI, see Appendix I and J. This was followed up with an email copy, one week after posting. If there was no response, the researcher made contact by telephone. This strategy yielded a very positive sample size as can be seen from Table 4. It must be noted, that contacting senior managers directly by telephone was an especially important aspect of the recruitment process as some senior managers were found to be anxious about their participation. The researcher reassured participants by discussing their engagement in the research, answering any questions relating to confidentiality and the themes that would be discussed. The phone calls also acted to build a rapport with participants, and



often resulted in senior managers highlighting how important they believed the research was and offering to facilitate the researcher attending their institution or agreeing to meet the researcher at a chosen location. Gatekeepers acted as a barrier to engaging with senior managers in a few institutions, preventing the researcher making direct contact with the senior manager.

#### *4.7.2.3 Phase two interviews*

Data collection in the form of semistructured interviews took place from September to December 2018. Nineteen participants took part in 18 interviews in HEI across the country, and via Skype and telephone. Due to shared briefs and/or differing responsibilities two participants from one institution were interviewed together, and in another institution, two senior managers were interviewed separately. Offering a range of interview communication options was critical to the success of the interviews due to busy schedules. It was also necessary to take an informal, relaxed, and conversational approach to the interviews as senior managers tended to be quite nervous and a little hesitant. During the interviews a number of participants admitted to having not considered the topic, and that engaging in the interview had stimulated them to undertake some research on what was happening in their own institution in relation to the social engagement of disabled students. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour.

The semistructured interview questions were based on a review of the literature including: Kuh (2003), McGuckin et al. (2013), Shevlin et al. (2004), L. Thomas (2012), Vaccaro et al. (2015), Trowler and Trowler (2011) and on themes generated from the initial data from focus groups with disabled graduates in phase one. As such, there were overlapping themes among the questions between phase one, two, three and four of the research. The themes covered during the semistructured interviews in phase two included: college culture, transitions, student voice, national targets, national and local policy perspective regarding student engagement, roles and responsibilities, barriers to social engagement, student experience, retention, and best practice relating to engagement of disabled students, see Appendix K for interview questions.

Following the interviews, the researcher emailed all senior managers seeking feedback. Many of the participants sought to be updated on the results of the research once it had been published.

### 4.7.3 Phase three – Focus group with disability support personnel

Phase three of the research occurred from May to November 2018. This phase took place concurrently to phase two and sequentially to phase one, see Figure 5.

#### 4.7.3.1 Phase three sample

A total of nine disability support personnel from DAWN, see Table 6, participated in a focus group. DAWN is a professional organisation for disability support personnel who are primarily responsible for supporting learners with disabilities in 16 HEIs (McCarthy, Quirke, & Treanor, 2018). In this context, disability support personnel included disability advisors, officers, tutors, head of disability service, and access officers. The primary purpose of phase three was to hear from ‘key informants’ who support disabled students and who understand the policy and practice who could articulate their experiences and understanding from their own perspectives (Rose et al., 2015). Purposive sampling was used for this phase and each participants pseudonym, gender and title can be found in Table 7. The institution each disability support personnel represented has been omitted to protect the anonymity of participants.

**Table 6.**

*Phase Three - Number of HEI represented in sample vs. Number of participants*

DAWN	
HEI Represented By DAWN	D.S.P. Participated
(n=16)	(n=9)

**Table 7.**

*Phase Three - Breakdown of focus group participants by pseudonym, gender, and title*

<b>DAWN Focus Group (n=9)</b>		
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Work Title</b>
Amber	Female	Disability Officer
Barbara	Female	Disability Officer
Donna	Female	Access Officer
Dora	Female	Learning Support Tutor
Eve	Female	Disability Officer
Grace	Female	Head of Disability Service
Hector	Male	Disability Officer
Lola	Female	Disability Inclusion Officer
Minnie	Female	Disability Support Officer

#### *4.7.3.2 Phase three recruitment*

An email invitation, a participant information sheet and ethical approval were sent to the Chair of DAWN in May 2018, see Appendices L, M and B, respectively. This was followed by a telephone call with the Chair, who agreed to bring the invitation to the executive. The executive agreed to circulate the invitation to its members. The focus group took place in November 2018 after the DAWN meeting. The recruitment segment of this phase took considerably longer than other phases. This was due to the necessity for the Chair to discuss the invitation with the executive and then communicate back to the researcher. The development of a relationship with a key gatekeeper was found to have been extremely important to the success of all phases of the research (Bryman, 2012).

#### *4.7.3.3 Phase three focus group design*

The focus group lasted approximately 1 hour, took place in a Dublin city centre HEI, and was digitally recorded. A series of semistructured questions, see Appendix N, were developed based on the existing literature and the emerging themes that had been identified from data gathered in phase one. As with the development of the other phases the researcher structured the focus groups based on previous research carried out in educational settings.

Following the focus group, the researcher emailed the Chair of DAWN thanking the group for its engagement in the research and seeking feedback.

During the focus group the researcher availed of the support of a research assistant to ensure that the focus group ran smoothly. The research assistant was bound by the same code of ethics as the researcher, see Appendix A.

#### 4.7.4 Phase four – Case example institutions

Phase four occurred from July to December 2018 and was the last of the four phases, see Figure 5.

Phase four involved identifying four case example institutions, see section 4.7.4 and undertaking interviews with disabled students, full-time student union officers, and disability support personnel in each institution. The aim of phase four was to capture the social engagement experiences of disabled students in four institutions. Disability support personnel and students' union officers were included to capture the professional voice and to discuss the local implementation of policy and practice relating to disabled students (Rose et al., 2015).

##### *4.7.4.1 Phase four sample*

The four case example institutions were chosen with the objective of ensuring a diverse sample and to develop a greater understanding of the experiences of disabled students (Zucker, 2009). Institutions were chosen based on several variables: socioeconomic background, geographic location, number of disabled students and institution type (IoT's or Universities) (Bryman, 2012; Rose et al., 2015). Twenty-nine participants from four institutions participated in phase four of this research, Table 8. The sample included twenty-three students, three disability support personnel, and three students' union full-time officers, see Tables 8, 9, 10 respectively. Two participants, a disability support person and a students' union officer, who had agreed to participate had to withdraw due to circumstances beyond their control. The pseudonym and disability of student participants can be found in Table 8.

Student participant age range was from 19–59 years. All students were studying at undergraduate level within one of the three main areas of study: Science, Technology/Engineering, and Mathematics; Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; or Health Sciences.

**Table 8.***Phase Four - Pseudonym and disability of student participants*

<b>Student Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Disability</b>
Abigail	Mental Health Condition
Bernie	Physical Disability
Dawn	Mental Health Condition
Denise	Blind/Visual Impairment, Deaf/Hard of Hearing, Mental Health Condition, Neurological Condition, Significant Ongoing Illness, Physical Disability
Derek	Significant Ongoing Illness
Diana	Attention Deficit Disorder ADD & Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder ADHD, Specific Learning Difficulties Dyslexia, Dyspraxia
Edgar	Mental Health Condition
Emily	Neurological Condition
Mary	Blind/Visual Impairment
Harry	Specific Learning Difficulties Dyslexia, Dyspraxia
Hilda	Mental Health Condition
Holly	Mental Health Condition
Jane	Physical Disability
Kate	Deaf/Hard of Hearing, Specific Learning Difficulties Dyslexia, Dyspraxia
Ken	Physical Disability
Kyle	Autistic Spectrum Disorder & Asperger's Syndrome, Mental Health Condition
Luke	Physical Disability, Mental Health Condition, Specific Learning Difficulties Dyslexia, Dyspraxia
Peter	Specific Learning Difficulties Dyslexia, Dyspraxia
Robert	Blind/Visual Impairment, Significant Ongoing Illness, Physical Disability
Tanya	Physical Disability
Tracey	Mental Health Condition
Tina	Physical Disability, Specific Learning Difficulties Dyslexia, Dyspraxia
Victoria	Mental Health Condition

**Table 9.**

*Phase Four - Breakdown of pseudonym, gender, and role of disability support personnel that participated from case example institutions*

<b>Disability Support Personnel</b>		
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Role</b>
Donald	Male	Disability Officer
Henry	Male	Disability Advisor
Tamara	Female	Disability Officer

**Table 10.**

*Phase Four - Breakdown of pseudonym, gender, and role of students' union officers that participated from case example institutions*

<b>Students' Union Officers</b>		
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Role</b>
Mark	Male	SU Officer
Martin	Male	SU Officer
Olive	Female	SU Officer

#### *4.7.4.2 Phase four recruitment*

The first stage involved recruiting case example institutions. Following a review of the literature relating to institutional type in Ireland, four institutions were chosen based on the following criteria:

- socioeconomic background,
- geographic location,
- institution type, and
- number of disabled students.

Senior managers or access and/or disability officers were contacted via telephone in each chosen institution. This was followed by an email and letter of invitation and a participant information sheet, see Appendix O. All the selected institutions agreed to participate and by doing so to facilitate the promotion of the research to students registered with their disability support service, and that a member of their disability support personnel would participate in an interview. Three disability support personnel were available for interview, see Table 9.

Disabled students registered with the disability service were sent an email of invitation from the researcher via the disability support service, see Appendix Q. Those interested in participating were invited to contact the researcher. Interested participants who replied, were then contacted individually and received a participant information sheet, see Appendix R. When identifying suitable interview candidates, many variables were considered, including:

- Registration with the disability support service within their institution,
- Year of study, and
- Category of disability.

The sample chosen was selected to represent as many of the variables as possible. A concerted effort was made to ensure that there were participants representative of 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> year in HE and a broad representation from the categories/type of disability. The type of disability, see Table 8, was based on the eligibility criteria and categories outlined by the HEA under the *Fund for Students with Disabilities* (2018a).

The second part of the recruitment process involved the recruitment of students' union full-time officers. In this context, "Student Union" full-time officer is defined as laid down in the *Universities Act 1997* as: "it means a person registered as a student by the university or a full-time officer of the Students Union or other student representative body in the university recognised by the governing authority who was first elected or appointed to his or her office while he or she was a registered student of the university" (Government of Ireland, 1997, 2006).

The researcher contacted each students' union in the case example institutions via telephone. This was followed by an email containing an invitation to participate and a participant information sheet, see Appendices P and R. Three students' union full-time officers were available for interview, see Table 10.

#### *4.7.4.3 Phase four focus group and interviews*

Following feedback from the pilot study and the graduate focus group, the researcher introduced a greater degree of flexibility for engagement in the research. Participants were given the option to choose to participate in a focus group or an interview, at a time or location that suited their needs, and the option to conduct the interview via telephone, skype or in person. It was interesting to note, that all blind or visually impaired students

and a number of physically disabled students chose to undertake their interview via telephone or skype.

A total of 20 student interviews and one focus group of three student participants were conducted (n=23), see Figure 5. Each interview and focus group lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. The semistructured questions were developed based on the existing literature including L. Thomas (2012), Vaccaro et al. (2015), Cashmore et al. (2014), A. R. Fleming et al. (2017), Morison et al. (2013), and the emerging themes that had been identified from phase one of the research, see Appendix S for student interview questions. Similar themes and questions were addressed during interviews with students' union full-time officers, see Appendix U for interview questions.

The semistructured interviews with disability support personnel addressed the following themes: policy and practice, the role of the disability support professional in supporting the social engagement of disabled students, identification of barriers and/or enablers to social engagement, and examples of best practice being implemented, and their thoughts on disabled students' sense of belonging in their institution, see Appendix T. There were a number of overlapping themes addressed among students, students' union officers, and disability support personnel with parallel themes addressed across the four phases. All interviews and the focus group began with an ice-breaker question as suggested by McGuckin et al. (2013). This allowed participants to relax and to develop a relationship with the researcher (Bryman, 2012).

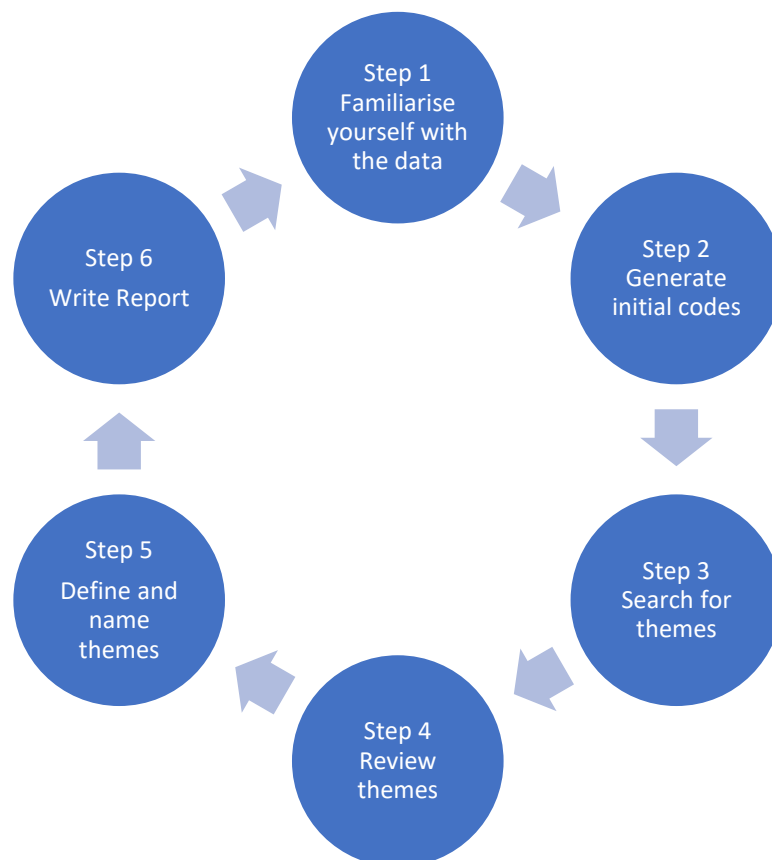
Following phase four individual and focus group interviews, all the participants from the case example institutions were emailed, thanking them for their engagement and seeking feedback. Several participants thanked the researcher and described it as an "enjoyable experience". Participants, especially disabled students, were extremely interested in being kept updated on the findings of the research and what impact this might have.



## 4.8 Thematic Data Analysis

Following data collection, the researcher undertook a six phase thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is one of the most common approaches to qualitative analysis (Bryman, 2012). This, in part is due to its “theoretical freedom” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 5) and so it can be used by researchers with different theoretical and epistemological approaches. This flexible, six-step approach, Figure 6, offers researchers a means of analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data and using these themes to address the research or reflect on the data. This allows researchers to minimally organise, and yet describe their data in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82).

Having reviewed some of the other analysis techniques, such as grounded theory, the researcher chose to use a thematic data analysis. This allowed the researcher to remain aligned to the research questions and the researcher’s transformative view.



**Figure 6.** A representation of Braun and Clarke (2006) six steps to thematic data analysis.

## Step 1 - Familiarise yourself with the data

The researcher listened to all the digital recordings before engaging in the analysis. This allowed the researcher to re-familiarise himself with the data and to reconnect with the emotional aspect of the interviews. It also allowed the researcher to note some initial codes.

## Step 2 - Generate initial codes and format transcripts

Due to the exceptionally large amount of qualitative data the researcher took the decision to have the data transcribed by a professional organisation. To ensure the transcript was an accurate verbatim transcript of the interview, the researcher relistened to the recordings and compared them to the transcripts, making amendments where required.

Following this, the researcher “actively” reread the transcripts searching for meanings and patterns within the data and noting them on the margins of the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was followed by another rereading in which codes were identified and noted within the margins, see Figure 7.

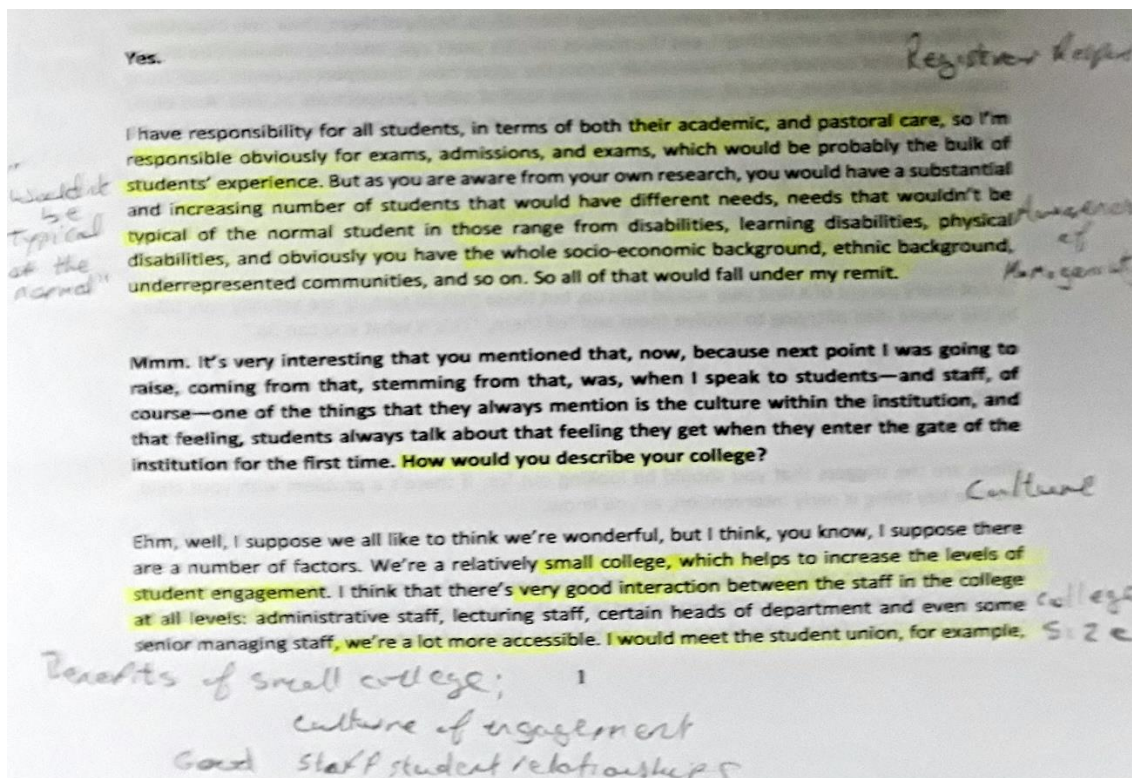


Figure 7. Jotting of initial codes and ‘patterns’ on transcript.

The process of relistening and rereading of the digitally recorded interviews and transcripts, was a very valuable step in the analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sarantakos, 2013) and allowed the researcher to become immersed in the data.

### Step 3 - Search for themes

The coding process generated groups of codes that could be gathered to form themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes were much broader than the initial codes and seemed to say something about the research, see Figure 8.

	Theme	System					
			rathv 12:39 Yesterday	✓		ra 12	rathv 12:39 Yesterday
Registrar			Institutional Collaboration		Culture defined as?	Fund	Community
Barry			HEA Compact		odel Impact	A Func	College
Bridget			Targets			st of di	In class
Brendan			Quota			st of in	How belonging is bro
Chris			National Policy			ost of e	
Colm			Change management within Institutions		Volunteering		From imported document
David			Access for All				From imported document
Eoin		X					
Francis			From imported document				X

Figure 8. Groups of codes were gathered to form themes.

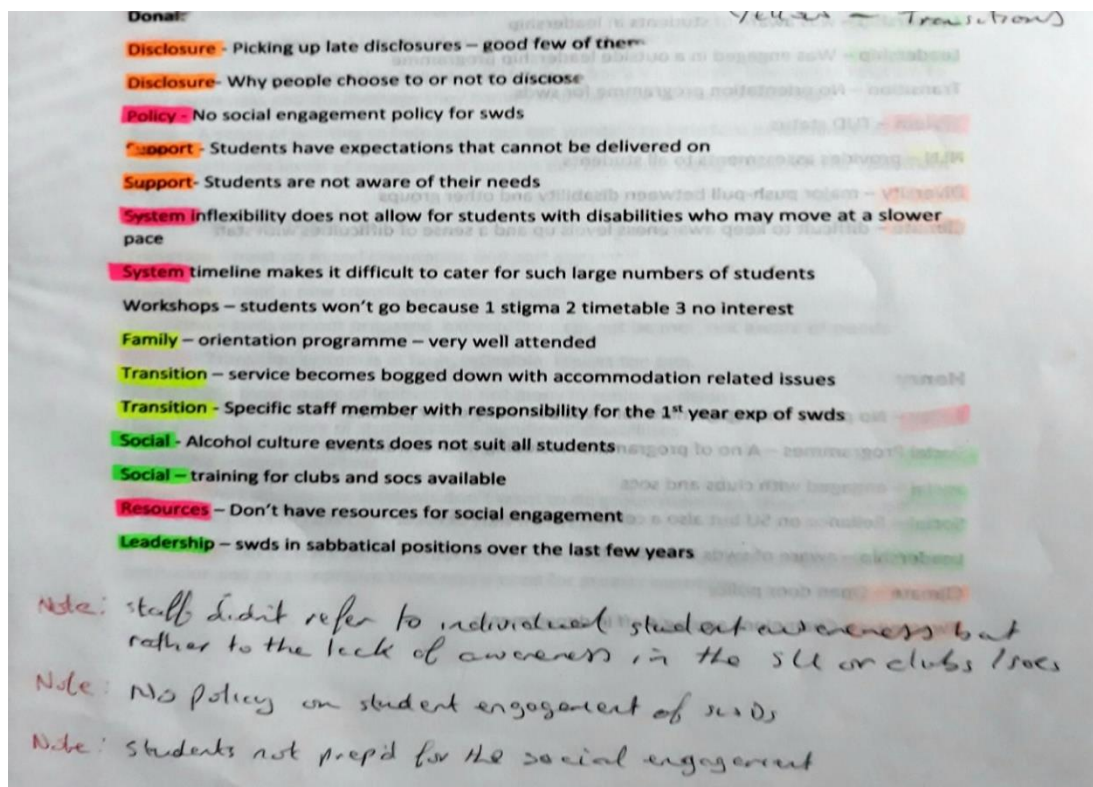


Figure 9. Themes and how they related to the data.

#### Step 4 - Review themes

Following the coding process, 14 themes were identified from the data, Table 11. The researcher undertook a review of these themes, bearing in mind, that the themes should be coherent, and they should be distinct from each other, Figure 9. The review was carried out by asking a number of questions of the themes as laid out by Maguire and Delahunt (2017):

- Do the themes make sense?
- Does the data support the themes?
- Am I trying to fit too much into a theme?
- Are there themes within themes?
- Are there other themes within the data? (p. 358)

It became clear that there were too many themes, with significant overlap among them and that some were not themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Table 11.**  
*Data analysis - Initial 14 themes*

Initial Themes Identified	
1. Structures / Systems	2. College climate
3. Culture	4. College size
5. Spaces	6. Disability awareness
7. Resources	8. Social engagement
9. Belonging	10. Orientation
11. Teaching and learning	12. Student support
13. Academic engagement	14. Transition

At this point in the analysis the researcher validated the themes in relation to the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2012). The researcher approached a trusted external researcher in another HEI with experience in thematic analysis and provided them with a sample of an interview, the codes, and initial themes that had been generated. Overall, the researcher received positive feedback. It was recommended that the researcher improve the organisation of the coding system and redefine some of the themes.

## Step 5 - Define and name the themes

Following a review of the 14 themes, they were collapsed into seven themes. These themes were further defined following a mind mapping exercise, Figure 10. The themes were then further collapsed into four superordinate themes and named (O'Day & Killeen, 2002), see Figure 11.

Three subordinate themes were contained within each superordinate theme, see Figure 12. Subordinate themes are themes within the themes and are useful for giving structure to a particularly complex or large theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 98).

## Step 6 - Producing the report

The final phase of the Braun and Clarke (2006) model was to prepare the report. In this case it meant compiling and presenting the findings, based on the story emerging from the data, see Chapters Five and Six for the research findings.

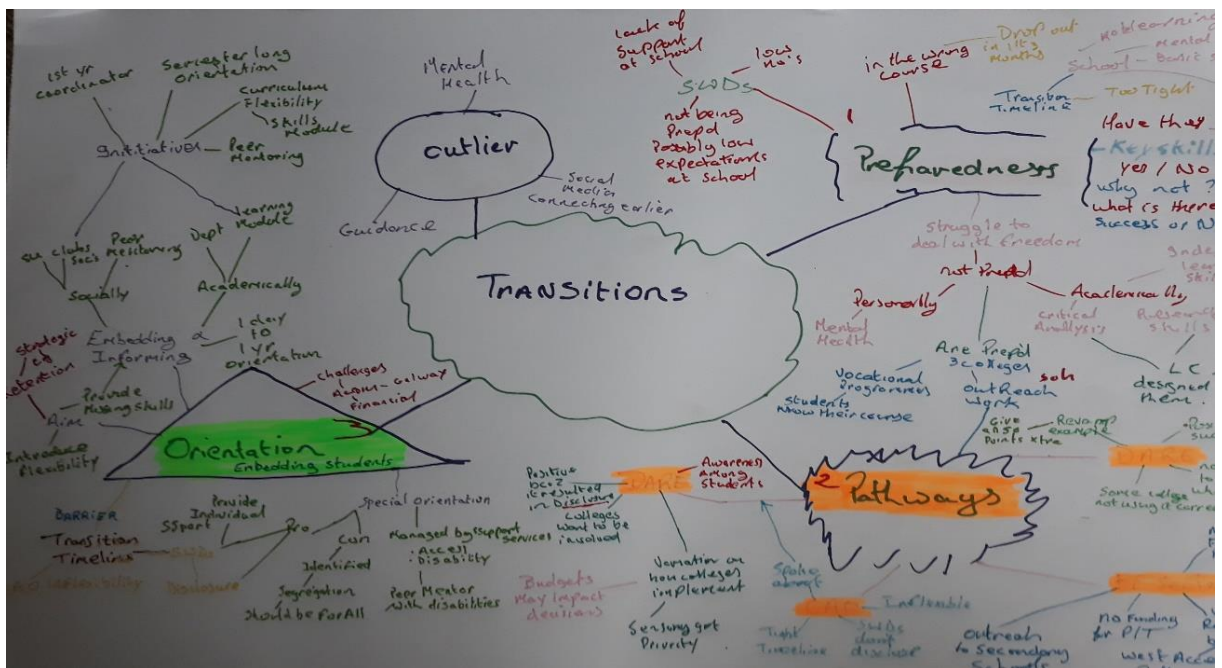
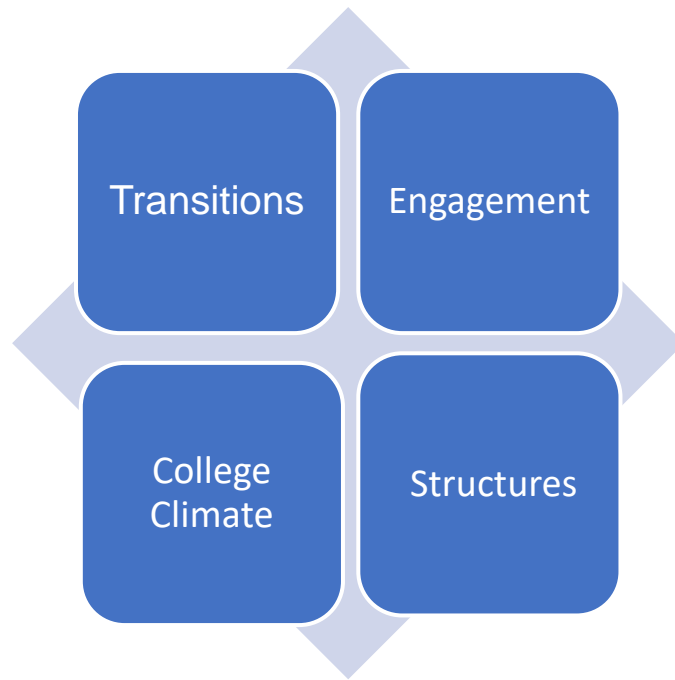
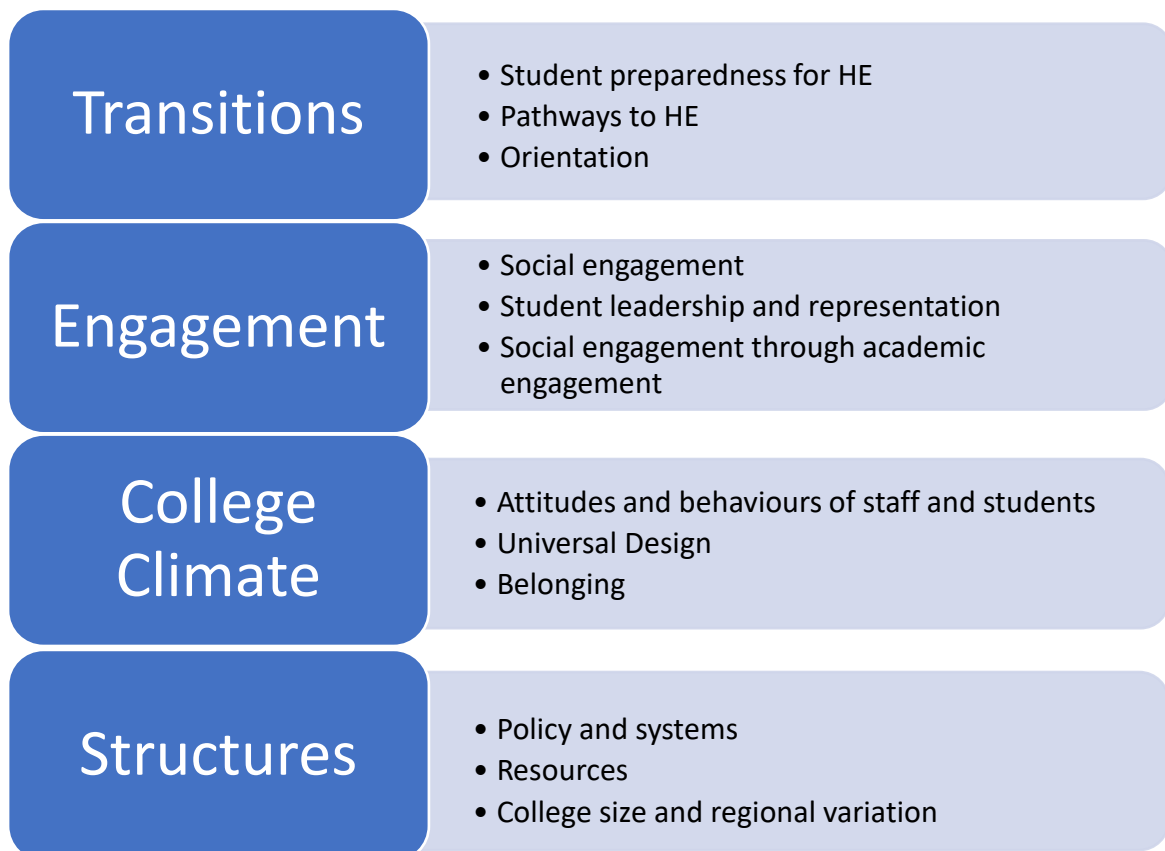


Figure 10. Mind map showing one of the main themes.



**Figure 11.** *Four named superordinate themes.*



**Figure 12.** *Four superordinate themes and linked subordinate themes.*

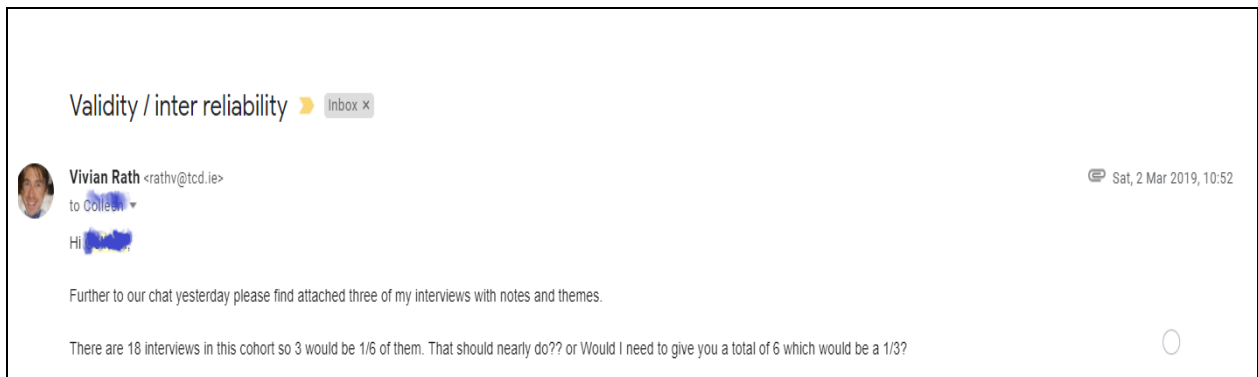
#### 4.8.1 Validity, reliability, and generalisability

Bryman (2012, p. 171) believed that validity, referring to whether an indicator (or set of indicators) devised to gauge a concept really measures that concept, is a fairly straightforward matter in which: “minimal steps may be taken to ensure that a measure is reliable and/or valid” (p. 173). However, he also contends that many researchers fail to report the validity and reliability of their measures.

Validity is identified as one of the strengths of qualitative research and is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant or the readers of an account (Creswell & Miller, 2000). A number of strategies were implemented; these were member checking, triangulation, and the reporting of disconfirming evidence (Bryman, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Member checking was established by providing participants with a copy of their interview transcripts after the interviews and seeking additional comments or clarifications.

Reliability plays a role in qualitative research with the primary focus being on coding (Creswell, 2011). Most small- scale qualitative studies are coded by a single researcher (Saldaña, 2015). Coding in this research was carried out by one individual. In order to ensure the reliability of the process, texts were read and re-read. The researcher also undertook a validity and inter-coder reliability checking of coding process, see Figure 13. This is inter-coder reliability checking is the degree to which two individuals agree about the coding of an item (Bryman, 2012). The researcher approached an external individual with expertise in thematic analysis to review the coding process during the data analysis of this research, see “Step 4: Review themes” and Figure 6.

Generalisability relates to how the findings can be generalised beyond the confines of the particular context (Bryman, 2012). This research focused on hearing the ‘voice’ of those who have been marginalised, working together and amplifying their experiences to initiate transformative change. The primary concern of this research was not with generalisation but as Maxwell (2005) notes, to provide: “an adequate description, interpretation, and explanation of” the experiences of those who participate in this research” (p. 71). Thus, the development of generalisations was not deemed a critical aspect of this research.



**Figure 13.** Email as part of the validity and inter-reliability checking of coding process.

## 4.9 Ethical Considerations

There were a number of ethical considerations to be managed during this research. R. Harris, Holmes, and Mertens (2009) note that the transformative paradigm's axiological assumptions rests on the recognition of power differences and the ethical implications that derive from those differences in terms of discrimination, oppression, misrepresentation and being made to feel and be invisible. I was conscious throughout the research of power differences that might exist or be perceived between the communities I was researching with and I. As such, I undertook a number of steps which were guided by the ethical principles as laid down by the *School of Education, Trinity College Dublin*. These principles are further supported by a set of concepts that all research in the school must adhere to. An *Ethics Review Checklist* was completed using the ethical guidelines for postgraduate researchers in the *School of Education, Trinity College Dublin* (Loxley, Seery, & O'Sullivan, 2010).

The researcher developed an ethical code for the research based on one developed by Doyle (2015), see Appendix A. I extended and reframed these principles to take into account the axiological assumptions of the transformative approach as outlined in Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) who maintain that the principles of ethics include respect, beneficence, and justice, however the transformative approach adds to these. Respect thus includes "the examination of cultural norms of interaction in diverse communities and across cultural groups". Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) define transformative beneficence in terms of, "the promotion of human rights and improvement of social justice". There is an "explicit connection between the process and outcomes of research and the furtherance of a social justice agenda" (p. 196).



#### 4.9.1 Ethical approval

An application seeking *Ethical Approval* was submitted to the *Trinity College Dublin, School of Education Ethics Committee*. Approval was granted by the Director of Research, see Appendix B. All participants were provided with access to the ethical guidelines and ethical approval before participation, see Appendices A and B respectively.

#### 4.9.2 Informed consent, confidentiality & data protection

Ensuring confidentiality and the anonymity of participants was an important aspect of the research. Confidentiality in research implies that private data identifying the participants will not be disclosed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Ethical standards prescribe that participants in social research should be fully informed, offered anonymity and consent agreed (Sarantakos, 2013). Informed consent “implies that prospective research participants should be given as much information as might be needed to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to participate” in the research (Bryman, 2012, p. 712).

At the beginning of each phase of this research, participants were given a participant information sheet, and advised of their rights and the nature of the study. Participants were informed that all contributions would be anonymised with no participant being identifiable in the research. The *Informed Consent Form* can be found in Appendix C. To this end all or any identifying information was removed from interview and focus group data and a pseudonym was assigned to each participant in advance of their participation.

A critical aspect of confidentiality is the management of data (Bryman, 2012). The Irish *Data Protection Acts, 1998, 2003 and 2018* confer obligations on people and organisations who hold personal data on others and confer rights on people whose information is held.

All necessary steps were taken to ensure the research was in full compliance with these regulations. All qualitative data relating to the four phases of the research was stored electronically in a password protected network drive within one HEI.

#### 4.9.3 Vulnerable groups

Although the participants in this research were aged 18 years and over, every step was taken to ensure that this research protected what could be deemed a “vulnerable” group. The researcher felt it good practice to familiarise himself with the different ethical guidelines relevant to vulnerable groups produced by other organisations. *Ethical Guidance for Research with People with Disabilities* (National Disability Authority, 2009), the *British Psychological Society* (BPS, 2011) and the British Educational Research Association (2011) combined with the *Trinity College Dublin Principles for Ethical Research* were all consulted before engaging in the study (Loxley et al., 2010; Trinity College Dublin, 2014).

#### 4.9.4 Unequal relationship

The researcher felt it necessary to consider the impact of his position as a former higher education employee, a current student, a disability rights activist and also the possibility that he was known by some or all of the participants. Participants could feel concerned that the researcher’s position might affect their rights to confidentiality and anonymity. The participants were therefore provided with ethical approval before the session, were made aware of my position and any potential conflict this could cause and the steps being taken to protect their anonymity and confidentiality. All participants were advised of their rights to end their participation in the research at any point, this placed the power in the participants’ hands.

#### 4.9.5 Duty of care to research participants

Israel and Hay (2006) recommend that researchers take proactive steps to protect their research participants. They can do this by developing trust with them, promoting the integrity of the research, guarding against misconduct and impropriety that might reflect on their arguments or institutions and being prepared to cope with new challenging problems. Disabled people and researchers have a history of an uneasy relationship (Oliver & Barnes, 2010). In line with the researcher’s transformative stance, the researcher ensured that due regard was taken for the well-being of all participants engaged in the research. Section 4.9 provided an insight into the ethical considerations and steps taken to protect research participants during this research, and to maintain the anonymity of all participants, with due care taken to protect their human rights

(Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). There was an ethical impetus to support the need for social justice and to remove the barriers to social engagement of disabled students in HE. Following the research, all participants will be invited to a presentation of the main findings of the research and offered a copy of the research.

#### **4.10 Conclusion**

Chapter Four presented how this research was undertaken. It described the recruitment of participants, the data generation and collection procedure and the thematic analysis undertaken. It outlined the steps undertaken to ensure that the research was carried out ethically, with the well-being of participants and improvement of human rights in mind. It concluded by detailing how the results of the research will be shared with participants and utilised to improve the social engagement of disabled students in HE.

Chapter Five will present an introduction to the findings and the findings from the data analysis of the student voice.

## Chapter Five: Findings - Student Voice

### 5.1 Introduction

Chapter Five explains the layout and structure adopted for the presentation of findings in this chapter (5), and the subsequent chapter (6) outlines the prevalence of findings and the structure of superordinate and subordinate themes of these chapters. This two-chapter structure presents the large quantity of rich research data in an accessible manner.

Chapter Five will present the student voice. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model places the student at the centre of the environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). A central tenet of transformational research is hearing the voice of those who are being marginalised (Mertens, 2017). This research places the disabled student voice at the centre of the research and as such the findings will begin with the data generated from interviews and focus groups during phase one and four of the research, see methodology Chapter Four.

The student voice included:

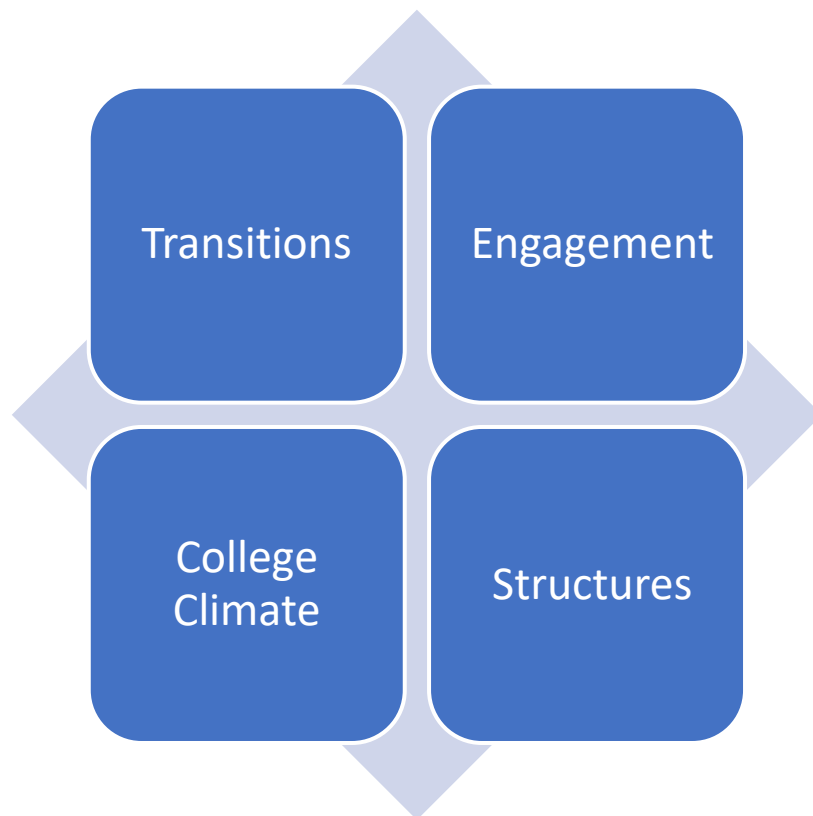
- Disabled undergraduate students (n=23),
- Disabled people who have recently graduated (n=8),
- Students' union full time officers (n=3).

Chapter Six will present the college response. To develop a clear understanding of the HE environment in which the student is located this research sought the response of 'key informants' (Rose et al., 2015) within that environment, This data was generated during phase 2, 3 and 4 of the research, see methodology Chapter Four. These included:

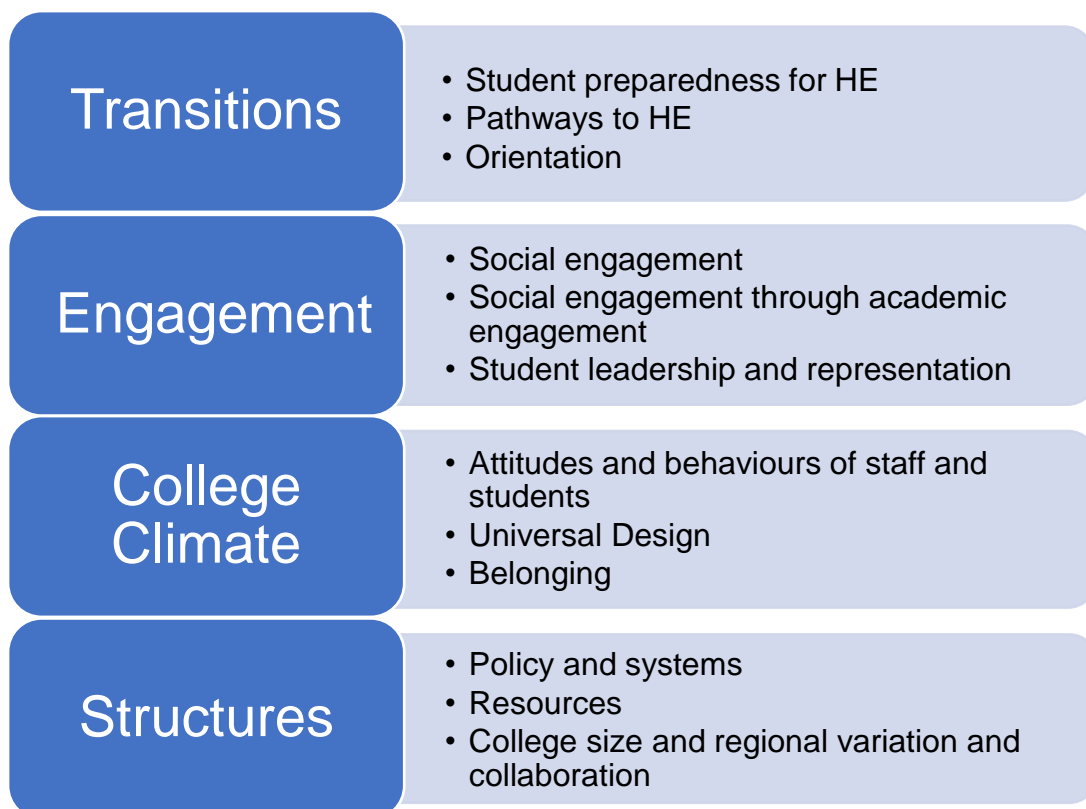
- Senior managers (n=19),
- Disability support personnel (n=12).

## 5.2 Super and Subordinate Themes

Four superordinate themes were identified following a thematic data analysis, see *Chapter Four*. Within each of these were placed three subordinate themes. These subordinate themes were selected based on three criteria, firstly when groups of pertinent codes came together to form a sub-theme, secondly, they were included due to their prominence, and thirdly their relevance to the superordinate theme. This was carried out as outlined in the process recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006); Daly et al. (2016). The list of the four superordinate themes is provided in Figure 14, with their associated subordinate themes listed in Figure 15.



**Figure 14.** *Four superordinate themes.*



**Figure 15.** *Four superordinate themes with associated subordinate themes.*

### **Superordinate theme 1: Transitions**

Transitions captures the 'induction' and 'development' of students within HE (Gale & Parker, 2014; National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2015; Tate & Hopkin, 2013). This follows their transfer from post-primary school through the CAO system, FE settings, mature learners, and students entering through the (HEAR) and DARE entry route (Hyland, 2011).

### **Superordinate theme 2: Engagement**

Trowler and Trowler (2010) defined engagement as, "the investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution". The HEA used this definition in its '*Report of the Working Group on Student Engagement in Irish Higher Education*'. This research focused on social engagement. Social engagement was broadly understood as identified by L. Thomas (2012);

"Social engagement can be seen to create a sense of belonging and offer informal support through interaction with friends and peers. Social engagement takes place in the social sphere of the institution, including social spaces, clubs

and societies, the students' union, in student accommodation and through shared living arrangements" (p.14).

**Superordinate theme 3: College climate**

This research adopted the definition of college climate used by the University of California Office of the President, (2014) "the current attitudes, behaviours, and standards of faculty, staff, administrators and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potential" cited in Harbour and Greenberg (2017, p. 4).

**Superordinate theme 4: Structures**

Structures refers to the institutional policies, processes and organisation of the institution (Kift et al., 2010). This facilitates the institutional culture and contributes to consistency across the institution (L. Thomas, 2010).

**5.3 Prevalence of Findings**

The prevalence of findings is stated in terms of the number of interviews in which the theme was identified. The numbers were expressed throughout in terms of language as detailed in Daly et al. (2016, p. 193). Similar approaches have been taken by Griffin-O'Brien (2018) and Rose et al. (2015).

For instance, the maximum number of disabled student interviews in which a superordinate or subordinate theme could be inferred is (n=23) or 100% or all, see Table 12.

**Table 12**

*Quantification equivalencies employed in presentation of findings, as sourced from Daly et al. (2016, p. 193)*

Quantification Equivalencies used in Chapters 5 & 6					
A Few	Some	Half	A Majority	Almost All	All
Up to... 20%	40%	50%	60%	80%	100%

This section presented the prevalence of findings within the research. The findings of the student voice are presented in the next section.

## **5.4 Findings of the Student Voice**

The data generated from semistructured interviews and focus groups with disabled students and graduates, and students' union officers from phase one and phase, see Chapter Four, of the research, constitute the findings of Chapter Five. These findings provided a deep insight into the barriers and enablers to the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE in Ireland. The findings will be presented under the four superordinate themes outlined in section 5.1: Transitions, Engagement, College Climate and Structures.

During the interviews, the graduates impressed upon the researcher the importance of attending HE and the key skills they had developed during their time in HE. They identified attending HE as being "life changing, and the best thing they ever did". Stephen believed that the "life skills he developed were invaluable". He described developing skills such as "living independently, finance and organising himself. Kevin felt he" didn't just get a degree, he met lifelong friends, he learned to advocate for himself, learned "how to manage a PA and obtained transferable skills" which he brought "into employment".

## **5.5 Theme 1: Transitions**

Transitions was the first superordinate theme that emerged following data analysis of the student interviews and focus groups, see Figure 14.

All the participants discussed some element of the theme of transitions and identified themselves as having been curious, excited, interested, but also nervous about coping academically and managing their disability, lonely, and lost. They identified the process as often overwhelming, frightening and intimidating, while also being helpful, advantageous and useful.

Theme 1: Transitions was categorised into three subordinate themes:

- Student preparedness for HE
- Pathways to HE
- Orientation



### 5.5.1 Student preparedness to transition to higher education

The students focused on their expectations of college, the academic challenges and finding the work / social life balance. The 'level of preparedness of students for the transition to higher education' featured strongly across the data. Students' union officers believed these different levels of preparedness could be attributed to the secondary school environment.

Academically, students such as, Tina identified it as a "completely different learning environment and structures [to] school". She concedes that she should have been far more "worried" about the academic requirements but wasn't, because she described herself as "been coasting" in school. She found the "long reading lists... [with books] that don't come up in the exam" as "very difficult to get the hang of". She noted that since beginning college her reading and spelling has improved.

Harry too found that "coming from school that all the essays instead of exams" was "tedious" and he found himself becoming "bogged down with work". He found himself "leaving everything to the last minute" which influenced his social life. Robert was challenged by the increased workload. He described the large number of contact hours and assignments as "fairly intense to keep up with, especially with [his] disability". He explained that "he wasn't used to a workload like that".

Robert discussed his "work-life balance". He explained how he implemented time and energy conservation techniques to manage his workload and the demands of his disability. Victoria, Harry and Tina all highlighted the importance of trying to achieve a "work-life balance" whilst managing their respective health needs. Most students who raised this topic, felt they had not achieved the balance.

Luke said he found that his chosen college course "hadn't been what [he] expected", he thought business would be all about numbers, but it was not. However, he considers this as "positive", and that "if he hadn't had went to college, he wouldn't have discovered this". However, he noted that he had failed some modules and struggled to enter second year.

Luke spoke of his social life having not met his expectations. He foresaw himself as "going out [...] by torch light on a Wednesday night, [but that] hasn't been the case at all". Tina identified her biggest fear transitioning was the expectation that she would "lose all [her] friends". She reflected that she has become more distant with her "old friends"

but she has made “new friends” but that was “ok”. Tracey shared that she had been concerned that “she wouldn’t fit in” because of how she “looked” and that this would affect her “social involvement”. Graduates spoke of similar experiences and Nora found the “social side” a “dis-improvement” and believed that she was “alienated” because she was “deaf”.

On the other hand, students such as Harry, described how “he had an idea of what was coming” but he attributes this to “having to restart” due to medical leave in second year and taking the view “that first year was more like a stepping-stone”. Tanya too considered college to be “what she expected” but fully attributes this to having completed an “access programme”. She believed this had “tempered her expectations [and prepared her] for what was involved”. She contended that “students [in secondary schools] should be taught to do academic reading and writing”. Despite having completed a Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) course before beginning college, Kate found herself “overwhelmed” and unprepared for the “size” of the college and the number of people. Abigail too found the “size and number of people” difficult and wishes “that she had gone to visit the actual college before applying to it”. She based her decision on the “course and its reputation” and in hindsight she “definitely would’ve picked a smaller college”.

Students were apprehensive about coping with their “disability” in college. They described themselves as being “nervous”, or the experience as being “terrifying”. Two students who had “recently acquired” disabilities seemed to have found it a particularly daunting experience. They were worried about how they would manage “physically” and “academically”. Tracey identified how she felt the pressure to meet her expectations of college. She believed that people would “have their stuff together” which would make it “difficult” for her because she was “dyslexic” and “needed support”. However, she found the reality quite different and that “academically” it wasn’t as difficult as “expected” which was a significant relief.

Students described how their unpreparedness for the college environment, workload or social engagement exacerbated underlying or created mental health difficulties for them. Hilda reflected that in her first days and weeks in college she had been “suffering huge anxiety” but she had “no idea where to turn”. Her anxiety “spiralled out of control. leading to her taking a year out”. When she returned, she found she had a “much clearer sense of why [she] was meant to be there” and she “registered with the disability support services”.

Graduates considered the first semester very difficult and identified development of resilience as vital for success in college. Graduates identified family and college support as being very important during the transition. Kevin discussed his strategy for success during that first semester. He shared that he had “considered leaving [his] degree” because he thought it “was going to be difficult to make friends”. He explained how he, in association with his disability support adviser, decided he would not leave but “set a goal that he would remain until Christmas”. He felt the critical aspect of him deciding to stay was that he “made friendships and felt socially accepted”. Graduates noted the importance of being resilient especially during times of difficulty. Sophia explained how when she was younger and was struggling in school her dad had shown her ways of coping. She identified how this was critical when she was under pressure in college.

### 5.5.2 Pathways to higher education

Some students and a few graduates discussed their different pathways into HE including specific college access programmes, further education colleges, and Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses. Many of these entrants were mature students.

They spoke extremely positively of the PLC, access and further education pathways. They described them as “very helpful” in preparing them for the transition to HE. These pathways gave them “an opportunity” to enter college that they believed they “wouldn’t have had” as a result of different socio-economic difficulties including “due to family financial issues [or other difficulties] when they were young”.

They identified having learned “key skills” whilst undertaking these courses. Tanya described how she had developed “academic writing, using the library, computer and presentation skills” and how to “present material in an academic format for submission”. She explained that learning these skills put her at an “advantage” to other students upon entry to HE. She described herself as “much more aware now of the challenges” students face during the transition.

Students acknowledged the importance of the friends they had made during these courses, and in some cases those friends entered college with them. Tracey identified this as being “a very big advantage” especially when she first “went in for induction days”, Luke had a similar experience to Tracey. However, this wasn’t the experience of all students and Mary explained how she, “didn’t know anyone arriving because the people

[she] had been in an access course with had gone on to other colleges” which she found very difficult.

Despite students generally finding these alternative pathways “very helpful” students acknowledged that they had found the transition “challenging”. Derek considered it as “a step up from what I’ve been doing within the PLC”. He found the large classes “a bit of an adjustment” but he felt that “it [higher education had] been what [he] expected and more” and he found it to be “very inclusive of anybody, irrelevant of their gender or how they identify.” Tracey too considered it a “big change” due to “it’s a different breed of people” within the environment.

Students found access programmes very useful, and in some cases they found the experience of completing the pathway challenging. One student spoke of her experiences of the “access programme as being over-whelming, tearful” and resulted in her having to attend “counselling” because she “thought she was going to have a nervous break-down”. However, she believes she would not “be [in college] today had she not gone through it” and learned how to “negotiate the pitfalls”.

It was interesting to note, that students did not discuss the Central Applications Route to education and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) and their experiences of completing this.

### 5.5.3 Orientation

Many students now complete a new student “induction” or “orientation” entering HE. The following section will present students experiences of this. Almost all students, graduates and Students’ Union Full Time Officers discussed their experiences of beginning college. They provided an insight into the DARE orientation, the general student body orientation, peer mentoring, and their experiences of late arrival following medical leave or due to illness. The majority of students began by painting a picture of how they felt when entering college during orientation week. Students described finding the place as “helpful, friendly and feeling at home”. Others found the experience “intimidating, and overwhelming”, this made them feel “panicky and anxious”. They were concerned it would go “disastrously and they wouldn’t be able to cope”, with some highlighting that they found it “challenging due to their disability”. Tracey found her college “very big” and

described herself as like 'Alice in Wonderland' and feeling that the "whole place was going to swallow her up".

It was apparent that within the colleges there were three types of orientation systems for disabled students. In the first type disabled students attended all student orientation only. In the second type, disabled students were offered the opportunity to participate in a DARE orientation followed by all student orientation. In the third type disabled students entered under the umbrella of "access" and undertook their orientation with students entering under the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and mature students. These students were also given the chance to attend 'the all student' orientation. The all student orientation usually took place after the DARE or access orientation. During this time, all students including disabled students entered college over the course of two days or a week. Bernie described it as "a brief run-down of what's going to happen in the college and a run-through and a breakdown of your course", and how to work the IT system. This was followed by introductions from the different "supports and sports departments" including the students' union, sports clubs, and societies.

Harry, a student, found the events during all student orientation "very helpful for meeting new people", especially because he "was living off campus". Dawn found that the many "different kinds of supports including student advisers and [student] ambassadors" put her at ease. Tina had completed both orientations and described 'the all student' orientation as being met, "in a big hall and being divided into groups... separate from her new DARE friends". She found she spent "most of her time wandering around alone" and considered it "quite daunting".

All the graduates discussed taking part in some form of general orientation programme. There was a consensus that the transition can be more difficult for disabled students. Nora felt that this was because "during those first few days, you do stand out to everyone else, you stand out as a person with a disability, rather than a person with ability." She explained how not having an "interpreter" available to her outside of class prevented her interacting socially with her new classmates. Nora finished by saying, that people with disabilities just wanted to be "treated like an equal".

The large crowds of people made it challenging for some students. Students such as Luke found the "the amount of people on the first-year orientation very frightening". He felt that it was not a "friendly and helpful environment because unfortunately everyone is a bit nervous and no one really has time to be helpful". Although Dawn found "it so

big” she also found it “fun” and found “there were so many people with so many different interests, so you could find your niche interest”. Many of the students interviewed found it difficult to manage due to the large numbers of new students at that time. The DARE and/or access orientation took place “a few days before the start” of term and before the ‘all student’ orientation. It was run over two or three days. Dawn, a student was very enthusiastic about her experience and explained how it “was just people with disabilities [...] who all got to know each other”. She considered this “kind of funny” but she “enjoyed it because everyone had different issues” which they shared and made comparisons. Victoria found the DARE orientation to be a “phenomenal help”. She described being “invited to come into the access centre to discuss supports around examinations” which she found to be a “great experience”. Denise agreed with Victoria’s comments.

Robert’s orientation involved students under the access umbrella. He found it “brilliant” having senior access students show him around the campus and share their experiences. Tina thought the access orientation was great because of the diversity of students in the one group. Robert particularly enjoyed having an opportunity “to get acquainted with the college before he had to deal with the large crowds”. It made him “feel a lot more comfortable” resulting in him “feeling at home”. He considered the whole event “hugely helpful” and he asserted that “anyone he had talked to [...] thought the same”.

Only one graduate spoke of being part of a specific orientation programme for disabled students. Kevin considered this “vitaly important”. He described meeting his new “best friend” whilst having the opportunity to live on campus for several days. He felt he was at an “advantage straight away” because of this. Stephen felt access to a “mentor who could have helped him ..find his feet”, and provided him with “extra communication” on disability related information would have been useful. He described being “landed into the environment” the same as an “able-bodied” student. He felt this was very difficult coming from a “school-based environment in which you have a special needs assistant throughout the day for the period of five years”.

Meeting people and making friends was at the forefront of most students’ minds when interviewed about their orientation experiences. Peter and Robert, among many others, identified “ice-breaker games” as being “a really good way to get to know campus and meet people in your course and not feel like you are completely alone.” Peter found the DARE orientation particularly useful for making friends and he described meeting “his

best friend". Robert described how making a friend with a disability reassured him that he was "in the right place" which he found "very comforting".

For some of the students, like Peter, they met "their best friend". But many just made acquaintances. Jane found it challenging to maintain contact with the students she met "because they were doing different courses". But she did feel a certain comfort in "seeing them around campus and being able to say, hi". Dawn had a similar experience and she told me how two students who she had met during the DARE orientation were now "auditors of the debating and games society". It was apparent from her story that this was important to her.

Kate explained that she had missed her DARE orientation but she "would've liked to have gone" because she had spoken to friends later "who often mentioned that they had all met on that day". She also discussed how other friends had said "Oh it was useless,". But she believed "it would've been useful for [her]". Emily was very annoyed that there "wasn't a specific orientation for students with disabilities in her college", as she was "nervous coming in with a disability" and it would have been helpful. Robert believed that there should have been more orientation events across the year to help students.

Although Peter found the orientation events very helpful, he explains how he "didn't have much need for the service after that" but he did "appreciate the emails" and that they had kept in contact. This was a view shared by a number of students throughout the interviews. The main focus of Jane, Mary and Emily's discussion about orientation was accessibility. They described themselves as being very "nervous" about access before entering. Jane was relieved when she found that "most of [her] college was wheelchair accessible". But she was surprised to find that when she arrived, she "was the only one with a wheelchair." Mary identified it as "very challenging, trying to get around because I wasn't used to the buildings... and some of the buildings weren't accessible". All of these students felt that their worries about accessibility were somewhat allayed by how nice the other students were and how friendly people on campus were.

After discussing orientation week students shared their thoughts on their first semester. It was apparent that students found discussing this a little more emotionally draining. Dawn's immediate response was that she "found those first few weeks in college, very hard". Kate explained that she, found it "tough" because she wasn't living close by and "was contemplating dropping out". She found the pressure of having to decide before 'Halloween' whether she would leave or not very frustrating, especially because she was "worried" she would lose her free fees status. She decided to "invest in accommodation".

She found that this made it “a lot easier” and she “settled in”. She found she no longer was “constrained by buses... and having to hang around the college, trying to kill time”. She finished by adding that although “she had a bad experience [at the beginning], she was having a good experience now”.

Hilda found the transition very difficult and was hit with what she explains as “impostor syndrome”. She “didn’t feel like [she] could approach people”. She now realises this was “a very normal experience for people in college the first time, but for [her] it felt [she] was completely prohibited from [partaking in] any activities”. Hilda explained that she developed severe anxiety and as a result she began drinking excessively. The result was she decided to leave college. Emily, who did not have an orientation, found that a lack of awareness in her college made the first semester very challenging. She says, “there was actually [...] no discussion about [...] the fact that I had a disability and that, maybe the lectures I was involved in should not have been on the third floor” where there were no toilets available.

The interviews showed significant evidence of students’ awareness of supports available to them during that first semester, including regular support seminars; but equally, there was evidence of students not attending. Luke was “of the opinion that people have to find their own way”. He asserted that “there is stuff put in place but unless you are willing to make the effort yourself, I don’t think that all the supports in the world are going to do you much good.” There was a theme running through the interviews of the students taking responsibility for their actions. Sometimes, unnecessarily so.

‘Peer Mentoring’ existed as a support in all the case example institutions. Half of students were either actively involved as peer mentors or had been mentees themselves at some point. Students saw it as helping students “to get to know people in their course” and that their role was to “look out for people”. Tracey considered the campus tours they gave as particularly important for students with “disabilities... as it would put them and their parents’ minds at ease”.

In some colleges peer mentoring was managed directly by the institution, and students were recruited as volunteers. In other colleges, the students took an active role in managing it, usually under the stewardship of the Students’ Union (SU). Tina explained that the peer mentors reported back to SU who in turn “fed-back to the different college departments”. They had a responsibility to “come up with new ideas” of things to do each week with their mentees and these were then considered by “her department”. It was



evident that students who were involved as mentors took their roles very seriously and really felt they were making a contribution.

Tracey considered peer mentoring as central to students integrating into the wider college community as it allowed students to “integrate with second years, third years, lecturers and. was very helpful in breaking up the cliques that exist through speaking to more people they don’t know”. She sees the benefit of peer mentoring in her class in that they “have integrated into a class of friends.”

Whereas the majority spoke positively about peer mentoring, Dawn believed that “peer mentor groups don’t really work that well in her college because it wasn’t people who were doing the same subject.” This meant that students rarely met the other students from the mentoring group. This was a point that was made by other students during the interviews.

As well as peer mentoring students spoke about the other ways current students assisted them in settling into college. One of these was the role clubs and societies played. Students had mixed experiences about this time. Tracey described how the volunteers had attended their orientation. They told the new students about the events taking place and how to get “involved in the clubs, societies and the gym”. Peter identified the “freshers’ week” that took place during his orientation as a “absolute nightmare”. This was because of the large amount of people “crowded in to one small space all demanding attention”. However, despite this he did enjoy joining the societies. Robert noted doing “his best to go to” the club and society events during orientation week but he struggled. He went on to say that after that, and for the first half of the year, “he felt quite left out”. He described himself as “quite involved academically but not socially”.

Some students raised the issue of restarting in a new year due to returning from medical leave or missing orientation due to late arrival. Emily was late arriving due to having “acquired a disability” and was late beginning college and joined a different cohort. She had “missed the induction... and there was no one looking out for people coming in late”. Diana too missed her induction and as a result missed an opportunity to apply for a “bursary”. She believes that “people like [her] should be phoned” and informed about everything they had missed, and she insisted that she “shouldn’t be excluded”.

Abigail noted that she had taken a number of “leave of absences” on medical grounds. She describes it as being “quite difficult” having to come back “into a class that she doesn’t know because she was obviously a year behind them”. She (quite frustrated)

explains that she “doesn’t even know anybody’s name in [her] new class”. Hilda highlighted that one of the difficulties for her was having “to explain everything” as to why she was returning. Although she noted that she now feels “much more secure since returning and... much better academically”. She believes that “the social aspect of it has definitely changed”. She feels she no longer fits in, “because [she is] now at a place where [she is] not quite a school leaver and not a mature student either, so [she] is sort of in between, in a gap between the two, in terms of social activities.” Although she did find that the mature students had made an effort to help her fit in.

Students discussed “administrative” and “support” problems as well as in-class issues. Abigail highlighted the administrative difficulties of re-joining a course. She found herself unsupported when “applying to go back”. Her institution was “not very accommodating to people who might have difficulty getting all these things sorted, or like, issues with anxiety”. When she went to seek assistance, the “student advisors were kind of backed up for a week or two, so I didn’t get the chance to meet with anyone really before I went back.”. She goes on to say that class-wise “it’s going ok now”.

Edgar had a positive experience and found his institution, particularly his department, very helpful when returning from leave. He describes how “all the staff [...] were very supportive and helpful [...] he felt like they were definitely trying to help me pass the year”. He said, this was “kind of moving, [...] I thought it was really, it felt good”. He went on to highlight the process he went through before restarting which began by him meeting his ‘disability officer’. But he noted that “although it was well intentioned coming back into college was never going to be remedied by meeting with someone for a half hour a week, and going over your schedule, but I definitely was aware that there was kind of support and that was reassuring”. However, he did find the introduction of a “quiet room as cool”.

Harry, unlike the other students, re-joined his college having come from a “satellite campus”. Although he had an orientation as a first year, “he felt that they should have had a separate orientation” when he joined the larger campus. He “felt that was quite a negative aspect”. Although he was in second year, his group joined the first years and this “didn’t feel right” to him mostly because he did not know them.

One graduate, Donal discussed the challenges of returning from medical leave. He found it extremely difficult to re-integrate with his class and re-engage with his academic work. He explained that he had spent ten years completing a four-year degree. He described

his college experience as “frustrating” and felt, that all his friends were moving on, and he was joining “new classes every year and no knowing any of the faces”.

Students and graduates suggested some supports HE institutions should be implementing to help students returning. Abigail and Hilda recommended that a designated member of support services should meet with students to provide more information on what classes to take and how to re-join their institution. They highlighted the need for the institutions to have some form of understanding of the difficulties for a student re-joining. They did not expect the college to ‘hand hold’ students through absolutely everything, they just expected greater “engagement” on their part, even just an email acknowledging their return.

This section outlined the orientation experiences of students, graduates, students and Students’ Union Full Time Officers entering HE. They provided an insight into the DARE orientation, all student orientation, peer mentoring, and their experiences of late arrival following medical leave or illness. The following section will present a summary of the first superordinate theme, transitions.

#### 5.5.4 Summary of theme 1: Transitions

The data demonstrated that students found themselves unprepared for the institution size, having to make and lose friends, the academic workload, the difference in structure, the demands of their timetable, balancing academic and social life and how to access support.

This unpreparedness had a negative impact on students; leading to some failing exams or suffering severe anxiety, while some students had to take time out. It was evident that students who attended access programmes or returned after leave seemed more prepared. Students chose the wrong course, or the wrong college because they had not made a preliminary visit.

Despite it being some years since the graduates had transitioned to HE, they presented a vivid account of their experiences. The first semester was reported as very challenging and the failure of the institutions to provide key supports such as “sign language interpreters” negatively impacted on students’ ability to engage in the wider college community. It was clear from the discussions that the graduates had applied key skills that they had learnt at home to enable them to succeed. The main skill being “resilience”,

combined with ability to rely on “family support”. Graduates were in a position to identify what would have helped and they recognised the need for a mentoring support network. All SU representatives were clear that in their experience, students were transitioning at varying levels of preparedness. It was obvious that there was not a comprehensive and uniform school transition preparation programme and that students’ transition experiences were being negatively impacted by the tight transition timeline.

Students recognised the many positives of entering college through an ‘alternative pathway’ which included developing the academic skills necessary and the creation of friendship networks to allow them to establish themselves. Although, they shared predominantly positive experiences they also pinpointed various difficulties including, cultural barriers, academic challenges and the size of college classes. They also found the course work in these pathways quite difficult to manage but accepted that it had prepared them for the challenges of attending HE. The descriptive language of the students created a clear picture of their orientation experiences. It was obvious that this was a traumatic period for many of the students but also a time of great excitement. Students widely acknowledged the value of their orientation and made recommendations on how it could be improved. The interview data highlighted that students returning from leave do not have a positive experience; they made a range of recommendations to improve this.

## 5.6 Theme 2: Engagement

This was the second superordinate theme that emerged, see Figure 14.

Almost all students, graduates and Students' Union Full Time Officers outlined their understanding of social engagement, and its' importance. It was broken into two interconnected pieces "social" and "academic" as the "everyday interactions with classmates, interacting with tutors, staff and feeling included within your department".

It involved college life beyond lectures; enjoying yourself in societies and clubs, meeting friends from class for coffee, and having someone share problems with. Tanya, a student, believed that social engagement "is just the oil that makes the world go around, and a pleasant place for everyone to be in."

A very large number felt that social engagement was important because it created a sense of belonging, and it contributed to community participation which is very important for society and good for your CV. They believed it was important for positive mental health, for preventing social isolation and for making new friends. As Emily, a student, said "it was nice to see a friendly face".

Students felt that it was important to meet a diversity of people, to see a different side of things and challenge yourself. Graduates and Students' Union Full Time Officers reflected on the impact after leaving college. They believed it was important for boosting your employment prospects and broadening your horizons once you left HE. It was accepted that students enter college for academic reasons, but also seen as necessary to bolster your grades and boost your employment prospects with social engagement. Martin, an SU officer, felt that this demonstrated that you were "trustworthy" and "you're hard-working". Sophia, a graduate, felt she would never have done what she was doing today without the "kind of social experiences in college". She believed she would not have had the "confidence" to take her first job, progressed in her career, or make friends in her employment.

Theme 2: Engagement was categorised into three subordinate themes:

- Social engagement,
- Social engagement through academic engagement, and
- Barriers and support for social engagement.

### 5.6.1 Social engagement

A majority of students considered themselves to be socially engaged in clubs, societies, students' union, and leadership roles. They also discussed their pre-college social engagement and their views on the experiences of males versus females. It must be noted that students were initially slow to begin talking about their engagement and were slow to mention the many activities they were involved in. Upon asking students why this was, they told me they did not want to boast.

Students spoke of forcing themselves to get involved or had just joined because their friends had. They were surprised at how approachable clubs and societies were. Most identified that it was not until the second semester of first year, or in second year that they became more active, when they continued with pre-existing activities or took up a new hobby. One student spoke of how his family, in particular his mother, had encouraged him. Students spoke of the benefits of being socially engaged. Kate expressed the view that she was "more confident since joining" and now "ran her own radio show". Mary believed that the benefit of engagement was that you met people "from the team whilst walking around campus". Luke was of the opinion that "the best students are students who have more than academics going on in their head", they are "students who are involved in clubs, societies and sports who have different friends".

Almost all Students' Union Full Time Officers felt that disabled students were not as socially engaged. Mark was quite adamant, "Absolutely not, no. I don't think they're as engaged, and I think there are a number of barriers". He felt that barriers such as inaccessible venues, poor planning, lack of supports could result in feelings of social isolation.

The majority of graduates were currently socially engaged in a range of different hobbies from "military history, writers' groups to music". They considered engagement very important but found it challenging with the demands of their career. All of them spoke of having friends, many of whom they had met during their time in HE and these friendships had continued post-graduation.

A number of the students felt that the clubs and societies could have been more inclusive and done more to promote themselves. Luke said he was unaware of what was on offer. He would have liked it if a member of the clubs "could have, put their arm around you"

and said “look we realise, and we have something for everyone, especially for you, because of all your special needs and this a society for everyone”.

Students wishing to join sports clubs described having to disclose their disability in advance and in some cases having to provide supporting medical documentation. This was identified as a barrier to joining. Students had reservations about presenting this documentation to other students and expressed data protection concerns. Tracey was worried that she “wouldn’t be able to face her class, if something was let slip”. Other students such as Mary were not permitted to join due to “health and safety” reasons. She believed that they refused her membership because they were, “not sure how to deal with that, so it’s going to cause us more problem running an event”.

Maintaining engagement in clubs and societies was a challenge for students who were absent due to ill health. Dawn explained that you need to be “there all the time, and then if you’re not, then you don’t make friends as much, so it’s not great.”. She found this “very stressful”.

A few students felt excluded after joining, including Harry who was on the football team but felt he was “not part of their clique”. Luke expressed the view that there was a greater need for the inclusion of people with “cognitive and physical disabilities”. He went on to say that “he couldn’t emphasise enough the power of being in a group can have on people’s mental health”. On the other hand, Tanya who described herself as a mature student, says she “wouldn’t have been insulted if somebody would’ve said we don’t want you but found she them very welcoming”.

Tracey characterised this lack of inclusion by the fact that they “weren’t disability aware” when organising events. She believed one factor was that the students running the groups were “young”. She emphasised strongly that they should have to “undertake inclusion awareness training”. Tanya expressed that inclusion and awareness depended on the personality of those in charge of the group as “personalities will always dictate the comfort level that people will feel when they look for friends or friendship”.

Derek believed that it is important for “everyone to understand that anything is possible and [that in college] everyone should have the opportunity to make new friends”. He went to say that he felt, “it’s about ensuring that someone with perhaps autism, finds a society that caters [for them, providing] quiet spaces, and a very open space to talk about things”. Dawn was not aware of the college doing anything but felt that really the

responsibility should lie with “the students”. Students were also quite critical about the management of student societies, but they felt this was understandable because the students running them were “inexperienced and young and not aware”. Dawn felt that it was important that members, “don’t devote your life to too much of anything, because it’s all student led so it’s probably going to fall apart at some point, and it’s better to be the outside of that happening instead of the inside of that happening.”.

Students displayed an interest in meeting students in a similar situation. Abigail said she would like to meet people with a disability like hers, so she could share her experiences. She said, “they would have the same kind of issues that I would have with regards approaching like studying and the social aspect of college, and if you have someone that understands what you have going on, even a little bit, it makes it a lot”. Students spoke about the presence or establishment of student societies for disabled students or access societies. Access societies varied depending on the college, but in most cases, included students under the headings of mature, disabled or from socio-disadvantaged backgrounds. In some cases, these were established by the college access office but run by the students or in other cases they were established by the students.

Robert described the aim of the society was “to have one that anyone can take part in, even if they’re not part of our society. Just that anyone can come to, it’s accessible for everyone, and everyone can have a great time”. Kate explains that, “nearly everyone in it [laughs], [are] all disabled in some way or other. We all were talking; we all were familiar with the disability office”. Mary described it as “kind of nice to get to mix with people, that have a disability, so it’s nice to see where they’re going.” She went on to say that it gives her “hope [...] and you go, well, I can keep fighting the fight to get what I need to go on into the next year”. Junior students enjoyed talking to senior students about their journey, as it left them with the feeling that “if they can do it, maybe I can go on and do it too.”

There were also examples of sports clubs being established by disabled people. Peter spoke very excitedly about his new interest, “wheelchair fencing”. This club had received significant financial support from the college. He hoped that “in a few years students from the society might eventually reach the para-Olympics”. Students identified these clubs and societies as “safe spaces” to share their identity, be part of a family, and engage socially. As explained by Derek, “I think it’s very inclusive, and because of that particular society, there is a very clear social aspect”. There was one example of a student club or society being refused the right to establish. Dawn felt there was no support for the social engagement of disabled students within her college. She explained



that students in her college had, “tried to set up a mental health society this year”. She felt that this came down to a lack of awareness by the decision-making committee within the college. Two of the Students’ Union Full Time Officers identified having societies for disabled students in their institution. They considered these very useful, especially, in raising awareness. Olive described the society in her college as very proactive, it had developed a “go to guide” for students and staff on how to host accessible events. She felt that this society provided a space where disabled students “didn’t have to explain themselves”, where they can feel “understood, supported and accommodated”. However, it must be noted that Olive admitted that she had never attended a meeting, but she supported the group when necessary.

Graduates discussed the importance of peer groups as a catalyst for change within institutions, an opportunity to have your voice heard, and to meet other people. Sophie had been involved in establishing a “disability society” in her institution. She explained they established it because the college disability service “didn’t organise a load of events”. She went on to say that this changed after they established the group and the college became “more aware”.

Half of students considered their college to be an easy place to meet new people. They explored their friendships with college friends, acquaintances, and pre-college friends. Students discussed different ways of communicating and interacting with different friend groups. Students recognised ways in which their friends supported them. Abigail and Hilda described how their “closest friends” were important, when they were “really stressed” or during a “wobbly year” and that it was “important to have a strong group of friends”. Hilda defined “a friend... as someone that you go for a coffee with, [...] either on or off campus, it’s someone that you go into the library to sit beside, it’s somebody that you have memories, external to being in the same lecture together.” Students began by telling me about how they met their friends. They met them in a variety of ways and places including through their “Dare orientation, in class, societies and clubs and [...] standing in a queue”.

Students varied in the number of connections they had, and some like Edgar and Ken preferred their “own company”. Tanya had a few “close friends” but had many acquaintances and describes herself as “the type of person who doesn’t need people when she is on her own”. Students regularly spoke about the many acquaintances they had, who they “could say hello to” but weren’t “close friends” with. Holly explained why these were important, “even if we’re not best friends, just to have a nice camaraderie

going, it does make it pleasant going in [to class], which we do, it's a really lovely class I'm in.". Students pinpointed "barriers to making and maintaining" friendships, these included "disclosing their disability, having a personal assistant (PA), accommodation", "overcrowded and inaccessible space and large crowds".

Hilda and Holly found that living at home made it difficult and Hilda found that when she moved out, she made friends with her housemates. Abigail who describes herself as being from the country found that her college was "quite cliquey". Dawn did not have any friends in her class in first year due to the large class size but did make friends through the "societies".

A number of students considered attitudes of other students to their disability to be a barrier to making friends. Mary who had "one or two good friends" believed that the "rest of the people in my class don't deal with me because they don't know how to deal with my disability, so they don't really talk to me". This made her feel on her own. Whereas Kate, who described herself as deaf felt the reason, she "ended up with the group of friends" she had was "because [she] could actually hear them.". Jane believed that sometimes having a PA may act as a barrier to her making friends.

Students spoke about being unwilling to disclose their disability or share the challenges they face because they "didn't know them well enough". They were nervous about how students would react. Luke described himself as "building up barriers" and he had taken the approach that he "had enough friends".

Students spoke about the challenges of maintaining friendship. Dawn deferred a semester due to health issues and found "it has been quite difficult keeping in contact with them" as she does not have the energy. Hilda also found it difficult, "I'd say the biggest barrier is my own perception of what I have to offer to a friendship, because I have lost friendships through the fact that I can't get out of bed". She was also concerned about being seen to be too "dependent on them". Holly shared similar views to Hilda and described not wanting to be "talking to people whenever" she is unwell because that wasn't "what she was actually like" and she felt she was lucky to have the friends that she did.

Students highlighted how pre-college friends acted as a "support and encouragement" especially during the early weeks of their transition, or in the case of mature students. Kate considered herself "lucky" to have entered college with these friends. Others spoke

of meeting new friends through these friends. Although Hilda felt she had “fallen into “the dangerous trap of only hanging out with people that [she] knew beforehand”.

Students maintained contact with pre-college friends through “football” or “over the weekends”. However, the level of connectedness varied depending on the student. In many cases, students seemed to become less close as they became more embedded “in college life”. Abigail considered her pre-college friends more important whereas, Luke considered these relationships “equal”. A few students spoke about having very poor friendship experiences pre-college.

Three graduates outlined the positive and negative effects a personal assistant (PA), special needs assistant (SNA), or an interpreter can have on friendship development. Kevin who described himself as a wheelchair user, identified how he would use his PA as an “ice-breaker”. He would then ask his “PA to move to the left or the right of him” to allow him to speak to the new friend. However, he emphasised the importance of being “able to strike up a conversation”. Nora who described herself as requiring the support of an interpreter, had a different perspective. She felt that the presence of her interpreter resulted in people being less likely to approach her because they felt “she had somebody there, so, I don’t need to talk to her”. Conversely, she identified the challenges to social engagement of not having her interpreter when on her “own” outside of classes. She felt that “people” were “hesitant to engage with her because they felt she couldn’t hear them”. She considered herself lucky that she became friends with her interpreter but also that there was another deaf student in her class. She was adamant that her “college life would’ve been a lot harder” only for that.

Students recommended that it was very important that others strategically plan their engagement. Dawn recommended that students, “don’t get too involved.” She believed students “should consider which skills you want to acquire from it, so like if you’re interested, what kind of friends do you want to have”.

Graduates took the opportunity to raise the topic of the development of intimate relationships in HE. They believed that forming relationships can be more difficult for disabled people for a multitude of complex reasons, some of which were personal to the disabled person, and some related to the societal perception of disabled people. They raised their own personal hang ups” and “judgements” which make it more difficult. Kevin was “definite that it especially difficult for people with a visible disability”. He believed that the current society is based on “looking at people on Facebook, Instagram, we’re looking at the big muscles, the big chest” and this is the “idea of what man should look

like or the idea of what a girl should look like". Larry who described himself as having an invisible disability said it would make you "very wary of disclosing due to the stigma [...] which makes you afraid of frightening her away". Zena was of the view that it "depended on the person you are dealing with". She described having both positive and negative experiences. Sophia agreed with Zena but said that she, like Larry, found it very difficult to disclose. She found that disclosing in these situations resulted in "a little emotional upheaval". She perfectly understood why people with "visible disabilities might find it harder to meet somebody". Overall, the participants felt that there was a lot to be done to support disabled people form intimate relationships.

Some students raised the notion of social engagement experiences of males compared to females. Emily believed it was "much tougher for lads than it is for girls." Because "girls socialise in a different way and girls are very chatty, and a lot of them are quite gregarious, and it's as much about the social thing as it is about the academic thing. Whereas lads, [...] don't let on that things aren't going well, you know". Harry agreed with this from his own experience "I have actually noticed that a lot more girls seem to be more involved than the males. The males seem to do their own thing taking the attitude of "if it wasn't going to benefit them, why do it". However, a larger number believed that males had a more positive social engagement experience. Mary believed that males don't class social engagement "as a problem because they go drinking. So, they have a social life and they go out to the matches." She felt that females liked to focus on the "academic side of college". Bernie felt that males were more attracted to sports clubs and societies because they were more group led, whereas females preferred hanging out socially.

Luke highlighted that it was more difficult for males with disabilities because they did not fit the stereotypical view of males. He felt, "that a lot of activities men or lads my age would be involved in I can't take part in. And that is no one's fault. I am not here playing a violin for you, but that is just a reality of it." He explained "there could be a soccer tournament on with fellas who would be my way of thinking, near enough my age my sorts and appearances and I can't get involved in that. I can't because they are able to play football and I can't. Which, which I am going to be honest that is difficult for someone as well.". A number were of the opinion that there was no difference in the experience of males and females. They did note the effect of "leaving the student uniform behind" and the need for greater "sexual consent" courses.

### 5.6.1.1 *Barriers and support for social engagement*

Almost all students and graduates discussed barriers to their social engagement. These included lack of transport, financial difficulties, accommodation, family difficulties, medical concerns, college workload, type of events, students' age, structural issues, bad attitudes, and negative behaviour. Holly highlighted that it was often not one difficulty or inconvenience that created the barrier but when you "actually take a step back, and look at all of them together, [...], they're actually quite a burden."

Graduates spoke at length about the effect of negative behaviour and attitudes on their social engagement. Kevin recalled incidents, whilst being out with his friends in nightclubs and bars, when he had been "patted on the head" and "congratulated for being out". He described being referred to as "brave and courageous" and identified himself as feeling "public property". He felt that this would "prevent people from going out".

Emily, a student, was furious when she was unable to socialise in the SU because "she couldn't access the lift because she didn't have a key". She could not join her friends for coffee during the long class breaks because of the distance she needed to travel across campus to a canteen that was "still open". So, she was forced to remain behind on her own. Tina believed that in order to "improve social involvement", the college, "shouldn't take away student spacing" and "turn off the lifts".

Jane found "timetabling a barrier" to engagement. She explained that "all the society events took place after [college] hours". She decided not to sign up to any societies because of that. Dawn felt that the clubs and societies "were disorganised" which made it difficult to access support for engagement or to "make a complaint". She believed that there were three reasons for this: "one they don't have the same experiences, two there is no structure, and three, they're all friends with each other, so if someone stops being friends with another person, it all kind of collapses."

Emily, like Tanya and Hilda found "age" to be a barrier to engagement. She felt that "at her age it wasn't that important" and she felt "that many of the younger ones wouldn't want to hang out with her". So, she chose not to attend. She was disappointed that there was not a peer led society like a "mature student society" in her college or that the SU did not offer events for mature students.

Students, graduates and Students' Union Full Time Officers felt that the "type of events" can act as a barrier to engagement. This was especially the case in relation to "alcohol" themed or related events. Dawn explained that many of the "SU bonding events" focused on alcohol and she didn't drink because of "mental health" difficulties. Tina "avoided any of the student union events because of that". Bernie felt that this again demonstrated a "lack of awareness".

Edgar believed that events could be improved if there was a "trend" towards promoting the idea that "you don't have to drink, and you can have a good time without drinking". It must be noted that across the interviews there was evidence of students being very conscious of mental and physical health and well-being. This point was supported by Students' Union Full Time Officers.

Living off-campus and transport were a difficulty. This usually occurred in tandem with college timetabling difficulties or the inability to find accommodation. Mary a student, who "couldn't afford to live on campus" described herself as a "commuter". She explained that her bus left at 6pm but many of the college engagement events began at 7pm. She considered this to be "not fair" and that she'd "like to go" but could not. Mary had hoped that her disability support service could have organised for the bus service to "do one late night every week". She said disability service did offer to "provide a taxi" but she appreciated that this might "cost too much" and was concerned that this may be taken from the disability "supports that she needs". Although Robert appreciated the access office organising transport to college for him, he found it frustrating that he could not make changes to allow him to attend social events.

Students' and graduates' interviews primarily focused on their ability, while acknowledging that at times their impairment prevented them from being fully engaged. Students' Union Full Time Officers believed that it could be more difficult for students with certain types of disabilities to disclose their disability and to engage with "clubs and societies". Mark felt that those with "intellectual and physical disabilities" may find it more difficult to "come forward and may be shy". He thought that "there was no one to welcome them", to let them know that "it doesn't matter that you have a disability". Martin felt that the "stigmatisation" of neurodiverse disabilities such as "ASD" and "mental health" difficulties came down to a "lack of education". He finished by adding that this stigmatisation can have a significant impact on the mental health of those with disabilities. Mark worked with the Access Office on a new initiative to support more engagement in college clubs and societies for disabled students.

Robert, a student, found that he was not “physically up to it” and because the events “didn’t suit someone with a disability” he was unable to participate. He said he found this “very tough” to deal with. Edgar said that “because of his anxiety” that he “liked to arrive early and leave early to avoid milling around”. Holly found that her “mental health condition” and the “medication” she was taking “had an effect” which was worse than the disability, so she “wasn’t really able to take part in activities”. Dawn found that one of her biggest issues was “walking into a room full of people”. She felt that it was a help to have “another person to go in with to act as a form of support”.

Jane found that her relationship with her mother often acted as a barrier to her involvement. She described her mother as a “very caring person” and “very protective” of her and as a result “she would not let her go”. This made her “very frustrated” and “annoyed” her greatly.

Students highlighted “accommodations” that were made to allow them to “attend events” could in some instances act as a barrier. Although most appreciated these accommodations, Tina found that the accommodations made could themselves be quite isolating. She gave the example of being provided with “a chair whilst in a venue” where everyone else including “her friends” were “standing up”. Ken found one of the clubs “willing to let him have a go” even though he could not take part in some of the manoeuvres. Denise liked to go and “observe” and the club were willing to facilitate this. However, it must be noted that neither student had taken up these offers.

It was evident from the interviews that many of the students were socially engaged through college or student led activities to support and promote engagement. There was noticeable variation in individual colleges, where some offered a wide range of opportunities and others provided very little. These programmes also varied significantly. Students who were engaged in these activities really enjoyed them.

A few students were very critical of the institutions’ efforts to provide social engagement supports for disabled students. Graduates also believed that there had been little or no support for social engagement during their time in HE.

Jane, a student, was unaware of any “supports” on offer. She wondered was this “because maybe there aren’t many with a physical disability”, she “hadn’t seen very many”. Tracey felt there were more supports for those with mental health difficulties than the physically disabled.

Mary described her college as encouraging students to “get involved” but was visibly frustrated at the lack of supports “to show you how to get involved”. Although critical, Jane was not sure “how the college could support student engagement” and felt “that some of it needs to be up to the student to break out of their shell and try things”.

Luke expressed that his “biggest request would be for the institution to provide supports to get students with disabilities involved”. Kyle would have liked if the college had offered something to improve his “confidence” and introduce him to “other autistic people”.

Students discussed a range of initiatives, including buddy programmes, ambassador programmes, peer mentoring, guides, societies, and club activities.

Many students spoke about their involvement in ambassador programmes, peer mentoring, and acting as an orientation guide. They identified the benefits of these college/ SU organised, peer-led programmes as; the “opportunity to attend many events throughout the year, “meet lots of new people”, “confidence building”, “improve public speaking”, “sharing experiences with other students”, “helping others to socialise”, “doing things they may never have done”, and “learning about the college”.

Diana spoke excitedly about the many friends she had made through these programmes, “I got to know better a girl that I met before, who has a similar condition to me, and then another girl I got to know who is in third year, and then my friend, who’s in my class who’s also got a disability, he was there. So, it is just great, and you’re getting to know the staff as well”.

One college had offered students access to a buddy programme. Tina described how her friend, who she spoke of as having a “learning disability” had “gained great confidence” since she utilised this buddy system to attend events. She said that herself, and her friends look out for this student too, and that this had increased awareness of disabilities in the class.

Holly’s college offered a “gym programme” in association with “student counselling”. This was aimed at students wishing to “improve their mental health”. She described this as being “very good” and she “really enjoyed it as it took the fear out of going to the gym”. Jane spoke about a weekly meet up for first year students organised by her access office to help them to get to know each other. She felt it “wasn’t that good, because only one



or two students attended". She felt students did not attend because, "they had their own friends". But she went to say that such events are "useful" if people attended.

From the interviews, it was evident that although some students may have been struggling to make friends, they were not interested in college engagement programmes. Robert believed that for him, "personally" there was not much that could have been done to support him. He described himself as being "in a bit of a rough place with my disability, so it is very much due to that, but it is just because it was very poor timing for me, that's all it was".

### 5.6.2 Social engagement through academic engagement

A majority of students discussed issues including academic challenges, making friends through group work, and academic demands versus social engagement.

Students had different experiences when engaging academically. Hilda found that "so far it has been wonderful". Students identified that important elements of a good academic experience were the right course choice combined with making friends. Robert explained, "academically I'm loving it because I'm doing a computer science degree. And I'm loving it, it's what I've always wanted to do, and socially, I struggled at the start, but once I had a solid group of friends behind me, that was brilliant too".

A number of students spoke of how academic staff had given them individual support and taken the time to sit with them, often providing them with "extensions" in order to get the work completed. They spoke of tutors being extremely helpful. They felt that they, themselves, needed to take more responsibility and access the supports that are available. Many students were very proud of their academic achievements "considering their disability".

However, students also pinpointed a range of difficulties in engaging academically, such as "being prevented from recording the lecture", being "unsure if they were allowed to record", "fear of explaining medical difficulties to academic staff", "failure to provide lecture slides in advance", and the "fear of leaving during the middle of lectures".

They also spoke of structural difficulties that they considered challenging and prevented them from engaging, including; "difficulties getting to class due to timetables", "unable to find appropriate seating close to the top of the room or on the end of a row", "overcrowded corridors" and a "lack of awareness" of these difficulties. Ken, Denise and

Victoria also explained how “exhaustion” affected their ability to engage academically. They described how they had “often come into lectures with no sleep whatsoever [...] and I’m just getting more fatigued as the day goes on.”

These academic and structural challenges acted as a barrier to engaging socially through their academic work. Mary explained “I can’t just go and have a cup of tea with my friends because I’ve so much extra tuition” and she blames this “for not having a social life”. She described how this became worse upon her entry into second year because she “didn’t received the correct supports”. Kate believes she “didn’t get the opportunity to interact with her class because it was a large group” and she couldn’t “hear people”. However, Tina noted that the staff in her department were very inclusive and it was apparent that this meant a lot to her.

Hilda thought there was a need for the institution to implement an early warning system for staff to identify at risk students. She believed it was not specifically the college’s role to “identify students who may be dossing off work” but there was a need for tutors to be in touch with students. Holly found that having a “tutor as a middleman was brilliant” because having, “to contact the lecturers individually and everything would’ve just been overwhelming at that stage”.

Group work formed an important part of students’ and graduates’ academic engagement. Students reported very mixed experiences. Mary thought it “was good, but then in another way, it’s challenging” due to the diversity of students. Which she says, “can make it hard to get the mix, to integrate with each other” especially if it is competitive. She believed it was not “a good environment in which to make friends” because “there can be a lot of arguing”. Mary finished by saying that it was a “great thing to get your confidence up, but it’s not a great area for making friends.”

Conversely, Luke believed that he “would have never talked to anyone” only for the group work”. Tracey felt it was the “roleplays” and groupwork that broke them up and forced them to “integrate”. Robert explained that it was through group work that he started making friends and Diana found this “supportive”. Abigail believed that it was, “good for the social aspect of things” but she also has had “many troubles with group projects, because there’s always issues with some people not submitting work on time which can affect the student’s grade”. This was a point highlighted by a number of students.

Donal, a graduate believed that one of the “biggest challenges was forming groups”. He found it particularly difficult because he did not know people in his class. Many other graduates had similar experiences to Donal. One benefit of group work was the formation of friendships. Donal noted that “the best friends that [he] made over the four years” were through group work. Nora and Lorcan agreed and discussed similar experiences.

Participants also highlighted how a “lack of awareness among students” impacted upon their group work experience. Kate spoke of how her group always chose “really loud venues”, resulting in her being unable “to follow anything and blaming her for not paying attention”. This resulted in her having “a serious falling-out with one group because they failed to book a room”, meaning she could not participate in the group work.

Hilda, a student, believed that students should not have to engage in graded group work until second year. She felt that at that stage students will have made “connections”. She felt that it would be then possible “to work better together and maybe become friends”. Tracey too felt that she had her “friends” who she liked to “chill out with” and then she had her chosen few” who she liked to work with.

It was evident that there was push-pull for students on whether to focus on their academic or social engagement. Most, like Tina acknowledged that, “they were there to learn”. Abigail felt that there was a “a lot of pressure to do well” academically. She “felt there was no “encouragement, from a staff perspective “to be socially involved”. But she believed that both were equally important and “that they have to kind of go hand-in-hand”.

Victoria like Diana, explained that she was not “part of any clubs or societies this year, purely because [she had] too much academic work to do.” Bernie described how her “college workload would impact on her social involvement”. Hilda believed that, “it is important to be socially involved, I think it’s more important to get a degree”. She went on to say that “having a friend supports academics, but academics doesn’t really support having a lot of really, really busy social interactions all the time”.

Graduates discussed the importance of their academic engagement. They found that the early years of college were the best time to engage socially and build connections as once it came to third year, academic requirements took “precedence”. Sophie who had been very involved in the student’s union, noted that once she reached “third year

[she] was pretty much head down the whole year". She described it as "very rare to meet up with somebody on the corridor and that was kind of hard as it went from one extreme in first year to the other". There was a belief among certain graduates that if you had a disability there was more pressure to do well academically. Donal, who acquired his disability whilst in college, felt that he would need higher grades to compensate for his disability.

Graduates felt that there was also a certain pressure on the college to maintain a visible degree of "fairness" and college could not be seen to provide extra concessions for social engagement of disabled students. Stephen postulated that perhaps the overall aim of attending "college was to earn a degree" and that your "social life" came second.

Participants also highlighted the need to maintain a work-life balance. Most found this very difficult. Victoria, a student, began by noting that she hadn't found the balance yet, but she explained how she worked "very hard to [find the balance], sleeping, taking breaks, eating well, trying to fit in smaller parts of social activity when I can". Harry believed that although, college was about "getting your degree" he asserted that there was a need to "interact with people" because you could be working with them in the future. Although he finished by sharing that "he had not, could not, figure out the balance" and was "too involved".

Graduates described wishing they had "gone easier on themselves" and taken more "time out". They highlighted their strategies for success. Kevin explained how he found "goal setting" as very important combined with regular "relaxing breaks" in which he went to meet his friends after submitting an essay or completing an exam.

### 5.6.3 Student leadership and representation

Students demonstrated high levels of engagement with the Students' Union (SU). For some this was passive awareness of events or services, and others were active in representing their class, being involved in campaigns, or personally availing of services. They described the SU as being amazing, approachable, supportive, and empowering. The SU was identified as having an important role in awareness raising about issues including budgeting, mental health and wellness. They also held a disability awareness week. Holly "really enjoyed the opportunity to volunteer" during this week. Robert described how his meeting with the Vice President for Welfare Equality resulted in him speaking "about his disability and his experiences on campus at an event during

disability awareness week". He felt this was "a really good idea". Students saw the SU as "advocating on their behalf", Tracey described how they "helped her" during a "dispute with a fellow classmate". Derek, considered the SU as being there for you if, "you feel you aren't being represented properly" and "they give you the support to, not only help yourself, but others." He finished by saying that they had "empowered him to make a change". A number of students took on representative positions within the SU. Kate became a class representative and a member of the student council/senate. She was pleased that once she had made her voice heard, others supported her, and changes were made.

All the Students' Union Full Time Officers were aware of a student with a disability in a senior decision-making position. Mark explained that their structure meant that there was a specific representative from the DARE and HEAR programmes within their governing structure. This was common among all union bodies who participated. The officers all provided evidence of occasions when a disability related matter was brought forward, and changes were made within the union, or when a campaign was organised to make changes in the institution. However, Martin said that he would "like to see more representation of disabled students going forward". He felt that "the college" needed to do more to "empower students" and provide them with the "tools to be professional complainers". He also held the view that there needed to be "a push towards people who do live with any form of disability" to put themselves forward and not "be afraid". He believed that the "social stigma" may be holding some students back.

Student union officers were quite conscious of the voice of students at a national level and their collective ability to bring about change. They spoke of interacting with unions in other colleges and sharing campaign ideas. Mark thought that "the HEA would listen to the student voice if the student voice was projected at it". Martin believed that the HEA needed to "focus on disability" more. Mark thought that the government was starting to recognise the students' input, in that "we've certainly seen the student input into the last couple of referendums" and that, "the student voice is being listened to at the national level". He described receiving email responses from "different ministers" following contact with them and being "pleased that he was being listened to".

Students who took on representative positions admitted that these roles were very demanding and that "at times it can be very hard to be a class rep, because you take on the class' problems". They also spent a lot of time preparing reports on accessibility issues. Bernie explained how she had completed an "accessibility audit of the college

over a two-year period” and then presented it to senior management. It was clear that students took these roles extremely seriously and were very proactive. Not all students took up leadership positions through the SU. For instance, Harry described himself as a “representative through the access office”. Tina found it useful having HEAR and DARE representatives in such positions because they supported each other and understood the challenges. Kate was really pleased that the “committee leader president” was the “senate/council disability member”. Students also spoke about being student ambassadors, chairs of clubs and societies.

Those interviewed felt there were many benefits to being engaged in leadership roles. Diana said, “she wouldn’t have been able to” run for a position before coming to college. She felt that her “self-esteem” had improved and that she was “proving” to herself that she “can do something”. Peter explained that he liked being able to have “his say at the meetings” and holding the clubs to account. They also benefited from seeing other disabled students in leadership roles and Tracey said that when she saw her friend with a disability running for a position she felt, “if [she] can do it, then she could too”. She described her friend as “challenging her”. Robert expressed the strong view that having advocacy skills was “very important”. The following section will present a summary for the second superordinate theme, engagement.

#### 5.6.4 Summary of theme 2: Engagement

Despite the barriers identified, the majority of students considered themselves socially engaged. It was evident that social and academic engagement were linked. This link was not always positive, and participants struggled to find a balance. For a number, this balance was contingent on other factors beyond their control. These factors included timetabling, transport, accommodation, financial, support service organisation, structures within the clubs and societies, awareness, accessibility issues. A failure of the institution to resource the necessary supports to enable them to socially engage was a factor.

Graduates were very reasonable about the lack of support for social engagement and blamed the recession. Participants identified family and friends as supporting their unmet needs. Students wanted to have more control over how their supports were delivered. It was evident that there was a feedback mechanism available to students both within the institution and the students’ union. Students’ Union Full Time Officers showed an awareness in relation to the issues impacting students, and there were examples of

student feedback mechanisms resulting in changes. However, it was clear that there was limited direct input by disabled students, with a limited number participating in decision-making in the SU and wider college environment.

Ultimately it appeared that colleges with peer groups were more aware and active when it came to disability rights. Many students made friends through their orientation programmes and there was a definite desire to engage in peer led groups to share their experiences. Participants expressed an interest in taking up leadership roles. It was a source of pride to disabled students and graduates to be able to identify disabled students who were in such positions.

Based on the data it was apparent that there was, what could be described as a patchwork of initiatives being implemented to support students' social engagement. The peer mentoring programme was the exception as it appeared to be implemented across colleges. The student voice suggests that there is not a clear policy or coordinated support structure being implemented across the colleges to support the social engagement of disabled students.

## **5.7 Theme 3: College Climate**

College climate was the third superordinate theme generated from the data, see Figure 14. All Students' Union Full Time Officers, and almost all students and graduates spoke about the college climate.

Theme 3: College Climate was categorised into three subordinate themes:

These data are categorised into three subordinate themes:

- Attitudes and behaviours of staff and students,
- Universal design,
- Belonging.

### **5.7.1 Attitudes and behaviours of staff and students**

Participants' views concerning the contribution of a supportive environment, student voice, disability awareness, and disclosure of a disability are presented.

The majority of students reported having a positive or very positive student experience within their institution. Graduates, students and Students' Union Full Time Officers

considered their institutions as supportive, caring, friendly, diverse, and nurturing environments. Students primarily spoke about the feeling when they first entered the college during orientation week, identifying the help on offer from both staff and students alike. Jane noted that in her college “there was always nice people to hold the door or move a chair.”

Students spoke about the factors they believed were critical to creating a positive experience. They included enjoying what you are doing, student support, enjoying learning and enjoying, you know, getting it wrong sometimes, getting on well with your lecturers and tutors, universal acceptance, finding people you get along well with, rights and accessibility, these were all identified as being hugely important.

Student support featured very strongly throughout the interviews. Students appreciated and were quite knowledgeable on the range of services available to them. It was clear from the student data that staff and students play a major role in the creation of a supportive college climate. Robert believed that the creation of a “supportive” environment came down to two things “friends and the approachability of lecturers”.

Although students spoke of a range of supports, they focussed on those of the disability support or access services. They spoke extremely highly of these services, and identified them as approachable, amazing, providing them with note-takers, live-scribe pens, and additional tutoring which made a huge difference to their grades.

Like the other services, students often identified one person who made a difference. Robert reflected his first day meeting with the access office and what stood out for him was that his “advisor had a disability and it was a visible one”. It made him feel a lot more comfortable because the advisor knew what they were talking about.

There was substantial evidence of students availing of a wide range of other supports outside of the disability and access offices including “student counselling”, “chaplaincy”, “students’ union”, “students’ advisers”, and academic supports including “tutoring” and “maths clubs”. In many cases, they referred to one particular person who made an impact.

Academic support was mentioned regularly throughout the interviews and it was apparent that this mattered to students. Academic success and being “able to enjoy your degree” were very important to Dawn. Mary considered it important to “get on with your lecturers and get on with your departments”. Students spoke of their “lecturers as being



approachable, willing to talk to you... and understanding". Luke described the combination of the academic staff and access office as going "above and beyond the call of duty" and being "essential to my settling in in university." Holly described how her tutor had supported her by acting as a "middleman" between her and her lecturers during a difficult time.

However, support was not widespread, and there was evidence of a 'siloiing effect'. Graduates and students identified instances when they raised issues pertaining to their disability with different services and were advised to attend the disability service. Bernie, a student felt that "some of them just didn't really care". This seemed to occur most regularly in relation to academic supports and when students were raising accessibility issues with "campus or building services".

Whereas students identified the people as supportive "caring" and well-meaning, although there was evidence of the structures and systems surrounding them not being so. Kate noted "if you went to someone and asked for help, they'd try their best to do whatever they could for you". One negative example was the "failure to pass information of accommodations" to academic staff. Ken was extremely agitated about this as he had brought "in all the medical reports" and given the disability support service permission, but they had failed to inform his lecturers. He felt lecturers should be "informed" because he had nothing to be "ashamed" about. This was a point supported by many participants.

This failure to transfer information created a great degree of anxiety among participants about how academic staff would react to them. Issues of concern were "recording the lectures", "falling asleep in class", "having to leave class early due to pain" or "toilet breaks". This was of greatest concern to students during small in-department exams. They were often afraid they would not receive the supports they needed. Victoria, a student, had to spend the first two weeks of second year visiting all the academic staff to explain her disability and support needs to them.

There was also reported instances where the information had been passed over to the academic staff, but they admitted to students that they "hadn't looked at it". Students also spoke of staff blaming 'General Data Protection Rules' for the failure to pass on information to academic staff.

There was evidence of individual departments being particularly unsupportive and failing to implement the most basic support requests. Students reported this as having a

detrimental effect on their academic, mental and social well-being. Mary explained how she had considered “leaving college”. It also affected the students’ sense of identity and resilience. Robert began by saying that college had been “amazing” at the beginning but then he began to have some problems with one of his department and “every other department had been amazing”. He described how he had to depend on the kindness of classmates to get his work done.

Students who described these incidents noted that they were not “looking for special treatment” they were just seeking “fairness”. Tracey believed that although it can be difficult, “students with disabilities need to talk about their disability and continue to ask for help”.

Students identified a variety of different support initiatives being implemented in their institution. These ranged from academic supports such as “a student run computer programming course” and the presence of the “National Learning Network” on campus. Mental health supports included “a text support service” for students feeling anxious, a “counselling service being available at the off-campus accommodation”, “chaplain weekly lunch” and “SU mental health awareness week including meditation”. Tracey described how she felt when she received a text from the counselling text service, “I felt like I mattered, even though it was something, like, so small”.

Similarly, to support use patterns identified in earlier themes, there was clear evidence of students choosing not to avail of the supports. Dawn shared two reasons why she felt students don’t attend seminars organised by student services, “well, I think that those [...] often end up being patronizing or not understanding the student experience” and students “don’t have time to go do it because of the work/life balance thing.”

Emily chose not to avail of supports when she began college. Despite facing difficulties due to exhaustion during the Christmas exams and recommendations from academic staff she continued to refuse supports. She said her reasoning was that she wanted to “assert her independence through seeing could she do it on her own” and “to be as good as anyone else”. Hilda believed that if she had been “more up front” and “registered with the disability support” instead of “denying that it was something that needed to be addressed” it would have been more beneficial to her. Tracey believed that there should be mandatory assessment for all students.

Throughout the interview's students, graduates and Students' Union Full Time Officers emphasised having their voice heard. Harry, a student, was of the view that the recent removal of the "student common room" was evidence that the voice of "students with disabilities was not being listened to by the college". Kate, on the other hand, believed that the voice of disabled students was listened to more than the regular student voice in her college. Tracey who describes herself as a member of "student council" agreed with Kate. However, she found that it "takes a while" to bring about change. Tina identified how her engagement in "student activism" had resulted in the college responding to the student voice and establishing "a buddy system", implementing "sleeping pods, and automatic doors".

Harry added that he felt that he was being listened to by "the access office". A point supported by Robert, who spoke of the access office seeking feedback on how the programme could be "changed" and how since he became a "volunteer" he has witnessed how this feedback resulted in change.

Students were very aware of what was going on in the wider college environment and identified times when they felt the people, or the environment contributed to making them feel uncomfortable. Emily spoke of a "sense of a slight disillusionment with some of the lecturers, and within the department". She contended that "there was always a sense in there was no point of complaining". She believed it was "probably the college environment".

Emily thought it would be valuable for the college to undertake "attitude surveys" about the "college environment" and ask students and staff what would "make things better". Although she felt the majority of academic staff were "conscientious" she felt there was a need for greater academic "accountability" within her institution.

Graduates, students and Students' Union Full Time Officers commented on the diversity of their institution, as an "inclusive, liberal" environment. Derek, a student, identified how "there is a lot of openness in how we talk about things, how we can have an open conversation about sexual harassment, disability awareness, LGBT aware". Hilda felt strongly that that the college "should be doing all they can to encourage people from all walks of life to go into higher education." Despite the recognition of diversity, half of students felt that there was no disability awareness within their institution. Denise and Ken expressed the opinion that "awareness" of disability among staff and students was critical to "being able to fit in to "your class", and your college "without being isolated by

people's ignorance". Mary felt that greater "inclusion in a college would make it a better college".

Graduates and students expressed concerns about the awareness levels of their classmates. They spoke of a "stigma" around certain disabilities including "nonvisible disabilities" and perceptions around their use of supports and being "treated differently". Jane, a student, felt that "some people could be more aware, like, I feel like that still, in the 21st century, it's still a problem.". Tracey, a student, said she "constantly felt like she had something to prove because of the stigma surrounding mental health". Graduates, including Kevin, believed "the perception of disability out there in society in general, [well] it can be portrayed as still unusual or different to the norm and so it is treated in that regard. But once you bridge the gap, that initial hesitation, then I think you get better reception from both lecturers and students." Stephen believed that the "stigma" came down to people not being "exposed to disability prior to coming to college" and as a result "they tend to stay away from what they are not familiar with". Kevin went on to highlight the importance of "normalising disability, and... normalising the talk about disability and language around" it. He felt a certain responsibility "to break down prevailing attitudes" and make people aware. Stephen believed that the more he "went to the social events" that "perceptions did change, helping to reduce the stigma". Emily had a different view and believed that "when you're disabled, you're slightly invisible. Or you are not on people's radar. It's, you know you can be a bit sort of paranoid and think, [...] really, and I'd say for a lot of my classmates and for a lot of my tutors, you know, my disability would've been an education for them."

Students spoke of other classmates, especially friends, who were extremely "supportive, despite not knowing what to do". These friends were identified as being "accepting" and seen as "not treating them differently".

Aside from the work of their students' union, Holly and Hilda questioned how much was being done in their college to raise awareness. Bernie found that her classes' awareness levels had increased due to her campaigns to improve campus accessibility. Emily highlighted how her college ran a programme for students with intellectual disabilities. She describes this as having dramatically increased awareness and encouraged people to show greater empathy.

Students went on to discuss staff awareness and Emily noted how following returning to college she felt that "they were in my corner." Mary expressed the strong opinion that "departments were more aware" than the students in her class. She believed this was

because “they have dealt with people before who had disabilities” whereas “the students just don’t want to know anything.”

Students regularly mentioned their tutors as needing greater awareness levels. Tracey believed her tutors needed to brush up on their “communication and awareness”. Tina, on the other hand, spoke of how her tutor had been instrumental in having her class moved when she explained to him that she “was missing tutorials” because it was in an inaccessible venue.

Graduates concurred with students’ views and Lorcan felt that “a lot of lecturers and laboratory workers” were also “quite wary” of him. He found this especially when “handling jars and chemicals”. However, he found the staff did become “used to him” eventually. Donal was of the opinion that there was a need for greater awareness among staff especially when it came to formation of groups and people returning from medical leave. Stephen found “work experience” as being extremely useful in demonstrating your “professional” capabilities to classmates.

Two out of the three Students’ Union Full Time Officers demonstrated good disability awareness, and all of them identified having regular contact with disabled students. None of the officers had undertaken disability awareness training. However, two out of the three officers thought that there was poor disability awareness within their institution. The consensus was that the student body was less aware than institutional staff. Olive believed that the students’ union wasn’t “inclusive” and this was reflective of the “situation across the whole college” like the “societies”. Officers pinpointed various reasons for this. They believed that people were not aware until they had “encountered someone with a disability in their life”. They identified a general lack of awareness among the wider society.

Olive was adamant that the student organisations demonstrated a lack of awareness because of a failure to implement a “policy”. It was accepted that the annual turnover rate of the union, society and club officers acted as a barrier to increasing awareness and developing policies and culture within the student organisational body. Olive suggested there was a need for better “policy and a governing body” over the union to assist in implementing this policy. She felt that until “something is put in place” and student organisations are “strongly encouraged” then awareness levels would not increase.

Martin believed that there was a need for a “national campaign”, to improve societal awareness. Officers believed that the inclusion of disabled students in SU life increases awareness.

Mental health and mental health awareness featured strongly during discussions with all participants. Dawn, a student, spoke of a greater awareness at a surface level but a need to tackle the deeper held negative perceptions, “So people are comfortable talking about mental health in an abstract way, or like when it comes to people with good mental health, but like, if someone is actually struggling or isn’t able to do things because of it, it isn’t recognised, and it is still stigmatised”.

Overall students identified the need for “disability awareness training” for staff, but especially students. They felt that this should take place as part of the “orientation programme”. Robert believed that the training should focus on the fact that disability is common and that “people with disabilities are just the same, they’re just people”. There was evidence of the students being proactive in this regard and working with the students’ union and college departments. Mary described how she was working with her “two departments to make them more aware”.

Among graduates, the issue of disclosure resulted in some significant discussion during the focus groups. There was a range of views expressed concerning why a student should or should not disclose. Larry recalled choosing not to disclose his disability or register with the disability support service. He spoke of being part of the disability society and attending meetings “on the quiet” and that upon reflection he was “sorry” that he had not told his friends. He believed he chose not to disclose because he felt there was a “stigma” around disability. Kevin on the other hand believes it is important to disclose your disability, “for yourself as well as to get support and help”. The majority of the graduates felt that awareness levels in the environment were an important factor in students deciding to disclose.

Some students spoke directly about disclosure of their disability and it was obvious that choosing to disclose was a very personal matter. A few students recognised my disability and noted my ability to understand. They spoke about their “fear of disclosure”, “worries about not disclosing” and the techniques “used to disclose”.

Students with visible disabilities seemed less uncomfortable about disclosing than those with “invisible” or “hidden” disabilities”. Students spoke of having to disclose their

disability as part of the DARE entry route. The majority were satisfied with having to do this because they could avail of the many supports, they needed in college. Harry said, “if I didn’t disclose, I wouldn’t have got in, so I had no problems at all with disclosing it.” Students gave a number of reasons for choosing not to disclose before entering college or to their friends including, “not wanting to be judged”, “wanting to be like everyone else”, “being proud”. One student who did disclose found the process “very hard”. Tracey explained how getting to know another person with a disability who was, “so full of life” helped her to “open up about her disability”.

However, students did note a difference in choosing to disclose to their peer group and the college. Abigail had chosen not to tell her friends she was “registered with the access service”. Mary spoke of being afraid to disclose to people in case they, “will walk away from you, or they won’t want to be friends with you”, that they would question why she is in college. Holly felt she did not “mind, once like a friendship has been established, you know”. She was aware of other students having bad experiences following disclosure due to students “jumping to conclusions”.

Students described having different techniques for disclosing including “making a joke” of their disability, “apologising” for the effects of their disability, or being “straight up”. Emily felt that this was the best approach because she felt “people were curious” and it was a good way to “connect” with people. Students confided how they had shared “in-jokes” with other disabled students about their disability and how it was important to be “open”. Peter said he had no problem disclosing and, in his sports club, he would make a joke that it wasn’t his “fault that I can’t keep up with you” it on you. I would have no problem in disclosing that. Like I would say in a bit of a jokey way, like.”

Although Dawn did not mind disclosing, she preferred not to “go into details about what the experience is like for her”. She felt it was necessary to disclose to “explain” why she was “quiet” or didn’t attend events and why she was such an active mental health campaigner. Dawn felt it necessary to disclose to prevent people “assuming” things about her.

Students also recounted how they had often felt uncomfortable not disclosing to their friends and that they felt it put a strain on their relationships. They believed it contributed to a lack of understanding and awareness in the class. Despite believing this, Peter felt that people should be given “privacy” and should not be pushed into disclosing.

### 5.7.2 Universal design

The majority of students discussed teaching and learning spaces and graduates also highlighted how failures in accessibility negatively impacted upon their HE experiences. Venue accessibility was identified by Students' Union Full Time Officers as affecting how students interacted with other students. Jane, a student, described how she was unable to sit with her friend because of tiered seating, and so sat alone at the front of the class. This made her more aware of her disability and prevented her from being socially involved with her peers. She noted that it was times like that she wished she was not "disabled".

Students spoke of being unable to make it to class on time due to scheduling of timetables and the distances they had to move across the campus to reach their lectures. Their late arrival was compounded by being unable to access suitable seating arrangements to allow them "record the lecture", "see "the board, or sit on an "aisle seat". Students spoke about academic assessment as much as class activities and many reported availing of exam accommodations. They appreciated these, but also mentioned the disabling effect. Abigail would have preferred to have been in the "main hall". She would have liked if there had been "an individual room set aside to the main hall where she could sit her exams". Students found it "lonely" having to sit their exams on their own.

Students complained that often during the "continuous assessment" process they did not receive accommodations. They identified "a lack of awareness" by exam administrators of their needs. Tanya felt at a disadvantage in situations like this.

Students voiced their disappointment that inaccessibility issues prevented them meeting in their lecturers' offices. Students were forced to make advance appointments and arrange meetings on the ground floor. Lecturers made individual accommodations to facilitate these meetings.

Fire safety was a major concern for two students interviewed. Emily identified how there "was no evacuation chair on the third floor". She raised this with building services, but no changes were made.



The failure of elevators/lifts, or the access to them, was the most frequent issue around accessibility. Students were extremely annoyed either on their own behalf or on behalf of their friends, as this negatively impacted upon their social and academic engagement. It resulted in students feeling isolated and interfered with their sense of belonging. Tanya identified the lift as a limited resource in her institution and was frustrated by people who chose to use it unnecessarily. She felt this demonstrated a lack of awareness among staff and students. Students identified needing to have a key or, having to approach members of staff to operate the lift. Tracey said her friend “uses a wheelchair” but she does not consider her as “special needs” and she questioned why the college puts “barriers” in the way of students.

A majority of students spoke about the contribution of “spaces”, within their institution. These included “learning”, “social”, “chill-out”, and “safe” spaces. They described being “angry, frustrated, embarrassed” at having their “independence” or the independence of their friends taken away by “inaccessible spaces”. They were left feeling the “college didn’t care”. The development of spaces that meet students’ different needs was recognised as important. Students valued having access to their safe, quiet or chill-out spaces. Hilda described her quiet space as an area where she knows “nobody’s gonna come in and shout at me”. She describes these places as more “student orientated”. Such spaces included counselling, the chaplaincy and the students’ union.

Graduates, and particularly students, had strong views on universal design. Many maintained “accessibility” was probably one of the most important items for “a good student experience”. Tracey believed that by not facilitating this the college was “isolating her”.

Tina explained that greater accessibility would mean that her she and her friend would have “their own independence [...] you don’t have to wait for someone to open the door”. She went on to identify a location that was fully accessible “there was also access for people with wheelchairs, there was a wheelchair toilet in the common room along with two regular toilets as well. It was great for everybody, not just for people with physical disabilities”.

Students felt that staff failed to understand how students use and interact with social spaces. Hilda identified how the college had developed a new student space and then populated it with posters, music and TV screens. She believed this was fundamental

misunderstanding of how students “interact with media” and “how spaces are used by students”.

Tina believed that the new space in her college had not been developed in consultation with disabled students because it was so badly laid out and that the college had replaced the seating with “bean bags” which could not be accessed by disabled students.

### 5.7.3 Belonging

A majority of students reported feeling a sense of belonging within their institution. When discussing belonging, students referred to “a feeling of being at home”, “connections with students and staff”, “finding your people”, and “getting involved”. A few students connected belonging to the “achievement” of obtaining the “results” and the “right” to attend college. There was a sense from students that this could not be taken away from them. For instance, Tanya said, “I absolutely feel like I belong. This is something that I deserve for my own personal self”. Robert believed that in college it was about “finding that sense of belonging”. He felt that it was what he needed “especially with my disability, I needed that to get my motivation back. And that’s what college has done for me”. Students identified the contribution of “spaces”, “infrastructure”, “people”, and “supports” such as the “disability and access office” in developing a sense of belonging.

Derek felt that what made him feel like he belonged was “how he was treated”, “how he had the opportunity to express his opinions”. Diana was adamant that she belonged and believed that becoming engaged in the wider college community had contributed to this. She went on to say, “I’m just so proud to be a part of [...] and doing what I’m doing, [...] I think everybody should have that experience in their life”. Several students identified the disability support and access office as contributing to their sense of belonging. Jane expressed the view that it was her engagement with the access office, her personal assistant’s help, and her friends that had made her feel like she belonged in college.

There were many instances when students did not feel like they belonged. Students spoke quite emotionally, about feeling “alone” “feeling invisible”, and wanting to “feel the same” or “be seen like everyone else”. Bernie described how inaccessible buildings prevented her from socialising with her friends. She recounted an incident in which the “lift was broken” for a long period of time which meant she could not access the student services with her friends. Students’ union officers believed that “wrong course choice”

and having “no friends” were the two main reasons for students feeling like they did not belong in college. A few students spoke of being “left out” of “whatsapp groups” or being bullied by class members on social media or in class. Mary reported that in her first year, she had been bullied due to a “social media” post. She detailed how, “everyone kind of drew away from” her making her feel that she “shouldn’t be in third level... and she wasn’t entitled to be in college life”. Students did however note that the institution had been quick to react, and all issues had been satisfactorily resolved. Students spoke of feeling that bullying would not be tolerated in their college.

Students and graduates differentiated between a sense of belonging within their class versus the rest of the institution. Graduates identified having had friends but feeling uncertain about their sense of belonging. Tracey, a student, said there was “a time I didn’t feel like I belonged in my class, but I did belong in the college”. She went on to say that “sometimes I’d actually pray for the end of class”. During these times she would go and “chill in the students’ union, or the lunchroom”.

Students such as Holly believed that her “class was separate from the college community”, for two reasons, firstly that “her class were only all together for two modules”, and secondly because, they didn’t have one central location or “hub”. Abigail spoke of lecturers and tutors not knowing her name and not knowing very many students in her class.

Emily spoke about getting a sense of “disillusionment” among staff and students. Robert identified how the failure of his department to work with him to provide support affected his sense of “finding his place”. He felt “he wasn’t supported the same as everyone else, and he didn’t [...] receive the same opportunity”.

In contrast, Holly felt “it did help having lecturers who talk to you after the lectures, who are happy to go through things with you, and you know, like, make a joke”. She believed it was important that “the formal barrier” was removed. Peter too felt like he belonged in his department and enjoyed the opportunity to interact with the students from different years. Edgar believed “he had found his people” and really got a “lot out of the material, studying and the quality of the staff. I think they are really the business”.

Seeing staff and students on campus with a disability contributed to a sense of belonging for some students. Robert identified how a disability officer who had a disability made him feel more comfortable and like he belonged. This person assisted him to gain the

supports he needed in his department. Emily described how she had spoken to “one of her lecturers, who had a physical disability” about the challenges she faced. Emily felt that if “you weren’t a person with a disability you wouldn’t have been as aware”. Jane said that seeing disabled people on campus made her feel like she belonged and “if they can get through this, so can I”.

Students identified a number of ways in which a sense of belonging could be created or improved within their institution. They suggested, “increased disability awareness”, “breaking down cliques”, and “greater departmental engagement”.

Mark, SU officer, believed that there was a “very good sense of community” in his institution and he believed that a contributory factor for this was the “small” size of the institution. However, he highlighted that research carried out by his union had shown that the sense of belonging among students “had dropped”. He identified that there are students “walking around” who feel like they “don’t belong”. One of the difficulties identified was “financial reasons”. He concluded by noting that “HEI should be looking” into students “sense of belonging” and believed that they should be running a campaign around “change of mind”. This would support students who have chosen the wrong course.

The following section will present a summary for the third superordinate theme, college climate.

#### 5.7.4 Summary of theme 3: College Climate

Students, graduates and Students’ Union Full Time Officers gave their thoughts on college climate through the subordinate themes of attitudes and behaviours of staff and students, universal design, and belonging. They identified how the location, size, infrastructure, attitudes of staff, diversity of the student population and course choice, all impacted the climate within their institution.

Participants generally considered their HE a supportive environment, one in which they recognised the help of individual members of staff. However, students were very clear that the structures and systems in place frequently did not facilitate this supportive mindset. Participants noted the importance of the institution facilitating and listening to the student voice. There was evidence of this occurring in relation to access and diversity. However, there was significant gaps identified in areas such as buildings and

services, the academic field, and in student social life. Participants spoke of varying levels of awareness, with some examples of very good practice but there was also reported poor awareness among students' classmates. These attitudes affected students' decisions to disclose their disability and students' sense of belonging.

Students, graduates and Students' Union Full Time Officers identified the contribution of "spaces", "infrastructure", "people", and "supports" such as the "disability and access office" in developing a sense of belonging. Students in particular were very familiar with universal design approaches and were very annoyed at the inaccessibility shortcomings of the institutions and frustrated by their failure to make changes on reported issues.

Students and graduates differentiated between a sense of belonging in their college and in their class, and Students' Union Full Time Officers expressed concerns about students' sense of belonging. The visibility of disabled staff and students contributed to a sense of belonging for students. Being welcomed and included by staff and older students in their department was also identified as positive contribution.

Graduates spoke frequently about the perceived 'stigma' surrounding disability and their efforts to make staff and students more aware. It was clear that this had a major impact on students and put extra pressure on them. The focus groups also expressed an overall lack of awareness within the institutions and an over reliance on the disability support service. Participants saw their college as attempting to be supportive but failing to be fully inclusive.

Ultimately, the data points to the need for a whole of institution approach to awareness raising initiatives. The institutions should support the students' union to develop and implement awareness raising strategies among the student body, to be delivered by the students.

## 5.8 Theme 4: Structures

Structures was the fourth superordinate theme that emerged from data analysis of the interviews with students, graduates, and students' union officers, see Figure 14.

All of the students' union officers, and several students and graduates mentioned the impact the structures and system had internally and external to their institution. Participants mainly spoke of the system indirectly, referring to a part of HE experiences. They regularly noted the impact of "culture", "resources", and "policy", on the national and institutional systems.

Theme 4: Structures was categorised into three subordinate themes:

- Policy and systems,
- Resources,
- College size and regional variation.

### 5.8.1 Policy and systems

Students, graduates and the Students' Union Full Time Officers spoke about the effects of timetabling, structure of courses, resource constraints, accessibility issues, and the wider treatment of diversity. External system issues included, homelessness, addiction supports, financial difficulties, national culture and attitudes, and access to transport.

Students identified how a combination of an "inflexible system and structures" in combination with their "disability" can create "barriers". Kyle believed that his "progress has been hindered significantly both by my disability, my mental illness that comes with it, and the college's inability to deal with it on both a personal and a systematic structural level." He explained that a failure of the college to register him following his return from leave had created "an enormous amount of stress and limited his ability go get involved". Jane found the operating hours and timetabling of the institution to be a significant challenge as it affected her ability to engage in social activities, and access services. Jane said her timetable made her life "really hard" because she was dependent on college transport to and from college. It meant she was had to be up at 6am and did not return home until 7pm, leaving her exhausted. This timetabling acted to compound the effects of her disability.

Tanya found her college's "policy and system regarding booking lockers and access to lifts and disabled toilets frustrating". She described how despite her arthritis she had no access to a locker and so she had to purchase a wheelie bag to carry her books around all day. She shared how students were required to request a key at reception to access the disabled toilets.

Kyle felt that the college could be "a bit more flexible and that it was very difficult to maintain a positive outlook when, it feels like the entire institution is against me." He wished to have "an institution to be more responsive and flexible, and helpful to me. Especially in times of crisis."

Students discussed the effects of systemic challenges outside the institution. A number of students disclosed that they were from socio-disadvantaged backgrounds. They highlighted difficult circumstances at home, "including parents who were living with a disability", "unemployment", "homelessness" and "addiction". Diana who had struggled with addiction described the benefits of education, "since I got clean and sober that I've even been able to (a), have the self-esteem, and (b), have focus to be able to do something. And the more time I spend back in education, and the more confident I've grown". Tracey spoke of the challenges she faced due to homelessness "I have been homeless for 3 years, [...] I know a lot about the law, so I deal with a lot of people that are being evicted from their homes". She describes how when people hear she is 'homeless' it adds to the "stigma... of having a mental health condition".

A number of students spoke about having to commute due to the unavailability of affordable accommodation. Jane explained that, "most people would travel because the apartments, they're very expensive". She was concerned that even if she did live away from home, she would not be able to "manage" because she might not have access to the necessary supports. She explained how she had been forced to wait until the beginning of her second semester to receive a 'power chair' from the Health Service Executive.

Graduates spoke about the impact of accommodation and transport. Sophie revealed that having access to "campus accommodation removed the challenges and cost of travelling, it helped to reduce exhaustion levels", and "definitely impacted on her ability to socialise".

Many students and the Students' Union Full Time Officers believed that mental health awareness was a cultural and societal problem within Ireland, and not a problem that is confined to HE. Holly, a student, felt that "obviously the students' union is making [an] effort, there's still a lot to be done but it's more than a societal thing than a college one".

Two students and one SU officer spoke about the planned designation of their institution as a Technological University (TU). Martin, SU officer, considered this to be a "very positive", development. They felt that this would have significant benefits for the college especially in relation to diversity and was a sign that their college had "thrived". Martin identified his union as facing some challenges amalgamating the three unions resulting in some budgetary uncertainty. Another concern was how to develop a new structure for union officers to ensure the "best for their membership". He highlighted that 'disability' currently falls under the remit of the SU Welfare Officer and that this may change when they move to the new structure, falling under the remit of an equality diversity and inclusion (EDI) officer".

All student union officers spoke about policy. They were aware of policy at an institutional and national level. Although aware of different policies and their significance they were often unable to supply details. They identified an important part of their role as representing students on the decision-making committees across the institution and recognised their institution as having an EDI policy. Martin added that his college also had an EDI committee and was very pleased that it was connected directly under the President's Office. However, he was concerned about the diversity of the membership of the committee, as there was no representation from the travelling community, and he was unaware of any disabled people on it; while there was strong representation from the LGBTQ community and most of the board were staff.

The interviews with Students' Union Full Time Officers evidenced a clear lack of policy within the unions. All the officers admitted to having no EDI, or social engagement policy for disabled students. They highlighted the fact that Unions change very regularly which makes changes difficult. Olive believed that lacking "a written document to follow" especially in relation to the social engagement of disabled students, was a disadvantage. She had become more "aware" of this since organising events. All the officers were adamant that having a policy was very beneficial because it provided "a protocol" which is based on "consultation and feedback". However, they felt that policy was not going to be useful unless it was "backed up by resources".



## 5.8.2 Resources

A few students, graduates, and all the Students' Union Full Time Officers discussed the institutions' inability to provide supports due to a lack of resources. In each case this was a significant cause of concern for participants. Abigail, a student, found that it was difficult to access "support services" in times of crisis or when you have an "urgent query". She believed this was because they did not "have the resources to deal with the large number of students registered with access". Kyle considered the service "very good" but believed that they were "limited in what they can do in terms of resources and in terms of funds".

Graduates identified how a lack of resources prevented their institution from supporting their social engagement. Stephen was of the view that "from the college perspective, either the resources weren't there, or it just wasn't recognised". He felt the pressure fell on the student to "push themselves forward". Sophie recalled how members of the college authorities had explained the lack of resources to her. She reported being told that, "the colleges were underfunded because [...] there was such an increase in the amount of disabled people coming to college in the last couple of years, but the funding remained the same". She went on to say that she was informed that "they didn't really have a lot of time, manpower or money to focus on the more social aspects of it". She believed that the "recession" may have had an impact. She finished by saying that it fell upon "student activism" in the form of the college disability society to "fill the void".

Hilda, a student, felt "fully entitled to participate in everything disability services will throw my way, and I'm so grateful for the sort of reasonable accommodations that have been given to me." But despite this, Hilda felt that at times she "definitely would've felt like I was sort of snatching food from someone else's mouth, or you know, diverting resources somewhere that it wasn't necessary for me" when she believes she should have been "reaching out and asking for help". It is worth noting that over the course of the interviews students often identified a certain personal responsibility for the lack of resources available to the disability or access services in their institution.

Graduates and students spoke about the extra costs associated with having a disability. Stephen identified extra costs associated with travel and accommodation, and the difficulties accessing accessible options. He noted the obstacles faced acquiring part-time employment, a barrier non-disabled people did not face. Graduates noted that this meant they did not have any disposable income to enable them to participate in

extracurricular activities. Stephen felt it would “helpful” if there “was a reimbursement, or a partial reimbursement of the transport costs”. He felt this would “allow for better social participation”. Students described how having to work had resulted in missing orientation and had negatively impacted on their ability to socially engage.

Students’ Union Full Time Officers had autonomy over how their budget was spent. They could potentially direct the necessary resources towards supporting the social engagement of disabled students. Olive felt that they “would be able to facilitate different needs”. However, it was apparent that there was not a system established for disabled students to make the union aware of their requirements. Olive explained that the “union” did not have control over the “societies”. She felt that whereas it would not be a difficulty for “large societies to provide supports, it might be a challenge for smaller ones”. But she felt it does not cost anything to be a little more “aware of where their events are being held” and have an “inclusive” mindset.

Family members were identified as an important resource by graduates and students alike in providing emotional and financial support. They spoke of how their family helped them by minding the kids and taking up the slack domestically. Tina, a student, described how her husband “always supported her and thought it was great that she was going back to college.” Mary, a student, describes her family as having “made her” and having “stuck with her through everything”. She found that “only for living at home” she would not have succeeded. Tracey, a student, explained she was ready “to quit” because “third-level” was not for her when her son asked her what she was going to do when she completed her degree. This was the impetus for her to refocus and keep going.

Students noted their parents’ role in their decision making and being involved in subject choices. Peter reported that his mother had played a role in him becoming socially engaged in HE. He explained that his mother had encouraged him to “exercise” more. So, he had joined “danceSoc”.

### 5.8.3 College size and regional variation

Many students discussed the size of their class and college, and the effects of regional variations. Harry outlined the difference between the environment of the smaller, rural satellite college and the larger main college. He explained that there was “only about 80 of us down there at the time, so it was a very small group and you were living five minutes

away from people of your own age". He says, it did not really have the "feel of a college environment". He said the move to the larger part of the college was more difficult for many of his classmates. He also felt that there was a certain "stigma" associated with being from the satellite college.

Students including Abigail, Dawn and Derek found the size of their respective colleges challenging. They commented on the "numbers of people" and the difficulties in "keeping up socially" due to this. Students spoke about the challenges posed in accessing "accommodation and transport" in certain locations and the "costs" of attending college in that region.

Students attending larger colleges were more likely to comment on the number of students within their class. Holly felt she was in a "unique situation because there's a lot of small classes". She felt this created a "secondary school environment". She described how her friends "had classes of 100/200 and they had much more difficult times". Across the interview's students seemed to prefer small class sizes.

The following section will present a summary for the fourth superordinate theme, structures.

#### 5.8.4 Summary of theme 4: Structures

It was apparent that students and graduates struggled with structural barriers. There were students who struggled with significant difficulties outside of the institution and faced internal institutional difficulties which compounded these problems.

They expressed a degree of concern about the resources available to their disability support service or access office. It was apparent that these concerns impacted upon their decision to seek assistance in time of crisis. Graduates felt the impact of limited resources within their institution and the effects of the economic recession. However, despite this they demonstrated resilience and had empowered themselves to provide other options in areas where they considered their institution had failed them. It was quite clear from the data that participants' families were a significant external resource and positively affected students' progress within HE. The size and location of the college offered extra challenges to some students in the form of accommodation, transport, and large class sizes. Students' Union Full Time Officers, unlike the other participants, had a very keen interest in policy and national resources. There was an obvious lack of policy

within the students' union with policy implementation and development clearly hampered by the temporary nature of the union. The data illustrated the necessity of a review of their current EDI and engagement policy status. It seemed from the data that the resources did in fact exist, that there was a willingness, but there was clear lack of a structure through which supports could be developed and implemented.

## **5.9 Conclusion**

Chapter Five introduced the presentation of findings. The chapter went on to present the first set of findings under the heading of the student's voice. These findings were presented under the four superordinate themes, transitions, engagement, college climate and structures. The majority of students considered themselves to be socially engaged. However, almost all students reported barriers to their social engagement. These barriers were identified as impacting upon their sense of belonging and community within HE.

Chapter Six will present the second part of the presentation of findings and will detail the data relating to the college response.

# Chapter Six: Findings: College Response

## 6.1 Introduction

Chapter Six, 'College Response' will present the findings that emerged from the analysis of data generated from qualitative methodologies with senior managers and disability support personnel, see Chapter Four of the research. These findings will be presented under the four superordinate themes, see Figure 14. The first superordinate theme of transitions will be presented in the following section.

## 6.2 Theme 1: Transitions

All senior managers and disability support personnel discussed the theme of transitions. The theme of transitions included the following subordinate themes:

- Student preparedness to transition to HE
- Student pathways to higher education
- Orientation

The subordinate theme of student preparedness to transition to higher education will now be presented.

### 6.2.1 Student preparedness to transition to higher education

Almost all senior managers and disability support personnel (DSP) believed that students were not prepared for the transition to HE; many highlighted that the reason was multifaceted. It was recognised that all students face a range of challenges when preparing to transition including:

- Different expectations,
- Anxiety,
- Financial burden,
- Difficulty in finding accommodation,
- Wrong course choice,
- No appreciation of support needs,
- Being ground into dust by the leaving certificate.

Charles described how when students make the transition this may be “the first time that they have had to make decisions on their own”. He identifies that for some of the students that attend his college, they may be the “first in their family to attend college” [with] “some may not have had a particularly positive or affirmative experience in previous educational environments.” He sees this as even more challenging for those who find that “they are not with their peers that they had growing up with” when they transition to college. Overall, he believed that “there are much greater expectations now as they enter higher education, so you do get a sense that they carry with them greater burdens, greater responsibilities”. Disability support personnel supported this point.

Senior managers noted that many students were arriving at college with a greater level of anxiety, stress, and other mental health difficulties than they had observed before, with many students ill-equipped to manage their mental health. They describe the numbers as having increased exponentially, with the problem having become more serious and more varied. This led to increased demand on their services to support these new students. Barry was of the view that students were “not adequately prepared, academically or personally” for higher education.

Disability support personnel believed this was compounded by the fact that disabled students were entering the institution with very little understanding of their support needs. They identified, with a high degree of annoyance, examples of poor or no advance planning. Students and parents were arriving during orientation week with expectations of services for students that had not been flagged in advance. Reasons identified for this included a lack of awareness and discussion at school level, the system and structures in education, and the tight transition timeline for students and staff.

Hector believed that students “didn’t realise they had to register their disabilities [and that that there was an] assumption [that the services were] just going to be there [when they arrived]”. Grace maintained that there was an “assumption that we know they are coming” and that students think there “is joined up thinking because there is a bit more interaction when they go from primary to secondary school”.

Both senior managers and DSP acknowledged that students also lacked key academic skills such as, “problem solving”, “ability to work independently”, and “research skills”. Dick, senior manager, felt that “students come into university today in the Irish system inadequately prepared for that idea that they do actually have to enhance and expand

on what they are getting in the classroom”. Jenny, senior manager, emphasised that the curriculum in secondary school does not prepare students for the transition, a view shared by a preponderance of senior managers.

Ann, senior manager noted that although they lacked certain skills the students were, “highly skilled at using IT”. She voiced her disappointment with the “recently introduced Project Math’s”<sup>1</sup>. She felt it should have improved students problem-solving skills. She described the students as risk-averse and used to getting the big volume of notes in a pack or being spoon-fed Barry, senior manager, elaborated further describing the secondary school’s system as being “focused on memorising material” that “doesn’t equip (students) for university life”. Dick outlines a vision in which he sees the secondary school system “in a place where at the very least during the leaving cycle they are being inducted in that way of doing things”.

This was not a view shared by all senior managers, and Nick argued that the Leaving Certificate does not “prepare them (students) to transition into higher education because that is not its function” and that students learn many skills. He was of the view that the colleges need to “take on the responsibility” of helping their students’ transition. A process Jack’s college begins early on when he outlines their work to prepare students for the transition, “we try to engage with the student when they’re in second year, in second level. And start them on the journey there and point out the pathways”.

In contrast, two senior managers felt that students were prepared when transitioning to their institutions. They attributed this to the size of their college and the links they had forged with the secondary level and further education sectors. Jenny felt that a combination of their small size and their links with secondary schools and further education was important in preparing students for the transition, “we would be working closely with...teachers to try and support the efforts nationally”. Jenny also suggested that the vocational nature of their course may be effective in preparing students.

Senior managers acknowledged that all students face challenges transitioning. Conor was of the belief that for some students “transitioning was easier than for others”. Jill felt there was differences among student groups, and she saw this in relation to the transition

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<sup>1</sup> Project Math’s was introduced across all secondary schools in 2014 and puts more emphasis on real life scenarios, requiring a real understanding of math’s rather than just rote learning.



of disabled students from secondary school to HE compared to other students. She was of the view that, “there’s something seriously needs to be looked at there, and I’m wondering how much of that is expectations within the secondary school system for those students”. David noted that these difficulties, “may well be, that it is well, amplified for students with disabilities”. Leo believed that “some students with disabilities are better prepared for the transition” than others “particularly the chap who’s got a physical disability, like the guy in a wheelchair, he’s been living with that for years, maybe his whole life, and I think oftentimes those guys are far, far better prepared, because they’ve been climbing that mountain for so long that they have worked out who they are and what they want to do and how they want to get on”. Leo found that in some instances disabled students are better prepared than the “so-called “able-bodied” student”, he believes this is “because they’re expected to be able to do everything, but in fact they’re not really ready for it, at the same time”. Although this was not a view widely expressed across the interviews.

When discussing student preparedness senior managers referred to the “national picture”. David was of the view that there was a need to “do better (nationally)”. He highlighted the work they have done in their college to support students, “we now have a transition officer”. He describes this as something that has been identified by “all institutions” across the country because this is “the point where students feel the pinch”. He describes one of the difficulties facing institutions is the varying level of supports required “It is difficult because not all students need the same amount of support”. David too reflected on the contribution of the “National Forum for Teaching and Learning” to the discussions on what can be done at a national level. He identified “that the skills of being able to take responsibility for things [and being able to] structure your workload” [are skills that] probably [could be] developed nationally”.

The transition timeline, from when students receive their results from the CAO up until they begin HE, was identified as being too short and creating difficulties for students, leaving them unprepared for the transition. Disability support personnel highlighted the challenges of delivering the support needs of disabled students during this time. James, a senior manager, felt this resulted in the whole process being chaotic in his institution and he asked “should the Leaving Cert results be released that bit earlier?” This was a point raised by both sets of participants, as it was felt it would give students more time to prepare and access supports.

Among DSP there was a focus on what needs to be done within their institution to support students who were entering unprepared.

The first suggestion related to the transition timeline; it was that the period from September to December should be designated as a time to prepare students for HE. During this time, students would learn study skills, how the system works, and join clubs and societies. The academic year would then begin in January. All those in the focus group agreed that this would improve retention, and possibly contribute to increasing students' sense of belonging by providing students with a stepping-stone into HE.

The second suggestion made by DSP was in relation to making students more aware of the system and the language used in HE. Dora felt that there was an "assumption" among staff, that students "know the system and the language used". She believed students were afraid to "voice" their lack of knowledge and as a result student need to be supported during this time. There was general agreement within the focus group about this. Donald described how his institution undertook outreach activities to prepare students for the transition. He spoke of working with students from "5th year and 6th year", "guidance counsellors and parents". He believed this was useful in ensuring that "disability is catered for in terms of access". He was of the opinion that the benefits of this followed "through, the CAO process, through the admissions process, and through the orientation process".

Senior managers including Charles reflected on national transition supports and the challenges in making changes within HE "I think that what we need to recognise is that the needs of the population we serve has changed. But changing the fabric of higher education is a very slow process". David describes one of the challenges of making change nationally as the fact that "the seven universities in Ireland are not notably good at playing well together." He believes this because they "have all been encouraged to be each other's competitors". Conor was of the view that, "I don't think we'll ever be in a position where all students are fully prepared, but there certainly are things we can do to make that transition easier".

The majority of students enter HE through the CAO system but there are currently an increasing number of pathways to HE. These pathways, and the barriers and opportunities they present were discussed among participants, and this is addressed in the next section.

## 6.2.2 Pathways to higher education

Pathways to HE was spoken about by all senior managers under the theme of transitions. They spoke primarily about the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE); access from the Further Education sector (FE); the Central Application (CAO) application route; and programmes they had running in their own institutions or regions that supported the pathways to education.

A few senior managers spoke of the CAO and primarily referred to its inflexibility. There was a belief that it resulted in students studying courses in college which were the wrong course choice. They described being unable to move these students as outlined by Jill, “this inflexible system that doesn’t allow us easily to move people from one course to the other, there are barriers against that, like the CAO for instance”. She believes these affected students’ “sense of belonging”. Nick expressed the opinion that the CAO was “an enabler to me as Registrar to admit students” and that once these students had been admitted, his college should be able to move students across courses if necessary. Nick considered the CAO as “being restrictive and a bit conservative in their approach, admitted that in certain circumstances his college does allow students to change courses and identified this practice as “not unique to our institution, I can assure you. Other people are doing it. It is in the interest of students. Like I said, we are student-catered organisation”. This practice certainly was not unique to Nick’s institution and although it was not openly discussed, there was evidence in the interviews of senior managers managing a ‘system within the system’ to overcome restrictive structures and meet the needs of their students. Jack gave the example of how this “inflexible system and lack of alternative flexible pathways” prevents some disabled students progressing from secondary education. He identified the important role flexible pathways can play for non-traditional students from diverse backgrounds.

Jack described a case which he was “familiar” with a student currently doing his leaving cert who is doing 4 subjects but needs 5 in order to enter third level”. He believed that the student may not be in a position to complete a degree, but that it would be useful if the student could enter the college and complete “one or two modules”. He identified this an opportunity for the student to “engage socially and meaning a lot for the student and his family”. Jack was adamant that, “the colleges need to be [...] a little bit more flexible on around that entry process”.

A majority of senior managers spoke of the introduction of alternative pathways. Across the interviews there was a strong view expressed, “that there’s not enough movement from further to higher education” as highlighted by Jill. This affected disabled students, and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Jack felt there was a greater need for parents to consider further education as part of the conversation when helping young people decide what to do after their leaving certificate. He felt it would also be helpful in giving the students time “to grow up”. Jill identified challenges, “because the system is not sufficiently coherent to be able to work for people all the way through,[...] having a vision for third level that’s not aligned with second level—you’re going to have difficulties”. Charles believed that the system and structures in HE was designed with “the belief that there is one standard student”.

Suggestions were made on ways to improve the pathways’ availability. Jill suggested that perhaps one mechanism of having greater “integration” between HE and “further education” was to introduce a system similar to the “community college system in the US”:

a system whereby it’s actually very common way for people to access third-level initially, because they can go there for a couple of years and then transfer their credits over. That is a really good because we could then have, a whole wide network of ways of people to access [third] level education, and that may well apply also to students with disabilities.

It was apparent that there were regional access mechanisms being implemented, whereby all of the further education colleges within a region collaborated with a college in that region in creating access routes. The aim was to ensure further education programmes were aligned, so there are natural pathways provided to facilitate access from FE’s into HE. These were identified as working well. Conor described how regionally based colleges like his achieved this “in order to meet the needs of our region we have to actually offer a range of programmes. By a range, I’m talking about a range in terms of disciplines, in terms of levels, and part of that agenda is also our access agenda”. This often meant sacrificing “specialising in undergrad, research or other disciplines”. Senior managers in these regions also offered reduced point entry routes for students to enable their transition. These courses were often provided with additional academic type supports such as math clubs.

However, not all access routes were universally accepted within colleges. Negative attitudes and perceptions of some academics towards those entering through the access pathways was identified as a problem by Conor. He found that staff perceived students

entering through this route as, “problematic or were not coping as well academically”. He explained that he had to demonstrate to them through research, “that those students who came through the access route, performed, on average, at the same as the median point for students from the mainstream CAO cohort”. There was not much discussion among disability support personnel in relation to pathways. Dora was of the opinion that students who entered having completed a FETAC or PLC were better prepared. She felt there was a “massive difference and that they cope so much better”. This point was supported by the majority of the participants in the focus group.

The necessity for HE to meet revenue targets was identified as a potential barrier to disabled students by a few senior managers. Jack expressed the view that in some of the larger colleges where quotas have been originally established for disabled students entering through alternative entry routes, they may now be filled by international students. He believes that “essentially you are pretending, there are pathways for these people, when in fact there’re not. So, you’re increasing your capacity, maybe coming from the leaving cert or maybe international students or whatever to meet revenue bases, but you have these other students running into a cul-de-sac”. Jack raised concerns about the lack of funding available to support disabled students who study part-time courses “student assistance funding was never available to part time students [...] not in cases of a student with a disability.” He identified the practical effects of this lack of access to funding on disabled students. “The only way they can come to college is on a part time basis. But it takes that person two hours to get ready in the morning. You know, they could be exhausted by 1:00 [...], so it’s actually not physically, [...] possible for them to do anything, and they go home in the evening then, and they may have to do some physio, or whatever, feed themselves, and they just flop into bed. That’s all they can do. So, you know, it’s very hard to expect a student like that” to study without supports”.

The disability access route to education (DARE) was one of the alternative pathways discussed by senior managers. Jill spoke of it as, “a national success story that’s not talked about” that has resulted “in significantly increasing levels of participation from both

groups (HEAR/DARE)<sup>2</sup>". She noted how this pathway had resulted in "year on year" increases of students with disabilities.

Beth and Des described how the DARE had "changed things in their college resulting in students having to, declare their disability, which is good". This allowed them to support students. They also described it as "probably breaking the mould [...] it breaks down barriers and opens up the conversation, we have students coming into the programme with disabilities, clearly most come out the far end, it's great to be able to say to a student that, there's no way I can say that if you have a disability you will be less successful. So, I think that's a very positive thing to say".

Those institutions who were not part of the DARE scheme spoke of how they planned to join it, and the benefits they foresaw, "DARE has become really kind of, the high-visible access route into higher education. Everybody seems to be aware of it. We're attaching ourselves into that as well", "we will get the additional funding".

Although the DARE scheme was generally seen as an overall success, senior managers did recognise some challenges with the pathway. The inability to provide medical assessment reports to support an application was identified as a potential barrier to some disabled students. Jill expressed the view that "overrepresentation of advantaged socioeconomic groups, or underrepresentation of disadvantaged groups, because certain families from certain areas can afford to have certain kinds of medical assessments". Despite this senior managers spoke of continuing to support students even if they have older reports.

Another issue related to implementation practices taking place within individual colleges. For example, how colleges managed the intake of students from particular cohorts of disabled students. There was a view expressed by a few senior managers that colleges may be allowing greater numbers of certain types of disabled students entry over others. Jill suggested that this could be due to the decreased costs of supporting those students, "so of course, those other ones don't cost us as much, because you don't have to change

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<sup>2</sup> The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) is a college and university scheme that offers places on reduced points and extra college support to school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who are resident in the Republic of Ireland.

The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) is a third level alternative admissions scheme for school leavers whose disabilities have had a negative impact on their second level education. <https://accesscollege.ie/dare/>

facilities, you don't have to change doorways and, where else, or buy fancy equipment. Yeah, that is a risk." However, she did make it clear that the "biggest issue is that they're (students with significant disabilities) are not coming forward through the secondary system to us".

Jill highlighted that the practice in their college was "that we would prioritise those with sensory disabilities over others because we were seeing so few of them, and our suspicion was that they were not receiving the appropriate services in secondary school, so they weren't getting the points, even with the break that we could give them to get in".

Although the reduced points entry system offered to students through DARE and the associated colleges was generally identified as positive this was not a view shared by all senior managers. Noel offered a different perspective, one in which he believes there needs to be a "philosophical" shift in thinking in relation to how the reduced points system is administered.

Noel makes the argument that the scheme needs to change its focus away from "reduced points":

I would like to revamp the HEAR and DARE scheme such that it is not about reduced points for a programme, it is that you as an individual start with 50 points. And then you will qualify to your programme on the basis of the same CAO points as everybody else. It's just that some of those CAO points was essentially awarded to you as a consequence of the fact that you suffered an inequity.

However, Noel believes that the way the quota system is currently administered impacts upon who gets a place:

That's not, in a sense, the way quotas work, though, because the way quotas work, say, is, in science the entry is 515 points, therefore we will allow 20 or 30 people in with 450 points. And my argument would be, but every single person who has 450 points actually has 515 points and they have their place.

Noel believes that by removing quotas, you remove any perceived stigma that may be associated with entering college through the HEAR or DARE routes:

I think the philosophical change here is that actually, by doing quotas, we're doing it at a programme level, but in fact, by essentially giving to the individual, then each individual is then having to achieve—you're removing, in a sense, the stigma, if that's what it is, of being a HEAR or a DARE student, that nobody would bully now. But at the end of the day, you come into the [institutions] with X points, just in the same way as when we do, we assess international baccalaureate, or we take A-level, we convert, those into an equivalence of points.

Noel completes his argument for changing the system by expressing the view that practices in some institutions do not reflect the policy:

There are institutions that have the HEAR and DARE quota, and that quota is essentially nothing to do with whether you're below the points. So, if you're a registered HEAR student, and you get 600 points, you still get a place from the quota, as opposed from the regular CAO entry. To me that is, shall we say, evidence of a lack of understanding of what we're trying to achieve.

Following acceptance and/or entry into a HEI, institutions offer students a new student "orientation".

### 6.2.3 Orientation

Orientation, also referred to as new student induction, was the second subordinate theme identified by all DSP and almost all senior managers. It was recognised as critical in helping students during the first six weeks. Senior managers spoke of their colleges putting a lot of effort into orientation to assist students overcome a difficult turning point.

Abby empathised with students and identified some of the challenges they face when transitioning, "it's more difficult for the student leaving home along with being thrown into very large classes, and confusing environments with seemingly little or no support. It must be quite intimidating, quite frightening".

Student retention, a strategic objective of the colleges was closely aligned with senior managers' need to provide students with a "good start". There was a widespread recognition as Charles put it, that "if students don't feel part of the broader community within the first six weeks you can lose them". Abby identified the importance of student retention, "and obviously we want to improve our student retention".

Orientation programmes were seen by senior managers as important in supporting students to develop a sense of belonging, a sense of place, a feeling of being at home in their department or part of the community. Orientation initiatives focused on providing students with the skills they would need to succeed academically, and socially to embed themselves in the institution. Jenny spoke of the importance of giving students the freedom to "ask questions" during this time. The majority highlighted the importance of meeting the students within the first week and making themselves available whilst



promoting a welcoming environment, as highlighted by James “the day a student walks into the place, they’re met by everybody up to the president”.

Programmes varied, but were carried out through dedicated lectures, information events, and social events with the students’ union, student societies and college departments. Disability support personnel identified this relationship with the SU as both positive and negative. They expressed concerns about being unable to manage the message from them and an obvious tension was apparent.

There was also a significant level of variation among the different colleges with some orientation programmes being one day, to a full week with other activities extending right throughout the semester. However, a large majority of the institutions have or were moving to some form of extended orientation. For instance, Nick detailed how they extended their orientation activities over the “first five weeks” in semester one. One of the reasons they made this decision was they found that students “forget maybe half” of the detailed information they had been provided with, so, they now go for a more “sustained approach”. Conor outlined how they had developed their programme to target “key turning points based around why the student tended to leave”. They found through exit surveys and interviews that the main reasons students left were wrong course choice and finance, no friends, lack of belonging. To combat this, they offer financial supports and allow students to change subjects and in certain cases to change course.

It was widely agreed that there was a need to take a more flexible long-term approach during the first few weeks and months.

Interestingly, some senior managers spoke of their orientation programmes being led, managed, and delivered to incoming students by current students, with supervision by staff members. Charles described “the best resource is when you have students and staff working together”. The view was shared that students are often more aware of the broad spectrum of students that will be attending. Peer mentoring programmes, the Students’ Union and college clubs and societies were seen as critical to the success of the orientation programmes. It was identified by Leo as an opportunity to “try to impress on the students from the very outset the importance of their social integration into college life.” Jenny described peer mentoring as a “framework for the students...to support the kinds of challenges that they may be experiencing” and peer mentors were identified by Charles as important in promoting “involvement and developing a sense of community”.

Educating, informing and empowering parents was also deemed an increasingly important aspect of new student orientation, with some programmes providing information sessions directly to parents on what to expect when their student is in college. Supporting parents to support student's mental health was recognised as being very important during this time. A point was raised concerning the required balancing act of keeping parents informed without impacting upon the students' rights.

Disability support personnel felt that many disabled students face extra challenges. Harry identified some of the challenges he believed, "students with significant disability face when transitioning". He considered "managing their disability, adapting to being an adult" or "managing adult services" as some of the challenges. He felt that students had to manage "an awful lot of change during this time". Dolores felt that these challenges were not widely appreciated within her institution. She believed there was an expectation that they will "slot in and understand everything about the place". Henry was not sure you can "really prepare people for what it's like and that all you can do is support them to transition in as smooth a way as possible". Orientation was identified as important in helping students develop connections. It was felt that there was a large amount of pressure on students to make those initial connection during that time because of the speed at which the term moves. Barbara noted that if students do not "put themselves out there in the first couple of weeks then people will have formed their little groups and then it is harder for the other students to join".

Jack outlined an example of how a first-year student with a disability had a negative transition experience and the difficulties faced in trying to mainstream events in his college:

We'd a situation here last year where somebody, on his very first day here, he was in a motorized wheelchair, and he got stuck on a lift, it was just, it was so embarrassing, it was awful. We do everything, and the very moment he goes to actually use the thing, bang, he's stuck! You know, the induction is happening next door and he's sitting outside while some mechanic tries to fix this thing. This shouldn't happen, and we've tried to make changes [...], like automating doors, central buildings [...].it was a small thing, but it was important.

The majority of DSP and senior managers identified hosting a specific orientation for disabled students. These events took place before the main orientation and were described in some cases as a pre-orientation. Students were expected to attend the main orientation afterwards. The aim as explained by Noel, senior manager was "to get them (students) to be much more aware of the specific supports that are there to support

them". Disability support personnel highlighted that students' attitudes to orientation had changed over the years and that there seemed to be a reduction in stigma surrounding attending it. Minnie believed that the stigma had reduced considerably in the last number of years and this was due to the increase in students entering through the "access programme". There was a widespread agreement with this point. There was considerable variation in how these events were run. Delores, DSP, spoke of holding an "access orientation, where all access groups, HEAR, DARE, Mature", attended the one event. She believed that it acted to "really level the playing field". Lola, on the other hand described their college as mixing some parts and keeping other aspects separate. She believed it was "impactful for DARE students to see a large group of other DARE students because it said, oh I am not so special after all". However, there was a strong view expressed that all orientation events need to be mainstreamed. There was a view that at individual department and faculty level a lot more could be done to support the transition of disabled students and to enable mainstreaming.

A few senior managers identified their college as not having a specific orientation for disabled students. In these instances, the general viewpoint was that such programmes "furthered the difference", or there was a fear of "marking them (disabled students) out as "special". These colleges would seem to prefer to take a more individualised approach as outlined by Frank, "the consensus is that we can talk to students on their own and they have open doors to various offices should they need them". Jack outlined that they preferred to support students individually because of their "unique needs, it's one of the problems with students with disabilities is that, in a lot of instances, their disability is not necessarily unique to them, but often their needs are unique to them, so you're kind of devising a programme around them". Leo felt that the overall student experience benefited from not separating students, "their experience is richer when they're fully integrated" in the student population, "as opposed to putting them out there as a kind of special group". It must be noted that these were mostly smaller institutions. There also seemed to be an absence of consultation with students on their preferences.

There were different initiatives taking place across the HEI. For instance, orientation activities for family members were identified as being very effective and there was a consensus that both students and family members benefited. One DSP reported having a specific staff member with responsibility of the first-year experiences of disabled students. Disability support personnel described hosting pizza nights but described how they needed to stay well back as students did not want them involved.

Another initiative implemented within a few institutions was peer mentors registered with the disability support. These students supported incoming students and were seen as role models. Leo, senior manager, believed that it was important to provide leadership opportunities for disabled students. He felt it conveyed the message, “that if I can do it, then so can you”.

Similar to student preparedness, senior managers spoke of the transition timeline as a potential barrier to supporting disabled students, with some colleges beginning their first-year orientation within two weeks of students receiving their CAO results. Providing supports within the “transition window” was deemed challenging. Eoin described their college as “chasing their tail” in trying to provide for the “support needs” of disabled students in this tight timeline as it can take “weeks, or it can take months for that need to be serviced”. He described themselves as “unprepared and reacting rather than being proactive, it’s galling, we (Ireland) could be doing so much more”.

Across the interview data there was awareness of a need to provide students with greater flexibility in first year and the academic skills to succeed. Three similar examples of practice were provided by senior managers, Barry, Nick and Charles. They described how their colleges had developed a specialised module for first year students. These ran from six weeks to a full year and involved students working in small groups with a focus on debating, asking questions, and getting to know each other. Barry highlighted one of benefits of the small classes was “having a tutor that knows them by name and having the same peer group around them. And they’re much more likely to make a social network that way than if they’re in our big classes”. These programmes were often supported by peer assisted study sessions. As described by Nick “this is a programme where you have the more senior second-third years working with you in a dedicated, controlled environment to help you through first year”. Charles spoke of how their “first year curriculum for most programmes now has been radically changed. They had implemented a more problem-solving type delivery method. In most of our disciplines, they have taken on board that the first year should look and feel very different. There is more project-based learning”. However, there were challenges identified in implementing flexible approaches. Charles identified one of the challenges of introducing flexible approaches that divert from the traditional way of thinking is that you will be seen as impacting upon the QQI framework and your professional accreditation for that module.

Disability support personnel highlighted the pressure they felt during this time and the demands expected of them during orientation. Donald described a “pressure to meet hundreds and hundreds of students and get them registered and join all the dots together while worrying about somebody who might not be going lectures or slept in or something”. He like others, was exasperated, highlighting that it was not possible to do everything. He went on to explain how he they tried to strike the balance of “giving students a minimum level of support”. Again, disability advisors felt that the tight timeline contributed to a lot of the difficulties.

The following section will present a summary of the first superordinate theme, transitions.

#### 6.2.4 Summary of theme 1: Transitions.

The interviews with senior managers and DSP provided insight into the role transitions plays in the student lifecycle at national and institutional level. Through the subordinate themes of pathways, students’ preparedness to transition, and orientation it was possible to identify barriers and enablers to student transitions.

It was evident from the interviews that they had concerns about students’ levels of preparedness to transition. This was characterised by students being unaware of their support needs, their academic requirements, or being prepared to live independently. This lack of preparedness was identified as leading to retention issues. The reasons for this were mostly system related including a lack of awareness and discussion at school level, the system in education including the leaving certificate, and the tight timeline students and staff have to work within. There was a certain lack of clarity around where the responsibility for preparing students lay. However, those interviewed identified a need to do more at national level and institutional level to support student preparedness. Although, it was noted that there was an increasing number of pathways available to HE there is an obvious need to significantly extend these.

The disability access route to education, which was singled out as a national success and identified as being a contributor in the increasing number of disabled students. However, in contrast, this route also had a potential disconnect between the national policy and the practice within individual institutions. These related to the difficulties students face accessing medical reports and how institutions apply the quota system within their institution. An inflexible system being implemented nationally emerged which

negatively affected senior managers' ability to support the development of student pathways. The inflexibility of the CAO results timeline was a potential barrier for students transitioning.

The new student orientation was critical to helping students develop connections and a sense of belonging within the institution. The majority spoke of hosting specific events for disabled students or as part of their overall access orientation programme. There were many initiatives being implemented at an institutional level to support students and student delivered orientation activities and student ambassadors were considered a successful student support mechanism. However, the inflexibility of the higher education system was deemed to be a barrier to the implementation of more flexible modules for first year students. It emerged that many institutions ran orientation activities for disabled students. However, this was an item of contention, with a few of those interviewed believing that this acted to further alienate new students.

Overall, transitions emerged as a dominant superordinate theme across the interviews. It was evident that there was significant variation in the implantation of policy and practice within institutions. It became clear that institutions' ability to support students transitioning was impacted by their ability to work within the wider higher education system.

The next section will present the findings for the second superordinate theme, engagement.

## 6.3 Theme 2: Engagement

The second superordinate theme that emerged was labelled “Engagement”. This was categorised into three subordinate themes:

- Social engagement,
- Student leadership and representation,
- Social engagement through academic engagement.

The findings under the subordinate theme of social engagement will now be presented.

### 6.3.1 Social engagement

All disability support personnel and senior managers discussed their perspectives on the theme of social engagement. Senior managers considered social engagement to be broken into two interconnected pieces “social” and “academic”.

Disability support personnel felt it could be sub-divided to include “civic” and ‘social media” engagement. Across the data they described each one as:

1. Social engagement took place outside of the classroom. This was seen as “going for tea with friends”, attending “events like freshers’ week”, “joining clubs and societies or sports clubs”, “accommodation”, “off-campus”, and being involved in the “students union”.
2. Academic engagement was seen as taking place primarily in the classroom, it was identified as engaging with “social groups through projects” and “group work” and in “talking to students and lecturers in the classroom” and their “department”.
3. Social media engagement took place online, it was seen as when students connected using platforms such as “WhatsApp, Facebook and Snapchat”.
4. Civic engagement occurred through “volunteering” as “ambassadors”, “student leaders, student mentors, peer mentors, and mentoring programmes”.

It must be noted that participants spoke very highly of the students within their institutions, taking time to emphasise the efforts made by individual students within different clubs and societies to support engagement for all.

Participants believed that together this formed what was discussed as the “holistic experience”. It was recognised as being “expressed differently depending on the person”. Overall though it was rather generously interpreted, as can be seen from Noel,

senior manager, who identified it as looking like “participation, looks like being active and engaged within both the education programmes, but also about getting more than that out of the university, [...] forming friendships, relationships, both within the class cohort, but across the wider institution”. It was highlighted that it was also about what happens in the academic sphere through “in-class engagement with peers”, developing skills such as “teamwork” and being involved in “class representation” and “leadership”.

Almost all participants spoke about the impact of social engagement using words like, “essential, good and is hugely important”. James, senior manager, considered it to be what, “some people call the ‘hidden curriculum,’ basically the real-life curriculum is having those cups of coffees, sitting in the groups, you know, sometimes talking about the least thing, except work”. Participants identified it as contributing to a “sense of belonging, community”, enabling students to “feel part of the wider community”, “helping student to feel they’re not alone” that “they’ve found their tribe or place”. Engagement in clubs, societies and the students’ union was identified as giving students their “sense of place”.

Like many other senior managers, Noel went on to identify his vision for students social engagement “I’d like to think that when you leave the university, you’ve done a whole range of things that you might not have thought either possible or that you actually even realised you wanted to be involved with and engaged with”. James felt very strongly that all students should have the opportunity to do this, “I think it’s just so important, and everybody deserves a chance at that. Everybody, whether you’re a mature student coming back, or you’re a kid of 17, or you’re somebody in a wheelchair, or you are somebody who’s visually impaired, it doesn’t matter, you should be able to get the same experience”. This was a view widely expressed by senior managers, although some expressed concerns on how best to achieve that aim.

Almost all senior managers and DSP believed that there were opportunities to improve the social experiences of disabled students. Yet in contrast several senior managers spoke of “not being aware of” any difficulties for disabled students engaging socially or of issues “not being brought to their attention”, and so they “presumed” this was not a problem. Nick was quite forthright on his views of the social experiences of disabled students, “So, I don’t know what their experience of it is. I have no idea, to be quite honest”. Some saw a need to investigate further, like Linda who wondered if “our disability office is aware of... I am sure they are aware of that shortcoming. It just has not been brought to my attention”. The question caused Jill concern, “as I’m talking to



you, I'm getting more insecure. I'm not as worried about the social integration of students with learning disabilities. I am wondering now if there's actually more students with physical disabilities who are not getting what they need than I am aware of. They're certainly not very visible on the campus, so I'm not seeing all that many students in wheelchairs". James believed there were physical barriers to the social engagement of disabled students but thought his college was about "80% there" but "there's so much more we could do....I think there's simple accessibility issues" He identified a need for a shift in thinking, "I think about making it the norm. Too often it's an add-on matter, rather than an actual central feature of what we do. We like to think that it is, we like to tell people that it is, [...] there needs to be more centrality to it [...] that it's something we do rather than, oh, this is an extra". David was adamant that from his experience disabled students "certainly weren't out of the loop, they certainly weren't, they were involved in as much as anyone else. One in particular was more so. So, I think when you are talking about disabilities, you are talking about a range of situations. I think that we certainly as a university, we try to make, we have to make our buildings as wheelchair accessible as possible so that shouldn't be an issue, we hope".

In contrast, all DSP believed there were barriers to the social engagement of disabled students. Like senior managers they felt there were opportunities to enhance the social experiences in their institutions. Henry acknowledged that there was "additional challenges for students with disabilities to engage in social activities". They noted a range of factors acting as barriers to engagement. Awareness among those in charge of "college clubs and societies, and the students' union". They believed the "timing of events", "type of events", "transport for students with disabilities" who are commuting, "personal assistance" and "transition experiences" all acted as barriers.

Disability support personnel saw a lack of awareness among students' union and clubs and societies resulted in them choosing venues that were inaccessible or hosting events without any thought for students' needs. Lola thought "that sometimes there is a lack of awareness maybe, with other students. I don't think there is any malice in it. But I think there might be a lack of awareness around making sure all events are accessible to everybody". Dolores believed this was compounded by the constant change of personnel within these groups. Minnie believed that there was "work to be done" in relation to these social groups. Especially in relation to promoting their "terms of reference", and "rules". She identified this as important to students with "autism and Asperger's syndrome" who like to know the rules and "what is appropriate". She highlighted that it was critical that these students "don't get off to a bad start".

Many of the DSP discussed offering support to the students' union and the clubs and societies in relation to enabling disabled students engage. Participants gave examples of social groups within the institution which had made significant effort to include disabled students. Barbara recounted how she had contacted a "society in relation to supporting a student with a significant physical and sensory disability". She described how the society sent a representative to meet the student and accompany him to his first event. She said, "every time I see him he is with a crowd".

Disability support personnel considered the "timing" of events, "transport" to and from and the "type of events" as potential barriers to social engagement for disabled students. These were usually interconnected. There was full agreement when Minnie voiced the belief that there was as an "issue with events being concentrated" in the evenings. She also felt that that many of the events were based "around [a] drinking culture and that this could lead "some students" to "feel excluded". A number of participants raised the issue of disabled students commuting to and from their institution. Dora believed that "a commuter" with a disability was "really at a disadvantage". Hector discussed the difficulties his service faced in providing flexible transport for students in an environment where there are so few accessible taxis.

Senior managers like Nick, Jack and Charles identified funding as a barrier to the wider social engagement of disabled students. Charles spoke about how "the funding at the moment assumes that the only activities that will be considered are those that fall into what might be called the academic domain". He discussed how his college has worked to overcome this barrier, "what we are trying to do is a get a curriculum model that embeds these other activities that are seen as part of their academic programme". Charles hesitantly at first, described the process his college follows to try and ensure disabled students receive supports to engage in the wider social engagement his college "we are constrained, but it means that we have to be a bit more innovative on how we design those activities". He described how "logistical issues", providing "support individuals" and "timetabling" can act as a barrier to them doing this. He identified how they overcome these difficulties, "at the moment we are sort of doing it by pretending they're timetabled. And then seeing can we attract funding for that [...], But no, it is a challenge". Other senior managers too referred to having to be "innovative" in supporting individuals' social engagement outside their studies, but unlike Charles they did not outline the steps they took.

The positive contribution of “clubs”, “societies”, and the “students’ union” was widely recognised. Charles, senior manager, pointed out that, “the student’s union has a big part to play in ensuring they design and encourage their students to get involved in clubs and societies”. Tom, like many other senior managers spoke about the working relationship they had with their students’ union, “our student union and ourselves kind of have a team approach to this, so we have a disability office, they have a disability officer, we have a disability officer”. There was evidence too of where this relationship was not so harmonious, and some including Barry and Noel believed that the students’ union sometimes failed to capture the diversity of students’ views.

What was interesting to note across the data was the level of autonomy left to students to be responsible for their own social needs. Charles, senior manager explained, “others then that come in with particular interests or whatever it happens to be, maybe the society doesn’t exist, so you encourage them to set it up”. However, he felt there was a bigger challenge in providing for the needs of disabled students, “then you are back to the bigger challenge. So, there are certain programmes of study that lend themselves to greater integration and I was going to say, ‘more fun activities’ than others”. Similar points were made by others including Nick, and James.

The majority of senior managers were not aware of any college societies specifically for disabled students in their colleges, as stated by Nick, “I’m not aware of any dedicated clubs and societies that particularly focus on students with disabilities”.

In fact, several were adamantly against the development of such groups and believed that students should have a place in the wider college clubs and societies. Again, as highlighted by Nick, “I would expect that they are involved in whatever is on offer and that is the way that I would look at it. I am very much for this integrated approach, you know. You don’t bring attention to somebody with a disability”. “Whatever they have, if they are able to cope with it, fine. If they need assistance, that’s fine”.

Among DSP the existence or establishment of peer groups, clubs or societies for disabled students created quite a degree of discussion. Participants shared very strong opposing and supporting views. Barbara noted that they had an “access society” within their institution. She described this as “really being fantastic” and has been a support for different students especially those “on the spectrum” or those who were “really struggling”. Minnie expressed an opposing view. From her “experience” she felt that there was “a lot of negativity” associated with “those groups”. Grace described meeting

students who had a “bad experience in secondary school and felt they brought that “negativity” with them into the activism society”. She felt that this negativity would “impact on students’ college “experience”. Grace went on to express a certain exasperation, as to why students would want to focus on “disability activism” and wished students would “focus on something that is fun” especially considering that they’re “living with a disability all day”.

Disability support personnel noted that social engagement can depend on many factors including the “personality” of the individual or “the type of disability” the student lives with. Dora believed that there were some “students with very significant disabilities who have great personalities and put themselves out there”. She went on to highlight that if “you get a combination of a student with a significant or visible disability plus he/she is a little bit shy” then “I just don’t think they have a good time at all”. Lola spoke of being “most worried about” the students who spent all their time within the disability or access service. Because they identified this as their “social support”. Eve expressed the view that “deaf students would seem to be the most socially isolated”. She felt this was “mostly because there are so few of them”. There was widespread agreement with this point.

Senior managers perceived different levels of difficulties in engaging socially for students depending on the different types of disabilities. Noel commented that “the experience from the learning disability students is probably easier overall”. He was of the view that this was because “we have not up to now done as good of a job in managing. And I think that we’ve recognised that, and there’s a kind of a change in tack”. He shared the view that students from the three main “target groups of physical disability, sensory and blind, and deaf and hard of hearing are absolutely still marginalised. Relatively speaking, to the rest, there’s a piece of work that we really need to do, both at a [...] level, just in terms of being able to support the more severely disabled”. Barry felt that the cohort identified were at a real “risk of being left behind in terms of the social life”. He spoke of local arrangements and staff facilitating students in his college, “some venues, some offices they can’t call into, and they can always make arrangements, and someone will come downstairs to meet you.” But he highlighted that this is “not the same as being able to drop into the office when your friends are dropping in. So, there is a risk that they’re more marginalised or less centrally, less socially engaged than other students”. He explained that “It’s partly for that reason that we prioritise accommodation for students with disabilities”. This was a deliberate strategy employed by his college to support people with physical and sensory disabilities”. It was evident from the data that practices

such as this were widespread across the colleges and implemented on a case by case basis.

Senior managers such as Leo had no concerns for students with physical disabilities and felt they were well engaged in his college but shared significant concerns for “the person with autism who maybe finds it very difficult to become engaged socially.” He spoke with a degree of emotion about seeing, “them wandering around on their own, kind of lost in their own little worlds’.” He described “it is a bit more difficult to get them engaged, because it’s not natural for them”. Jill identified students with Asperger’s syndrome as requiring attention. She felt strongly that there “needs to be a whole re-education of the student population [...] to stop those students from being picked on, to stop them being bullied [...] to have a wider acceptance of the kinds of differences” to support the students to manage “social anxiety”. It was interesting to note that across the interviews the senior managers who raised this issue primarily focused on students from the three target groups as students who were most at risk of social isolation within their colleges.

Senior managers who felt there was a need to act to improve the social experiences of disabled students were often unsure what needed to be done. Jack had a general sense that it was necessary to improve the experiences of people with disabilities and felt that it came down to available resources, “I would imagine that there is, because what will always be an issue is resources. You can do more if you have more resources”. Nick thought that they had “lots of students with disabilities” and “would be surprised if they weren’t involved”. Conversely, James had direct experience and spoke with pride of knowing the disabled students in his college and “meeting them” regularly. He believed that the ones he knew about were as socially involved as any other student, but he did acknowledge that some do face barriers. However, across the preponderance of interviews a general lack of awareness was apparent concerning the social engagement experiences of disabled students.

Across the interviews there was evidence of initiatives being implemented in colleges, and DSP noted improvements and that students were more socially active. It was accepted, that there was a need for institutions to do more. However, there were varying levels of awareness among senior managers about institutional practices. Senior managers such as James, were very aware, and felt that based on his personal experience of sports for people with disabilities that the main problem was that people were not “aware of it”. Speaking primarily about sports for people with disabilities, he

expressed the view, that people did not appreciate “that it’s just sport, [...] it’s as competitive as any able-bodied sport”. He believed that the solution to providing increased sports for people with disabilities in college, was greater “visibility” and the need to see “people doing it” and the need for other students to have “role models”. James highlighted the need for colleges to work together to form ‘sports partnerships’ with community organisations. He believed this should be carried out for three reasons; firstly, it would allow them to pool resources, secondly, it would allow colleges with small numbers of disabled students to form teams and thirdly it would introduce young disabled people to college. James’s college was one of a few that had introduced sports for disabled people.

Abby, senior manager too felt that “visibility of people with disabilities” and “sport” were important. She also noted the contribution of having an active staff member with a disability, “one of the staff members, who uses wheelchair facilities, is part of the clubs and societies sports team”. She described their sports facilities as being the, “very core to all of students, and the total body in terms of accessibility, and availability of services”. Abby highlighted the important contribution the sports centre makes to the social engagement of all students, “we’re extremely lucky to have it because it provides a forum for gathering and for social interaction outside of the classroom for many students”.

Senior managers such as Jill spoke of their college’s development of a range of measures to support students with autism. One of the many examples she gave included the introduction of “quiet spaces” across the college along with “pods in the library so that they (students) can retreat”. A number of colleges involved in the research had implemented “quiet spaces” and programmes for students with autism and Asperger’s through working with the national autism organisation ‘AsIAM’. Jenny firmly believed that awareness raising among staff and students is key to greater “students’ engagement in college”. She spoke of how, “every year we would provide some kind of workshops for staff and led by the counsellor for learning support service in terms of working with and supporting disabled students and or students who are experiencing difficulties”.

One DSP’s institution had launched a pilot project that provides access to “taxis, and PA’s” for students wishing to engage in “clubs and societies”. Another had developed a programme in association with their “students’ union” that provided access to “a contact within a club or society” for a disabled student. If that student then wished to get involved, they contacted the designated person and they accompanied them to some of initial events. Again, participants raised their fears around hosting “disability specific events”

in case they might “act to further alienate students”. Grace spoke of student feedback they had received in which students described “being lonely and finding it difficult to meet people”. They had responded to this by organising a regular “coffee morning” based on subject choice instead of highlighting “disability”.

Almost all DSP discussed the impact and contribution of social media on students’ social engagement as students were utilising this for academic and social needs. This occurred in the form of “WhatsApp” groups, whereby students would discuss upcoming exams or homework or arrange to meet up socially. Barbara found it very interesting how students with “very significant difficulties” formed very strong social “connections with people in their class” not based on “face to face” communication.

Although Eve was aware of the benefits, she highlighted some of the difficulties it posed for students. She had found that some students were becoming more “anxious” when they interacted with the “WhatsApp groups” because they “took on class’s stress”. Donald also expressed concerns about the overuse of social media.

They had mixed reaction and experiences in relation to the use of social media to interact with students. Donald expressed the view that “social media complicates things an awful lot because there is an edge of uncertainty as to how that communication or that social engagement is going to be disseminated, received or recorded. Whereas that tended not to happen with phone calls or emails or text messages to the same extent”. He explained that users needed to be wary, “with social media, I suppose there is a duty of care around sensitivity because of disability. So, as a service, we have to be cautious and wary of that”. Dora reminded the group that one of the strongest and most successful societies in her college was the “gaming community”. She described how students involved in this “community” had an entire “social life online” and visited people around the world who they “game with”. She finished by noting that the majority of these students would be on “the spectrum or live with ISD”.

### 6.3.2 Social engagement through academic engagement

The majority of DSP recognised the contribution of in-class engagement to the social engagement of disabled students. Senior managers like Jenny felt social engagement looks like “a learning environment” which meant “that you’re working alongside peers from one end of the day to another. That there is a lot of conversation and sharing of

work in terms of seeing what other people are doing and talking about it. So, the social involvement in this college is very much centred on the interaction that supports". Linda felt it, "empowers students. It makes them feel like they can ask questions." She identified "group work and small group tutorials as absolutely essential to that." allowing students to "get to know each other" and form "friendships". Leo pointed out that "small group work breaks down barriers, gets students talking". Abby found this facilitated "social interaction", and the development of "graduate type attributes" Academic engagement was regularly identified as being important for retention. Tom explained, "our students are very engaged academically, and we see that in terms of attendance and retention and performance".

The interviews illustrated that it was part of policy to promote academic engagement. Ann identified what they were trying to achieve through academic engagement in their college, "we're doing two things here; we're helping them socially and we're helping them to build their teamwork skills which will be needed in employment [...] that's kind of what's going on in the classroom". She highlighted how individual departments helped students to socially engage, "our department then would work with the student engagement office, or indeed on their own in relation to specific student activities, particularly for first years [...] students that have gone off paintballing, or biking".

Ann noted the work of the "engagement officer". A number of senior managers spoke about their plans to appoint an engagement officer, frequently in tandem with an engagement strategy. Linda described the role of the engagement officer in her college as helping "to promote opportunities" which she found "fantastic". She described the challenge of developing a "structure" so the college could "deliver and scale so that it is available to all students and that they are aware of it and therefore can avail of it".

As discussed earlier in the results section, orientation was an important time to embed students in the college. Chris noted that it was also an important time for developing academic engagement through, "team building and icebreakers and so on, through to group work". He pointed out that, "the critical one is at the level of the programme where students spend most of the time there with their classmates". Like Chris, Tom believed that an important aspect of this was "the ways in which the different programmes interact with each other and share modules or, you know, work together across disciplines and a lot of that activity, so I think that builds engagement". Barry and Noel made similar points in relation to the role of the student's individual department and the friends students make in these locations. Leo spoke of his own college experience to highlight



the importance of in-class social engagement, “the first person I sat beside in college became my friend for life”.

Despite the weight Chris placed on the academic aspect, he still considered that, “the bit that probably makes the real difference from what I’ve seen, is the engagement in clubs and societies, and sport, where students can be involved with people outside of their own group”. Barry maintained that students get their social engagement from many areas of student life and not just through academic engagement, “It varies a lot by person. Some of them form academic groups, they identify with the subject, [...] Others get it from clubs and societies, and others get it from their residence, so people who live on campus [...] The people who live at home, I think a lot of their social life is at home”. This was a common point made across the interviews.

However, despite this point, Barry felt academic engagement was “important” and noted “that learning is such a social activity”. He explains why he considered it a social activity and why it is important, “there are two dimensions to that. One is that you need some support from a peer group when you’re learning. So, if we’ve all got an essay on the same day, we all help each other a little bit, or at least we all talk about it. to go home to another, to a family that have nothing to do with it, and they’re just looking at you are wondering why you’re worried about this essay, you don’t have that social support”. Barry’s second point related to the value of peer learning, “when you get to teasing out difficult ideas, if you have a group of people who are your peers who are going through those ideas with you, they think of them from different angles and it is that discussion that helps you learn, so it is really important that they make some academic sort of contact”.

Charles highlighted the difficulty for all students in engaging in social activities due to academic commitments, “It is still a challenge for all students to embrace the social side”. Because of the “the demands on the academic side”. He also noted the difficulties students who live off campus face, “many of our students commute [...] it can minimise their time to value other activities”. A similar point was made by Barry who expressed a degree of concern for any students that had to commute. The points made by Barry, Chris and Charles demonstrated the push-pull that seemed to occur in terms of level of importance placed by senior managers on academic and social engagement in the colleges.

Disability support personnel identified structural barriers including old buildings, classrooms with no access, poor seating arrangements as a barrier to students' academic engagement. One of the items that repeatedly arose during the discussion was access to elevators or "lifts". Tamara described how the "lifts" in her college had originally been installed as "service elevators" for the purposes of transporting "goods and services". As such they were not fit for purpose. Participants vented their frustration at not being able to access "keys" or to have "college services" make any changes. Tamara went on to say, "we've brought it up as being a barrier to students", but no changes were made. Grace gave an example of how the environment may affect students with different types of disabilities. She explained how a large, unstructured classroom may prevent a student who has a visual impairment from meeting their friends. She also felt that it was important that classmates were aware of this so they can better support their fellow students. During the discussion, participants identified students as utilising the support of note-takers or personal assistants during their class. It was felt by a few of those in the focus group that a student's personal assistant may act as a barrier to in-class social engagement. Tamara shared the view that, "a notetaker can often stop them from mixing". However, she then went on to highlight that she has also witnessed the opposite, "I've seen where personal assistants have become very involved in class and in different student union activities". She finished by highlighting that it depended on "the support they need or use" and the student.

Senior managers including Barry felt that students with physical disabilities may feel more engaged in the academic sphere in his college, "if the disability is a physical disability, a mobility disability, I think the students will probably focus on getting to their lectures. And they will probably, I hope, feel quite welcome and included in the lectures". He believed this was because these locations were the most accessible in his institution. On the other hand, Chris believed that students with visual impairment would face greater challenges in the academic environment, "I think there is real challenges to students who have visual impairment, and maybe this is less on the social side than on the teaching side. I think learning has become much more visual".

A small number of senior managers believed that there was a shared learning when disabled students worked with those without disabilities. Beth and Des noted, "students with disabilities who use alternative technology often teach their classmates of the benefits of this". Leo also spoke of the shared learning that occurred, "I suppose they were seeing the world through a very different lens, and I think the other people in the class realised it and could see that there was something really interesting in what they

were doing. And I think they started to try and emulate what those guys were doing, so yeah, I think that was a very good experience, and I think we've done reasonably well with most of those students in integrating them in that sense".

Charles identified that an important aspect of ensuring all students can engage either academically or socially is for staff to consider, how they "design any of the engagement activity". He explained that they ask staff to be "well aware of the range of abilities and the persona of the students that they need to accommodate. So, from the outset, whatever we're designing and whoever is designing it, and is responsible for implementing it, bears that in mind".

Civic and voluntary engagement was regularly mentioned as being an increasingly important aspect of senior managers' institutions and formed part of their strategic goals. Ann spoke of civic and voluntary engagement as being part of the greater social engagement of students, "there's a space there as well in terms of things like volunteer work". Linda described the thinking in her college was to, "increase the opportunity for students to be able to have that experience, if that's what you want [...] helping them nurture their graduate attributes could be sport, could be choral society". However, she did not limit that to just volunteering, "volunteering is very important but to embrace all of the things that help our students to grow and make them aware that this is important to them".

The interviews with senior managers demonstrated little recognition of the need to provide supports to enable disabled students to engage socially. Jenny believed that there were no other "challenges" in providing for cocurricular engagement than there were in providing for the needs of disabled students attending the college. She went on to say that, "there is nothing there specific other than that well, we try to look at the particular need and adjust the delivery or aspects of the delivery or the timing or in a way that we do when it is on campus". Jenny identified how support to enable the student to engage both academically and socially can lead to the student "feeling at home" and "feeling supported". She gave an example:

I would know one of our students who is an athlete, she has a visual impairment. She is excelling and she is progressing very well with her studies. The pathways mentoring programme that is going on between the colleges, being a small college, it is quite easy to address, you know the particulars... in a way that is maybe easier than in a really big institution. We can basically make, and we do make, adjustments to try and support students in achieving their potential in the particular field that they are in, in terms of making arrangements and trying to get flexibility of access. I think she feels that the

college has been really, supportive of her athletic success and enabling her to also succeed in her studies, and we're really proud of her achievements.

However, Jenny went on to note that this support was often not formalised but provided on an individual basis. She outlined some of the steps involved in this process:

we would have students who have all sorts of particular challenges and we would very much work to find ways of enabling them. We're not great in terms of formal, flexible provision [...] In terms of what we do, I can't describe, there is no separate unit or grouping of people who simply sort stuff. Between me talking to the head of department thinking about the range of companies. How we might do it, which would work and then brokering the conversation, you know, that is basically what we do. Trying to figure out what will enable this person to gain that experience and what can we do about that.

However Linda went on to explain that she was somewhat unaware of what needs to be done, "I am kind of struggling to answer is that I am not aware of it being brought to my attention that there was ... was anything that we should do ... but I think if there is something that could be done".

Charles believed that it was based on how the student was supported from the moment they entered the college, with responsibility in all areas of the institution, "but the best examples I've found here is that there is a cross-functional team meet the individuals and see how can we provide accommodation as to allow you to engage with what has been designed. I mean it does come down to, you know, there is an individual responsibility across all the functions in higher education to say, 'how can we do this better?'. He went on to explain that "we're constantly learning and there are many instances where we make mistakes, or we make assumptions, or we don't appreciate the additional challenge to what seemed like a good idea".

Across the data different practices were evident in the recognition of volunteering or civic engagement. In some colleges this was an inbuilt piece of a student's course. In others, the student had to choose to engage. However, there was a clear expectation among senior managers, that students would engage in some aspect of civic engagement before completing their studies. For this to occur institutions were developing "civic engagement opportunities" and some awarding mechanisms to enable this. As noted in social engagement above the appointment of an engagement officer and the development of an engagement strategy formed part of this.

Senior managers spoke of having "Dean's Awards", "Presidents Awards", and "Civic Engagement Awards". Many of the colleges looked to programmes in Scotland and

England from which to develop their own form of recognition. For instance, Ann detailed how they were, “developing” a “graduates award” to recognise “work outside the academic programme” like “Birmingham City University”. Ann went on to explain that although they had “sports scholarships” they did not have any recognition for student leaders. Leo explained that his college were, “linked up with *the National Forum for Teaching and Learning in Ireland* which has the “Digital Badge”. He identified the award as encouraging the “development of new skills” including “leadership skills” and that, “the badge is portable”.

Charles spoke of their institution “launching” a “digital badge soon”, which he hoped would form “part and parcel of the fundamental curriculum”. He explained what his college was hoping to achieve, “so you encourage the students and you give them space in your curriculum to do what they are good at and what they enjoy which could be social activities. They bring a portfolio which describes what they are doing, and we give them appropriate credit and recognise that”. Charles sees this as an opportunity for the college, but sees challenges in implementing it, “that to me is an opportunity sitting there, ready for us to figure out how we can embed that into our programmes”.

The following section will present a summary of the findings under superordinate theme two, engagement.

### 6.3.3 Student leadership and representation

Leadership, “student representation” and “civic engagement” were identified by senior managers and DSP as an important aspect of student engagement. Establishing mechanisms to hear the “student voice”, having “an open-door policy” combined with having student representation on “all decision-making boards” in the college were seen as critical. Senior managers spoke of actively promoting “student voice” in their colleges.

Senior managers like Tom, spoke of the structures they had put in place to ensure student voice is involved in all aspects of governance, “students sit on our academic council and they also sit on all the subcommittees of academic council, so things like teaching and learning and equality and programme validation, there are student representatives on all of our subcommittees. They’re obviously also on the programme board of all our programmes. So, there’s an opportunity for the student voice at virtually every formal meeting at the institute. And those—in some cases, those students are student union reps, but in more cases, they’re just nominated students from the student

cohort". Across the interviews the students' union were identified as a central link between the student body and the institution.

Leo, senior manager, expressed the view that there was a need to create "an environment in which a student can have a voice". Whether they wanted to be a "full blown activist or a quiet voice". Creating a, "sense of feeling that, you know, if they have something to say, or if they have a question it's taken seriously, and it's done within a confident manner". Students who feel they are "not being listened to or not being heard, they're much less likely to come forward a second time". Leo's view was widely expressed across the interviews.

Yet, despite this belief in student representation, a majority of senior managers were not aware of any disabled students in senior leadership roles in their college. A few of those interviewed pointed out that they "weren't aware of every student who had a disability", especially those with "non-visible disabilities." However, they often acknowledged, that this could mean that there were not any people with visible disabilities in leadership positions either. Jack noted that, "to our shame we haven't had a lot of students with disabilities on committees. Very limited, and probably not reflective of the proportion of students who might fall into those brackets in the college here, to be honest. We don't have a huge number of students, for example, with sensory disabilities". Leo commented that they currently did not have special representation from disabled students. He felt that "special representation of students with a disability... on some of the bodies is worth considering". Tom's initial view was that there were not any significant barriers for disabled students engaging in leadership positions. But upon reflection he felt that some disabled students might find it more difficult, "I suppose it depends on the disability... there may be some disabilities which, by their nature, inhibit people from being more vocal or wanting to put themselves in the spotlight". Several senior managers felt this diversity of representation was the responsibility of their students' union and recommended I speak with them. However, most agreed, that there was a need to consider this issue.

Frank explained how he had changed his personal practices when he realised the difficulties students had accessing his office:

students with disability, they can have difficulty getting to our place, so I normally say to them to email me first. It is not a big deal for someone who can walk to arrive at my door. But it can be a big deal to actually get through the building on a weekday, because you access my office to an open-air area. So again, I would be conscious of this. A number

of years ago, a student arrived to me absolutely soaked and said “I wanted to be here on time” and I said “it doesn’t matter, you could have waited and been dry and come back in”. I got more conscious of the difficulties of modality of them getting here or not getting here.

There were a few examples of senior managers working closely with disabled people in leadership positions. Charles spoke of a student who “was quite the campaigner in first year helping us identify obstacles to being able to navigate the campus. I asked the student would they be our advocate because they were in a much better position to tell us the weaknesses in what we were designing where. I do know that the ambitions for that student were to engage in student union politics. I think they went up for election”. Senior managers who had similar relationships with students spoke very highly of the students and the benefit of this relationship to the college. Abby was of the view that the size of the institution affected whether the voice of disabled students got through or not, “the previous institution I was in was an institution of over 20,000 students, and I think the student voice, with respect to disability, would’ve been maybe less noticed there, just by virtue of—not because people didn’t care, but just because of the sheer size of the institution. That doesn’t make it right or wrong, you know, I’m just saying I think we’re more aware and we can accommodate more easily because of our size”.

In contrast, all DSP were aware of a disabled student in a senior leadership position within their institution. However, none of the participants were aware of any students in leadership roles from the “three under-represented groups of students from the disability community”. This included students “who are deaf or hard of hearing”, “who are blind/or have a vision impairment” and students “who are “physically disabled/ or physical impairment”.

Eve believed that students face many barriers including “attitudinal” and “negative perceptions” and structural challenges. The focus group agreed that discussion was needed around the reasons why disabled students were not in leadership roles and it was necessary to ask students what the barriers were. Tamara believed that students with learning disabilities were more likely to “take part in students’ union roles or students’ union events, but students who have physical disabilities often do not go”. She felt that “there should be more encouragement to get students with disabilities involved in key roles within students’ union, so that they’re involved in organising activities”.

A number of senior managers had recently established an access committee or an equality diversity committee. Ann explained the thinking behind this, “we’re looking at

the whole EDI area in a bigger sense, as well, and possibly we are hoping to establish an equality committee, and for example, that might allow us to, I suppose, capture some more of that, so that you know, you would seek to engage more people with disabilities”.

Barry spoke of a working group they had established, “which I think includes disabled students in the facility side, looking at making the buildings more accessible. And of course, there are staff members with disabilities who are involved in those”.

Disability support personnel highlighted the increasing opportunities that now existed within institutions for disabled students to take on differing levels of leadership roles. These included “ambassador programmes for students with disabilities” and “peer mentoring” and that there were “different programme or different kind of models” across the country. Eve considered this an opportunity for students “to get to meet students that they wouldn’t necessarily get to meet through those programmes.” Minnie noted that “peer mentoring” had changed somewhat and whereas in the past it had an “academic focus” it now had a social focus. Participants found these programmes were linked to their colleges “graduate attributes”. They discussed seeking regular feedback from students on these programmes.

Jack, senior manager, offered an opinion on how more disabled students could be engaged in leadership. He believed that implementing a quota system was not the answer but felt that “we need to focus first on what are the reasons? And some of them may be discriminatory. Because some of them are. But there may be other reasons”. He felt these reasons could encompass the extra challenges disabled students face in college. He strongly believed that colleges need to ask students, “Why can’t you take it on? Is there something we could do that would enable you to go home in the evenings not completely whacked out, because we never knew that you never told us.” So, I think certainly, I think it’s important that it’s the—that we ask those questions. And the people that would give you the answers are obviously the people with the disabilities themselves”.

It was widely expressed that the initiative to increase the number of disabled students in representative positions must come from the “student cohort” and the students’ union. Jack, senior manager explained why, “Probably the way to do is to actually use the students to approach the students. I think that’s more important [...] every other student goes through the students’ union, the whole thing, and they’re going why are you not...?”.



A majority of participants were aware of, or their college was involved in the *National Student Engagement Programme* which is currently being rolled out to promote greater student engagement and collaboration between students and their colleges. The response of senior managers is interesting in the context of the national roll out of the *National Student Engagement Programme* which sets diversity and leadership as two of the pillars of the plan. Disability support personnel raised concerns about how disabled students would be supported to engage in leadership. Minnie said that they would “expect challenges in students being able to engage with the leadership aspect”. There were also concerns expressed as to whether the institutions will provide spaces for disabled students on committees.

#### 6.3.4 Summary of theme 2: Engagement.

Overall, the findings provided deep insight into the views of senior managers and DSP relating to the barriers and enablers to the social engagement of disabled students. They recognised some of the difficulties students with difficulties faced when engaging socially including “academic demands”, “inaccessible environments, commuting, outdated perceptions and financial barriers”. It was evident that these difficulties were compounded by challenges within institutions including limited “resources, outdated infrastructure, lack of accessible spaces, lack of supports, and a lack of provision by the students’ union”.

It is apparent from the findings that there was a lack of a deeper knowledge among senior managers about the social engagement experiences of students, in some cases, the views shared were not based on direct experience but based on indirect experience or perceptions. It was clear that many had not considered the topic, or they spoke of not being made aware of it. A number stated that the discussion would prompt them into further action.

It was clear that here seemed to be little consideration for supporting the social engagement either through in-class or through civic engagement. There was a lack of awareness in relation to the role disabled students play in the decision-making process within the institutions. A majority of participants spoke of being aware of, or that their college was involved in the *National Student Engagement Programme*. However, there was a clear lack of understanding of how they would implement this in relation to disabled

students. The establishment of student led peer groups was a somewhat contentious issue, that raised a range of views.

There was evidence of initiatives being implemented in individual colleges to promote the engagement of disabled students. But what emerged was a patchwork of initiatives based on good intentions, driven by someone with an interest, rather than part of an overall strategy. It was clear that student engagement was a high priority for senior managers and DSP, and there was evidence of embedding engagement strategies within the institutions. There was little evidence among senior managers of a knowledge or implementation of a social engagement strategy, supported by funding for disabled students. Overall, the need for greater awareness of the social engagement needs of disabled students emerged as a dominant superordinate theme across the interviews. The next section will present the findings for the third superordinate theme, college climate.

## 6.4 Theme 3: College Climate

The third superordinate theme that emerged following data analysis was labelled “College Climate”. All DSP and senior managers spoke about the importance of the college climate within their institution. Within this, there were three subordinate themes:

- Attitudes and behaviours of staff and students,
- Universal design,
- Belonging.

### 6.4.1 Attitudes and behaviours of staff and students

Senior managers used words like a student friendly institution, and hoped they were warm and welcoming, and an exciting place to be. They spoke about the students being at the heart or the centre of everything they did within their college. They recognised this as being of a great source of “pride” to them. Disability support personnel used words like, supportive, helpful, diverse environment in which the student body were kind and helpful to each other.

Developing a climate of support within the institutions was deemed to be extremely important and it was evident that senior managers had different visions of what their college climate looked or felt like. This can be seen from Frank who emphasised the importance of developing a climate in which the staff know the students, “We would know a lot of them [students] and it [college] has a very strong culture of people trying to make contact with students and to look after the ones who have problems or difficulties”.

Dick believed that no one is “anonymous on his campus”. He considered this to be “extremely important in terms of the atmosphere of his institution”. Dick felt that his “small institution” was a significant factor in creating this atmosphere, and “because it’s a small institution, access to services, access to staff, academic staff or support staff, is relatively simple and straightforward”. Conversely, Chris felt that although his institution was “a large institution they successfully managed to create a small institution feel” by providing an integrated student support network. He felt that it was going to be a challenge to maintain this in the future due to increasing student numbers.

Des and Beth shared Dick’s view and they spoke about how they have tried to create a “home from home” climate, “recognising that, almost like that old adage for ‘Cheers’,

“Where everybody knows your name”. They believed that they had created “a culture that is more familial than [...] you might get in other colleges”. They attributed this to the development of “an educational hub and a social hub”.

They expressed the view that a contributor to this climate was that “most of their students studied a similar discipline”, meaning, “that effectually they’re all doing difficult academic programmes, they’re on similar timetables..., so it creates a cycle of activity, [...], rather than multi-faculty institution where the pulse of the institution can be different depending on the programme”. Jenny expressed similar views on the contribution of the disciplinary and vocational nature of some of the courses in her institution.

Across the interviews senior managers regularly commented on the importance of “their staff”, considering them one of the items they were “most proud of in their institution”. Ann identified the “huge commitment of staff,” towards creating the climate within her college. She explained the impact this had on students, “you hear lots of small stories where something that looks very small means a huge deal to somebody, [...] on a personal level, with that student who got the extra chance”.

Barry had a vision of institutional support that included an investment in academic potential. He outlined that there had “been a very deliberate statement from all sides of the [institutional] management to say we want to retain a student focused culture”, and “we don’t want the senior academics buying themselves out of teaching and hiring occasional staff to do their teaching. We want the people who are the leading-edge researchers also meeting the students and meeting the first-year students”. This view was shared by many interviewees.

It was evident that senior managers were interested in developing a climate open to “student communication”. Leo felt the climate within his college was “quite an open [...] kind of approach [...]. We like to think of ourselves as being very accessible, and that students can easily come up, knock on the door, and get help and support when and where it’s required”. Senior managers spoke of conveying this message to students during the orientation programme. Ann noted that “a culture” in which students are, “formally involved as stakeholders in consultation” is a critical aspect in developing a climate within a college.

However, there was a difference in the reporting structures used within colleges. Some senior managers were very open to students reporting difficulties directly to them and

had an “open door policy”. Whilst others preferred students to make contact with the disability support services or follow the “proper channels”. Abby remarked, “if there are issues, they’re usually raised through the disability service”.

It must be noted, that during the research, the researcher found it somewhat challenging to make direct contact with senior managers. It proved difficult to locate contact details on some of the institutions’ websites. However, once contact was made senior managers were open to discussion.

The diversification of the student population was widely discussed throughout the interviews. Frank outlined that in his institution that this had occurred due to a conscious effort made by his college, “we wouldn’t have had a hugely diverse group of students in terms of ability or disability. But, over the last ten years we have taken a conscious decision to broaden access as much as we possibly can”.

Noel identified how he had made the “widening participation agenda” one of his “objectives” in his institution. Barry explained the necessity to take “a whole of the institution approach” to this. He noted that you don’t “want to carve out one category of people and say, you’re the people with the disability, or you’re the people from poor backgrounds, or you’re the people with special learning needs, and you’re to have a different stream within the university. In education, we object to streaming in schools on the grounds of the social segregation that it causes”.

However, Barry identified challenges with ensuring “a whole-of-institution approach” to access. He found it “challenging because the people in the access office buy that vision. That doesn’t mean that every administrator and every academic in the university buys the vision. There are, as you know, extremes in views everywhere, but certainly there are some academics would prefer if students weren’t here at all and they could just get on with their research”.

Noel explained that they faced challenges in his institution, and described the current situation and how he achieved a change in culture, “we found [a] broadly [...] siloed approach, where, again, we had people being directed to specific units for support, and nobody saying, actually, this is my student, and I need to support this student”. He described how it was necessary to work with “university governance, university administration”, to “put in place the policies, procedures, activities, and embed them through that structure, rather than just saying, isn’t it a great idea that we support

students? Because everybody buys into that. But what we've set about doing is really looking at how do we make it the responsibility of everybody?"

The above sequence from Noel and Barry's interviews was frequently identified by senior managers. This concerned the conscious decision whereby all aspects of the institutional structures are utilised to embed and obtain buy in by staff to bring about cultural changes, such as making "access everyone's business".

All DSP and almost half of senior managers spoke directly about awareness of disability within their college. Disability support personnel did not refer to a lack of awareness among individual students but rather a lack of awareness among the Students' Union, clubs and societies and the impact this has on the student's ability to engage socially. They referred to challenges they faced in managing this among staff and student groups.

Senior managers, including Ann, identified how her "awareness of students with disability has very much ramped up in the last maybe 5-10 years". She attributed this increased awareness to growing "numbers of students registered with the DSS [disability support service]". Conor believed that the increase in disabled students would lead to greater "normalcy". Ann supported this point with the comment that "most classes [you] now you walk into [...] don't look [...] half as homogenous as they looked even 15 years ago. There'll be a student with autism or there'll be a wheelchair user, you know, and it's just kind of taken as read".

Senior managers articulated examples of how their personal awareness and that of staff had increased due to interactions with disabled students. Jack began by speaking fondly about a student who uses a wheelchair and described him as, "tearing around the place". He went on to explain how the college had "remodified a whole workshop to enable him to undertake" his work and described it as, "one of the best things we did in a long time". He noted that the staff in the student discipline who worked on the project were, "quite proud of it, and they made modifications to machines and extension of handles and push-buttons and, you know, the whole lot. They made it safe, it was great". Jill believed that awareness held a focus on certain types of disability, "many people, if you say 'disability,' for them they see somebody in a wheelchair. And they don't, for instance, they don't think of things like mental health issues as coming under the classification of disability. Asperger's and autism [have] got a lot of airplay recently, so there is an increasing awareness of it".

A few senior managers spoke of having to manage negative perceptions towards disabled students and a lack of awareness among staff. Ann outlined her experience, “I suppose I would have encountered colleagues in the past that have said you know, certain students aren’t just meant for a third-level education”. Jack believed that, “there’s a big cultural part [to it] as well, there are still people who would have issues with people, particularly with the learning difficulties [...]. It’s a little bit discriminatory”. However, he felt that this attitude is “relatively small”. Nevertheless, he had concerns that even though “it is small, it can be very vocal”.

Frank, attempted to explain the effect of a lack of awareness from both the academic and student perspective:

Sometimes with lecturers or with tutors [...], if you’re not used to dealing with people [with] disabilities can be quite uncomfortable. They’re not sure what to say, they’re not sure how to react. They’re not sure what to do, and that can come across then as maybe a lack of comfort and that will express itself to the students, who will then feel that there is maybe a sense of that lecturer or the students aren’t comfortable with them. Sometimes people are just not good at dealing with difference. I think it is an individualistic thing. You know, I think if you ask those students, you know, is it due to the lecturer (not in the negative sense of being mean or disparaging- we wouldn’t want anyone to be that) but just in the level that lack of comfort or lack of ease.

Charles emphasised the need for “ongoing training with your staff, and that there is a need for the institution to understand our student base”. He believes that, “we regularly make assumptions, but we need to understand and that understanding needs to percolate everything that we do from the highest level down to the individual interactions between staff and students”.

There was a consensus among DSP of the need for student groups to provide improved awareness training for their representatives and have it embedded as part of their culture. Eve believed that it depended on the year with some disabled students running excellent campaigns to increase awareness among the student body. Amber spoke of “doing what they can” to support them but being unable to provide this type of training to these groups.

Senior managers, Beth and Des felt this was necessary but found in their college students were to the forefront in requesting equality diversity inclusion training. However, both discussed the challenges, one of these being the need to “re-educate every bunch of students we get in due to the rotation of students and students’ union officers”.

Cultivating a supportive environment and support provision was to the foremost of many of the senior managers' minds. Nick described being, "quite happy and very proud of the fact of the supports that we give the students with disabilities". Jack spoke of the "increasing number of students that would have different needs, needs that wouldn't be typical of the normal student in those range from disabilities, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, and obviously you have the whole socio-economic background". It is worth noting that over the interviews senior managers often referred to socio-economic status when discussing disability. Noel outlined that they wanted to create an environment within his institution in which they, "don't think of students by categories, we just think of them as individuals who have particular requirements, particular needs [...], we have [x number of] students and we probably have [x number of ] students with different tailored needs in each case. And so, what we have to do is provide a portfolio of experience that allows the students to find their position in the institution. [...]". He believed that the climate within his institution was very important in achieving this aim, "I would say there is a very open ethos in terms of wanting to be able to support the wide variety of students—disabled students, socioeconomic—all of the different categories".

However, he felt that there was "less of a clear understanding of what an individual either should do or what they can do. And still a little bit of a sense of, well that's great, we love to have these students on the campus, but actually there's a unit over there that's where they go". He was adamant that there was a need to change this thinking and ensure that all supports are "mainstreamed" and that "it's part of everybody's business".

Among other senior managers there was a strong sense that disability support was provided by the disability office. As exemplified by Abby, "we have a disability officer, so, and she's on the ground, she's very visible to the students, she's aware. I would say when students are registered and if they have any disability or any issues that we need to be aware of, she will be notified, so she will engage directly with them". However, Jack and Ann described facing opposition from academics towards the provision of "learning supports" or the "recording of lectures". They reported that this opposition was due to a belief that providing these supports gave these students, what the academics considered as an "unfair advantage". Ann described this as creating "tension" in her institution. Conor too had faced initial resistance to supports for "exams and assessments" for students with intellectual disabilities more so than students with physical disabilities. He noted that they were forced to deal with each situation "on a one to one basis between access staff and the heads of departments".



Ann believed this was beginning to change, “I’m hearing less of that”. She believes that the reason for this change may be because, “every year we’re getting in new staff, we’ve some very young staff now and I see them in the staff room, and they themselves have probably been in classrooms where there’ve been students with educational needs”. Jack felt that changes in his institution are because they have “mainstreamed that in our quality assurance handbook, such that the allowances for disabled students—so for example, extra time in an exam, or the use of a scribe in an exam, is actually built in as part of our exams regulations, as opposed to just being an unofficial engagement or arrangement that’s in place”.

Although senior managers spoke of developing a climate of support, they emphasised the importance that these supports do not prevent students developing the skills they would need once they leave college. Jack explains how the nature of support has changed within his institution, “I suppose when we look at what we would refer to as educational disability, things like dyslexia, that whole area has moved on, whereas maybe about 10 years ago, certainly some of 3rd level colleges almost had a ‘drop in’ service where a student gave in an assignment, it was proofread, corrected, and handed back to them”. He highlighted that, “what’s important though is that you try to prepare the student for when they eventually leave college, and those supports might not necessarily be available for them”. He concludes by explaining why he thinks this is important for the student, “I think when you get to that point it’s an awful lot better than students being given full support up to the very end, and then when they leave the supports taken away and they’re back to square one”.

Among a few senior managers and DSP there was evidence of the dominance of the medical model approach. The language used by senior managers reflected this as can be seen from Jack through his use of statements relating to disabled people in the college “it comes down to care”. Beth and Des were quick to highlight the dominance of the medical model in their college and suggested that the disciplinary nature of the institution contributed to this approach. They explained that they had begun to implement a strategy to overcome this which involved them in, “EDI (Equality Diversity Inclusion) proofing [...] the curriculum specifically for disability”. They acknowledged that they were moving from the medical to the social model, and that “there is an awareness that it’s something that we could do better”.

Beth and Des accepted that the dominance of the medical model allied with “cultural views” might impact upon disclosure of a disability by a student, “there are cohorts of

students within those groupings would benefit from supports but are reluctant to ask for support". This was the case among some students from an international background, where disability was viewed differently, "there are certainly disabled students who, in their own culture, would not be as forthcoming". Beth and Des also believed that some students were afraid to disclose for fear that "declaration will somehow follow them into their professional career and be perceived as a weakness". However, they noted that "there's a journey to go there". and that they believed their institution was "open" and "responsive" to student needs.

All DSP spoke about students' disclosure of their disability. They discussed how the college environment, awareness levels and stigma can impact upon a student's disclosure and willingness to avail of services. The reasons offered for late disclosure included lack of awareness, lack of understanding of their support needs, stigma associated with disclosing, and students who wish to attempt college without the supports. Tamara recounted how one student had not disclosed her use of a PA whilst in secondary school because she feared it might affect her ability to make new friends. Barbara felt that it was not "as bad as it used to be". She thought the reasons for this were multi-factorial "it is because the numbers have increased because of the DARE programme as well". There was general agreement with this statement among the focus group. Donal noted that "students can also be very pragmatic about disclosing and will assess if there might be a benefit to why they might disclose to somebody". They might choose to do this instead of "isolating themselves". He believed that the decision to disclose "comes down to previous experiences, personality, strength of character, resilience, and family background". All the DSP detailed how they supported students who wished to disclose their disability later in the semester. Donald added that although it was becoming "less likely" that students arrive having not disclosed, there was still a "large proportion of students who register with the service post-entry". One DSP felt that the model in which the National Learning Network (NLN) undertook assessments with all incoming first year students in their college helped to remove the stigma around disclosure. This ensured that students received the necessary learning supports on time.

Tamara highlighted that very late disclosure does present some difficulties for the service. The reason given by her was that the system was "inflexible". She explained that students must disclose in early October in order to receive funding from the fund for disabled students. She felt this system need to change.

Senior managers also raised the issue of disclosure of a disability but were not as conversant with the subject. Beth and Des highlighted that their institution encouraged students to disclose and ran awareness raising and information events which had seen positive results. Tom believed that the key was to create an environment in which supports were “normalised and that there’s no stigma attached to it”. Part of this was to offer all students “universal assessments to ensure we can, or we try and make sure that the additional services that are available are available to all initially”. Charles spoke of a similar structure in his institution.

Disability support personnel felt quite strongly that the representation of the disability service or access office within the college environment was extremely important. Henry explained that “it’s an access service for all not just a disability service”. They discussed their attempts to re-brand or change the name of their service. Tamara spoke of naming the service ‘Student Services Office’ because they were afraid that some students might feel a certain stigma around using the supports. Donald explained that the service currently provides a range of other supports including ‘communication and advocacy skills’ and the name no longer reflected the services they offered. Grace found, to her surprise, that when they approached students about changing their name, the students did not want to. Henry indicated that their service had an open-door policy which meant that students had the “opportunity to drop in at any stage”. He felt that this contributed to “a greater awareness of the services available”. He believed that this “accessibility resulted in more students registering with the service”.

#### 6.4.2 Universal design

The contribution of spaces towards the social and academic atmosphere of the institution was widely noted among participants. It was a factor in creating a sense of community and a suitable learning environment. Disability support personnel found that spaces played a role in providing an environment for students to get to know each other, in allowing students to disclose their disability, and to share information. Informal spaces such as waiting areas at the disability support offices were seen as locations where students meet other students and share information.

Across the interviews senior managers spoke of working collaboratively with the student body, in particular the students’ union, to develop spaces for students to socialise and study in. They discussed how cultural changes, changes in learning styles, and the

widespread use of technology among the student body has affected the type of spaces students and staff now need. Barry felt that they had “a lot of classroom space, and functional space, but not a lot of space to spill out into and hang around”. Nick spoke of how students spend more time on their laptops doing “groupwork” and so his college had provided “pods” with open “Wi-Fi” across the college.

In some cases, there was a difference of views between the students’ union and the institution. For example, Barry explained how they had previously given the students’ union control of “central social spaces” but they felt it only “served a subset of students”, and so they were currently moving towards creating more “informal spaces”.

As noted in previous themes, there was a great degree of pride among senior managers regarding new student friendly initiatives they had introduced. For instance, Abby spoke about how students were more “health conscious” and so they had worked with the students’ union to remove the student “college bar” and introduce “social hubs” where students “can gather and engage”. Jenny identified the lack of space in her college as impacting upon the ability of students to engage socially and preventing them providing a “healthy campus”. She sees this as a, “downside and weakness”. She believes that there two reasons for this, “one is that it is a very small campus” and the other “is a consequence again of absolute underinvestment, non-investment over upwards of 10 years in the campus”.

Ann described space as a “big issue” affecting their ability to provide “different spaces for students with disability”. But she felt they were “doing a reasonable job of it”. James was exasperated by the situation in relation to “accessibility” and declared that it was “embarrassing” and “exclusionary”. He spoke of “a student who is in a wheelchair” being “confined to one floor” because the building was old and they had not the resources to make the changes.

Many of those interviewed identified tiered lecture rooms as a barrier to access learning by not facilitating groupwork and students’ conversations. Charles believed that “if you are encouraging practices where you want more personalised learning and you drop an academic into a tiered lecture theatre, you are giving them a mixed message”. He was of the view that it was difficult to make “accommodations” and that it “was an architecture that had “outlived its need”. There was a preference among senior managers for an environment with “flat rooms with open spaces and technology”.

Senior managers gave examples of having to re-accommodate students due to infrastructural failings. Jenny recounted how a non-functioning lift in her college had negatively impacted on two students with “mobility challenges accessing their lectures with their classmates”. Barry had been obliged to take a similar approach, he considered it as a “half-satisfactory approach, because it means you’re putting in quick, temporary solutions into buildings instead of making it properly accessible”.

A few senior managers discussed the development of “quiet spaces” for students with autism or Asperger’s. Beth and Des “discovered that having quiet spaces is really fundamental part of (autism students) education process and working towards integrating that in a lot of our events”. Jack identified that ultimately he wanted to reach a point where “the student arrives in the morning,” and “that he or she can always blend in as seamlessly as possible into the institution, so there’s not a drama if the student needs to go to the bathroom for example”. Charles was eager to ensure that student success was “by design” and not “by accident”. For this to happen he believed that “we need everybody in the community to contribute to that. We need to recognise that we are constantly learning and that all feedback, positive and negative, helps us improve what we’re doing, and we need to have the willingness to seek that and to use it and to enhance ultimately that student experience”. The development of new spaces within larger infrastructural projects on certain campuses was seen as very helpful to changing the atmosphere within the college. A number of the interviewees, including Nick and Charles referred to developments that were underway on their respective campuses.

Barry was quick to highlight what he felt the solution was not “I certainly wouldn’t like to see a set of social spaces deliberately for disabled students, because that’s not in the spirit of things at all”. He spoke of what they are planning to do in his institution, “I would like to see us develop social spaces for students in our buildings, near to the teaching spaces, which are welcoming and accessible. And we are going to do that”. But he had concerns as to did that really solve the problem, “But again, I’m not sure that—that’s just providing infrastructure, that’s not the same as making the place genuinely inclusive. And I’m not sure what we do beyond that”.

Senior managers demonstrated varying levels of awareness as to what universal design was and how it should be implemented. Frank was unsure about it and described his college as not “having addressed it yet and that it was a disciplinary choice”. Nick described himself as not knowing “that much about it except that my simple understanding is that irrespective of who is in front of you, you don’t have to adapt your

content to suit them. Very simply it is designed to be inclusive, [...] instead of having special sorts of courses for people with disabilities or whatever it might be, you just have this approach to your content development and your teaching methodology that it covers whoever happens to be in front of you at any point in time". Nick considered it "a brilliant concept" as he understood it. He spoke of wanting to "integrate it into the curriculum and the culture" within his organisation.

Ann was of the opinion that regarding disabled students the "knowledge at the moment is very much orientated about providing the needs—about supporting them, to giving them the initial support during the initial learning to meet the programme outcomes, to enable them to be employable". She was of the firm view though that "the whole area of the universal design for learning" had not been brought to greater attention.

Many senior managers believed that some staff were fearful of applying the principle of universal design, as it might result in an "increased workload or increased costs". Leo took a more pragmatic approach and felt that, "there are lots of ways to make things easier for them [disabled students]. It doesn't require a lot of effort on the part of a lecturer because no one is going to have to do more".

There was also a contention that academic staff were very protective of their "academic freedoms" and that there may be "resistance" to "interference" in how they deliver their material. Leo spoke of teaching being an individual activity and "interference goes against the principle of academic autonomy".

Barry explained that part of their strategic plan was "to move in that direction of preparing staff to prepare their teaching materials in a way that is really inclusive". He also acknowledged that it was "tricky" as "you can't tell academic staff how to prepare their materials". But he felt that the risk was that if you did not and "you don't provide training and support events for staff, then you're leaving them to think it out for themselves".

He emphasised that it is "bigger than just preparing teaching materials with a bigger font or making sure that the audio is loud enough. It's dealing with the diversity of learning styles, and that's the big challenge, to try and get somebody who understands the material in one way, to try and present it in multiple ways". He believed that if this message wasn't delivered correctly then the response from the academic community might be, "We understand our discipline, don't tell us how to teach it," and we get a pushback from it".

Noel also believed that it was not a case of forcing it upon staff but rather bringing them along the journey with you and demonstrating to them that it is about “about inclusive excellence”. He outlined that this idea was based on the principle that, “in order to be excellent, and getting the best ideas from the widest range of thinking”, it must involve “understanding and incorporating the minority views and minority approaches”. Including people with disabilities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and hearing their stories. He went to say that these stories then become “an essential component of achieving excellence. They’re not just a side, you know, an add-on piece”. David and Barry favoured promoting a similar approach.

Disability support personnel were very aware of UDL and UD and felt that although there was increasing awareness among academic staff about different learning styles and techniques there was still a long way to go. Tamara was of the opinion that academic staff are using “new ways of learning but they often aren’t aware that there were so many different styles in the one class”. They believed that in order to raise awareness of universal design for learning it was necessary to have representatives on college committees such as the ‘teaching and learning’ and ‘departmental committees’ and to have a key point of contact in each department. Henry described having a “lecturer whose responsibility it was to work with the “access” office “ensuring that lecture material is accessible to students registered with the access office”. He considered it a “bit of a challenge to ensure that lecturers” made their work accessible because you’re dealing with people from different perspectives”.

A number of senior managers felt that in order to encourage staff to embrace UDL, it was necessary to take a multi-pronged approach which involved awareness raising, making it part of a professional development opportunity and embedding it in the policy of the institution. Tom explained the situation in his institution, “we have a formal teaching and learning programme which includes a credit-based module on universal design building towards a postgraduate diploma”. He found that “more and more staff are taking these accredited programmes to build their own professional development” leading to the professionalisation of education. He went on to explain that they also run a series of awareness raising talks and workshops for staff and students. James felt that there was “a degree to travel in relation to the implementation of universal design in his college”.

All DSP discussed the supports they provide and their efforts to make their services universally accessible to all students, especially students who had not registered with

the service. They did this by promoting what was available and offering students multiple ways of contacting them including online services. One aspect that resulted in quite a degree of discussion was the provision of information workshops. These workshops were on a host of topics including work-life balance, time-management and were requested by students. However, they were left frustrated at the poor attendance by students and feedback from students identified that the students preferred one to one support. But this was deemed resource intensive. It was also determined that students preferred online communication instead, but DSP expressed concerns students were missing out on the social interaction. Donald believed that poor attendance may also be attributable to disabled students not wishing to be associated with events with a “disability theme”.

### 6.4.3 Belonging

Senior managers regularly referred to a sense of community, connectedness, relationships, and feeling at home when discussing belonging. They identified the contribution of spaces, infrastructure, people, and supports in developing a sense of belonging for their students. Disability support personnel also highlighted the importance of student preparedness to transition, a positive transition, and appropriate supports.

During the interviews senior managers often linked students’ success to the creation of a sense of belonging. Jill opined that the “biggest reason for not succeeding is that feeling of not belonging, never finding their place”. Nick also expressed the view that, “one reason that students leave, is because they feel that they don’t belong. If there isn’t that sense of community and belonging, they’re gone”.

Senior managers including Jill believed that “choosing the wrong course is probably the most common reason” for this feeling of not belonging. Disability support personnel held a similar view to senior managers.

Senior managers identified ways in which they created a sense of belonging on their campus. James felt there were “multiple ways of doing it but the key was to start at the very beginning” when students enter college. Brendan believed it should begin even earlier, “we have an extensive outreach programme and a series of open days, [...] particularly amongst programmes which require portfolio entry, those students would



have been on the campus multiple times before they actually enrol and will have engaged with staff and will start to be invested in the place before they arrive”.

Disability support personnel highlighted the importance of the creation of an in-class sense of belonging. They identified that this could be enhanced by the appropriate teaching styles and creating a more inclusive environment. They believed that some students feel like they do not fit in with their class.

Senior managers agreed, while Frank believed that the student “subject area and their department had a role to play in embedding” a student in the college. Barry stressed that once a student begins college it is important to develop an “affinity with the class the student is in and this can occur if the student feels welcomed by the department”. But he noted that this can only work if the students “feel welcomed by their peer group”. For those who “feel alienated from the peer group he described it as “a hostile place”. He went on to express the belief that, “some of our students never feel an affinity to the institution as a whole, they feel an affinity to their department within that institution”.

Frank felt that “this [in-class belonging] is the only way that students can be embedded into a college”. Noel felt that it was even more critical in large institutions or in institutions with large class sizes, “I think within the college, or within the programme, what we need to be very clear on is that the student understands where they do belong within their academic programme”. Frank believed that if a student is studying English and “if English is a nice place for me, then college is a nice place for me, if English is a cold house for me, then college is a cold place for me”.

Noel believed it was important to create a “sense of identity between the student and the department’. But he felt it was not only the student that benefited from this, “I think all the faculty that are involved in the subject also gain a strength of identity that and create that community between the faculty and the student that is of a scale of a village scale”. Linda agreed that students with a strong identification with their discipline had a stronger sense of belonging. She also expressed the view that students’ sense of belonging increased as they progressed from first year into senior years. She wondered whether this was this because in first year “they were in large classes and they had lots of different lecturers coming in and out and then [they develop] this sense of belonging once they specialise”.

Institutional size, “class size” and the “vocational or disciplinary” nature were all identified as factors which may affect a student’s sense of belonging. Senior managers, including James, discussed attempts to reduce class size and introduce small group teaching.

Across the interviews several programmes were identified as examples of good practice or as contributing to creating a sense of belonging. Charles identified the implementation of “peer mentoring within his college as creating a sense of community” and that it “has given a greater sense of community for the broadest range of students”. Eve, DSP, shared the results of “student feedback” from her college which showed that “quite often the students who do the access leaders then go on and become ambassadors, peer mentors, orientation guides”. She believed that the students who got “involved” felt more “connected to the college”. She went on to add that student feedback demonstrated to them that students wanted to be associated with the “access office because it made them feel part of something”. However, she added, this was not the case for all students.

Senior managers such as Nick discussed the important contribution “clubs and societies and the students’ union” play in “creating a sense of connectedness and community”. Jill explained how important it was that students “felt part of a group” and she felt that it did not matter whether that group was “the club and society, or whether it’s your own classroom”. James considered his college “big into identity”. which he identified as being linked to “sport”, and the “clubs and societies, with almost every student wearing one of our apparel”. Abby believed that “creating belonging requires direct involvement in the decision-making process, and if they [students] feel that there’s merit in giving an opinion because the student voice will be listened to and action will result from it, then I think the student will probably feel as if they’ve engaged successfully”. She felt this was “a very definitive way of measuring engagement” and that it “gives a sense of belonging”.

Jill made some international comparisons between the Irish education system and the United States (US) system in relation to belonging. She expressed the view that student groups “weren’t nearly as homogenous” and that they never “talked about belonging” in the US. She believed that it is more of an issue for Irish students because they are being “shepherded through in groups like this, all the way through, with no choices, no electives, they’re all together”. She believed that it may be a “cultural difference”, a “hangover from the secondary school system”., and a result of the inflexible system which creates “barriers to re-admission” if you leave without completing your course. She finished by questioning the definition of student success in Ireland.

Half of senior managers believed that disabled students felt like they belonged in their institution. However, Frank felt, "It is easy for me to say they do, because I am not disabled". Abby was adamant that disabled students felt like they belonged in her college. She attributed this to the leadership demonstrated by current and past students in raising awareness, "we've had a couple of students coming through who are natural leaders and have created appropriate awareness of needs".

Like Abby, Nick expressed the view that to him disabled students, "have always felt part of the community". Similar to previous data, Nick believed that, "the fact that those issues don't arrive on my desk in relation to students with disability feeling that they are not properly treated suggests that they most likely are properly treated". He felt that this was an indicator that his college were, "doing the best that we can for them".

A few like James were more hopeful than sure, "I think they do; I really do think they do. I really hope they do, and if they didn't, I'd hope I'd know the reasons why and what we're doing about it to make it that it does work for them".

The contribution of relationships between staff and students was widely acknowledged. Nick felt that, "the fact that staff [in his college] know who you are, and staff give you time" and that you "can talk to staff outside of class" enables the creation of a "sense of connectedness and community because you are known". He believed that it was important that students did not feel like they were "just a number in a large lecture theatre", and "if you're not there, you're not missed".

However, a particular emphasis on the relationship between the senior managers and disabled students was apparent. Frank spoke of his relationship with disabled students in his college, "I would have a very strong relationship with two particular students". He recognised the challenges these students faced, "They do face massive difficulties. Like there is no point in saying they don't. We make a big effort to make them feel like they belong".

He held a strong opinion that there needs to be greater awareness of student's "ability". He discussed a "book of poetry by students who were at various levels of disability" within which "one of them had a fantastic poem. He [the student] was describing things he was, "[I'm] a football fan, a hurling fan, I'm an artist, I'm a musician [...] The very last line of the poem was "and all you see is my chair". I thought that was just so true because that is true".

In a few cases having a disability officer with a disability, and the visibility of disabled students on campus, was linked to disabled students' sense of belonging as expressed by Frank, "We have a specific disabilities officer, which is important. The people in the certificate [...] are quite visible in the college and they mix in quite well with the other students". Jenny identified how support enabling the student to engage academically and socially leads to the student "feeling at home and feeling supported".

Similar to the subordinate theme of social engagement a few senior managers identified a person's disability as possibly affecting a student's sense of belonging. Barry identified differences between those with mental health difficulties and those with a physical disability, "I think that, depending on the disability, I think people who have mental health difficulties, very often feel that they are socially isolated, and even though we would like them not to feel that, I think it is a more socially isolating experience for them. The people with physical disabilities, I think get a lot of support, but as I said, may feel that they're left behind socially". Barry highlighted that the "vision for the institution is if it's going to be an inclusive institution, that ethos of inclusion has to be everywhere" but he noted that "gives us very difficult issues".

The following section will present a summary of the findings under superordinate theme three, college climate.

#### 6.4.4 Summary of theme 3: College climate.

Overall, the data provided an insight into the views of participants on college climate. Disability support personnel and senior managers identified how the location, size, infrastructure, attitudes of staff and the diversity of the student population all affected the climate of their college. They clearly faced significant challenges in their efforts to diversify their institutions including attitudinal, systematic, and resource issues. There was a range of policies being implemented to make it the responsibility of everyone within the college. Although it was evident that there were gaps regarding the joined-up thinking of these policies. There were some excellent practices being implemented but these were sporadic and there were also examples of significant shortcomings. This was especially obvious when it came to facilitating the needs of disabled students' sense of belonging. In some cases, disabled students' sense of belonging was linked directly to their disability support service, seeing others with disabilities, in-class experience, having

disabled staff, being engaged socially, choosing the right course among many other factors. From the data it was evident there was a range of barriers and enablers to disabled students' sense of belonging.

The next section will present the findings for the fourth superordinate theme, structures.

## 6.5 Theme 4: Structures

The final superordinate theme that emerged following data analysis of the interviews with senior managers and disability support personnel was labelled “Structures”.

The theme included the following subordinate themes:

- Policy and systems
- Resources
- College size and regional variation

A majority of senior managers and disability support personnel spoke of the impact of internal and external structure on their institution. They spoke widely about the effects of these on their institution and HE more generally. They noted the impact of, culture, resources, policy, location and college size.

### 6.5.1 Policy and systems

Almost all senior managers discussed systems and policy implementation during their interview. They primarily focused on policy implementation at an institutional level and how national policy impacts upon their policy development. Beth and Des felt that, “the policies do work, [...] when people are aware of them, the challenge is getting people to understand what’s in them”.

The interviewees confirmed that in recent years there had been significant national policy developments in relation to; metrics, targets, widening participation goals, and making access everyone’s business. These issues were represented in the form of national policy including *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, *The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019*, and *The Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018-2020*. Senior managers spoke at length about these developments with reference being made to KPIs, and performance compacts with the HEA.

In relation to the implementation of national policy, a majority of senior managers favoured establishing targets to support institutions in making systemic changes to reach the participation goals established by the HEA. Abby felt it gave them “focus”. James believed that it “helped drive us along”, as long as “you’re not ramming numbers down peoples’ throat”. Fred was of the view that it meant they were all working towards a

similar goal as opposed to “doing our own thing [resulting in] it never getting better”. Linda explained how it works within her institution, “If you want to encourage change and monitor change as it is happening... get your baseline data, set your targets, and off you go toward them. I think it is important to be realistic and to be honest and to honestly capture the situation as it is. So, we are working on baseline data, [...] And, you know we are getting better at capturing the data as well and we have targets and we report on those every year”.

However, across the interviews senior managers expressed concerns about how the numbers of disabled students are calculated nationally. Leo explained, “I think some of the targets are fairly representative of the cohorts that they’re trying to bring in”. He was concerned that the methods used to calculate the numbers of disabled students “was underrepresenting the real number”. For example, “if you look at some of the national strategy documents, they talk about the students with disability and the numbers they use are based on those who qualify for funding under the *Funding for Students with Disabilities*, the (FSD), operated under the HEA. I’d be conscious that we probably have a good number of students here who should be eligible for FSD funding” that are not being supported. Barry was also unhappy with how the numbers of disabled students are calculated and felt that they were being underrepresented.

A few senior managers did not favour targets. They were adamant targets were not the way to implement change and contended that it was not the best way to achieve the goal of widening participation. Conor spoke of “not being convinced that performance and targets are necessarily a good way of doing it”. He believed, “that change was achieved because of, I think, the culture and the processes and the other structures and supports we’ve put in place”. He expressed the view that HE had “been subjected to an awful change in terms of the target metric performance metrics, more generally, for the HEA”. over the last number of years. He felt there was unnecessary focus on institutions that were doing well and expressed the view that targets should be focused “for the institution that are particularly poor”. Barry did not believe that “the system changes in response to targets”. He felt that, “simply announcing a target, unless you’re putting funding behind it or doing something else with it, it’s a notional target”. James felt strongly that “people make the difference—not systems, not numbers—people make the difference”.

The majority of senior managers spoke positively about engaging with the Higher Education Authority regarding, KPIs and contract agreements. They highlighted that these established targets were not imposed but rather evolved from consultation,

negotiation, and agreement. Tara spoke of having “done a lot of work in relation to creating access routes” through these. Conor was not as favourably disposed “towards these plans”. He described the “most recent version of the contract that higher education institutions have made with the HEA” as having “hundreds of metrics and measures in that, and if you look at the action plan for education, published document, again, hundreds of objectives. [...] I’m just not convinced that it’s the way of doing it or maybe I’m just probably a bit metric-ed and target-ed out of it”.

Although in favour of targets to improve greater participation, Noel believed that the issues were within the wider education system:

underlying issues are not really around the higher education institution, they might be sub-secondarily, they’re actually around the inequality of access to primary and secondary education that is leading to that inequality. And I think that’s going to be true for disability. You know, I would like to think, I wouldn’t like to bet on it, but I’d like to think that we don’t discriminate against disability. The problem at the moment is that actually there is a whole bunch of inequitable situations that lead to that underrepresentation. None of which is, if you like, purposeful, or targeted against a group, it’s simply the failure of multiple steps that leads to a society where there is an inequality of access.

Jill shared some of Noel’s views and went on to express the opinion that “the universities can’t fix all the problems of the world, including the ones that have been allowed to develop and fester all the way through [the] secondary school system”.

Among the DSP and senior managers there was significant work being undertaken developing institutional policy. Senior managers discussed their strategic plans, their vision, and how they lead change by obtaining buy in. They considered this as critical to success. They frequently described policy development within their institutions as a time-consuming and torturous process but the only way to initiate change. They gave countless examples demonstrating that the development of policy was central to making people responsible, especially regarding their special accommodations policy. This was most apparent when they were discussing increasing student diversity, widening participation and making access everyone’s business.

Concerning the development of strategic plans, Ann, senior manager, described “equality and diversity as having made its way into their institutional strategy”. She highlighted that having a “national strategy” to back that up made her “life easier and you can say this is what we have to do. It makes it practical”. Beth and Des felt it was “hard to measure the impact of those type of policies” and highlighted the importance of feedback. Dick explained that their “current strategic plan” lays out their “access” targets



and that since they implemented this, they have seen “increased participation in those terms”.

Disability support personnel discussed having a range of internal policies including diversity charters in their college in relation to disabled students and to promote equality, inclusion and diversity. These policies were seen to be generally effective. They described strategic objectives to increase the number of students from under-represented groups and working in partnership with their students’ union among other stakeholders to achieve this. The equality, inclusion, and diversity agenda contained a certain tension or competition to ensure that other diverse groups did not receive greater attention. Tamara described how the agenda to provide “gender neutral-toilets impacted negatively on the number of wheelchair accessible toilets”. She described “struggling to not have our wheelchair toilets taken for that purpose”. This was a common theme across the interviews.

Senior managers noted the importance of having a wide consultation with staff, students, and all stakeholders during the development of their strategic plan. Barry described how what, “emerged was a strategic plan that is saying we will take a whole of university approach. A whole of institution approach to access, and to inclusion, broadly inclusion, and I mean ethnic, racial—the whole range, that this would become an inclusive institution”.

Among DSP Tamara, Henry and Donald and focus group participants spoke of the absence of policy relating to engagement of disabled students in their institution. Henry believed that there was a need for a policy in this specific area. He felt that “further development in terms of having a structured approach to how we actually address the social issues of disabled students at the third level”. Henry detailed his difficulties in supporting students because of his reliance on services and supports outside of the institution and a lack of funding within it. He raised two main issues, “transport” and “PA” support”. He described how the “fund for students with disabilities only covered academic hours” meaning that if a student wanted to do anything outside of this then the remaining hours had to be provided through the “Health Services Executive”. He described this process as “challenging”. He highlighted similar difficulties with the transport system “typically our transport would cover one round trip a day”. He explained how this impacts on the student, “if the student’s lectures finish at 3:00, and they’re living close to university, it then means that they’d be staying around until 8 or 9 in the evening, and so then they would need to have an alternative way home”. Hector explained that

situations like this were compounded by the lack of “accessible public transport or taxis in the country”.

A number of senior managers spoke of the importance of having access champions on their programme boards to drive the agenda regarding policy implantation. Access champions are people who have an interest or knowledge in the area of widening participation or equality, diversity and inclusion. The senior managers discussed the need to have these people spread across different boards in the institution, in positions where they can influence others, rather than speaking to the converted. Noel explained how policy becomes implemented within his institution, “A lot of the mainstream agenda comes from, again, [...] putting things into terms of reference, putting it onto programme boards, getting governance, working in a direction, and then [asking the question] so what are you doing about this? It’s in your terms of reference to be responsible for this. [...] I think most people, once they realise, actually, that there is something that they can do, our programme boards and our programmes are actually very open to driving that agenda, it’s not a hard sell once they get engaged with it “. Jill made the point that there should not be a need for “special policies” and “special schemes” if the wider system and the “culture in society surrounding it was more inclusive and was actually providing the appropriate supports”. She linked system failures to the “funding models”. She gave the example of part-time education and suggested that “if we actually had a kind of funding model from the higher education authority, [...]” that “gave funding to people who could come part time” it would benefit a lot more students from difficult socioeconomic backgrounds. Across the interviews, the lack of funding for disabled students wishing to engage in part-time course was identified as a significant issue.

During the interviews, senior managers spoke about how student success was defined and how to support this within what they described as an inflexible system. They noted that the current definitions of student success within policy did not represent the changing model of a student. Many believed that there was a need to redefine what student success is. Jack felt the current measures of student success do not recognise the many extra challenges disabled students face. He believed that it was, “relatively easy to give the student a place and get them in the door. But to get them to succeed in whatever capacity”. He questioned, “how do you actually track the actual experience of the student as they go through the programme, what different needs to they have rather than the regular retention programmes, which is usually lack of engagement, with their programme on an academic basis, but these obviously have a lot of other barriers that need to be identified”. Jill believed it came down to standards and identified student

success as allowing students to “reach their full potential” but she identified the challenge of trying to “maintain standards” whilst also supporting disabled students, “we assist students to, we give them support, accommodations, whatever it is we need to do to allow them to achieve those standards”.

Charles identified the contradictions and challenges he faces within higher education, “our perception of higher education has become so imbued with benchmarks and rankings that perceptions can very quickly, even though you know what you are doing is right, you don’t get an awful lot of credit for these micro-interventions that are changing the life of one student”. H believes this is because, “you are not necessarily investing in and growing your Ph.D. student numbers at the other end. So you have always got the fine balance to work with and in an Irish context, you know, perceptions of quality in higher education are quite distinct and often very poorly informed.....We are constantly striving within the constraints of the system, because that is a system and how we can manipulate it to allow us to better serve the needs of the students”.

Jenny identified in the approach in their college as having a “framework for studentship which is basically a policy around the nature of the student supports that are in place” which was supported by an oversight committee. She described the development of national “student success strategy” and how “student success means different things to different people” and “depended on what you want from education”. But she felt it should include “student retention and students succeeding in their learning”. She felt that the “easy piece” was providing supports but the wider question was “what constitutes success” for diverse groups and she felt the best way to determine this was to “ask the students”.

There was a need to review the policy regarding transition experiences expressed. They noted the negative impact that policies had in the primary and secondary level system which created challenges for students transitioning, and they highlighted the inflexibility of education systems, and the failure of systems to be linked up. James, senior manager, identified how disabled students transitioning to college, “ and their families are having to constantly repeat themselves at each stage when it comes to seeking supports”. Colm, senior manager, felt this was particularly important in relation to the pathways to college, the provision of supports and the provision of part-time courses.

Disability support personnel faced challenges supporting students who had made the wrong course choice. Eve felt that the “educational system” had a role to play in the

number of students arriving having chosen the wrong course. She described how “every year” she “has at least four DARE students who find that the course they chose was not what they wanted to do”. She suggested that the problem was far bigger than merely the student’s decision-making process. Barbara believed that the current system allowed too little time for students to transition and make up their mind. She recognised how students had the added fear of losing their free fee status for the first semester if they did not leave college before the HEA deadline. Donald, DSP, noted that “the data demonstrates that disabled students are moving at a different pace” to the institution which he describes as “quite brutal”. He highlights that there are “key dates every week” which can be difficult for students who are struggling to manage a disability during the transition.

Charles, a senior manager, gave an example of an Australian institution managing their very diverse student population by changing the system. “They see three categories of students, rural, urban and cloud, but default student as cloud. And their rationale and their vision is their students work, it is just the default, they have recognised that. Many could be single mothers; others could have various disabilities that make it more challenging for them to physically attend. The default is not the student physically attending every day for X number of weeks in a semester. The default is all programmes are available online. However, if certain programmes need physical attendance, then that is provided first. So, if you’re a science student, you may well get your lectures online, but you’ll still turn up to do your labs”. He describes how they have listened to their learners, identified their needs then responded to that by “designing their programmes, their services and all of the infrastructure”.

Charles felt that the current system is not meeting the needs of the students, “we still have a system that assumes our first years will be physically present here for every week of every semester. And the truth of the matter is, for a lot of our students, that is a very artificial view of their life. So, what we have discovered is they have figured out how to work around that. They figure out how to maximise flexibility in what is largely an intransigent system. Charles believes that there is an “opportunity to do something quite different and respond to where our students actually are at the moment”.

Senior managers were very open about the difficulties they faced in making policy or system changes within their institution. A few senior managers spoke about making changes to policies regarding the opening times of their campuses, the availability of social spaces, the provision of coffee docks out of normal hours. They saw these hours

as, restrictive and limiting engagement, and considered these changes necessary for non-traditional students and part-time learners. They faced opposition from the service providers, to ensuring that there were facilities available outside lecturing hours.

Senior managers, for example Tara, was particularly frustrated attempting to work with different departments within her college making infrastructural changes to support a student with a disability, “I don’t know whether they’re a breed, but buildings offices within third level, the higher-level education area, they’re very inflexible. Very inflexible. The worst ever. It’s not just dealing with disability, just generally, [...]. So, I don’t know whether it’s a culture, I think it’s a culture. It’s not a lack of awareness, it’s a culture”. Barry noted that, any kind of change has, “to be slow, repetitive, consultative, and in being consultative, you build up enough—a majority support that allows the thing to go through. You don’t get unanimity, and there are still objectors, and there are still people who think it was the wrong thing to do, but it got to the point where a majority supported it”. He explained that institutions, “are not really staffed by people who feel that they are taking orders from a manager. They are independent thinkers, they want to do things because they believe in them, and so you have to persuade people of the point of view, [...] in fact, I think the most counterproductive thing we could do is to send an all-staff email from the president saying, “From now on, everyone shall take an inclusive approach”. I think that would just become a source of ridicule and mockery, really”.

Disability support personnel suggested that some senior managers were not in touch with or were not aware of the support needs of disabled students, or they would not know if disabled students were in leadership positions. Conversely Eve said that she found it very useful to be able to approach senior managers if there was a crisis. She highlighted that she felt comfortable to do this and it meant that problems were resolved much more quickly in her institution.

A few DSP spoke about the failure to provide funding support to disabled students studying on a part-time basis. Tamara highlighted that undertaking a part-time course may suit as it allows them time to manage their disability. However, she explained that “they can’t get the funding unless they study on a full-time basis”.

Charles, a senior manager, concluded by describing what his college “have been very good at is how you can manipulate all of those structures, policies and procedures to give us greater flexibility and meet the needs of that diversity of learners that want to attend here”. Throughout the interviews there was evidence of the “system within the

system” and of senior managers referring to the ways in which they were forced to adapt to overcome the system.

### 6.5.2 Resources

A majority of senior managers and a few DSP referred to the subordinate theme of resources. Dick, senior manager, believed that his role was to, “to provide the best possible education that we can [...] in the most prudent possible way in order to deliver that”. He identified funding in higher education as a “perennial challenge” and expressed amazement at how well the country managers to perform “on the global stage, in education”. despite the funding difficulties. Leo described the situation within higher education as “very challenging”.

Senior managers, including Tom, felt that “broadly speaking, yes. I think we are sufficiently well-funded, with the one proviso that infrastructurally it presents some difficulty, so in terms of supporting students with extra supports or whatever, yeah, we’re certainly adequately funded for that. But if you’re operating in a building that’s 200 years old, then lifts and fire escapes and all those kinds of things they come at quite a heavy cost”. Barry considered the “physical access in his legacy campus as a big problem” describing it as a “legal time bomb”. Jenny made the point that a lack of funding affects the infrastructure, which dramatically affects the social spaces available to all students including those with disabilities. Dick felt that it was very difficult to deliver on the access agenda in a climate of reduced funding. He described it as “the biggest challenge that we have”. He was quick to point out that “It’s not a lack of willingness on our part. It’s not a lack of engagement on the part of our absolutely fantastic access office. It’s that funding level. It is extremely hard to do more and more on less and less”.

Frank supported Dick’s point and explained why it was more difficult to manage a diverse population with the current resources, structures and systems:

when you bring in a more diverse populations in terms of ability or disability or in terms of social class or in terms of educational background, you’re doing no one any favours if you bring them in and expect them to work with the same systems that people are coming from. Which a more privileged background will have. So, I think if you bring them in, you do need to set up systems that will advantage them. Will equalise the situation for them. With [current] resources, with broader demands, it is very, very hard. It is a much more challenging environment to work in, now, than it was ten years ago. I don’t think that’s a bad thing. I think in many ways we should be able to do that.

Barry felt it was not possible to meet the participation targets and provide the supports required within the current funding model. He believed that the “inevitable result of” the HEA saying we’ll grow the system, without increasing the amount allocated per student is:

you have to have more staff-student ratios, more overcrowded buildings, eventually you run out of something, and the question is what breaks first? And that everybody can see that, and so they’ve decided to try and do something to change the funding model. But the underlying puzzle is you can’t change the funding model and fix the problem unless you put in more money. And they’re not prepared to put in more money, because they don’t have it. and they’re not prepared to raise taxes to get it, and they’re not prepared to raise student charges to get it, and so at the moment the system is going on in that creaking system of getting less per student each year. Very worrying. Can we meet the targets, can we do everything we want? Absolutely not.

When discussing resource constraints, senior managers regularly referred to the “financial downturn” using words like “the crash”, the “downturn”, “budget cuts”, “cutbacks”. They described themselves as coming from a very “low base” and being quite constrained. Ann spoke of these “budgetary constraints” as affecting their ability to provide academic staff with “contracts”. The result being that the staff were only available to students when delivering their class and not available to support students afterwards. Leo felt that “small colleges” were being impacted when trying to roll out universal design due to resource constraints, “It’d be nice to have greater resources for that. I suppose as a small institution, that has been a challenge for us”.

They raised the issue of a “lack of resources” and its effects on their staffing levels. Nick described the challenges in delivering the access service within the current levels of funding as being, “not easily done”. He described allocating the human resource support and the human capacity required, as “more problematic”. He felt that his college did not have “sufficient staff structure behind the access office” and “absolutely needed a second access and disability officer”. He believed that they were “funded adequately for the actual assistive technology resources and “[...] special needs requirements” and that “to be fair to the HEA, do your needs analysis, do the costing, you’ll get the money”. But he felt there was a gap when it came to the “implementation roll out” and that “access is not adequately funded”.

A few senior managers referred directly to the cost of supporting disabled students and the extra demands it placed on their services. Leo highlighted a concern when attempting to provide the support needs of disabled students, “some students with disability [who] would need quite a lot more management and quite a lot more care and

attention than another student. And if you've 20, 30, 40 of them, that's one issue" for staffing "and so much of it tends to be one-to-one support as well, and it gets very challenging to try and meet that staffing need".

Dick identified the challenge of providing support for disabled students as "quite simply that it all costs money". He felt that "it would be intensely unfair to say to the disabled person, [...] you got to pay for all of this". He went express the opinion that, "the funding environment, it squeezes our resources ever more. It should never be a trade-off. We will always do what we can do and we will try and interpret the rules to the benefit of the student every time".

Nick outlined their approach, "we sort of imply that whatever services are required, we will provide irrespective of the costs. And I must say the HEA have been very supportive of that budget. And we blow it, you know and that is what it is for".

Jill expressed concerns about the "expectations of students and their family's v's their ability to deliver within a restricted budget". She believed that there was a "culture in terms of what people expect the universities to be able to do". and questioned where the responsibility of the institution and of the wider society lay. She expressed concerns in relation to mental health support delivery. "That's the kind of thing that makes me extremely nervous because I feel that we are not equipped to really provide a service to that level. [laughs] it doesn't mean we shouldn't be providing a service, but a service to that level. And the biggest demand I'm seeing is in the mental health area, and the biggest call on us—and to some extent, an expectation that we will do that, but I keep saying, we're an education institution, not a health service!".

Disability support personnel also raised concerns that there was a high level of expectation among parents and students in relation to what colleges could support. Donal believe it was important for DSP to be mindful of their remit. He felt it was necessary to "realise the limitations and not try and create expectations for students that we are going to meet needs or demands that we would ultimately fail to do because we would be stretched too thin". Barbara explained that her role was to provide "academic supports" and felt, that disability advisors needed to "be careful you don't blur those lines".

It was evident that in some cases senior managers were conflicted between meeting national targets in relation to increasing income through perhaps, increasing the number



of international students, and meeting their support obligations. James identified the conflict that takes place in his own institution, “I think it’s, people kind of go, “Well, we’ve got X number of international students, and Y number of students without disabilities, and we’ve got a very small cohort here of disabilities, so will we invest time and effort into this?” And often the case is, no, or you don’t see it as important or as impactful. I think there’s a real challenge there, and I’m speaking for ourselves now”.

Senior managers regularly referred to funding streams such as “PATH”, “1916 Bursaries”, “Social Innovation Fund”, “Fund for Students with Disabilities”, “Higher Education Authority Funding”. They spoke at length about the advantages and disadvantages of bursaries such as the PATH 2 and 3. They identified these funding streams as being helpful in developing new “initiatives” and “projects” to support students within the HEA target groups. PATH 2 and 3 are two targeted funding schemes established by the Department of Education and Skills to support implementation of the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019*. PATH 2 is the 1916 Bursary Fund and PATH 3 is the Higher Education Access Fund <https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/path/>. Nick made an “application as part of a cluster” and described himself as “happy enough with the outcome because we got” what we applied for “so, they believed fully in what we are doing”. He identified, “that is going to allow me, for that period to bring in an extra resource and the other institutes to bring in an extra resource to widen access more”.

One of the challenges highlighted by many senior managers was the short term thinking and the failure of these funds to provide for staff to allow for the long-term continuation of a project. Once the funding has been used up the institution is forced to draw upon existing core funding if they want to keep the programme running. Jill explained the challenge her institution faces is that “there is an expectation coming from the HEA that we will manage a lot of these things with very little”. Nick also questioned “what happens after the three years, you know? What happens in the HEA? You have to show sustainability. But how do you show sustainability if your budget drops?” He became quite agitated because he had experienced similar issues with past funding streams such as the social innovation fund. There were millions allocated to it. “It was true that I introduced a whole range of other initiatives but then I had to go back to my executive team and say ‘guys, this is a good initiative’ the money is going to be gone next year, but we have to continue supporting it”. He identified his institution as now, “carrying an additional cost for what you have mainstreamed across an organisation”. He felt it created “unreal expectations and was a crazy way of funding”.

Barry felt that the funding system was unfair and explained what happened, “when they announced extra access initiatives, what they do is they top slice that out of the fund. So, it’s not adding extra money into the system, it is reducing the amount we get per student, and then giving a little bit extra for the access students. When we decide to do, or when they decide to do something else for springboard, or something like that, top sliced out of the recurrent grant. So, in fact, the whole system”. Ann felt it was unfair of the “government to expect staff” to continue to implement and develop new initiatives such as the “new consent classes without directing more resources” at these initiatives. Leo reflected back to “8 or 9 years ago, we were dealing with all this economic crisis, and the dominant mantra at the time was “Do more with less,” and I’m not sure that we’ve left that behind us, there’s still an expectation that you know, here’s another initiative and another initiative and another initiative, and you do it within your current resources. He felt that “Targets need to be backed up by resources”.

Disability support personnel highlighted that funding, and resources, were an issue when providing for social engagement supports. They pointed out that their funding only covers academic supports. Donald shared that he has had to apologise to students who sought social support because “we can’t do it”. Henry believed that this was “a challenge that really needed to be looked at from a funding point of view”. Eve felt that it would be helpful “if we or the SU had access to a ring-fenced amount of money, in order to make sure that anybody who wanted to attend an event could do so”.

Although Tamara identified that there was no specific funding for social engagement for disabled students. She felt confident that if she sought funding, “it would be forthcoming”, but she shared that “she has never sought funding to support social engagement of students with disabilities” as she believes it should fall under the role of the organising body. She concluded by sharing the belief, that the social engagement of disabled students should be the “duty of every person and it should be part of every person’s job to be inclusive and to encourage students to be involved, particularly students who have disabilities”.

### 6.5.3 College size and regional variation

Senior managers referred to the size of their institution, the location of their institution, and how this affected the service they were offering to students. A few believed that their institutions were established with a very specific purpose, as can be seen from Charles,

“So we were put here to serve the needs of a community that would not have traditionally availed of higher education”. Those located in regions were particularly mindful of their obligations to serve that region, they described themselves as being “rooted” in their communities. This often meant providing courses to meet the needs of the employment demands of the area and providing for unique social needs.

As outlined by Ann, “there’s a very high level of [...] commitment to what people would see as our traditional remit”. She identified this as a commitment towards “the student who were capable of becoming fine engineers, but mightn’t’ve gotten access to the honours maths, or may need to be taught in smaller classes to ramp them up more gently towards being an engineer”. She identified a “big commitment to flexible learning opportunities as well for people who are you know, lone parent family, the lone parents, people with kind of family commitments and all that, there would be a great commitment on the ground to getting support for these people if they’re prepared to make the commitment back”.

Charles highlighted the challenges in “trying to meet the needs of his students whilst trying to balance that against the demands of the system, [...] my greatest frustration [...] is that higher education as a system still expects you to conform to a norm. So, you still have the same quality assurance regime, you still have the same funding mechanisms, you still have the same structural concepts that permeate throughout the organisation”.

Ann believed that in an Institute of Technology there was a real focus on “identifying the gaps” and “closing them out”, “level the playing field” and helping the student “reach their potential” whether that was to become a “social care worker or an engineer”. Nick believed that they offered a better “student experience”.

A few senior managers discussed cooperating as part of regional partnerships to “roll-out joint initiatives, identifying them as offering a lot of scope” that brought great value to everybody. These partnerships could be regionally based and involved universities working with institutes of technology. Dick described how his institution had “collaborated”, with a number of institutions in his region to “promote the access agenda”.

There was also evidence of institutions forming “partnerships” with the further education sector in their region to provide pathway for students into higher education. In some cases, these partnerships extended to include institutions in Northern Ireland.

Senior managers spoke about the advantages and the disadvantages concerning college size. Those in “smaller colleges” believed they were at an advantage because their college would be “quicker to respond to students’ needs” and “it is quite easy to accommodate”, that it offered a more of “home from home environment”. Frank attributed their high retention rate to the college size which allows for “connectivity between the lecturers and students. the fact that if a student is missing that somebody will notice it”.

Those in smaller colleges also felt they were at a disadvantage because they did not have the “same level of resources as a larger college” especially when it came to the design of new initiatives. Leo believed that there was a need to do more to improve the social experiences of disabled students but this “might be a little bit easier in some of the bigger institutions, because they have economies of scale, and where you have economies of scale, you tend to have a little bit more fat, so that you can create additional resourcing or additional programmes, and so on. In a smaller institution, you tend to be relying on the same fewer numbers of people all of the time, and they get much more stretched, which is a little bit more challenging”.

Those in larger colleges felt they were at an advantage because of the wide range of “offerings” they could provide students, including courses, social engagement, and volunteering. However, they discussed their concerns around trying to respond to student needs quickly and to provide “a home from home environment”. David believed that the challenge for them was “as we continue to grow [...] how scalable is what we currently do?”.

A few senior managers and one DSP spoke about plans to merge with other colleges and form a technological university (TU). They described it as a good thing for their institution, an expensive task but worthwhile and it had increased their workload. They had looked at how services would be provided to disabled students and there was a belief it would result in increased resources for their institutions, which was seen as a positive development. The DSP expressed concerns as to whether services currently being delivered would continue. She also identified how there had been a lot of work around ensuring that the “voice” of students was part of the process. This included discussing how students would be represented on institutional decision-making committees and all other sections of college life.

The following section will present a summary of the findings under superordinate theme four two, structures.

#### 6.5.4 Summary of theme 4: Structures

The interviews provided valuable insights into the views of senior managers and DSP on the superordinate theme of structures. Within this they explored the subordinate themes of policy and systems, resources, and college size and regional variation. They identified how inflexibilities within the system and structures led to difficulties supporting the needs of a diverse student body. There was strong evidence pointing towards “the system within the system” which they had to manipulate to support disabled students. It was also identified how the structures and systems affects the culture, and the culture can shape the structures. They spoke of structural barriers and policies and practices that worked to penalise or hamper engagement. Reference was made to infrastructural deficits causing lack of spaces, which impacted on students’ wider engagement. Interviews demonstrated challenges faced by senior managers and DSP in making changes to their work structures.

Resources and lack of resources featured strongly throughout the interviews There was some positivity toward the different funding streams introduced. However, the consensus was they did not allow for long-term planning which impacted on the colleges’ ability to mainstream the projects. Senior managers demonstrated positivity toward targets as a mechanism to bring about change; policy implementation was an important aspect of this. DSP identified a lack of policy and resources dedicated to the social engagement of disabled students as an issue requiring urgent action. DSP highlighted the challenges of competing against the wider diversity agenda within the institutions. There was a frustration with the system and structures in place, how they interacted with it to assist students, and the level of inflexibility they faced.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

Chapter Five introduced the presentation of findings before presenting the first set of findings under the heading 'student's voice'. This included disabled students, disabled graduates, and students' union full time officers. Chapter Six presented the second part of the presentation of findings and detailed the findings relating to the college response.

This included senior managers and disability support personnel. The findings offered a window into the management of the widening participation agenda and social engagement of disabled students in HE. There was a clear lack of structures, support, and knowledge among staff on how to enable the full social engagement of disabled students. The findings are rich in detail and provide a unique opportunity to view the dynamic within the whole system and how the student interacts with the system around them.

Chapter Seven will synthesise the findings and discuss them in relation to the current literature, policy, theory, and practice.

## Chapter Seven: Discussion

### 7.1 Introduction

Chapter Seven discusses the main research findings following the analysis of data, chapter four, and presentation of findings in chapters five and six. The research set out to identify what are the social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland? It did this by hearing the lived experiences of disabled students, disabled graduates and students' union officers through the 'student voice', chapter five, and through hearing the views of senior managers and disability support personnel in chapter six 'college response'. Chapter seven will synthesise the key findings and discuss them under the four superordinate themes, with reference to the research questions, previous literature, theories, and best practice. The four superordinate themes are transitions, engagement, college climate and structures. The first theme presented will be transitions.

### 7.2 Transitions

The first superordinate theme identified was transitions, with three subordinate themes emerging:

- Preparedness to transition to higher education,
- Pathways to higher education,
- Orientation practices and experiences.

A successful transition to HE has been deemed critical to student success (McCoy et al., 2020). 'Preparedness to transition to higher education' will be the first subordinate theme to be presented.

#### 7.2.1 Preparedness to transition to higher education

The majority of senior managers and disability support personnel believed that students were not prepared for the transition to higher education. Disability support personnel reported disabled students as being unaware of their support needs, their academic requirements, or simply being unprepared to live independently. Students found themselves unprepared for the size of the institution, having to make and lose friends,

the noise and large crowds, the academic workload, and the different structures. It was evident that there was very little transition planning taking place for disabled students. The research of Doyle et al. (2017) on parent perspectives of transition planning for young people with special educational needs and disabilities in secondary school found disparate levels in quality of support and guidance. There were gaps in communication channels between parents and schools, insufficient awareness and understanding of the interplay between disability and successful post-school outcomes, and high levels of stress, anxiety and frustration experienced by students, parents and carers (p. 274).

Senior managers believed that this 'unpreparedness' negatively affected retention rates among students. This view was supported by disabled students who linked their level of unpreparedness to negative outcomes such as failing exams, leaving college, or having to take time out due to ill health. This resonates with Kilpatrick et al. (2016) findings on the retention and success rates of disabled students, that although the numbers of disabled students had increased, retention rates were lower than in the general student body. Yorke (2016) investigated the 'sense of belongingness' and self-confidence of first year students in UK institutions. He found that for students with a 'declared disability', personal health was most regularly identified as an influence on their non-progression (p. 12-13). There was a higher rate of disabled students who cited a lack of support from staff and students and large class sizes as issues. Interestingly, they had a lower propensity than the general student body to admit that a lack of commitment to their studies, the way their programme was taught, and a failure to make academic progress had been influential in their decision not to continue with their programme (pp. 16-17). The findings of my research clearly show that disabled students and graduates faced barriers to successful outcomes because of a lack of preparedness to transition.

Across the findings it was recognised among senior managers that all students including disabled students face challenges transitioning, such as "wrong course choice", "financial burden", and "accommodation shortages". Shepler and Woosley (2012) found that the earliest college transition issues for disabled students are similar to the issues for other students. Senior managers also identified that disabled students faced extra difficulties such as; "structural barriers", "difficulty in managing the demands of their disability", "lack or loss of family support", "social disadvantage", "greater expectations and anxiety". Disabled students' and graduates' interview data supports this. These findings mirror international research in acknowledging that disabled students face more transition challenges than their non-disabled peers (Ebersold, 2011; Oliver & Barnes, 2010; V. Williams et al., 2008). These challenges may include: insufficient academic



preparedness, greater expectations for self-awareness and self-advocacy, health concerns, and unwelcoming campus climate (Hong, 2015; McGuckin et al., 2013; Redpath et al., 2013). Disability support personnel believed that there was a lack of awareness within the institutions of the level of this extra burden disabled students face when transitioning. Getzel (2008) examined the critical programs that help students to persist in college. She found that success can be supported when faculty are aware of the needs of disabled students. Institutional readiness allied with collaborative work by departments and national services has been equally important for ensuring a successful transition (Getzel, 2008; Hong, Ivy, Gonzalez, & Ehrensberger, 2007; McGuckin et al., 2013).

In contrast, the findings show that a few senior managers believed that their students were prepared for the transition. They attributed this to the small size of their college and the links they had forged with the second level and further education sectors. Previous research has noted the impact of prior school engagement on students' aspirations and confidence (Madriaga, 2007). The findings from the disabled graduate and student interviews emphasised the importance of making advance connections and visits to the college and having social engagement in school in preparation for the transition. The development of collaborative links between higher education institutions and schools has been effective in supporting the transition of disabled students (Ebersold, 2016). Hendricks and Wehman (2009) examined the transition experiences of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). They identified a need for transition planning to prepare young people with ASD to develop the interpersonal skills to engage socially upon moving to higher education.

The findings show that there was a lack of clarity around where the responsibility for preparing students should lie. There was a sense of a shared responsibility with a regular reference to the "national picture". Yet, it was acknowledged that there could never be a fully collegial approach in an environment where institutions are in competition to recruit students. It was generally agreed that the current state examinations systems and structures; CAO, schools' system, tight timeline, and lack of disability awareness within schools does not support students to develop the necessary skills to thrive in higher education. The HEA report titled "*From Transaction to Transition*" raised concerns about the impact that learning styles acquired in secondary school have in HE on the quality of graduates and, conversely, the effects that practices and behaviours in HE have on second level students (Hyland, 2011, p. 7).

Senior managers noted that the barriers to higher education for disabled students are multifaceted. The OECD international review, *Inclusion of students with disabilities in tertiary education and employment* explored the access and transfer pathways for disabled students. It identified major barriers for disabled students, including the failure of secondary schools to begin preparation for higher education access and transition planning earlier (Ebersold, 2011). In the USA, transition planning begins early (from age 14) and students are required to have individual education programs (IEPs) to assist them prepare for the transition (Newman et al., 2009). It was apparent from the findings that student preparedness for the transition was at the forefront of stakeholders' minds. There was leadership shown and "champions" were apparent in relation to local initiatives within institutions implemented in response to national policy. It was widely remarked that in the last number of years there had been a significant national focus on transitions by the HEA and the NFTL which has resulted in improvements including a more coordinated approach (Denny, 2015; Hyland, 2011).

Disabled graduates outlined a range of skills that they had learned at home or from their family to enable them to succeed. The two main skills applied were resilience, and self-advocacy. Research has found that a student's confidence in their self-advocacy is a strong predictor of adaptation to college, thus indicating a vital need for self-advocacy skills in postsecondary education (Adams & Proctor, 2010; Hong, 2015). Among disabled students resilience has been found to be directly related to academic success, satisfaction and well-being (Ganguly, Brownlow, Du Preez, & Graham, 2015). Alumni with disabilities have identified that the ability to understand their disability and advocate for the necessary accommodations were critical to a successful postsecondary experience (Barber, 2012). Within the findings disabled graduates recognised that these skills in combination with the ability to rely on family support were essential elements for success during the first few weeks. They described how family had "taken up the slack" when supports were not available in college and encouraged them to "not give up".

In Ireland, Smyth et al. (2011), showed that parents and families play an important part in facilitating access, transfer and progression from second level into further and higher education; mothers played a significant role in decision making and course choice. The literature also acknowledges that parents have an important role during the transition process of disabled students (Evans et al., 2017). There was evidence in the findings of a graduate being unable to depend on her family because she was the first in her family to attend, HE. There were certain institutions running programs to educate parents on 'how best to support students during the transition' and 'where parents should go if they

are concerned'. A number of studies have recommended that including family can ease the transition by empowering students, reducing unrealistic expectations of the support staff, and allaying family fears (K. R. Brown & Coomes, 2016; Dallas, Ramisch, & McGowan, 2015).

### 7.2.2 Pathways to higher education

Participants were extremely interested in talking about their pathways to HE. The findings indicate there was an increasing number of pathways available to students through national, regional, and individual college access routes. The findings align with McGuckin et al. (2013) who found evidence that access, transfer, and progression pathways to HE for students with SEN were well established (p. 9). Yet the findings show that senior managers believed that there was a need to greatly increase the number of pathways into HE. They emphasised that a greater flexibility within the national system would allow institutions to adopt structures to suit the students' needs and the needs of their community. These findings are interesting in the context of *"The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030"* which recommends that if Ireland is to raise levels of lifelong and HE attainment, more is needed in terms of increased flexibility and innovation, broader routes of access, and a model of funding that supports students equally, regardless of mode or duration of study (Hunt, 2011, p. 17). These findings demonstrate an awareness of the goals of the strategy among senior managers, but equally highlight that this goal has yet to be fully realised. McGuckin et al. (2013) also found that choice making was influenced by access routes; availability and suitability of courses; and academic requirements. This implies that making a greater number of choices or pathways available to disabled students would afford them greater opportunities to engage. The findings show that senior managers reported challenges introducing alternative pathways. Negative attitudes based on 'unfounded perceptions', allied with an unwillingness to work with the new system by a small number of academic staff created difficulties. This was fuelled, in some cases, by a fear of "lowering academic standards" and of not meeting the "QQI Framework" requirements.

Disabled students spoke extremely positively of these alternative pathways including 'PLCs' and other 'FET' courses. These courses prepared them for the transition to HE by developing the necessary academic skills and the friendship networks to allow them to establish themselves. Students pinpointed difficulties including cultural barriers, academic challenges and the size of college classes. They found the course work in

these pathways quite onerous but accepted that it had prepared them for the challenges of attending higher education, including the social demands. Disability support personnel noted that students who entered through alternative entry routes were often better prepared than disabled students who had not.

Two interesting points raised across the findings were the necessity to introduce greater support and flexibility regarding part-time courses, and to implement programmes for students with intellectual disabilities. There were several programmes for students with intellectual disabilities in HEI, and senior managers spoke with great pride about their students and their programmes. Undergraduate disabled students felt it added to the sense of community and reported that sharing classes with students with intellectual disabilities increased their disability awareness. Björnsdóttir (2016) described the experiences of students with intellectual disabilities who attended a diploma programme in a school in an Icelandic university. Students received academic and social mentorship from undergraduate students within the institution. They found that collaboration with student mentors contributed to the development of the students' social networks and their sense of belonging (p. 126).

Senior managers identified barriers to entry to part-time courses for disabled students. Disabled students wishing to study part-time in HE were ineligible for the '*free tuition fee scheme*' and the *Fund for Students with Disabilities*<sup>3</sup>; this acted as a barrier and affected students with significant disabilities more. The findings show that disability support personnel and senior managers believed that part-time education would allow students with significant disabilities to manage the demands of their disability, whilst studying over an increased number of years. In Ireland, it is widely accepted that part-time education has received far less national attention and has been overlooked by the emphasis on full-time education (T. Fleming, Loxley, & Finnegan, 2017). The report on *Part-Time and Flexible Higher Education in Ireland* made nine recommendations for improvement. Two of which are of particular interest; firstly that: "by 2016, full equality of provision and support will have been achieved in HE for all learners, regardless of time, place or pace of study" and secondly that: "specific proposals are developed to ensure people with disabilities can participate equally in HE, regardless of mode or duration of study" (Higher

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<sup>3</sup> Since completion of the interviews the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) has been extended to support the needs of part-time students. However, it must be noted that the annual budget has not been increased.

Education Authority, 2012, p. 5). However, the findings show little evidence of a full implementation of these recommendations within the sector.

The DARE programme was singled out as a “national success” and acknowledged as contributing to the increase in the number of disabled students attending higher education by senior managers and disability support personnel. Disabled students expressed gratitude for the opportunities that DARE had provided them and commented that “they wouldn’t have been in college only for it”. These findings mirror McGuckin et al. (2013) who found that the DARE scheme was generally welcomed by support professionals in higher education as a “structured national-level approach to accessing higher education for students with SEN”. It was recognised that a significant number of students with SEN had accessed college through this pathway (p. 5), with the number of DARE eligible applicants showing a year on year increase since 2010 (Nic Fhlannchadha, 2018).

Notwithstanding this, senior managers believed that there was a disconnect between what the national policy intended for the DARE scheme and what was being implemented within individual institutions. Concerns were expressed as to how colleges implemented the ‘quota and reduced point entry systems’ for disabled entrants. The reduced points system was widely welcomed. Although a few believed there needed to be a fundamental shift in thinking, with the current system needing to change focus from a ‘reduced points entry’ to a more ‘equal’ system in which the ‘stigma’ is removed. There was also a fear that some institutions may be managing the quota and points system and not recruiting students with significant disabilities due to perceptions surrounding the extra costs of supports. The report titled, *“An Evaluation of the HEAR and DARE Supplementary Admissions Routes to Higher Education”*, 2014, found that, there was considerable variation across institutions in terms of the context in which targets are being set, the groups that are being targeted, and the implementation of quotas. They found that wider institutional policy can have an effect on institutional targets, such as when HEIs are physically located within a context of social disadvantage thus affecting the impact of the scheme (D. Byrne et al., 2013, p. 13).

Across the findings, it was recognised that the necessity for students to present up to date medical, including psycho-educational assessment reports acted as a barrier to students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. These finding resonate with the findings of McGuckin et al. (2013) who found that there was perceived unintentional barriers to access within DARE (p. 5). The DARE HEAR Facts and Figures 2017-2018

Summary Report found evidence that disabled students were doubly disadvantaged by also experiencing socio-economic issues (Nic Fhlannchadha, 2018, p. 7). It found that applicants from “other” schools (the majority of which are fee-paying schools) remain somewhat more likely to be deemed eligible for DARE (p. 6). This report followed ‘An Evaluation of the HEAR and DARE Supplementary Admissions Routes to Higher Education’ which ‘resulted in significant changes to the operation of the HEAR and DARE’ (Access College, 2020). Yet, there was a similar finding, in relation to the impact of socio-economic disadvantage and disability, and access to medical reports (D. Byrne et al., 2013; Nic Fhlannchadha, 2018). The findings show senior managers reporting cases where individual institutions continued to support students on a case by case basis despite students being unable to furnish documentation. It was recognised that DARE was not available within every institution and those institutions organised their own entry system<sup>4</sup>. Senior managers and disability support personnel from these institutions spoke of looking forward to introducing the scheme to their college. However, Charles observed that “changing the fabric of higher education is a very slow process”.

### 7.2.3 Orientation practices and experiences

The final subordinate theme relating to transitions focuses on orientation practices and experiences. It was recognised by senior managers and disability support personnel that a successful orientation and the experiences of the initial six-week period were critical to student retention. This was supported by the students’ union, disabled students, and graduates. It was considered important for students to develop a sense of “belonging” and a sense of “place”, a feeling of being “at home” in their department or part of the community.

It was evident that programmes were developed to provide students with the skills they would need to succeed academically and socially. The majority of students identified their campus as a “welcoming” and “friendly” environment when they arrived. For some students, seeing other disabled students or staff upon arrival was important and they recognised how this “made them feel like they belonged” or felt part of the “community”. The “perceived visibility” of disability has been found to be a good predictor of overall student adaptation to college for disabled students (Adams & Proctor, 2010, p. 178). The

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<sup>4</sup> Participation in DARE and/or HEAR by HEIs in the Republic of Ireland has now increased to include nearly all state-funded HEIs (Nic Fhlannchadha, 2018).

international literature identifies campus climate as an important factor (Harbour & Greenberg, 2017) in the successful transition experiences of all students (L. Thomas, 2012) including disabled students (Evans et al., 2017). Murray et al. (2014) examined the profiles of postsecondary adjustment among disabled college students. Students who reported poor adjustment also indicated they were uncomfortable and found the campus climate to be unsupportive (2014).

It was evident that there was significant variation in the implementation of transition policy and practice for disabled students within institutions. There were examples of institutions coordinating specific orientation and pre-orientation activities. These innovative programmes involved staff and students working collaboratively across the institution to support incoming disabled students. The data indicates that students found these extremely helpful with many disabled students returning the following year to act as mentors for new incoming disabled students. The literature has recommended that one way of improving the campus climate and fostering increased student success is to ensure that departments do not take a siloed approach in relation to supporting students (Kezar, 2005) but work together to make “access everyone’s business”.

The organisation of specific orientation events for disabled students was an item of some contention for senior managers and disability support personnel as some expressed the view that it might further alienate students. There was no evidence that students supported this contention, and indeed it is uncertain as to whether students’ views formed part of this decision. The literature points to the benefits of providing targeted orientation for disabled students, with several subpopulations benefitting (Evans et al., 2017, p. 424; Padgett et al., 2012), including those who struggle with the social demands of transitioning to college (Doyle et al., 2017).

There was a consensus among disabled graduates that the transition can be more difficult for disabled students. Nora felt that this was because “during those first few days, you do stand out to everyone else, you stand out as a person with a disability, rather than a person with ability”. The research acknowledges that disabled students encounter significant levels of stigma by peers (Trammell, 2009). A few senior managers believed that students with more visible disabilities, such as physical disabilities, were better prepared and able to manage the transition than those with invisible disabilities. Barnard-Brak et al. (2010) found that those with non-visible disabilities such as learning disabilities may be unable to explain the extent of their disability or the supports, they require. It has been found that students with ADHD and learning disabilities may have

greater difficulties adapting to college life than those with more visible disabilities (Adams & Proctor, 2010). The ability to self-advocate has been identified as extremely important by both staff and students. However, disability support personnel report disabled students entering orientation unaware of their support needs. This is not surprising, as students leave secondary school having been reliant on family, community supports, and friends to provide and navigate accommodations (Evans et al., 2017). There is an expectation within HEI that students will take responsibility for disclosing their disability and articulating their accommodation needs in an environment that is alien to them (Adams & Proctor, 2010; Hewett et al., 2016; Hong, 2015). Evans et al. (2017) recommend that institutions undertake a reflective process with students upon entry to help them identify their needs, complemented with an on-going process of advocacy skills development.

Meeting people and making friends were among the top priorities for most students when interviewed about their orientation experiences. It emerged that, student delivered orientation activities, peer mentors, orientation guides, the students' union and clubs and societies were considered successful student support mechanisms. The literature acknowledges that the transition is facilitated through "the positive impact of friendships, peers-support networks, significant education contacts and studying within an environment where the culture and related education practices understand and promote diverse learning styles" (Gibson, 2012, p. 366). Across the findings there were a few individual examples of student groups linking with the disability support services and organising "meet and greet" events for disabled students who struggled to attend college mainstream social events independently. Social integration in HE by first-year students has been found to be a key factor in ensuring that all students make a successful transition (Darwin & Palmer, 2009; L. Thomas, 2012). Relationships can act to buffer the negative effects of course efficacy and social support satisfaction (Lombardi et al., 2016). It is widely recommended that institutional faculty and staff be aware of the wider issue of social adjustment and the development of feelings of belonging and affiliation within the institution (Adams & Proctor, 2010; L. Thomas, 2012).

Students with chronic illnesses and mental health difficulties included managing their disability and their need to integrate socially in the challenges of the orientation period. International research has found that first-year students with chronic health conditions suffer higher degrees of loneliness than their non-chronically ill peers (Herts, Wallis, & Maslow, 2014), with 57% not knowing any other chronically ill students at their postsecondary institution (Herts et al., 2014). Evans et al. (2017) recommend that



offering students pre-orientation activities can help to focus on specific challenges that students may face but also may link students in with other disabled students. They advised that institutions offer students the opportunity to interact via online communities reducing the need for them to physically meet.

Senior managers and disability support personnel were deeply concerned about the levels of anxiety and mental health difficulties suffered by all transitioning students. They described it as being at epidemic proportions and noted their services were unable to cope with the demand. Disabled students who reported using the service, spoke positively about their experience. These findings resonate with the findings from E. Murphy, McKernan, and Heelan (2016) and E. Murphy (2016) who reported on the results of a national study undertaken by Ahead and the National Learning Network (NLN) investigating the experiences of students with mental health difficulties in HE in Ireland. The research found that there had been a significant increase in the number of students accessing counselling services within institutions. Students were generally positive about their experience but were frustrated due to the lack of accommodations. The report highlighted that there was a need for institutions to take a whole campus approach to meeting the needs of students combined with specialised supports. Further it recommended that the individual HEI's needed to undertake a review of existing policies and practices for students with mental health difficulties.

It was apparent from interview data that senior managers believed that their institutions' ability to support students transitioning was negatively impacted upon by their ability or lack thereof to work within the wider higher education system. The inflexibility of the CAO results timeline was deemed a potential barrier for students transitioning, as it was difficult to provide disabled students with the necessary supports within a short transition timeframe. There was evidence to suggest that staff and services appeared overwhelmed during this time, negatively affecting the delivery of service. Disabled graduates spoke of not receiving timely supports, such as sign language interpreters, negatively impacting upon their ability to engage in the wider college community. This resonates with national and international research where there was evidence of significant delays in the provision of essential supports during the transition period (Hewett et al., 2016; McGuckin et al., 2013). A pillar of the bioecological systems theory of human development is "progressive mutual accommodation" occurring within and between different systems in the student's life over a certain timeframe in a certain environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 107). A student must have developed the necessary skills and /or receive the appropriate supports in the new environment, to

allow successful transition from one environment to another; i.e. 'ecological transitions'; here it is from pre-higher education options to higher education.

There was a general sense of the necessity to provide students with a greater degree of flexibility in the first semester of first year. Disabled students and graduates expressed a need for:

- greater communications, especially during the first week,
- disability awareness training for peers,
- greater monitoring of student well-being,
- a consideration for the academic versus social workload.

Across the colleges some of these initiatives were already being implemented, with the exception of disability awareness training for peers where there was no evidence of this occurring.

## 7.3 Engagement

Social engagement is the second superordinate theme in the discussion of findings. This has three subordinate themes:

- Social and academic engagement experiences,
- Barriers and enablers to social engagement,
- Student voice and civic engagement.

Social and academic engagement experiences will be the first subordinate theme to be presented.

### 7.3.1 Social engagement experiences

Thomas described social engagement as, “taking place in the social sphere of the institution, including social spaces, clubs and societies, the students’ union, in student accommodation and through shared living arrangements.” (2012, p. 14). The findings clearly show that participants believe that ‘social engagement’ takes place in both the academic and the wider institutional community. Senior managers believed it was broken into two interconnected pieces, social and academic, which formed what was discussed as the holistic experience. On the other hand, disability support personnel differed somewhat, believing that social engagement occurred through four types of engagement: social, academic, social media, civic engagement, and leadership. Across the findings, it was identified by all participant cohorts as being expressed differently depending on the person. The literature shows, that previously research focused solely on academic engagement taking place in the academic sphere only, rather than a more relational approach (Krause & Armitage, 2014, p. 16). However, there is now a greater recognition of the students wider experiences, such as the affective domains lived by the students (Coates, 2010; Solomonides, 2013). The research findings demonstrate that participants cohorts believed in the wider ‘holistic experience’ of students.

All participant cohorts described the positive contribution of clubs, societies, and the students’ union to their social engagement. Almost all senior managers spoke about the positive impact of social engagement. Disabled students and graduates spoke about the positives, with the majority believing that social engagement was important because it created ‘a sense of belonging’. Social engagement was deemed important for positive mental health for preventing social isolation and for making new friends. These findings

resonate with international research which shows that social engagement creates a sense of belonging and offers informal support through interaction with friends, peers and institutional staff (Krause & Armitage, 2014; Kuh et al., 2008; L. Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 2006). Indeed, “framed by a combination of inter-related physical, social, cognitive and psychological dimensions, the concepts and patterns of student belonging, retention and success are measures and indicators of engagement” (Krause & Armitage, 2014, p. 3).

The majority of disabled students considered themselves to be socially engaged with a few students having no social engagement. This echoes research carried out Jacklin et al. (2007) who investigated the experiences of disabled students in higher education. The majority of respondents reported that overall, their learning and social experiences of HE was positive (p. 43). They found that 12.5% were not happy with their social experiences (p. 43). Their research outlined various “issues affecting degree of happiness with social and learning experiences”. These included, “teaching and learning, resources, tutors and other students, and informal and formal structures of academic supports” (p. 44). The disabled students and graduates in this study identified similar barriers to their social engagement.

Disabled students and graduates identified having friends as an essential part of their social engagement; to, “chat about problems, share workload and having someone to go for a coffee with”. Research has shown that friends are a vital part of a positive first year experience. Friendships result in a reduction in social isolation, creation of a sense of belonging, and a greater commitment to the institution (Eivers et al., 2002; L. Thomas, 2012; Wilcox et al., 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2008).

The majority of senior managers were unaware of any societies specifically for disabled students in their institution. Indeed, some were adamantly opposed to the establishment of such peer groups. Among disability support personnel, the establishment of student-led peer groups as a contentious issue, with a few believing they promoted negative attitudes and they would prefer if students became involved in the regular clubs. In contrast, both disabled students and graduates, including the Students’ Union, were supportive of the establishment of peer groups. Graduates and students believed that they were an important way of “meeting people, raising awareness, encouraging the institution to make changes”, and they relished the opportunity “to share their stories”. Ultimately, the findings show that colleges with peer groups or sporting activities for disabled students were more aware and active when it came to disability rights. The

literature suggests that the development of communities of disabled students supports them in building identity, developing coping strategies, and speaking on behalf of themselves (Avellone & Scott, 2017; Denhart, 2008). In fact, since peer support is important to all students, and disabled students have reported difficulty in making friends and finding support groups, establishing peer support groups (Evans et al., 2017) such as disabled peoples organisations could be very helpful. Of course not all disabled students want to be associated with disabled peer groups and colleges must always be cognisant of the fact that disabled students are not a homogenous group (Hong, 2015). The findings illustrated that disabled students failed to attend access office organised events. Students may decide not to attend for a multitude of reasons including timetabling difficulties, already having a friend network, or because it was organised by the institution and not by the student body.

The findings showed that academic engagement was identified as a route to social engagement. This included working in laboratories, tutorials, fieldwork, staff interactions and departmental meetups. Senior managers considered group work and small group tutorials as important to allow students to get to know each other and form friendships. Still, it was apparent there was little direct consideration for the social engagement of disabled students through in-class activities. The literature supports their views on group work. Group work helps students build team work and communication skills, enabling students build better relationships and contributing to higher self-esteem (David Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Conversely, the findings show that a large number of disabled students and graduates considered group work unsuitable to making friends due to the “pressure to make their grades”. They felt that it put a strain on relationships with many suggesting that they should not be expected to undertake ‘graded’ group work until the second semester of first year, or even second year. However, they did find it useful for making “acquaintances and connections which contributed to a sense of community”.

Disabled students and graduates noted group work challenges including a lack of awareness among tutors, academic staff, and especially peers, and a failure to use UD techniques. These barriers impacted on their ability to engage socially with their peers and academic departments. Students worried about disclosing their disabilities and informing their peers. Hitchcock et al. (2002) have argued that, “barriers to learning are not inherent in the capacities of learners, but instead arise in learner’s interactions with inflexible educational materials” (p. vi). Further barriers existed in teaching methods and the environment (Tinto, 2006). The facilitation of equity and communication by teachers can act to support inclusive process (Forslund Frykedal & Hammar Chiriack, 2018). The

development of a “local relationship” between the students and their tutors has been found to be critical to a student’s engagement (Carey, 2013; Coates & McCormick, 2014). The implementation of universal design for learning offers all learners opportunities to engage through alternative delivery methods such as group work (Higbee, 2009; Hitchcock et al., 2002). However, it must be implemented with an understanding of the needs within the class and the tutor/teacher must be prepared to support all students (Higbee, 2009).

Across the findings, almost all the DSP and students’ union officers noted the importance of “social media” in the social engagement of disabled students for both “academic and social needs”. The benefits were attributed to students with more “significant disabilities”. These findings echo the results of Morieson et al. (2013), who found that students described the social media platform ‘Facebook’ as the new study group. However, it was interesting to note that disabled graduates and students only discussed social media when specifically asked, and then they agreed it played a significant role. Social media appears to be so embedded in the student social culture that it is taken for granted. Students described it as being their second point of contact with other students after meeting in class. It was used to organise and form closer relationships and maintain old ones. These findings support the work of Morieson et al. (2013), who found that: “Facebook was the non-threatening way of approaching a stranger in the hallway” (p. 94). Social media has been helpful in maintaining “ties to old friends and reducing loneliness” (L. Thomas, Orme, & Kerrigan, 2020, p. 145). It has also been found to offer “a means to empower students with disabilities by circulating their first-person perspectives within the undergraduate culture” (Hartley, Mapes, Taylor, & Bourgeois, 2016, p. 242) thus promoting a culture more inclusive of disability. Social media offers a platform through which to share news, promote events, or find like-minded disability rights advocates, thereby offering a mechanism for students to communicate with other students and form a virtual community (Hartley et al., 2016). Although staff identified many benefits in the findings, they expressed concerns about using it as a form of communication with students. Despite this unease, there was evidence of all colleges using social media to communicate with their students. Students identified this as positive. Disability support personnel raised concerns about online bullying, and its contribution to student anxiety. These points were supported by disabled students who described incidents of online bullying, trolling and increased anxiety from social media use. They spoke of the support of their friends, students’ union, staff and college policies during this time. This resonates with findings of previous research of Green who reported that “peers provided an important role in coping with bullying”. Their research identified

the need to develop a greater “understanding of how people with disabilities experience bullying in college”. They recommended that a climate needs to be created within colleges in which students feel comfortable to report bullying (Green, 2018, p. 135).

### 7.3.2 Barriers and enablers to social engagement

Across the findings almost all disabled students and graduates discussed barriers to their social engagement. These included but were not limited to:

- Lack of transport,
- Financial difficulties,
- Accommodation,
- Family difficulties,
- Medical concerns,
- College workload,
- Type of events,
- Students age,
- Awareness,
- Structural issues/physical infrastructure on campus.

Senior managers lacked a deeper awareness of the social engagement experiences of disabled students; It was clear that many had not considered the topic or spoke of not being made aware of it. On the other hand disability support personnel identified many barriers to students’ social engagement. Papasotiriou and Windle (2012) noted that limited ability to socialise in college should be judged as one of the socially imposed restrictions affecting disabled people. It was acknowledged that some disabled students may face greater social engagement challenges than others. It was widely expressed that “disabled students from the three main target groups of; physical / mobility disability, deaf / hard of hearing and blind / vision impaired are absolutely still marginalised”. This was a point of deep concern as expressed by senior manager Barry who felt, “they were at a real risk of being left behind in terms of the social life”. Students with psychiatric illness, mental health difficulties, autism and other neuro-diverse disabilities may also face significant challenges. There was evidence of institutions working with outside organisations to develop ‘quiet spaces’ and tailored engagement opportunities for disabled students. The fears expressed within the findings are well supported in the international literature. Many research studies show that those with physical disabilities, blind, deaf, mental health or neuro-diverse difficulties can face barriers to social

engagement (Carette et al., 2018; Hewett et al., 2016; Papatirou & Windle, 2012). In addition to managing their disability, there were issues such as lack of awareness, negative attitudes, stigma, and barriers to physical infrastructure for the students (Carette et al., 2018; Madriaga, 2010; Papatirou & Windle, 2012). One interview participant who described herself as deaf / hard of hearing who wanted to play sport found that she had greater opportunities to socially engage outside the institution among the deaf community. Tsai and Fung (2005) identified that students with hearing impairment faced barriers to leisure time physical activities. Athletic and recreational activities are helpful to all students since they enhance quality of life, offer stress relief, and contribute to a sense of community.

Half of all disabled students believed that their college was an easy place to meet people. Yet, the data shows that disabled students and graduates faced barriers in maintaining friendships, and engagement in clubs and societies. Those with chronic illnesses and mental health difficulties found it particularly challenging. Long absences from college and a fear of disclosure resulted in social isolation. This was compounded by a reported failure of institutions to provide supports for students returning from leave. Disability support personnel highlighted several examples of supported returns, but senior managers noted that this was often left to individual departments. Disabled students and graduates found this isolating and it impacted on their sense of belonging. The findings highlight the desire of disabled students and graduates to be “treated as an equal” in social circles and with friends, while some found that this did not always occur. Previous research has found that disabled students want to be treated like every other student and meet the common expectations of a traditional student (Hong, 2015). A study of the literature highlights that nondisabled college students had false beliefs about disabled students already being socially engaged, exacerbating the potential for them to feel socially alienated, which in turn affected motivation to persist (Harbour & Greenberg, 2017; Wiseman et al., 1988). An interesting finding raised through the disabled graduates’ interviews was the reported barriers they faced in forming intimate relationships. They considered this to be a difficult topic for disabled students to openly discuss and noted social and cultural barriers to forming intimate relationships.

Some disabled students were concerned about seeking supports when joining college clubs and societies because it involved disclosing their disability to the students responsible. They were worried about who would have access to these details although they found the students in charge “friendly and helpful”. This supports similar results found by Avellone and Scott (2017) where “campus assurances of confidentiality don’t



necessarily ameliorate the concern around this stigma” (p. 14). The participants felt there was a lack of specific awareness among clubs, societies, and the students’ union concerning how to support them. The request for private medical information, for insurance purposes, especially in relation to sports, was particularly off putting for participants. In most cases, participants described not returning to join the club or society. This suggests a significant lack of trust between disabled students, and student led college organisations. It has been recommended that institutions should implement programmes and policies that foster understanding between disabled students and their non-disabled peers (Papasotiriou & Windle, 2012). Increased participation in campus activities supports development of disabled students’ sense of identity and their membership of the campus community (Greyling & Swart, 2011). This aids in the development of social and cultural capital that facilitates engagement and inclusion into the dominant society through groups and social structures (Bourdieu, 1986).

The findings show that disabled students and graduates discovered that having a personal assistant (PA), SNA, or an interpreter can have both positive and negative effects on the formation of friendships and relationships. They identified peers as being afraid to approach or speaking to the assistant instead of them and not wanting to interrupt conversations between the interpreter and student. Parker (1999) found similar issues in that, “the use of an assistant seemed to have an influence on relationships with other students”; and that “securing a personal assistant enables entry to HE, but does not ensure full engagement in the full HE experience and high-quality access of the whole curriculum”(p.499). The research shows that students were equally glad that they had PA support. Two students described becoming ‘friends’ with their PA or interpreter, although it appeared that in these cases the student befriended the assistant because they did not have any other options. This is a reflection of the limited opportunities for the student to engage with peers within the institution (Hall, 2004; Kitchin, 1998; Madriaga, 2010; Papasotiriou & Windle, 2012). Some disabled people have expressed that they “prefer the informal assistance of friends and relatives as being of better quality and more flexible” (Parker, 1999, p. 499). There were a number of examples of families having to meet unmet needs. The findings of this research demonstrate that this can be challenging for students. One student identified how their parent, who acted as an assistant was identified as “quite controlling”. Morris (1989) felt that having a parent as an assistant was not the most appropriate form of help for young people in higher education as this was a time when young people were moving away from family (p. 43).

Almost all senior managers believed that there were opportunities to improve the social engagement experiences of disabled students but were unsure what needed to be done or how to do it. What emerged was a patchwork of innovative initiatives based on good intentions, driven by someone with a specific interest, rather than as part of an overall strategy. Individual staff played an important role in these developments. The international literature correlates to the findings in that the positive experiences of disabled students were often dependent on individual members of staff instead of institutional policies. As a result practices varied considerably between departments (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010).

It was evident that many of the disabled students were socially engaged through college or student-led initiatives supporting engagement. These included: club and society programmes, funding schemes, pilot scheme to fund support for social engagement outside the academic sphere, support for volunteering initiatives, and specific disability focused programmes. One programme which was relatively widespread among the colleges was 'peer mentoring'. Students were involved both as mentors and mentees. Those engaged as mentors clearly enjoyed the experience. The literature points to peer mentoring as being an effective way to provide guidance to students, as they feel more connected to someone closer to them in age (Hillier, Goldstein, Tornatore, Byrne, & Johnson, 2019; Warnock & Appel, 2012). Hillier et al. (2019) investigated the effect of mentoring programmes on the outcomes of disabled students and found that "mentoring had most impact in knowing how things work at the university, how to meet people on campus, and accessing support. Mentees continued to benefit up to a year after the mentoring programme" (p. 487). The findings in my research show that those who had the opportunity to be a mentee had variable experiences. However, there was significant variation between colleges, some offered specific disability mentoring, whilst others did not. Lucas and James (2018) found in their work on the mentoring of students with autism spectrum disorders and/or mental health conditions that, "the quality of the mentee-mentor relationship was especially important". They identified that, "effective mentoring requires a tailored partnership, which involves a personal relationship, empowerment, and building bridges into the university experience" (p. 1). In stark contrast, half the disabled graduates did not identify any such programmes in existence when they were attending college. This possibly illustrates the developments in services in the last number of years.

College workload acted as a barrier to social engagement, as disabled students struggled to manage the requirements of their disability with the academic demands.

Research has found that the additional time spent by some disabled students on their work detracted from time establishing networks within college and resulted in increased isolation (Jacklin et al., 2007; Sachs & Schreuer, 2011). Senior managers were concerned about being unable to offer more flexible structures to students and noted the barriers posed by the national systems and frameworks. They considered that the current modular system offered disabled students' advantages. In contrast, Parker (1999) found that the modular system could disadvantage disabled students as it "inhibits the formation of supportive friendships" (1999, p. 500). Disabled students are forced to disclose their disability to a new group of friends in each new module.

Disabled graduates highlighted the importance of their college social engagement once they had left higher education. Sophia believed she would not have had the confidence to take her first job, progress in her career, or make friends in her employment without these experiences. The NFTL, '*Focus on Graduate Attributes*' (2019a) identified the types of attributes that many institutions expect from their students will have developed upon completion of their course. These include: "effective communication, problem-solving/critical thinking, international/intercultural awareness, creative enterprising teamwork and leadership", civic engagement and an ethical mindset are also included (p. 1). It is acknowledged that the "formation of a graduate does not take place purely in the classroom or library....and each of these personal choices, circumstances and interests can also contribute to personal and professional development" (p. 4). The findings of this research clearly show that disabled students and graduates identified many barriers to engagement in the wider 'student experience'. The findings show that these experiences may have a lasting impact on the development of their 'graduate attributes' and their professional development.

### 7.3.3 Student leadership and civic engagement

The final aspect of engagement focused on student leadership, representation, and civic engagement to students' social engagement. Students have a long history of being involved in institutional governance in Ireland, and their representation in institutional level governance and management is legislated for nationally (Carey, 2013). Research has concentrated on 'Student Voice' as having a possible transformative power in HEIs (Canning, 2017). Professor Tom Collins, Chair of the Working Group on Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision Making, notes that it "is axiomatic that higher education institutions (HEI) in democratic societies have a responsibility to model democratic

practices in their decision-making and routine functioning” (Higher Education Authority, 2016a). Higher education has been successful in increasing the number of students from diverse backgrounds, including disabled students, (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 2015). However, the challenge now is to “give greater voice to this difference” (Sellar & Gale, 2011). The ‘*National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*’ places “engaging with the wider society” as one of three interconnected core roles in the strategy. It sees this “engagement as taking on civic responsibilities and cooperating with needs of the community that sustains higher education [...] including the community and voluntary sectors” (Hunt, 2011, p. 74). Hurst (1999) argued that, hearing the voices and lived experiences of disabled students should be a central tenet of successfully understanding their needs, and as such they should be proactively consulted and empowered to advocate their views.

The literature has identified that disabled students lack self-determination and self-advocacy skills (Greyling & Swart, 2011; Hong, 2015). However, the findings in this research would suggest differently. They demonstrate that disabled students were generally aware of their rights, and there was evidence of them actively speaking up for themselves. Key components of self-advocacy are knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, ability to communicate, and ability to be a leader (Vaccaro et al., 2015, p. 673). Within the findings there was evidence of disabled graduates and students not having their “voice heard”, or not having a position at the decision-making table. Students were found to value engagement and identified wanting to participate in the decision-making process. The literature shows that engagement has been determined by the “relative power of the student” within that environment (Carey, 2013, p. vi). The findings report that some disabled students spoke positively of individual members of management and the students’ union, who acted upon their behalf. Disabled students and graduates complained of having to constantly self-advocate which they found tiring and an added burden. These findings reflect the literature, in which self-advocacy has been found to be a drain on disabled students’ personal resources. They are expected to be assertive far and above what is expected of the traditional student (Avellone & Scott, 2017; Greyling & Swart, 2011; Shevlin et al., 2004).

The majority of senior managers were unaware of any disabled students in senior leadership roles. In contrast, the disability support personnel were more aware. However, they were generally unsure of the structure available to disabled students to access the decision-making process within their institution. Senior managers and disability support personnel noted that they would be unable to identify students with

'non-visible disabilities. This finding could lead one to the conclusion that there was a total lack of representation by students with 'visible disabilities. The findings point to an absence of disabled student representation at the institutional decision-making table. Senior managers considered it the responsibility of the students' union to ensure the diversity of their representatives and the students' union officers expressed a need to increase the number of disabled students in representative structures. Notwithstanding this there were very few examples of supports being provided to disabled representatives to enable their engagement with decision-making boards. These findings are noteworthy in the context of the roll out of N-StEP, an initiative being rolled out by USI, HEA, and QQI, to promote greater student engagement and collaboration between students and their colleges. National Student Engagement Programme (2019) sets out diversity and leadership as two of the pillars of the principles of engagement. The majority of senior managers spoke of being aware of, or that their college was involved in this programme. Many identified it as important in providing all students with the skills to interact with the decision-making process; although they were unsure how this would be implemented for disabled students, and what they should be doing to achieve it, as were the disability support personnel. May and Felsing (2010) recommend that student "representatives may need support (e.g. physical resources, time, funding) to prepare for their role" (p. 13). They point out that "access to such opportunities should not be limited to a nominated student representative from the students' union, but should look to involve current, prospective and former disabled students where possible" (p. 13). The findings would indicate a clear need for greater awareness among the institution and the student representative body on the disability models that promote disabled student independence and leadership. Self-determination and participation of disabled students can only develop optimally in interaction with inclusive environmental factors, in particular social integration on campus and a responsive curriculum (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Greyling & Swart, 2011).

Within the findings students expressed an interest in undertaking leadership positions and a number were actively engaged at lower levels of student leadership. In a few institutions, there were disabled students in the most senior student leadership positions. It was a source of personal pride to disabled students to identify with disabled students in leadership posts. They acted as role models for participants who reported a view that "if they can do it, well then, so can I". This resonates with other research showing that positive success stories of other disabled people in leadership positions can be empowering and may encourage students to work through any challenging time they may encounter (May & Felsing, 2010). Disabled graduates highlighted the importance

of this to the creation of a sense of belonging. Martin (2017) explored the experience of disabled leaders among staff in HE. Barriers to leadership included: “invisibility of role models, limited senior buy in to strategic change, ableist assumptions, and disorganised infrastructure”. Similar to the findings of this research, there was “evidence of disabled people often possessing characteristics associated with effective leadership” (p. 1). This paper made recommendations including: “reviewing university systems from the user perspective, actively promoting a culture which celebrates rather than problematises diversity, acknowledging that leadership exists in many forms at many different levels across the institution” (p. 22).

The HEA “*Report of the Working Group on Student Engagement in Irish Higher Education*” is clear that representation is just one strand of student engagement, and not enough on its own, if there is to be a culture of engagement (Higher Education Authority, 2016b) . Across the findings, senior managers and disability personnel highlighted the important role of “civic and volunteering engagement”. They noted national strategies and the place of civic engagement in their own strategic plans. Engaging students in decision-making processes and active citizenship in institutions is a high priority of the Higher Education Authority as identified by Prof Tom Collins. He noted that “active citizenship is best learned if imbued in the culture and processes of the institution” (Higher Education Authority, 2016b, p. 1). Disabled students spoke about their opportunities to engage in civic and volunteer engagement as ambassadors and through their academic work. Indeed, this type of engagement has been considered a critical piece of the strategy for disabled people to develop a raised consciousness as they engage in grassroots advocacy for change in local communities (Charlton, 2000).

Disability support personnel identified many barriers, both within their institution and externally, to civic and voluntary engagement. In common with many of the senior managers they felt that responsibility lay with the volunteer organisations the student would like to volunteer with. The literature confirms that disabled people face a range of barriers such as inaccessible environments, lack of support and the cost of disability to their engagement in the wider social environment (Han & Chadsey, 2004; McDonnell, 2007; Watson & Nolan, 2011). Disabled people's citizenship rights have long been disregarded, such as their right to participate in civic engagement (S. P. Harris, Owen, & De Ruiter, 2012; Waldschmidt & Sépulchre, 2019). Rummery (2006) believed that “disabled peoples” citizenship is not just a matter of the social resources to which one can (or cannot) claim access in order meet their needs: it is also a matter of whether or not they can carry out their citizenship duties (p. 636). The findings show little evidence

of awareness, policies, structures and/or funding being made available to support their civic and volunteering engagement. There was evidence of senior managers personally undertaking to locate funding and make local arrangements for students. In line with the findings of my research, national reports have noted that there was: “evidence of some good practice in relation to student engagement in Irish HEI’s, [but] there is a lack of consistency both between and within institutions in the area and progressive practices are not always evident” (Higher Education Authority, 2016a, p. viii).

The majority of senior managers reported having or being in the process of establishing equality inclusion and diversity committees (EDI). Some reported offering diversity training to staff, but these mostly focused on gender equality, LGBTQ, and international students. Along with disability support personnel a few spoke of competition for “airtime and resources” between the different diversity groups, with a suggestion that disability was placed lower on the agenda of priorities. It is recognised that it can be a challenge to ensure that the voice of particular individuals does not dominate (2010, p. 32) within diversity committees in institutions. The suggestion that disability related issues are falling down the priority list is concerning.

## 7.4 College Climate

'College climate' is the third superordinate theme in the discussion of findings. It has three subordinate themes:

- Attitudes and behaviours of staff and students,
- Belonging experiences,
- Universal design.

The findings highlight the impact that attitudes of staff and students and universal design have in creating a college climate where students feel or develop a sense of belonging. The first subordinate theme to be discussed is 'Attitudes and behaviours of staff and students.

### 7.4.1 Attitudes and behaviours of staff and students

The findings of this research reveal that the majority of disabled students had a positive student experience and generally considered their institution a "supportive" environment. They recognised the help of individual members of staff and the support services as critical. Senior managers considered the climate in their institution to be "student friendly" and "hoped" their institutions were warm and welcoming, and an "exciting place to be". It has been found across international research that disabled students' perceptions of their institutional climate can have an impact on their outcomes, with positive perceptions leading to greater student success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ramsdell, 2014; Tinto, 2006).

Despite the finding of a positive experience, disabled students were very clear that the structures and systems in place within their institutions often did not facilitate this supportive mindset. Strange (2003) was of the view that in a fully open campus students will be able to 'navigate bureaucracies easily', enjoy the benefits of being more academically and socially integrated, and delve into the opportunities available within their institution. The benefits of having a community inclusive of diversity been identified as immense.

From the findings it was apparent that there was a perception among all participant groups of a widespread lack of 'disability awareness' among the student body, graduates pointed out that this resulted in a 'stigma' surrounding disability. Half of students believed



that their institution was not disability aware and felt that their peers were less aware than staff. Most senior managers demonstrated an awareness of the issues and a genuine interest in the topic. However, in a few cases the views they expressed were based on perceptions rather than experience. This contrasted with disability personnel who had direct experience. It was surprising that the 'medical model approach' was still quite evident in the culture of some institutions. In these examples, they often refer to the 'disability service office' as being critical to student belonging, engagement and identifying it as the place where students should go if they have a difficulty. This 'silencing effect' was evident among discussions with disabled students, graduates and the student union officers. Harbour and Greenberg (2017) argue for various constituencies beginning a cultural shift to create a more positive campus climate instead of relying on disability services offices to address all aspects of disability on campuses.

The findings demonstrate that a lack of awareness within the college environment had a major impact upon students' decisions to disclose their disability to faculty and in particular to their peers. These findings align with a study by Hong (2015) who found disabled students reported feeling constantly stigmatised by nonimpaired peers. This included those who believed that disabled students who received accommodations were getting special treatment. A lack of awareness among student peers can often be a more subtle barrier, not always considered (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012).

These results have important implications for the type of climate created within the institution. Madriaga (2007) concluded that when the atmosphere of the learning environment was negative, students "internalised [their] impairment as [their] problem, not the problem of others" (p. 407). Students struggled with the social threat of being judged or treated differently by their peers and their instructors and had a strong inner drive to rely on themselves, in some cases resisting special treatment at all costs (Hong, 2015). These studies are consistent with the findings of my research.

Senior managers reported facing barriers to bring about cultural change, including staff 'opposition'. This finding is interesting in the context of the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019*, which identified that it is necessary to ensure that the "access mission must be fully integrated across all faculties and areas of work in institutions" as this will help "achieve and improved experience and better outcome for all students in higher education" (Higher Education Authority, 2015a, pp. 2,3).

Disabled students and graduates spoke positively of the disability supports and counselling within their institutions. However, there was a number of examples of individual departments and staff being totally unresponsive to student needs. Similarly, international research has recognised that disabled students can view staff as creating barriers that prevent them from availing of the educational opportunities that other students have (Evans et al., 2017). Disabled students spoke of difficulties in relation to disability / access offices failing to make academic departments aware of their needs, especially at exam time. They identified the importance of having a staff member they could rely on when they faced barriers within the system. It is well recognised within the literature that staff can have an 'incredibly positive impact' (Evans et al., 2017; Schur et al., 2013) and students have attributed their success to these relationships.

It is interesting to note from the findings that participant cohorts generally felt that these negative attitudes were not limited to the higher education environment but were a reflection of a wider societal problem. Madriaga (2007) found that students were confronted by disablist and negative attitudes in higher education and within the greater society. In general, participants perceived there to have been a positive improvement in the attitudes towards disabled people over time. Graduates spoke of there being a 'stigma' towards disability when they were in college, whereas current students referred to a 'lack of awareness'. This point was supported by DSP who felt that attitudes were beginning to improve. Senior managers also believed this to be in response to greater numbers of disabled people in the college environment.

However, the findings also highlight the perception that this improvement in attitudes towards disabled people is at surface level only. Participants across the cohorts believed that certain types of disability, such as mental health difficulties, are treated more negatively than others. This finding is consistent with the research carried out by Ramsdell (2014), who found that students with physical and sensory disabilities reported the best perceptions of campus climate and faculty teaching practices, with the fewest perceptions of stigma. Students with mental health difficulties reported lower levels of peer support and less positive perceptions of campus climate, combined with higher levels of stigma associated with their diagnosis.

## 7.4.2 Belonging experiences

A sense of belonging has been found to be central to student success and retention in higher education (L. Thomas, 2012; L. Thomas & Jones, 2017). This is especially true for students from minority backgrounds such as disabled students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Vaccaro et al., 2015).

The findings demonstrated the wide range of factors that affected students' sense of belonging. Factors such as: the relationships between staff and students, the contribution of "spaces", "infrastructure", "people", and "supports" such as the "disability and access office" contributed to developing a sense of belonging. Steps such as: hearing the "student voice", having a "positive transition experience", and developing a "sense of identity within a student's department", were all deemed central to this process. Findings also identified factors recognised as negatively impacting on students' sense of belonging were, "having no friends", "financial worries", and "wrong course choice". The international literature clearly shows that all of these factors contribute to students' retention (Astin, 1975; Kuh et al., 2008).

The majority of disabled students expressed a sense of belonging within their institution as students and graduates reported having friends "to talk to", who "helped" them, and who they "shared" their "problems" with. Peer support is considered a marker of a sense of belonging across the literature (Björnsdóttir, 2016; Hoffman et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2008). The relationships developed were about more than peer support, as disabled students developed skills and confidence, working to make student communities more aware, whilst also acting as a support to others. These findings mirror research carried out by Vaccaro et al. (2015) found that, "social connections were more than vehicles for general social integration and that they formed only one part of the belonging puzzle" (p. 683).

Senior managers and the students' union officers expressed concerns about the depth of that feeling of belonging. Indeed, findings illustrated that students differentiated between their sense of belonging in-class, which they felt was negatively affected by a lack of awareness among staff, faculty and particularly peers, and their sense of belonging to their institution. Reason and Rankin (2006) researched campus climate, as cited in Evans et al. (2017, pp. 265-268) and found disabled students felt more comfortable on campus as a whole, slightly less comfortable in their department, and

least comfortable in their class. On the other hand, L. Thomas (2012) found that “students are most likely to feel like they belong to their programme, with a sense of belonging generally decreasing at departmental, school and institutional levels (p. 6).

In the findings, participant cohorts linked disabled students’ sense of class and departmental belonging with student success. The literature has identified the academic sphere as the most important site for nurturing participation which engenders a sense of belonging (L. Thomas, 2012, p. 6). Pichon (2016) found that disabled students’ satisfaction with faculty and peers in the classroom was facilitated by: small class size, sharing multiple classes, and connecting with one another. A combination of other factors contribute to student success for disabled students, including perceptions of the campus environment, involvement in social activities, and academic support (Lombardi et al., 2011).

There was evidence of HEI working to build relationships and to embed students into the fabric of their department, and thus contributing to their success. The NFTL recommended in their publication on ‘Understanding and Enabling Students Success in Irish Higher Education’ that institutions, wishing “to fully embrace student success must take effective steps to maximise the engagement and integration of all students who feel that they do not belong” (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019b).

Many of the disabled students and graduates reported in the findings, having a peer group, a friend or a location where they did feel a sense of belonging, and that increased after first year. Strayhorn (2012) noted that students’ sense of belonging, changed over time through various experiences: of personal acceptance, or having a rightful, valued place in a particular social context tends to stabilise and consistently influence one’s commitments and behaviours. Huger (2011) believed that students’ sense of belonging wasn’t fixed but was of an unstable nature and waxes and wanes in response to changes in environmental factors. Not only that, but students can have a different sense of belonging among different groups and in different educational settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) over time, such as within the microsystem (with friends and peer groups), mesosystem (educational relationships between the student, her/his peers and her/his teachers), and macrosystem (the student and the educational establishment) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

It was interesting to note in the findings, that a few students linked belonging with a sense of “achievement” and their “right to be in college”. Research has shown that disabled people are constantly being told by the dominant culture what they can and cannot do, and their place in society (Charlton, 2010). Many individuals internalise this oppression and come to believe that they are less capable than their peers (Charlton, 2000). Disabled people are often viewed through a deficit lens, in which it is highlighted that there is something wrong with them (Olkin, 2009). This research demonstrated that disabled students and graduates showed a high degree of confidence, resiliency, self-belief, and skills to help them manage. This resonates with the findings of Vaccaro et al. (2015). They went on to recommend that in order for institutions to “promote a sense of belonging among students with disabilities, professionals should emphasise and celebrate student strengths and engage in intentional advising and programmatic efforts to support students in their quest to master the student role” (p. 684).

The findings revealed that students’ sense of identity affected their sense of belonging. With students managing the disclosure of their identity carefully. Many students identified as having multiple identities and did not necessarily consider disability as a primary identity. One student spoke of being homeless, a mother, disabled, mature and having to decide which identity to disclose at a particular time. These various identity roles necessitated determining what were the implications, costs and benefits of each disclosure choice (Almog, 2018). The findings indicate that mature disabled students were particularly challenged by their identity and a few struggled to find their ‘place’ within the ‘college community’.

Disabled students believed that seeing other disabled staff and students on campus contributed to their overall sense of belonging. They expressed the value of having someone who understood their needs, their experiences of having a disability, and who may have used the supports. Senior managers commented on the valued contribution individual disabled staff made to introducing new initiatives or raising awareness. These findings echo the results of other research where disabled staff have been identified as effective role models of success in the community (Denhart, 2008; Evans et al., 2017) by encouraging student engagement, and helping students learn about disability beyond their own experiences (Damiani & Harbour, 2015; Harbour & Greenberg, 2017). However, it must be recognised, that the overall number of disabled staff identified within HEI was very small.

### 7.4.3 Universal design

The findings highlight the emphasis disabled students and graduates placed on the role of universal design (UD) of “spaces” and “teaching and learning techniques” in developing a sense of “community”. This contrasted with a few members of senior managers and the students’ union officers who appeared to have limited knowledge of the principles and/or how it should be implemented; however, the majority of senior managers were aware of universal design. Universal design, and universal design for learning, offer an approach that ensures the provision of inclusive, flexible, and supportive learning environments for all students, including disabled students (Evans et al., 2017). The NDA identify UD as the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability, or disability (National Disability Authority, 2020).

Disabled students and graduates’ interactions with staff, faculty and peers was found to be severely restricted by “inaccessible spaces”. Senior managers emphasised the important contribution of spaces towards the social and academic atmosphere of their institutions. Spaces were widely identified as contributing to creating a “sense of community” and a suitable “learning environment”. The provision of spaces in a college to facilitate activities such as “quiet study, group work and social activities” has been identified as extremely important (Morieson et al., 2013, p. 93).

Students described being “angry”, frustrated, and embarrassed” at having their independence taken away by inaccessible spaces leaving them feeling the “college didn’t care”. Senior managers and disability support personnel found these structural, physical, and in some cases organisational barriers a source of great “annoyance and embarrassment”. These findings resonate with the literature which has identified the many barriers disabled students face in trying to engage with their colleges (Hong, 2015; Oliver & Barnes, 2010; Shevlin et al., 2004; Tinklin & Hall, 1999). In order to be able to engage fully in the campus environment disabled students are expected to overcome inaccessible environments and be prepared to advocate constantly on their own behalf (Evans et al., 2017). Students noted the failures of their institutions to fully embrace UD techniques, or provide examination supports and alternative examination formats. This was a point supported by disability support personnel. These findings echo research demonstrating that if students have a choice of assessment method this can increase

student satisfaction, result in a greater proportion of higher grades and may reduce the need for 'reasonable adjustments' (Waterfield & West, 2008).

Senior managers and disability support personnel believed there was increased awareness among staff of UD but "felt there was a long way to go". They identified challenges in encouraging staff to fully adopt it within their teaching. They believed that this was due to fears of 'increased workload' and 'interference with academic freedom'. This corresponds to international research which has found that faculty may perceive inclusive pedagogical strategies and accommodations as a burden, a threat to academic freedom, or as a dreaded problem that students should work to overcome (Damiani & Harbour, 2015; Hong, 2015).

Senior managers spoke of how cultural changes, diversification of learners, changes in learning styles, and the widespread use of technology has affected the type of spaces and learning styles students and staff require. Senior managers emphasised that this is a long-term process; changes are implemented in small steps, and are prioritised based on the requirements of one's campus. Burgstahler (2008) identified the foundational aspects of UD as: as equitable use: flexibility in use: simple and intuitive; perceptible information; tolerance for error; low physical effort; and size and space for approach and use.

There was evidence across the data of initiatives being undertaken to improve spaces and make them more inclusive to all users. Senior managers spoke with pride of their work with student groups to introduce "quiet spaces" and "sleep pods". However, there were reports of these efforts being hampered by system and resource constraints. The infrastructural difficulties created restrictions, but further barriers existed in the attitude and response of members of "campus services". This was a point raised by all cohorts including senior managers who described having to intercede on behalf of students to have lifts repaired. If access routes to physical spaces involve awkward bureaucratic manoeuvres, are inaccessible, or in a state of regular disrepair, that sends a powerful message to the whole campus about disability and disabled members of the campus community (Edyburn, 2011; Harbour & Greenberg, 2017; Pearson & Samura, 2017; Titchkosky, 2011). Kitchin (1998) argued that inaccessible spaces are a means to control disabled people and are an expression of disablist power relations within society. Strange (2003) believed that institutions must first and foremost develop an inclusive and safe environment. He believed students require a basic sense of belonging to the college, free from threat, fear, and anxiety, otherwise efforts at other learning goals are

unlikely to succeed. He was adamant that college leaders must prioritise the physical human aggregate, organisational, and constructed aspects of campus environments to establish a safe, inclusive environment. The importance of the social experience of HE is well established in research and there is a need for HEI to give equal attention to social and learning spaces (Jacklin et al., 2007, p. 50).



## 7.5 Structures

Structures is the fourth and final superordinate theme to be addressed. Within this, there are two subordinate themes 'System impact' and 'Resources'. These will be discussed using a systems approach, this considers how the constituent parts of the institution work together (L. Thomas, 2019).

### 7.5.1 System impact

The data involving external structures shows that disabled students and graduates struggled with a range of systemic barriers external to the institution. These barriers impacted on their ability to access the services, supports, and means required to attend and engage fully in higher education. One student was unable to live independently or engage fully in college life due to a failure by the external body, the Health Service Executive (HSE), to provide a motorised power chair and PA hours. This was compounded by the short CAO results transition timeline. Students receive the results of the national exams (Leaving Certificate) and are expected to find accommodation and transition to college in a very short timeframe. This is an extremely stressful process for all students (Hyland, 2011; Smyth et al., 2011). Disabled graduates and students identified other very stressful barriers such as being unable to find 'accessible accommodation', 'inaccessible transport to and from college': and 'inaccessible social venues outside of the college'. It has been argued in the literature that these barriers are further reinforced by a society where, despite the existence of policies and anti-discrimination legislation, complete inclusion is far from being a reality (Shah & Priestley, 2011; Slee, 2010).

Senior managers identified how inflexibilities within the HE system, structures and policies lead to difficulties supporting the needs of a diverse student body. It was apparent from the data, that DSP believed that this disproportionately impacted on the delivery of service to disabled students within their institution. There was strong evidence pointing towards "the system within the system" where senior managers felt compelled to manipulate the system to find the resources to support individual disabled students. Providing essential supports should not be dependent on the kindness of staff but should be based on institutional policies (Fuller et al., 2004). A shift of such magnitude requires cultural and systematic change at both the policy and practice levels (May & Bridger, 2010, p. 6).

Across the interviews a number of senior managers implied that they were supporting the students almost as an act of goodwill, rather than in recognition of their obligations under the *Equal Status Act, 2000-2004* (Law Reform Commission, 2020), or the *Disability Act 2005* (Government of Ireland, 2005). The Equal Status Act confers a legal obligation on educational institutions to make reasonable accommodations for disabled people in their education and examinations systems and in relation to the provision of goods and services (Government of Ireland, 2005; Law Reform Commission, 2020; McCarthy et al., 2018). Such a response leads one to question as to how well embedded is a 'rights-based approach' within institutions. McCarthy et al. (2018) note that the role of a "Disability Officer" involves ensuring that all relevant legislation is implemented across the institution. However, interviews with senior managers suggested a 'rights-based approach' was not always embedded, and it is clear from the data that a 'whole of institution approach' is needed to enact critical rights-based legislation as intended by the *UN CRPD* (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016).

Across the data there was evidence of work being undertaken to develop and implement national policy to change the culture and diversity within HEI. The data points to senior managers facing challenges in bringing about change within their institutions. Challenges reported included: academic autonomy, resistance by individual units, the time it takes to bring about change, national policy demands, and resources. Lumby (2012) explored leadership in higher education and found that the characteristics that make HE distinctive are found in other types of organisations and it may not be as different as the claims made (p. 1). It has been argued that there is a need for greater institutional alignment. This necessitates the matching of resources, policies, and practices with the institution's educational purposes and student characteristics through forging educational partnerships (Kuh et al., 2010).

Disability support personnel, senior managers, and students' union officers considered the widening participation agenda as extremely important. A few spoke of how their institutional strategy reflected their vision for inclusivity and such policies were seen to be "generally effective". However, they reported challenges embedding them within the culture of their institution. The data suggested a degree of competition between different diversity groups for resources. This challenge for institutions, of ensuring that the voice of all diversity groups is equally represented, is noted in the literature (May & Felsing, 2010). Hannon (2017) examined shifts in institutional positioning in the evolving Irish HE system and noted that strong leadership was essential to steer a diverse mission in HEIs.

However, DSP spoke of the importance of knowing that they had the support of senior managers when implementing these policies and dealing with individual departments. Indeed, it has been found that ensuring early buy-in from all staff, including members of senior management, is critical to winning hearts and minds within colleges (L. Thomas, 2011, p. 283). Senior managers reported it was extremely useful to have national policies to refer to when faced with internal opposition.

L. Thomas (2019) identified culture as referring to the values, attitudes, and practices of the staff and students. She highlighted the fact that in order to create compatible understanding and action these elements need to be 'tightly' defined within policy and must involve all the stakeholders of the institution including students. The importance of hearing the voice of disabled people in relation to issues that concerns them is well recognised in the literature (Barton, 2005; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Yet, the data clearly shows that disabled students were generally not visible at senior levels of student leadership or among the decision-making structures of the institution. This result raises questions as to how the culture and structures can change without their engagement or input? International studies reveal, that the very presence of women and other minority groups has the potential to disrupt existing power regimes (Bebbington & Özbilgin, 2013) with positive results. Much of the international research demonstrates the importance of an evidence informed approach to change, and central to this, should be the voice of disabled students (L. Thomas, 2011). The data showed that students' union officers were very aware of the importance of policy development at both national and institutional level. Despite this, there was an obvious lack of policy development within the students' union. The data demonstrates that, although there was a will to engage in policy implementation and development, progress was notably restricted by the temporary nature of the positions within the students' union.

Senior managers spoke of the need to engage and collaborate with all stakeholders within the institution, especially students. So, although senior managers, DSP and students' union officers espoused the value of creating a culture of inclusion, the data would suggest that the structures were not in place to achieve the engagement of disabled students. Senior managers reported that in some cases, students did not have the skills to bring forward the problems of those they represented in a coherent manner. Thomas (2019) identified that the interaction of culture and a well-resourced structure should enable stakeholders to be sufficiently well informed and have the capacity and commitment to implement inclusive practices.

From the data it was clear that the majority of institutions did not have a specific 'social engagement policy' for disabled students and in many cases, it was apparent that this had not been considered. Disability support personnel highlighted a dearth of policy and dedicated resources for the social engagement of disabled students. It has been argued that when staff are faced with inconsistencies at a local level combined with a lack of clarity in relation to institutional policy, individuals will rely on their own meaning making (Stevenson, Clegg, & Lefever, 2010, p. 112). Stevenson et al. (2010) point out that this results in the problem becoming located locally and with individuals by management, rather than recognising the fundamental issues are due to ambiguity in policy or in wider socio-structural constraints. A lack of clear policy in relation to the social engagement of disabled students, could lead to similar results in Irish institutions. Research literature supports the view that the 'widening participation agenda' should not be restricted to merely facilitating underrepresented students entry into college but must also focus on their engagement in the entire college experience and successful outcomes (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011; L. Thomas, 2010).

The data points to senior managers' belief that there was a need to re-define what student success was in HE. They felt that the current "inflexible system" does not support success for the diversity of the student population including disabled students. Senior managers expressed concerns about the pressures to "maintain standards", within set "quality frameworks" and "benchmarks" impacting upon the institutions ability to support students' success. This response is noteworthy in light of *The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2015-2021*, which requires HE institutions to embed "student success" for targeted underrepresented groups and success forms a central aim of the document (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019b, p. iii). International research indicates that providing students with engagement opportunities with the entire college including staff, peers, and student services results in the creation of a sense of belonging, greater retention, and successful student outcomes (L. Thomas, 2012; Yorke & Longden, 2008). It is therefore essential that institutional policies reinforce and enable engagement (L. Thomas, 2011, p. 284). It has been identified that this necessitates an institutional commitment (Yorke & Longden, 2008) or a 'whole of institution' approach (L. Thomas, 2019). This "requires alignment and consistency across the institution to create an inclusive approach which all students benefit from irrespective of where they are located within the institution, and which extends not just across their lifecycle, but throughout their daily lived experience, incorporating their academic experience, and also their personal and social well-being and their professional development" (L. Thomas, 2019, p. 15). In Ireland, the Department

of Education and Skills' *System Performance Framework for the Higher Education System, 2018-2020* necessitates that institutions develop a Student Success Strategy that takes a whole of institution approach by 2020 (Department of Education and Skills, 2020, p. 15). The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning report 2019, *Understanding and Enabling Student Success in Irish Higher Education* recommended practical steps that institutions can undertake. These included encouraging leaders at all levels to demonstrate an authentic and public commitment to student success by: reviewing institutional policies and procedures to ensure they are aligned, enabling, and student-centred; identifying through student partnership opportunities for addressing logistic and infrastructural obstacles to student success; and reviewing institutional supports and services to ensure they are adequately resourced, for-purpose and well-communicated to all students, especially at key times (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019b, p. 16).

Across the data the majority of senior managers and students' union officers were in favour of 'targets' as a mechanism to support the implementation of national policy to achieve systemic changes. It was evident that in recent years there had been significant national policy developments in relation to "metrics", "targets", and "widening participation goals". Ireland is one of very few countries in the EU where HE uses targeted measures to assist in increasing participation of under-represented groups and these targets have been seen as successful (Department of Education and Skills, 2020, p. 15). The majority of senior managers spoke positively about "engaging" with the Higher Education Authority in relation to the development of 'Key Performance Indicators' (KPIs) and the 'Performance Agreement' with their institution. Performance agreements are used by the state to achieve national priority objectives within HE (Hannon, 2017; Jongbloed, Kaiser, van Vught, & Westerheijden, 2018). Hannon (2017) found that 'Performance Agreements' were considered by the HEIs as a controlling instrument, signifying a lack of trust by the state in HEIs. He found that the state recognised this lack of trust and argued that the HEIs have "autonomy to engage individually with the PA objectives according to institutional mission, ambition and strategy" (p. 197). Murray et al. (2014) These findings are somewhat contradictory to the results of this research. However, it must be noted that Hannon's research took place between 2011-2016 and the different results may be reflective of a 'bedding in' period in the institutions. This research shows that some concerns were expressed that these policy documents focused on single areas, and failed to address the barriers that existed at every level of the education system, as can be seen from Charles's comment, "it's

simply the failure of multiple steps that leads to a society where there is an inequality of access” to HE.

The need for change in internal structures to facilitate merging institutions to create a technological university was raised in a few interviews. These findings are supported by research carried out by Hannon (2017). He reported that there has been a “scaling up of the ambition by IoTs to become universities since the launch of the *National Strategy for Higher Education*. This is evidenced by ten of the fourteen IoTs having formed consortia with the ambition of becoming a TU. The interviews with students illustrated that they had been engaged in the process and were well informed. It was generally considered to be a very worthwhile development that would enhance the diversity of the college. There were, however, concerns expressed by a students’ union officer and disability support personnel that the process had been ‘expensive’ and had created a degree of uncertainty within the institution which negatively impacted upon the delivery of service. Feeney, Lillis, and Ramsey (2020, p. 8) interrogated the concept of Student Union engagement in Irish higher education through an examination of the policy and practice related to the creation of Technological Universities (TU). They found that student representatives willingly embraced the responsibility and accountability as partners at the highest strategic levels of governance in a university (p. 8).

The findings showed that DSP played an important role within the institutions. They were quite clear concerning their role, and they worked towards defined objectives. This had a positive impact in that it seemed to give a sense of direction and confidence in their role within the institution. However, it also appeared to be somewhat restrictive. Disability support personnel play an important role in the development of inclusive policies and supporting disabled students within institutions (du Toit, 2018). The report titled: “*The Role of the Disability Officer and the Disability Service in Higher Education in Ireland*” defined these roles and recognised the need to professionalise the role of the disability support officer. This requires developing the role from one of supporting the student, to working collaboratively with staff across the campus to create a fully inclusive college (McCarthy et al., 2018, p. 6). The key vision of this publication was one “where the disability officer is a key position and a critical resource in higher education, as the principles of Universal Design for Learning are adopted as a recognised baseline for supporting students with disabilities on their educational journeys” (p. 15). It was noted that they work across the system within higher education contributing at both a local and national level.

## 7.5.2 Resources

The second subordinate theme, resources, featured strongly throughout the findings. Disabled graduates referred to the 'economic downturn' and how this affected the availability of supports, services, and their social engagement within their institution. The data shows that students had been informed of, and were concerned about, resource constraints within their disability support service. This awareness may have, at times, impacted upon their decision to seek assistance in times of crisis.

It was clear from the findings that disabled students and graduates faced a range of personal resource issues. These included socio-economic disadvantage, homelessness, drug addiction, and having to maintain employment whilst in college. The high cost of attending higher education for all students has been widely discussed in the literature and it shows that an increasing number of full-time students are engaged in part-time work (Higher Education Authority, 2005). Within the findings, students described how they faced extra costs, including the cost of disability, when trying to engage socially. Research has shown that disabled students face financial barriers when attending college (Holloway, 2001; Shevlin et al., 2004). The extra economic cost associated with disability in Ireland is significant and varies by severity of disability (Cullinan et al., 2008). It was apparent from the data, that for many students, families were a significant external resource which positively affected their college progress. The report '*Study on the costs of Participation in Higher Education*' (Higher Education Authority, 2005), identified that disabled students are much less likely to be engaged in part-time work. The potential result is a greater reliance on state and family support. The report noted that disabled people with a specific learning disability face the extra cost of presenting a psycho-educational assessment, to enable them to access services and equipment within their institution (p. 87). They further noted that State support is unlikely to meet the costs of attending HE, resulting in financial difficulties for some students. This financial strain may have an impact on students' level of social engagement and retention. The study suggests that if HE policy aims to address the under-representation of such groups within HE, the financial barriers they face must be addressed (p. 87). However, despite this, disabled graduates demonstrated resilience. The data shows they empowered themselves to provide other social options in areas where they considered their institution had failed them; these included establishing peer disability groups.

Senior managers spoke of funding as a perennial problem and reported that it negatively affected the institution in three ways:

- Day to day running of the institution,
- Infrastructural development,
- Future planning.

It was obvious that many were still struggling after the economic downturn. Kuh et al. (2011) believed colleges now face a range of challenges that are unprecedented due to the recent deep recession which continues to take its toll and rising college costs. Hannon (2017) found that participants reported “difficulties for leadership in time of austerity, with sustainability cited as a top priority given a reduction in public funding and an increase in student numbers” (p. 198). The research findings indicate the impact that a lack of investment in infrastructure and spaces was having on the engagement of disabled students. Senior managers and disability support personnel believed that the institution was failing diverse learners by not adapting the system and structural aspects to suit their needs. They felt that the current funding environment restricted their ability to make these changes. It has been widely acknowledged within the literature that disabled students face barriers to their participation (Oliver & Barnes, 2010). The findings pointed to concerns for the future, that it would not be possible to continue to meet the participation targets set by the HEA, and provide the supports required within the current funding model. There was a palpable sense of frustration in relation to HEA policy to grow the system, without increasing the amount allocated funding per student. The Association for Higher Education Access & Disability (2016) noted, that there has been a year on year increase of disabled students supported by the fund, from 7,897 students in 2012-13 to 10,500 students in 2014-15. Yet, funding levels have not increased in line with the increase in student numbers.

One senior manager raised concerns that some institutions may be recruiting “more lucrative” international students rather than disabled students. This was due to the perceived extra costs associated with supporting students with severe disabilities. This point was supported by several senior managers noting the extra costs of supporting disabled students in their institution.

The literature recognises the challenges the economic climate poses, and that despite the level of institutional commitment, one of the major issues facing universities is the need to maximise recruitment of students (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016). Universities are being pressurised to deliver a high-quality postsecondary



education, at less cost and to an increasingly diverse student body on a large scale (Kuh et al., 2011). However, despite the concerns raised, senior managers generally considered disability support to be currently well resourced.

It can be seen from the data, that DSP considered a lack of resources dedicated to the social engagement of disabled students as an issue. Although students' union officers confirmed this, they clarified, that if necessary, they could access the resources to provide supports within the union for their events. The interviews with Students' Union Full Time Officers suggested that the resources did exist, and that there was a willingness in the union to provide supports, but there was an apparent lack of structure through which disabled students could make an application. The data also showed that the structures within the union were separate from the clubs and societies. Students' union officers, disabled graduates and students were generally unaware of support structures within the college clubs and societies. A few senior managers and DSP highlighted how the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) currently assumes that the only activities that will be considered are those that fall into what might be called the academic domain. Charles discussed how his college has worked to overcome this barrier by trying to establish "a curriculum model that embeds these 'other' activities so that they are seen as part of their academic programme". The purpose of the FSD is to provide funding to HE and FE institutions to assist them in offering supports and services to eligible students with disabilities so they can participate on an equal basis with their peers. It directs institutions to promote an inclusive educational environment that encourages independent learning, and the development of transferable skills (Higher Education Authority, 2017). These skills have been found to be critical to developing a sense of belonging and increasing student retention (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; McGuckin et al., 2013; L. Thomas, 2012). The data suggests that without the correct resourced supports disabled students are unable to access these social engagement opportunities. Yet, the FSD does not extend to supporting these socially engagement needs of disabled students to Social engagement is essential to student learning and could be considered an essential part of the college service but access without the correct supports to fully engage is not true opportunity (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

There was evidence of a national funding programmes for institutional initiatives. Senior managers and disability support personnel considered the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) funding initiative very useful, but they expressed concerns about the future of such funding. They considered that while it allowed colleges to be innovative it failed to plan for the long-term viability of projects including staffing

requirements. There was evidence, that institutions located in certain regions had collaborated to access the funds to develop specific initiatives. This fund was established by the Department of Education and Skills as a commitment to the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019* (Higher Education Authority, 2020b). The literature noted the benefits of such funding initiatives. Kuh et al. (2011) found that, even modest amounts of additional external funds to support pilot initiatives and/or participation in national initiatives between colleges helped sustain and improve student-success. These funds certainly seemed to stimulate the development of programmes within institutions, however the anxiety created about the long-term viability and the inability to provide for staff cast a shadow over the initiative.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

Chapter Seven has discussed the findings generated under the four superordinate themes: transitions, engagement, college climate, and structures, and their respective subordinate themes. Overall, the findings from the interviews and focus groups of 65 participants from 19 HEI present a clear window into the barriers and enablers faced by disabled students and their social engagement experiences in the HE environment. It is evident that although the majority of disabled students reported being socially engaged, they faced systemic barriers to this wider engagement. There was a clear lack of policy and practice supported by the necessary structures and funding, to enable their social engagement. This was identified as having a negative impact upon their sense of belonging.

Chapter Eight will seek to draw together all the elements of the study and conclude the research project. It will present a summary of the research, with reference to the researcher's reflective process and the transformation that has taken place, rationale, questions, methodology and findings. It will identify the research contribution made, the limitations of the study, and outline areas for future research.

# Chapter Eight: Conclusion

## 8.1 Introduction

Chapter Eight will reflect upon the study in its entirety. It will begin with a reflection on the research journey. There is a focus on learnings and how the research has contributed to existing research, theory, policy, and practice. There will be a recognition of the limitations of the study and suggest areas for future research.

The overarching aim of this research is to understand, what are the social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland? Four main questions were addressed to realise this aim.

1. What are the barriers and/or enablers to the social engagement of disabled students in higher education?
2. Do disabled students feel like they belong within higher education?
3. How do national and institutional level policies foster/impede the social engagement of disabled students in higher education?
4. What, if any, institutional practices are being implemented to promote the social engagement of disabled students in higher education?

In particular, the study's research design and findings make a significant contribution to addressing the dearth of research that exists in relation to the social engagement experiences of disabled students in HE in Ireland, connecting the policy at different levels of the system with the lived experiences of disabled students.

The contribution of this study lies in the rich experience and depth of information captured through the utilisation of a qualitative approach to the research. The bioecological framework enabled the examination of the dynamism that exists among the different levels of the HE system around the student. This was complimented by the researcher, being a disabled person, who took a transformative approach to the research, which ensured that the voice of disabled students, remained at the heart of the study.

Many of the findings, including those relating to student transitions, structural barriers, and a lack of awareness, were in line with existing research in the field. However, the findings relating to students' social engagement experiences, in-class sense of belonging, engagement within the institutional decision-making process, leadership opportunities, and the views of senior managers, make a noteworthy contribution to existing research.

Before engaging with the research questions, the researcher felt it was necessary to reflect on the researcher's positionality and the journey that has taken place during this study. The next section titled "Reflection" outlines the researcher's reflections on that journey.

### 8.1.1 Reflection

At the beginning of my research journey, I took the time to acknowledge my position as the researcher in relation to the research. At that time, I considered how the disclosure of my disability would impact upon participants, whilst also reviewing the importance of rapport, reciprocity, and my position as an insider. See Chapter One and Four.

Throughout my research, I have engaged in a continuous process of reflection and implemented a reflexive process as outlined by (Berger, 2013). Now, as I reach the conclusion of that research journey, it is time to once again to reflect on my current position in relation to when I began this journey. I will do that within the context of my theoretical framework for this research; the bioecological model used by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006, p. 798), detailed in their framework of *Person, Process, Context and Time*.

I identified myself as a "person with a disability" when I began this study, emphasising the aspect of person first. I was in good health, in full-time employment, living independently and actively engaged socially in my community and workplace, I had a sense of power. I very much espoused the social model view of disability (Oliver, 2013) Ireland was still in the depths of a financial depression, and the cultural and social environment had become a little stagnant at that time. I developed chronic asthma shortly after starting my research. This resulted in protracted hospital admissions and large amounts of prescribed medication. I was forced to leave my employment, and I

moved home to live with my parents. I became detached from my social network, and I soon became totally dependent on the state for medical and financial support. This dependency continued and indeed worsened as the income thresholds for my medical card and disability allowance prevented me from working part-time, as the limit did not cover the cost of engaging in work (Cullinan, Gannon, & Lyons, 2008). I had become the unintentional victim of a system, medically modelled, that had set out to “care for” or “fix me” but acted *de facto* to remove my sense of identity, my voice and my power.

This significant life-course event and my interaction with the systems around me had a profound impact on my view of the world and the lens through which I viewed my research. Indeed, there is an implication that the impact of significant life events is exacerbated if they are ‘out of sync’ with the prevailing norms (J. Williams et al., 2009). My experiences of the disempowering nature of the system became reflected in my research. Using the bioecological model, I aimed to examine the impact of the different levels of the system on the student; micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono systems. I worked to ensure that participants at each level were included; from the student, located at the centre of these systems, right through to senior management. As a result of my own personal experiences, my view of the microsystem was in many respects viewed through the lens of the chronosystem.

A combination of my own personal characteristics and the support of “significant others” allowed me to remain resilient (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). I connected with disabled people in Ireland and across the world through engaging in discussions on Twitter and Facebook. I developed an understanding of the wider, “world view” experience of disability (Shah & Priestley, 2011). I developed an appreciation of how different, yet similar, that experience can be for the individual, whilst, being seemingly united under the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006). As a result of campaigning for the rights of disabled people in Ireland, I was invited to contribute to the *4<sup>th</sup> European Parliament of Persons with Disabilities* and had the opportunity to connect with disability rights activists from across Europe. I realise upon reflection, that it was during this time that my use of language changed. My experiences, and the development of my thinking, were reflected through the evolution of my research questions. One example was that I moved from using the term “people with disabilities” to identifying them and myself as “disabled people”. I found myself migrating from the emancipatory approach and becoming more tightly aligned to the transformative approach. I had now begun to see myself as working together with my disabled participants for “personal and social transformation”. I was, as per social

constructivism, growing and developing, whilst at all times remaining aware of the potential influence of personal bias and the possibility of it infecting the dataset or me. Through a process of reflection, I remained fair and did not allow my insider perspective to infect the data.

Through my extensive review of the literature, I found myself becoming less aligned to the social model of disability. Although I acknowledge this model's usefulness is in its simplicity and as a campaign tool, I believe the social model of disability fails to take account of the diversity of the experiences of impairment (Shakespeare, 2006); in this I include my own experience of chronic illness. Through my own experiences of marginalisation and isolation I became attuned to the failures of the system and the level of dependency it created among disabled people, taking away fundamental civil liberties, such as access to transport. As a result, I reviewed my methodology and how I engaged my research participants. I offered multiple avenues to participation, including phone and online platforms. The research methods I used contributed to methodological data collection techniques and demonstrate the importance of understanding your participants needs and the barriers they may face. Through my "literature review" it became apparent that many of the definitions used within higher education, such as definitions of "belonging", and "engagement", do not take into account the diversity of the student population, including those with disabilities. This was reflected in my work through the use of wider or multiple definitions. Through my interactions with national bodies such as the NFTL and the HEA *National Student Success Forum* I brought this knowledge forward and contributed to the development of a wider definition of student success.

By adapting to interact on a regular basis with my new environment I found that I was becoming, in the words of Bronfenbrenner (1979) an active agent. I found my "voice" and through social media I interacted with the world of academia. Most importantly, I used the extensive knowledge gleaned from my Ph.D. reading and personal experiences to highlight the barriers in society faced by disabled people. I was appointed to the Irish Human Rights Equality Commission (IHREC) Disability Advisory Committee (DAC). A committee involved in monitoring the implementation of the CPRD in Ireland.

This public profile, in conjunction with my Ph.D. research, has allowed me to contribute to the wider discourse, increase public understanding of the issues raised through this PhD, and ultimately advance public policy. However, this public profile also resulted in greater recognition both among younger disabled people and more senior members of

academia. My position as a high-profile, vocal disability activist, meant that I had to be mindful of the potential impact upon participants' decision to engage in the research or not. The key to successful participation was assuring confidentiality to all participants.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) note that individuals navigate their developmental pathways within a specific social, economic, and cultural milieu, through which individual events are experienced and negotiated. This was also the case for me, personally, and for my research development. Ireland also underwent a "cultural and social awakening" and an "economic revival" during the time of my research. Female and LGBTQ rights were identified as being a key priority, there was a greater recognition of "intersectionality" and the opportunity for all people to choose their identity. This was also reflected in the evolution of my questions by the addition of "sex identity" categories. During that same time, Ireland was identified as the worst country in Western Europe to have a disability. Conversely, the number of disabled students attending higher education increased significantly (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, 2015, 2019).

It is very difficult to separate the researcher from the research as I acknowledged in my methodology Chapter Four at the beginning of this journey. However, I believe that it is not necessary to make such a separation if the researcher is honest about their positionality and engages in a continuous reflexive process. I have engaged in critical reflection throughout this research, and I have relied on a few "significant others" to tease out my potential biases and values. I recognise that over time the lens through which I view the world has changed. This change is the result of altered personal circumstances of health and employment but is also driven by a changing environment around me. Ireland moved from recession to a recovery period during my Ph.D. study, with a new focus on LGBTQ and women's rights. As I begin my conclusion the world has changed again. This has occurred in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. I, like many other disabled people, have been categorised as a "vulnerable" person and have been forced to "cocoon", and will have to remain isolated from friends and family for the foreseeable future. The medical model system that was supposed to "fix" me and "keep me safe" now acts to make me and other disabled people more vulnerable. Our rights, as declared by the United Nations (2006) fade into obscurity.

I write my conclusion as the lens through which I see the world is evolving again. However on this occasion, I am skilled at working from home, I have experience of being isolated, I have a network around me and I write with a sense of confidence in the



knowledge I have developed over this research journey. I write with the words of the independent living movement in my mind, "*Nothing about us, without us*".

I have outlined my reflections and restated my position in this section. The next section titled "Thesis review" will outline the scope of the research.

## 8.2 Thesis Review

The researcher will highlight the scope and depth of the research by outlining each part of the study.

Chapter One set the context of this research, it outlined the rationale, the aim, and the questions this study sought to answer. Through describing the researcher, the researcher's positionality was presented and discussed. The chapter concluded by presenting the theoretical framework for the study.

Chapter Two presented the first part of the literature review and gave an extensive review of the literature guided by the aim and the four research questions. This included: the historical and social context of disability, the models of disability, and the national and international legislative and policy context.

Chapter Three presented the second part of the literature review. It examined the transition, retention, engagement, and sense of belonging of disabled students in higher education in Ireland. Based on the literature review and the related gaps identified in the Irish research, a clear rationale for the research questions and methodology was outlined.

Chapter Four presented a detailed outline of the research methodology. This included the research; framework, design and methodology and the philosophical foundations on which this was laid. A qualitative approach was utilised during this research, including interviews and focus groups. The research methodology was related to each step of the four-stage data collection process, including detailed information relating to the research design, and the ethical considerations. The chapter concluded with a presentation of the data-analysis process and the limitations of the methodology.

The research findings were presented across two chapters. Chapter Five, titled 'Student Voice' presented the data from interviews and focus groups with disabled students and graduates, and students' union full time officers. Chapter Six, titled 'College Response', comprised of qualitative data from senior managers and disability support personnel. The data within each chapter was explored under the four superordinate themes of transitions, engagement, climate, and structures which evolved from an in-depth thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Finally, Chapter Seven “Discussion”, and Chapter Eight “Conclusion” brought together, discussed, and outlined the major conclusions from the research. The findings were presented under each of the research questions within the context of the research framework. Placing the student at the centre of the system, allowed a more holistic presentation of the conclusions within the context of the higher education system. The researcher has detailed the scope of the thesis in this section. The following section will present the conclusive research findings.

### **8.3 Conclusive Findings**

The conclusive findings will outline the major findings of the research and explore how they relate to the research questions, the existing literature, the theory, policy and practice.

#### **8.3.1 What are the barriers and/or enablers to the social engagement of disabled students in higher education?**

This research shows that the majority of disabled students considered themselves to be socially engaged and to have a positive student experience. Social engagement was considered extremely important to student retention, belonging, and developing key graduate attributes. However, almost all disabled students and graduates spoke of barriers to their social engagement, with a cohort having very limited or no social engagement. Persistent barriers had a major impact on students’ sense of value, ability to maintain friendships, and a sense of belonging. Moreover, there was also little evidence of a strategic approach to their social engagement, or knowledge of how to achieve it at senior management level.

Ultimately, the findings of this research support the results of previous studies highlighting the barriers faced by disabled students in engaging in higher education. The fact that students experience these barriers in the context of a history of specific disability and equality legislation to protect the rights of disabled people in Ireland is of serious concern. It raises significant questions regarding the effectiveness and observance of such legislation within institutions. The findings point to a compliance mentality in relation to higher education performance agreements, and a ‘fire-fighting’ approach to the

barriers exposed by disabled students. One must ask, why is this the case? It appears, there is a climate in many institutions involved in this study in which disability is a surface-level priority. This may be subject to change depending on environmental factors, such as legislative or economic changes, or public attitudes. Nationally, disabled people are three times more likely than non-disabled people to face discrimination when accessing public services including education, health and transport (Banks, Grotti, Fahey, & Watson, 2018). HEI operate within this wider socio-political environment and the research points to a climate within colleges that reflects this societal culture.

This research points to an obvious will among senior management, DSP and students' union full time officers to support the social engagement of disabled students', and there were examples of individual institutions implementing enabling practices. However, it was sometimes unclear what research or evidence supported the establishment of these practices and initiatives. Moreover, the research indicates that there is little understanding of how the barriers faced by disabled students impacts upon their ability to engage. It is widely accepted, that HEI should not make judgements about the effectiveness of their policies and practices in the absence of student engagement data (Kuh, 2003). Currently, the ISSE undertakes research on the engagement experiences of students in higher education in Ireland (Yorke, 2016). However, it is not possible to identify the experiences of disabled students from this data. Prior to this research, there has been no published research on the social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland. This finding indicates that decisions are being made in the absence of sufficient data to support them and further supports the view that disability is, for many a surface level priority.

The research shows that to engage in "educationally beneficial" activities, disabled students must expend disproportionate amounts of time and effort to overcome barriers. This often occurred at the expense of their social engagement and other meaningful successes. The research findings raise questions in relation to the suitability of existing definitions of engagement currently in use across HE. It questions their ability to adequately reflect the diversity of the student population with HE. Within the existing definitions of engagement there is a focus on what a student does, rather than what a student perceives, judges, or feels.

There is an expectation that institutions will provide the necessary conditions for engagement. The findings demonstrate very little evidence of resources being deployed within HEI to remove the barriers to disabled students' social engagement. However,

there was evidence of a focus on additional supports to remove barriers to “academic engagement”. Disabled students continue to face barriers to their learning opportunities and other “meaningful activities linked to learning”. There is an inherent responsibility on institutions to provide for the social engagement of disabled students which contributes to student success. Within national policy, the concept of ‘access’ is understood to encompass not only entry to higher education, but also retention and successful completion. The implications of this research are, that this policy should include the social engagement of disabled students. However, this requires clarity in relation to what constitutes engagement. A definition of engagement must encompass the engagement experiences of all students, including disabled students, and take account of the personal and environmental barriers they face. Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of a sense of belonging and its connection to social engagement. These findings illustrate that future definitions of engagement should not only take account of the sociocultural aspects of student life but also include the impact of the affective domain.

Institutions in which there was a strong disability peer group or disabled student leader, were seen to be more disability aware. Specific orientation programmes, that were student led and linked to the mainstream activities, were highly valued by transitioning students. However, the research points to strong evidence of adamant opposition among individual staff in institutions to the establishment of specific orientation programme programmes and/or peer groups for disabled students. This occurred to the extent that such programmes did not exist. On the basis of these findings we must ask the question, why do institutions feel that they should decide for disabled students? Upon reflection, this opposition appeared to be based on a lack of understanding among senior managers or DSP on how to implement inclusive practices. There was a belief that the best way to include disabled students was to encourage them towards mainstream groups. Such practices fail to take cognisance of the individual experience of disability, the barriers that have been identified through this research and the need for the disabled students to voice and share their experiences. Such findings would point to a disconnect between what students want, and what institutional staff believe is best for them. As opposed to deciding what is best for disabled students, institutions should recognise that there is an inherent value to disability and see disabled students as partners and leaders of change. It was clear that providing the opportunity for disabled students to contribute to social engagement practices had a transformative effect. The interaction between the individual and the organisation is also reflected in Bronfenbrenner’s dynamic-multi-layered model. The research highlights the need to target both institutional and

individual, staff and student factors to bring about sustainable change. Equally, this finding underlines the necessity to identify a national definition of engagement, and the policies and practices being engaged to support this.

However, establishing disability peer groups is not the panacea to all social engagement difficulties for disabled students. Rather, the research points to the need for an approach which develops, embeds, and promotes a range of inclusive opportunities for all students for social engagement. Successful engagement of disabled students requires institutions to consider the cultural, strategic and individual dimensions of their approach (May & Bridger, 2010). This approach could include the implementation of UD or UDL across the institution (National Disability Authority, 2020). Senior managers will need to overcome the implementation challenges identified in this research to enact these changes. This requires significant commitment and resources both institutionally and nationally and a greater support from the powers within the macrosystem. Decisions will need to be based on evidenced empirical research. The research identifies the need for a regular national study on the engagement experiences of disabled students This should be complemented by in-depth research into the individual experiences of disabled student cohorts.

The concluding points in response to the first research question present a range of barriers and/or enablers to the social engagement of disabled students in HE. The following section will respond to the second research question, do disabled students feel like they belong within higher education?

### 8.3.2 Do disabled students feel like they belong within higher education?

Mahar et al. (2013) developed a transdisciplinary conceptualisation of social belonging that considered the experiences of disabled people and the environment around them. They offered a criteria for belonging based on five principles: subjectivity, groundedness, reciprocity, dynamism and self-determination (Björnsdóttir, 2016).

This research highlights the critical role the development of a sense of belonging has in disabled students' lives. Furthermore, social engagement was recognised as being vital to the formation of connections that lead to a sense of belonging. Although there was evidence of institutional practices being undertaken to create a sense of community, these practices were largely implemented in the absence of data on students' sense of belonging. Half of all disabled students in the study believed that there was no disability awareness in their college and that their non-disabled peers were not as disability aware as the staff. Seeing other disabled students and staff on-campus contributed to a sense of belonging and a welcoming climate, especially during the transition phase.

The results of comparing the experiences of disabled students and graduates against the five principles of belonging indicate that the majority of students felt a sense of belonging within their institution. A framework like this can be a useful tool, but it only provides broad information about students' experiences; and individuals can still experience marginalisation within the institutional environment (Mahar et al., 2013). Indeed, the findings show that there is a cohort who either feel they do not belong or are uncertain about their sense of belongingness, especially in class. These results are significant considering the emphasis senior managers and disability personnel placed on the contribution of in-class belonging to student success. It raises the question, why students made this differentiation? It is obvious from this research that the college climate created, through the attitudes, behaviours, structures, systems and awareness of staff and students, played a critical role in students' sense of belonging. Environmental factors such as the absence or presence of barriers acted to augment, hinder or promote a sense of belonging by changing the interaction of students with peer groups, classmates, or the broader institutional community. Such barriers can be compounded by failures to deliver timely supports and embed universal design teaching and learning techniques. According to the "bioecological approach," institutions themselves bear responsibility for the design and creation of the campus environment. These findings highlight the need for institutions to address these issues.

Disabled students and graduates made recommendations to improve students sense of belonging, such as to “increase disability awareness among students and staff, break down in-class cliques and increase departmental engagement with students”. Staff recommended increasing opportunities for “student voice” and promoting departmental engagement. Although one recommendation cannot be endorsed over another, it is widely recommended in the international literature that, institutional departments and programmes should nurture a culture of belonging through their approach to interpersonal relationships (L. Thomas, 2012, p. 7).

This research contributes to the existing international literature on the sense of belonging experiences of disabled students in higher education. It is hoped it will act as a catalyst within institutions for the creation of a climate in which all students can feel like they belong. It is acknowledged by Yorke (2016) that there has been “no instrument in general use for identifying ‘belongingness’ in higher education” (p. 155). Yorke offered a short instrument that can identify changes in students’ sense of belongingness over time. The research points to the need for institutions to undertake research on disabled students’ sense of ‘belongingness’ within the microsystem in higher education.

At a national level, these findings have implications and raise significant questions for the wider education system. In the past two decades, there has been a shift towards more inclusive schooling at primary and secondary school level, with disabled students participating in class or as part of special classes in a mainstream setting with their non-disabled peers (Rose et al., 2015; Rose et al., 2010). Therefore, it is necessary to ask the question, why do disabled students in higher education report a lack of awareness among their non-disabled peers? Surely, their non-disabled peers have studied, socialised, or come in regular contact with disabled peers in the school environment. Have the practices within the school environment acted to shield young disabled people from these necessary social engagement opportunities with their non-disabled peers? Banks et al. (2016) found that within the post-primary setting, special classes are more likely to be negatively perceived by the students attending the class and by their peers in mainstream classes. The level of day-to-day integration of students into mainstream classes and longer-term movement into and out of the special classes over time is influenced by school level climate and processes. It is widely acknowledged that a diverse environment is not necessarily an inclusive environment. It appears that “formal and informal practices, designed by non-disabled adults, to facilitate the inclusion of disabled students in mainstream schools may be very similar to those which disabled students perceive as barriers to their full participation in mainstream education” (Shah,



2007, p. 425) The findings of this study indicate the necessity to undertake further research into the impact of policy and practice in the wider education system on the sense of belonging experiences of disabled students.

### 8.3.3 How do national and institutional level policies foster/impede the social engagement of disabled students in higher education?

The research points to a failure of national policy to adequately consider the social engagement opportunities of disabled students within higher education. This is illustrated by the fact that targets have not been established and resources have not been allocated. In HEI, where the research points to the existence of a 'compliance mindset', this policy failure acts to blinker institutions from creating a wider and more inclusive holistic student experience for all students. This is reflected in the findings by the fact that institutions did not have a policy for the social engagement of disabled students. The failure of national policy to adequately consider the social engagement of disabled students in HE has resulted in continued barriers to their social engagement at institutional level.

Reflecting on these findings, it is necessary to ask the question, why hasn't there been a policy focus on the social engagement of disabled students up to the period of this research? The most likely explanation is that there is not a culture of social engagement of disabled people in Irish society (Watson et al., 2015; Watson & Nolan, 2011). As a result, policymakers may have little or no awareness or lived experience when it comes to the social engagement of disabled people. This perhaps is no surprise, as policy makers do not live in a vacuum and will be impacted by the socio-cultural environment in which they are situated. This research illustrates how this lack of awareness is compounded by: the absence of disabled people in decision making roles and the barriers disabled people face in the informal interactions that contribute to policy making (Klemenčič, 2012). The national policy focus, which has been mirrored at an institutional level, has primarily been one of increasing the numbers of disabled students in HE and supporting their academic requirements (Higher Education Authority, 2015a). The research shows that policy developments to broaden and improve the process around the DARE scheme have been widely welcomed. Although it has been noted that there is a need to fully equality proof it, DARE was considered to have levelled the playing field and enabled student transitions. These policies have been deemed highly effective (Higher Education Authority, 2018c), and the number of disabled students has increased

as a result. This research shows, that this prevailing single-minded target focus, fails to consider the value this research has found that disabled students place on their wider social engagement and its contribution to their sense of belonging, a key factor in student retention. This is most likely to due to an absence of data on their social engagement experiences and their exclusion from the decision-making process and representative positions. The research shows that the results of this absence of policy, clear targets and committed resources, are that institutions have not embedded social engagement policies and practices for disabled students into the climate and structures of their institutions.

It must be acknowledged that there are signs of hope for the future. The period of this research has seen a changed political, economic, cultural and social context. There has been a national focus on the development of policies relating to student engagement (Higher Education Authority, 2016b), student success (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019b), and the development of graduate attributes (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019a). This development of policy has been largely driven by the recognition at government level of national and international research which underscores the contribution of these and other factors, such as a successful transition, pathways, and a sense of belonging, to student retention. Parallel to these developments has been a focus on the diversity and inclusion agenda. This has been driven by a seismic shift in cultural and social attitudes to the rights of certain groups within Irish society, primarily women and the LGBTQ community. This has prompted the government to implement targets and financial incentives to institutions to extend the development of diversity and inclusion policies. The realisation of gender equality has advanced through the *Athena SWAN Charter*, gender neutral facilities and increasing diversity on decision making boards (Higher Education Authority, 2019b). This research shows, that although these changes are welcomed, there are significant concerns that there has not been an equal focus across all diversity groups, especially disability.

Positive developments have included the roll out of the National Student Engagement Programme (National Student Engagement Programme, 2019) and recognition by the recent Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021, (Higher Education Authority, 2018c) that there is a need for institutions to focus on “student success” among underrepresented target groups. The research indicates an acknowledgment among senior managers of the importance of increasing student engagement and student partnership, and this was reflected in their institutional

strategies. Indeed, it could be argued, that the engagement of disabled students was implied within these policies, using words like “inclusion and diversity” or “all” students. The research shows however that such an implication fails to recognise the significant number of environmental barriers disabled students face to their social engagement. The study points to a knowledge deficit among senior management, disability support personnel and the students’ union officers, on how to provide for the social engagement or leadership opportunities for disabled students. The significance of student agency to create desired conditions for study and life becomes even more critical in situations where there are structural barriers. It is recognised within the international literature that non-traditional students may face barriers to their engagement in representative positions. Bronfenbrenner notes that that regular participation in such interactive processes, over time, generates the ability, motivation and knowledge, and skill to engage in such activities both with others and on your own. These proximal processes are considered as the primary engines of development and it is evident that disabled and non-disabled people lack these opportunities. The implications of this research are that these positive developments will only be successful if all students are engaged. This may require positive action whereby supports to enable meaningful participation are offered to develop a pattern of comprehensive engagement with the decision-making process. This research clearly identifies the need to establish a social engagement strategy for disabled students which acknowledges difference. Thus, to treat everyone equally, we must treat some a little differently. This necessitates the development of a structure which places the student at the heart of the decision-making process and a climate that respects their rights, thus promoting inclusion across the whole of the institution.

#### 8.3.4 What, if any, institutional practices are being implemented to promote the social engagement of disabled students in higher education?

The research indicates that, although there were many positive practices to support disabled students’ academic needs, there was a lack of structured programmes and a gap in practice to support their social engagement. Practices relating to the engagement of disabled students were not based on a set of specific policies or guidelines but rather the modification of existing practices to provide individual supports to allow a student to participate. Many of the existing initiatives identified through this research appeared to be a reaction to the consequences of systemic failures within the wider education system. Programmes and inclusive practices were highly valued by students. However

initiatives were sporadic, often poorly resourced, and frequently initiated by a member of staff or student with a specific interest.

These findings demonstrate that within Irish society, practices relating to disability are viewed as an add-on. They have been developed through a prism of care, charity, and good will, rather than a realisation of the inalienable human rights of disabled people. Such practices have been found to be disempowering, disabling, and have acted to make disabled people vulnerable. Ultimately, the existing practices within HEI reflect the norms within our society and equally, the climate within HEI. The research highlights the importance of the day-to-day interactions between staff and students for enabling social engagement and creating a sense of belonging. The ratification of the UNCRPD in Ireland offers the potential to reframe these interactions through a rights-based approach to practices, but most importantly it empowers disabled people with an internationally recognised framework of rights.

A welcome development has been the recent publication of *The Role of the Disability Officer and the Disability Service in Higher Education in Ireland* (McCarthy et al., 2018). The research shows that such guidelines offered clarity and direction to disability support staff. Many disability support services and/or access offices offered a range of innovative programmes to enable disabled students develop leadership skills, socially engage and make the transition to HE. Although such developments are positive, nevertheless it is concerning that they are primarily driven by disability and access services only. The development of these programmes occurred in the context of significant institutional barriers and the failure to offer social engagement or leadership opportunities in the wider environment. Programmes, such as orientation, were focused on compensating for the failure of secondary school systems and practices to adequately develop the required skills to succeed in HE. Student leadership and representative competency programmes were delivered in the context of disabled students and senior staff who supported them reporting that they were not being listened to in the wider institutional environment. The research points to the importance of a strategic approach to practice that is clear and deliberate rather than one that is confined to isolated projects. The research clearly demonstrates that the failure to have robust policy resulted in practices that misinterpret mainstreaming and how inclusive policies should be implemented.

In line with the already recognised national focus on student engagement, there has been an increase in publications to support practice, such as National Student Engagement Programme (2019), a series of guidelines for students' union, senior

managers, and other staff within HEI. The research points to institutions implementing practices that were generally seen by students as creating a welcoming and supportive environment. However, the research also identifies a knowledge deficit among staff, students' union, and peers in relation to practices that enable the social engagement of disabled students. This is compounded by the absence of policy or guidelines. Institutional approaches must take a bottom up as well as a top down approach. This means focusing on the day-to-day practices of staff, and student club and society leaders. The international research demonstrated, that addressing individual-level transformation was found to be a significant part of the process by which inclusive practice was developed and embedded across institutions. To ensure the consistent uptake of inclusive practices, it is necessary to modify institutional policy and processes, and work with individuals to promote positive attitudes and changes to practice (May & Bridger, 2010). It is evident from the research that moving these agendas "from the margins to the mainstream" (L. Thomas et al., 2005) within Irish HEI continues to be a significant challenge. Social engagement of disabled students necessitates a move away from supporting individual students, towards a whole institution approach. Inclusive practices need to be considered at all stages of planning and policy development. A universal design approach to institutional practice and student engagement offers a framework through which reasonable accommodations that were viewed as add-ons can be mainstreamed. Such an approach can empower disabled students by enabling them to independently navigate environments from which barriers have been removed. It is clear from the research that there is a need to develop a set of national best practice guidelines to support the social engagement of disabled students within higher education.

## 8.4 Limitations and Areas for Future Research

To undertake good research, the researcher commits to controlling for validity, reliability, fidelity and take the time to acknowledge the inherent limitations of the research study. This enables the reader to take them into consideration when reviewing the work and interpreting the findings. The limitations to this research involve the societal barriers to participation in the research, the inflexible nature of the higher education calendar, a dearth of literature pertaining to the research area, the breadth of the study, and the researchers position as an insider. These limitations are presented in this section, together with opportunities for future research.

Societal barriers such as inaccessible transport and HEI, impact of disability and lack of resources all acted as an obstacle to participation for disabled participants, staff and the researcher. These barriers resulted in a number of participants having to cancel their engagement with the study. This signals the necessity to undertake research on methods and data collection that enable the inclusive engagement of disabled people in research, and the potential development of a research charter and guidelines for the inclusion of disabled people.

At the time of undertaking the “Literature review”, there was a significant gap in the literature pertaining to the engagement and belonging experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland. This was compounded by gaps in the literature relating to the engagement and belonging experiences of the general student body in Ireland. This limited the diversity of definitions relating to the social engagement and belonging experiences of disabled students available to the researcher. Future research is warranted, that involves more in-depth study of the social engagement, leadership, and sense of belonging experiences of disabled students in higher education nationally, akin to the studies in the UK and Iceland (Björnsdóttir, 2016; May & Bridger, 2010; May & Felsing, 2010; L. Thomas, 2012; Yorke, 2016). This research needs to extend to the entire system including primary, secondary, and further education. Moreover, considering the diversification of education, it is necessary to undertake research into the suitability of existing definitions of engagement, belonging, and participation in leadership.

The central tenet of this research was based on hearing the voice of disabled students. It included a wide range of voices from within the different levels of the education system

to extend the depth of the study. This captured the dynamic nature of the environmental impacts upon the experience of disabled students in HE.

There was a vast array of data collected; however, the voices of some additional staff members were omitted from the study due to time constraints. The volume of data may have constrained the researcher's ability to undertake an in-depth examination of the wide-ranging experiences of individual disabilities and the barriers they faced. A more detailed study of the engagement, sense of belonging and leadership experiences of individual disability cohorts is needed such as that of Hewett et al. (2016).

Finally, as acknowledged through my reflective process, see Chapter One, Four and Eight, my position as an insider may have acted as a limiting factor. I am cognisant that the closer one's subject matter is to one's own life experience the more likely it is that bias may occur (McCarthy, 2013). It was at times challenging to detach my own personal experiences as a disabled student from that of the student participants. I have worked to combat such potential biases through a methodological and reflective process. However, it is widely acknowledged that to eradicate research of all sources of bias is to rid research of human life (Plummer, 1983). As the number of disabled researchers undertaking research increases, it is recommended that future research is expanded to consider the role of disabled researchers as insiders in research. The present section outlined the limitations of this research and areas for future study. The following will present some concluding remarks.

## 8.5 Conclusion

The overarching aim of this research was to determine, what are the social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland? It focused on the barriers and enablers to disabled student's engagement, students' sense of belonging within HE, and how national policies and institutional level practices foster or impede the process of engagement. This research stands alone as the only significant research undertaken on this topic in Ireland. The transformative nature of this research has acted as an amplifier of the voice and experiences of disabled students and graduates, unmasking the challenges they face and connecting this experience with the policy at different levels of the system. My role as a disabled researcher, and the research's role in amplifying the voice of disabled students will, at the very minimum, open the conversation and increase awareness of the subject. The research findings clearly show the value disabled students place on their social engagement and its contribution to their sense of belonging. However, this research also uncovered the systemic structural and cultural barriers they face to their social engagement within higher education. The research has unearthed numerous themes related to disabled students, such as: belonging, college climate, leadership, the management of the implementation of inclusive practices, and the role of the disabled researcher, which all have remained unstudied or under-studied. This research contributes to the public discourse on the social engagement of disabled students in higher education. Undoubtedly, the relevance of this study is in its ground-breaking nature, but it is particularly significant in Ireland 2020. An environment in which the delivery of HE has, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, had to undergo a rapid metamorphic process. It appears that how students engage socially with their higher institutions and each other will change permanently. 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 before, it is important that we include the voice of disabled students in this process and ensure that they have a seat at the decision-making table.

The role of the researcher is to add to the existing knowledge and in the words of Frans Brom, to unmask power structures not to support them (Brom, 2019, p. 1). This research has exposed the barriers disabled students face to their social engagement, with the intention that Government, policymakers, higher education managers and student leaders will recognise the value disabled people bring to the institutional life of higher



education. The growth in understanding of the barriers that exist to these students' full social engagement, should demonstrate the need to undertake systemic structural and cultural changes to allow full engagement of disabled students. In this regard, the findings of this research must be used to inform research, policy, and practice and make a valuable contribution in the public policy context. Those operating at all levels of the eco-system must work towards enhancing inclusive practices in our education system to support the social engagement of all students.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Code of Ethics

#### **This Code of Ethics is informed by various sources including:**

- Trinity College Dublin, School of Education Ethical Research Principles,
- Trinity College Dublin. (2014). *Policy on Good Research Practice V3.0*. Trinity College Dublin,
- Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011): British Educational Research Association,
- Ethical Guidance for Research with People with Disabilities (2009): National Disability Authority,
- Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009): British Psychological Society,
- Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human Participants: British Psychological Society,
- Data Protection Acts, 1998 and 2000,
- Doyle, (2015, p.557), *Scaling the mountain: The topography of disability and transition to higher education in Ireland (Code of Ethics)*.

#### **The researcher commits to:**

1. A signed declaration of agreement to abide by this ethical code,
2. Recognising the rights of all students and individuals/institutions who participate or are referred to in this research to have their confidentiality protected,
3. Seeking voluntary informed consent before undertaking any interviews or focus groups with any participant as part of the research process,
4. Informing participants of their right to withdraw from the process at any time,
5. Describing accurately, truthfully and fairly all information obtained during the research,

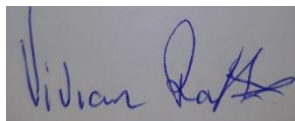
6. Incorporating accurately data gathered during the research into the text of any report or other publication related to the research, and ensuring that individual opinions and perceptions are not misrepresented,
7. Protecting the sources of information collected from focus groups, interviews, observations and other data collection methods,
8. Securely keeping data gathered during the research process, ensuring it will only be available to the researcher,
9. Storing and destroying data gathered according to relevant Irish Data-Protection Legislation (Data Protection Act 1998, 2003),
10. Reporting procedures, results and analysis of the research accurately, and in necessary detail to allow all interested parties to understand them,
11. Making themselves available to discuss the procedures, conduct, or findings of the research with any party involved in the research process,
12. Conducting research that involves collaboration, an impetus to support the needs of social justice and equality and strives to remove the barriers for disabled students.

### **Code of Ethics**

13. The researcher asserts the right to participate in any publication of the research findings in academic journals/other media, which may ensue from the research.
14. Reviewing the ethical code in response to any changes in procedure or legislation which may impact upon the conduct of the study.

*Name: (Please Print) Vivian Rath*

*Signature:*



## Appendix B: Ethical Approval Confirmation

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### Ethical Approval Confirmation

Approval Vivian Rath 5th February 2018

Phdrsrch <[PHDRSRCH@tcd.ie](mailto:PHDRSRCH@tcd.ie)>

Mon, 5 Feb  
2018,  
12:26

to Vivian, Phdrsrch, Michael

**Approval Vivian Rath**

**5<sup>th</sup> February 2018**

Dear Vivian,

The School of Education's Ethics Committee has received and reviewed the amendments to your application for approval of your research project.

It is the decision of the Committee that you may now proceed with your research on the condition that it is carried out as indicated on your application. Should there be a change in the design of your research project, you will need to re-apply again for approval from the School of Education's Ethics Committee.

If you have any queries regarding this decision, please contact the Chair of the School of Education's Ethics Committee and Director of Research, Dr Ann Devitt ([devittan@tcd.ie](mailto:devittan@tcd.ie)).

We wish you all the very best with your research project.

Kind regards,

Fiona McKibben  
Research Officer at the School of Education  
on behalf of Professor Ann Devitt  
Director of Research

**3088 School of Education Arts Building**  
**Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin**  
**Dublin 2, Ireland.**  
**Tel | + 353 1 8963583**

# Appendix C: Consent Form-All Research Participants

## Consent Form

*Research investigating the social involvement experiences of students with disabilities in higher education.*

### Participant Confirmation:

(Please answer each question by ticking Yes or No)

	Yes	No
I have read the 'Participant Information Sheet'.	-----	-----
I have read the researchers 'Code of Ethics'.	-----	-----
I have been told what this research is about.	-----	-----
I understand that only pseudonyms will be used in the final report.	-----	-----
I know what to do in this study.	-----	-----
I am agreeable to the researcher taking notes during the study.	-----	-----
I am agreeable to having the interview recorded.	-----	-----
I have had an opportunity to ask questions about the study.	-----	-----
I am happy to take part in this study.	-----	-----
I know that I can leave at any time either before or during the study.	-----	-----
I understand that there may be a research assistant present to assist the researcher.	-----	-----
I understand the findings may be published in academic journals and presented at conferences.	-----	-----

### Participant Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form and the attached information sheet. I understand that all data collected from this study will be treated with full confidentiality and, if published, the data will not be identifiably linked to any individual. My questions have been answered by the researcher and I have a copy of the consent form. Therefore, I consent to participate in this research.

Name: (Please Print) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

### Researcher Contact Details;

Vivian Rath, PhD Researcher

[rathv@tcd.ie](mailto:rathv@tcd.ie) / 0877730784

School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

## **Appendix D: Biographical Information Instrument-Disabled Graduates & Students**

### **Social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education.**

**Pseudonym:**

-----

#### **Demographic**

**For the following please circle the letter to indicate your answer.**

##### **1.What is your age?**

- a. Under 20 years
- b. 20 – 30 years
- c. 31 – 40 years
- d. 41 – 50 years
- e. 51 -60 years
- f. 61 years or over

##### **2. What is your gender?**

- a. Male
- b. Female
- c. Transgender
- d. Other

##### **\*3. What is your status?**

- a. Employed
- b. Unemployed
- c. Seeking Employment
- d. Further Study

**\*Only disabled graduates were asked this question**



**\*4. When in college do you live at:**

- a. Home
- b. On-Campus
- c. Private Rented Accommodation
- d. Other

**\*Only students were asked this question**

**5. For the purposes of this research can you indicate what disability you identify with? Please circle the letter to indicate your answer.**

- a. Autistic Spectrum Disorder & Asperger Syndrome
- b. Attention Deficit Disorder ADD & Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder ADHD
- c. Blind / Visual Impairment
- d. Deaf / Hard of Hearing
- e. Mental Health Condition
- f. Neurological Condition
- g. Significant Ongoing Illness
- h. Physical Disability
- i. Specific Learning Difficulties, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia
- j. Developmental Coordination Disorder

## Appendix E: Phase One-Graduate Invitation to Participate

Dear Graduate,

If you are interested in talking to me about your social experiences in higher education, have graduated within the last 5 years and have a disability, I would like to hear from you.

Your social participation experiences will form part of a doctoral study that I am conducting in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. This research will give you the opportunity to express your views on your social experiences during college. There is very little research on this topic particularly in an Irish context. This research looks to address this gap.

The aims of the study are:

1. To find out what students' with disabilities social experiences are like in college,
2. To identify the barriers or what helped students with disabilities to be involved in the social side of college,
3. To understand how the social experiences of students with disabilities may be supported, and to develop strategies for meaningful inclusion in the social life of college.

If you agree to participate there are two things, I would like you to do:

- 1) Email me at [rathv@tcd.ie](mailto:rathv@tcd.ie)
- 2) I would like you to participate in a focus group about your social experiences. The focus group will last approximately 50-90 minutes. You can let me know a time and day that suits you to meet on the registration form.

This research has received ethical approval from the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. Any information or data which you share during this research will be treated with full confidentiality and, if published, the data will not be identifiably linked to any individual. Your participation is entirely voluntary and even if you agree to participate now you may withdraw at any time during the study.

If you would like more information on this study, please don't hesitate to email me. **Email:** [rathv@tcd.ie](mailto:rathv@tcd.ie)

I look forward to hearing from you,  
Vivian Rath  
[rathv@tcd.ie](mailto:rathv@tcd.ie) / 0877730784  
School of Education, Trinity College Dublin

## **Appendix F: Phase One-Participant Information Sheet**

### **Graduate Focus Group**

**Project title:** Investigating the social engagement experiences of students with disabilities in higher education.

**Purpose of the research:** This study is being undertaken by Vivian Rath as part of a PhD programme in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin under the supervision of Professor Michael Shevlin.

**Why is it being undertaken:** The main aim of this research is to identify the barriers and/or enablers to the social involvement of students with disabilities in higher education.

#### **What will I be asked about?**

- You will be asked about your thoughts on your college social involvement experiences,
- You will be asked, if you think there were barriers and/or enablers to your involvement in college life?
- You will be asked to give suggestions on how HE could be improved to facilitate greater social involvement by students with disabilities.

**What does taking part involve?** Participants will be invited to take part in a focus group with the researcher. This may last up to 50-90 minutes. The focus group will be recorded using a Dictaphone, but no reference will be made to participants actual names. Participants will choose a pseudonym for the purposes of the focus group. After transcription participants will be provided with a copy of their focus group transcript and given the opportunity to add anything they may have forgotten.

**Research assistant:** During the study the researcher may avail of the support of a research assistant. The research assistant is bound by the same ethical code

as the researcher and is thus obliged to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

**Your Participation:** Your participation in this research is of vital importance. It will be entirely voluntary, and the focus group will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner. You may choose to leave at any point during the research.

This is an opportunity for you to have your voice heard, and to have your say on a topic that is extremely important and has not been widely researched.

**Confidentiality:** Any information or data which you share during this research will be treated with full confidentiality and, if published, the data will not be identifiably linked to any individual. All of the data shared will be stored securely and will be destroyed in accordance with Irish Data Protection Legislation. For further information please see the attached Ethical Principles for the research.

**Questions:** If you have any questions please don't hesitate to contact me on the contact details below.

Vivian Rath [rathv@tcd.ie](mailto:rathv@tcd.ie) / 0877730784

PhD Researcher, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin

## Appendix G: Phase One-Semistructured Interview Questions

### Disabled Graduate Focus Group

#### Icebreaker

Could I ask each participant for their pseudonym?

Thinking back on your time in college how would you describe it?

1. What do you think are the most important elements of a good college experience for you?

College life has academic and social elements – How would you describe your social engagement?

2. Many people emphasised the importance of making friends in college.

In your first weeks in college, what would have helped you?

Thinking back, what stands out for you from that time?

Was it easy to meet people in your college? What would have helped?

How did you make friends in college?

What were your overall impressions of the college and the people in it?

3. Tell me about your social experiences before you came to college? Were you involved in local events, or clubs?

How did your social involvement in college compare to your previous social involvement, was college what you expected?

You mentioned / or didn't mention "social engagement" experiences.

Can you reflect on your own time in college, and your social engagement experiences?

Can you give me examples of how you got involved in college?

Were you involved in clubs, societies, class groups, peer mentoring, student ambassador programs & SU?

What level of involvement did you have?

Did you hold any leadership positions in college?

Do you hold any now?

4. During your time in college did you feel part of the college community, like you belonged?

Did you have someone to talk to about your problems?

Was there ever a time or an incident when you didn't feel that sense of belonging?

5. Some disabled people choose not to disclose their disability in college

Was this identity important to you or do you think it matters?

Did you know anyone else with a disability in college?

If you didn't, why do you think that was?

Was there ever an incident where you became more aware of your disability?

How did that make you feel?

6. From your college time, what factors, people, or activities enabled you feeling a part of college life?

Did you require any supports to help you engage?

What kind of supports did college provide to assist you in social engagement?

Should college have a role?

Additional questions.

Did you prioritise certain aspects of college? Why do you think that was?

Looking back, would you place the same priority on them now?

## Appendix H: Phase Two-HEI Invited to Participate

26 publicly funded HEI based on the list they compiled by the HEA  
[www.education.ie/en/Learners/Information/Providers-of-Higher-Education/List.html](http://www.education.ie/en/Learners/Information/Providers-of-Higher-Education/List.html)

<b>University</b>
Dublin City University
University College Cork
National University of Ireland, Galway
Maynooth University
Trinity College Dublin
University College Cork
University of Limerick
Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
Dublin Institute of Technology
Institute of Technology Blanchardstown
Institute of Technology Tallaght
<b>Institute of Technology</b>
Athlone Institute of Technology
Cork Institute of Technology
Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art and Design
Dundalk Institute of Technology
Galway Mayo Institute of Technology
Institute of Technology Carlow
Institute of Technology Sligo
Institute of Technology Tralee
Letterkenny Institute of Technology
Limerick Institute of Technology
Waterford Institute of Technology
<b>Other Colleges</b>
Royal Irish Academy
St Angela's College
National College of Art & Design
Mary Immaculate College

\*National College of Ireland & Dublin Business School were represented in the DAWN focus group.

## Appendix I: Phase Two-Senior Managers Invitation

Senior Manager,

xxxx

**Re: Invitation to Participate**

Dear xxx,

My name is Vivian Rath and I am a PhD Researcher in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. I am undertaking a study into the social involvement experiences of students with disabilities in higher education in Ireland under the supervision of Professor Michael Shevlin.

The aims of this research are to:

1. Identify the barriers and/or enablers for the social involvement of students with disabilities in HE,
2. To investigate how national and institutional policies and practices facilitate/impede the social involvement of these students,
3. To identify local practices and policies that promote the social involvement of students with disabilities.

This study is important because, although, there has been an increase in the number of students with disabilities attending third level there has been little research focus on their social involvement experiences. The study is taking place at a critical juncture in policy development on students' social engagement, through the implementation of the student engagement project (N-STEP) and the National Plan for Equity of Access 2015-2019. It is essential therefore, that there is research on the experiences of students with disabilities to contribute to these important developments.

Senior management are critical to the implementation of national policies in higher education and as such, I believe, it is critical that your views are included in this pivotal piece of research. To this end, I would like to extend an invitation to you to participate in an interview.

If you are agreeable, I would propose that this interview would take place at a time and location of your choosing. It should not last any longer than 40 minutes. Participation is entirely voluntary, and confidentiality will be guaranteed. Full transcripts will be sent to you for consideration after the interview.

I have contacted all Registrars of HE institutions to ascertain a national perspective and I sincerely hope that you will look favourably upon this request. Your input is critical to the study and is an opportunity to contribute on a topic that has not been widely researched.

I have received ethical approval from the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

Thank you for taking the time to read through this,

Vivian Rath.

[rathv@tcd.ie](mailto:rathv@tcd.ie) / 0877730784

PhD Researcher, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.



## **Appendix J: Phase Two-Senior Managers' Participant Information**

**Project title:** Investigating the social involvement experiences of students with disabilities in higher education.

**Purpose of the research:** This study is being undertaken by Vivian Rath as part of a PhD programme in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin under the supervision of Professor Michael Shevlin.

**Why is it being undertaken:** The main aim of this research is to identify the barriers and/or enablers to the social involvement of students with disabilities. In so doing, it is hoped to be able to offer recommendations to remove these barriers, to highlight examples of good practice, and to inform future planning for the full participation of students with disabilities in higher education environments.

### **Background:**

Increasing numbers of young adults with disabilities have been gaining the necessary qualifications to progress to higher education. It is widely accepted that the transition to higher education can be more challenging for these students, as they face a range of barriers to their full participation.

Engaging in social networks both inside and outside the classroom constitutes a significant step in the process of forming an independent personal and social identity. Social involvement in the wider third level community has been consistently identified by HE researchers as critical to enable a successful transition, for students with a disability. Lack of social involvement and a positive sense of belonging in HE is also a factor in student attrition.

Engaging students is at the heart of the National Strategy for Higher Education and the National Student Engagement Pilot that has recently been launched. The National Plan for Equity of Access 2015-19 aims to increase the numbers of students with disabilities 'participating' in higher education. At an international level the EU Disability Strategy 2010-20 and the United Nations Convention 2006 aim to 'overcome inequalities in academic and social opportunities for students with disabilities'.

Although many campuses have made great strides in creating more accessible academic programmes and providing academic supports, cocurricular aspects of

campus life have received significantly less attention. International research has identified that students with disabilities face barriers to social involvement. Despite the recognised importance of the skills developed through engagement and the contribution of a sense of belonging to student's well-being, there is very little research on the social involvement experiences of students with disabilities in HE in Ireland.

As you can appreciate this research has real potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the social involvement experiences of students with disabilities.

**What does taking part involve?** Participants are invited to take part in an interview with the researcher. It should not last any longer than 40 minutes. The interview will be recorded using a dictaphone, but no reference will be made to participants names in the dissertation. After transcription participants will be provided with a copy of their interview transcript and be given the opportunity to clarify statements as appropriate.

**What will I be asked about?** During the interview the following themes may be covered:

- National and local policy implementation relating to inclusive policies and students with disabilities in higher education,
- National and institutional policies relating to the engagement of all students,
- What you believe are the barriers and/or enablers for the social involvement of students with disabilities in higher education.
- Other themes covered during the discussion may include funding, and roles and responsibilities.

**Research Assistant:** During the study the researcher may avail of the support of a research assistant. The research assistant is bound by the same ethical code as the researcher and is thus obliged to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

**Confidentiality:** Any information or data which you share during this research will be treated with full confidentiality and, if published, the data will not be identifiably linked to any individual. Hard copy items will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's school at all times. Access to raw data will be limited to the researcher and his research assistant and, potentially, examiners. Data

will be retained for no longer than is necessary for the specified purpose or purposes. Following this period, all electronic copies of the data will be deleted from all storage sites and all paper copies will be shredded, in accordance with Irish Data Protection Legislation. The research has received ethical approval from the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

**Your Participation:** Your participation in this research is of vital importance. It will be entirely voluntary, and the interview will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner. You may choose to leave at any point during the research.

This is an opportunity for you to have your voice heard, and to have your say on a topic that is extremely important and has not been widely researched.

**Questions:** If you have any questions please don't hesitate to contact me on the contact details below.

Vivian Rath [rathv@tcd.ie](mailto:rathv@tcd.ie) / 0877730784

PhD Researcher, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

## Appendix K: Phase Two-Senior Managers' Interview Questions

### Icebreaker

Can you tell me your responsibilities toward your students?

1. Both students and staff have often referred to the college environment and culture. Students talk about the environment when they first enter the gate.

How would you describe your college?

What are you most proud of about your college?

One of the key themes of the National Access Plan is that "Access is everyone's business".

How do you think institutions across the country have done in embracing this theme?

Do you feel your policies are fully inclusive in your institution? Can you tell me about them?

Can you tell me a little about the funding model used to support disabled students?

2. Do you think students are adequately prepared for the transition to HE?

What can be done to facilitate this?

Are there any programmes for disabled student engagement currently running in your college you'd like to tell me about?

3. Despite the gap in years between current and past students one barrier that overlaps between them has been physical barriers, i.e. lifts, steps, structural, etc.

At a national level why do you think we haven't seen improvements in these barriers?

4. Students/graduates have spoken of the importance of social involvement; What do you think social engagement looks like in your college?

Does this tie in with your vision?

What do you think are the overall experiences of disabled students in your college?

5. Are there opportunities in your college or in the wider HE environment for improvements to enhance the social engagement experiences of students with disabilities?

What are they and how do you think we could go about implementing them?

What do you think are the challenges associated with doing this for management?

6. Developing a sense of belonging has been found to be extremely important for students' academic performance, well-being, and retention.

What steps need to be taken within a college to create a sense of belonging?

Do you think Irish institutions succeed in creating that for students from diverse backgrounds?

Do you think disabled students feel like they belong in your institution?

7. How does your institution create an environment that promotes student voice?

How would students go about contacting you?

8. Colleges are currently working to implement the new National Student Engagement Programme. One of the key elements of this is including students more fully in governance.

What are the opportunities within this?

Does your institution have a policy on social engagement?

How do you see students with disabilities engaging with this?

9. What are your thoughts targets and participation targets?

Do you think they are the best way of reaching our goal of equity of access?

10. Has it been possible for institutions to meet their wider participation goals whilst meeting the challenges that increased capacity of a diverse population brings?

## **Conclusion**

Are there any examples of good practice you would like to bring my attention too either inside or outside of Ireland? Is there anybody else you would recommend that I speak to?

## **Appendix L: Phase Three-Invitation to DAWN**

### **Re: Invitation to Participate**

Dear Chairperson,

My name is Vivian Rath and I am a PhD Researcher in Trinity College Dublin. I am undertaking a study into the social involvement experiences of students with disabilities in higher education in Ireland, under the supervision of Professor Michael Shevlin.

The aims of the research are to:

1. Identify the barriers and/or enablers to students with disabilities social involvement in HE,
2. To investigate how national and institutional policies and practices facilitate/impede the social involvement of these students,
3. To identify local practices and policies that promote the social involvement of students with disabilities.

This study is important because although there has been an increase in the number of students with disabilities attending third level there has been little focus on their social involvement experiences. It is taking place at a critical juncture in policy development on student's social engagement with the pilot student engagement project and the publication of the National Plan for Equity of Access 2015-2019. It is essential that there is research on the experiences of students with disabilities to contribute to these important developments.

I believe that it is important that the professional voice of those dealing directly with students with disabilities is included in this research. To this end I would like to extend an invitation to your network members to participate in a focus group.

If your members are agreeable, I would propose that such a focus group could take place before or after one of your network meetings or events. It should last approximately 50-90 minutes. I have attached a participant information sheet for your attention. All participation would be entirely voluntary, and all contributions would be treated with full confidentiality.

I sincerely hope that DAWN members will look favourably upon this request. The input of your members is critical to the study and is an opportunity to contribute on a topic that has not been widely researched.

I have received ethical approval from the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. I have attached a participant information sheet, and please don't hesitate to contact me if you require further information.

Thank you for taking the time to read through this.

Yours,

Vivian Rath.

[rathv@tcd.ie](mailto:rathv@tcd.ie) / 0877730784

PhD Researcher, Trinity College Dublin.

## **Appendix M: Phase Three-DAWN Participant Information Sheet**

**Project title:** Investigating the social involvement experiences of students with disabilities in HE.

**Purpose of the research:** This study is being undertaken by Vivian Rath as part of a PhD programme in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin under the supervision of Professor Michael Shevlin.

**Why is it being undertaken:** The main aim of this research is to identify the barriers and/or enablers to the social involvement of students with disabilities. In so doing, it is hoped to be able to offer recommendations to remove these barriers, to highlight examples of good practice, and to inform future planning for the full participation of students with disabilities in higher education environments.

### **Background:**

Increasing numbers of young adults with disabilities have been gaining the necessary qualifications to progress to higher education. It is widely accepted that the transition to higher education can be more challenging for these students, as they face a range of barriers to their full participation.

Engaging in social networks both inside and outside the classroom constitutes a significant step in the process of forming an independent personal and social identity. Social involvement in the wider HE community has been consistently identified by researchers as critical to enable a successful transition, for students with a disability. Lack of social involvement and a positive sense of belonging in HE is also a factor in student attrition.

Engaging students is at the heart of the National Strategy for Higher Education and the National Student Engagement Pilot has recently been launched. The National Plan for Equity of Access 2015-19 aims to increase the numbers of students with disabilities 'participating' in higher education. At an international level the EU Disability Strategy 2010-20 and the United Nations Convention 2006 aim to 'overcome inequalities in academic and social opportunities for students with disabilities'.



Although many campuses have made progress toward creating accessible academic programmes and providing academic supports, cocurricular aspects of campus life have received significantly less attention. International research has identified that students with disabilities face barriers to social involvement. Despite the recognised importance of the skills developed through engagement and the contribution of a sense of belonging to student's well-being, there is very little research on the social involvement experiences of students with disabilities in higher education in Ireland.

As you can appreciate this research has real potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the social involvement experiences of students with disabilities.

**What will I be asked about?** During the interview / focus group the following themes may be covered:

- What you believe are the barriers and/or enablers to students with disabilities social involvement in higher education.
- Other themes covered during the discussion may include national and local policy and practice, funding of social involvement, roles and responsibilities, and existing research.

**What does taking part involve?** Participants are invited to take part in a focus group interview with the researcher. It should not last any longer than 50-90 minutes. The interview / focus group will be recorded using a dictaphone, but no reference will be made to participants names in the dissertation. After transcription participants will be provided with a copy of their interview/focus group transcript and given the opportunity to clarify statements as appropriate.

**Research Assistant:** During the study the researcher may avail of the support of a research assistant. The research assistant is bound by the same ethical code as the researcher and is thus obliged to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

**Confidentiality:** Any information or data which you share during this research will be treated with full confidentiality and, if published, the data will not be

identifiably linked to any individual. All of the data shared will be stored securely and will be destroyed in accordance with Irish Data Protection Legislation.

**Your Participation:** Your participation in this research is of vital importance. It will be entirely voluntary, and the interview / focus group will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner. You may choose to leave at any point during the research.

This is an opportunity for you to have your voice heard, and to have your say on a topic that is extremely important and has not been widely researched.

**Questions:** If you have any questions please don't hesitate to contact me on the contact details below.

Vivian Rath [rathv@tcd.ie](mailto:rathv@tcd.ie) / 0877730784

PhD Researcher, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

## Appendix N: Phase Three-Semistructured Interview Questions

### DAWN Focus Group

#### Icebreaker

What does social engagement look like in your college?

What are the most important elements of a good student experience?

1. Are there opportunities in your college or in the wider HE environment for improvements to enhance the social engagement experiences of disabled students?

What are they and how do you think we could go about implementing them?

2. I have found that a large majority of students found the transition difficult, they often became quite emotional during the interview.

Do you think students are adequately prepared for the transition to HE?

What can be done to facilitate this nationally?

What about in your own college, are there opportunities to do more?

Are there any current programmes for all students in your college you'd like to tell me about?

Any specific programmes for disabled students?

3. Do you think disabled students feel they belong in your institution?

How do you go about creating a sense of belonging and community for all students?

4. Is there a need to provide greater support to disabled students to engage or have their voice heard; how should we go about it?

Do you know a disabled student in a senior leadership position in your institution?

Does your college have any student affinity organisations (Access Soc, Mature Student Soc), for disabled students? peer mentoring programmes?

Are you aware of N-STEP to improve this situation and how should we go about it?

#### Conclusion

- I. Can you identify examples of good practice either inside or outside of Ireland?

Anything you would like to add?

## Appendix O: Phase Four-Case Institution-Invitation to Participate

Registrar / Access Officer,

### Re: Invitation to Participate

Dear xx,

As per our phone-call on xxx, my name is Vivian Rath and I am a PhD Researcher in Trinity College Dublin. I am undertaking a study into the social involvement of students with disabilities in higher education under Professor Michael Shevlin.

The aims of the research are to:

1. Identify the barriers and/or enablers to students with disabilities social involvement in HE,
2. To investigate how national and institutional policies and practices facilitate/impede the social involvement of these students,
3. To identify local practices and policies that promote the social involvement of students with disabilities.

I'm contacting you to invite your institution to take part in this important research as one of four case example institutions. Should your institution agree to participate, I would request the following:

1. That I invite current undergraduate students registered with your service to participate in a one-on-one semi-structured interview with me, at a time and date of their choosing, to discuss their social involvement experiences in college.
2. That, I undertake a one-on-one semi-structured interview with you or members of your team, to discuss your local policy, practices, and views on this important research topic.

Your institution will remain anonymous and all information shared will be treated with the strictest confidentiality.

As discussed, this is a critical piece of research, that has not been carried out in Ireland to date. I have attached my participant information sheet, which will provide you with more information on this research.

I have also attached, a draft of the letter to participate that I propose to send to your students for your perusal. If you would like to discuss this further, please don't hesitate to contact me.

I sincerely hope your institution will look favourably upon my request.

Vivian Rath|  
PhD Researcher, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.  
[rathv@tcd.ie](mailto:rathv@tcd.ie) / 0877730784

## Appendix P: Phase Four-Students' Union Invitation to Participate

### Invitation to Interview

Inbox

**Vivian  
Rath**

Dear Students' Union Officer,

My name is Vivian Rath, I'm a PhD student in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. I'm researching the social experiences of students with disabilities in higher education. Your institution has agreed to be one of my four case example institutions. There is little or no research on this topic as there has been a focus on the academic needs of students with little focus on their social needs.

As part of my research I am interviewing students, staff and members of the students' Union. I have attached the participant information sheet and the consent form for your information.

I was wondering would you be available to participate in an interview during the next two weeks?

I am also planning on organising a focus group and interview with students with disabilities from your institution to discuss their experiences.

I have attached a participant information sheet, consent form and my ethical code for the research.

If you have any questions please don't hesitate to contact me.

I hope you will be available to participate,

Kind regards,  
Vivian  
0877730784

## Participant Information Sheet: Disability Support Personnel, Student Union Officers

**Project title:** Investigating the social involvement experiences of students with disabilities in higher education.

**Purpose of the research:** This study is being undertaken by Vivian Rath as part of a PhD programme in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin under the supervision of Professor Michael Shevlin.

**Why is it being undertaken:** The main aim of this research is to identify the barriers and/or enablers to the social involvement of students with disabilities. In so doing, it is hoped to be able to offer recommendations to remove these barriers, to highlight examples of good practice, and to inform future planning for the full participation of students with disabilities in higher education environments.

### **Background:**

Increasing numbers of young adults with disabilities have been gaining the necessary qualifications to progress to higher education. It is widely accepted that the transition to higher education can be more challenging for these students, as they face a range of barriers to their full participation.

Engaging in social networks both inside and outside the classroom constitutes a significant step in the process of forming an independent personal and social identity. Social involvement in the wider HE community has been consistently identified by higher education researchers as critical to enable a successful transition, for students with a disability. Lack of social involvement and a positive sense of belonging in higher education is also a factor in student attrition.

Engaging students is at the heart of the National Strategy for Higher Education and the National Student Engagement Pilot has recently been launched. The National Plan for Equity of Access 2015-19 aims to increase the numbers of students with disabilities 'participating' in higher education. At an international level the EU Disability Strategy 2010-20 and the United Nations Convention 2006

aims to 'overcome inequalities in academic and social opportunities for students with disabilities.

Although many colleges have made great strides in creating more accessible academic programmes and providing academic supports, cocurricular aspects of campus life have received significantly less attention. International research has identified that students with disabilities face barriers to their social involvement. Despite the recognised importance of the skills developed through engagement and the contribution of a sense of belonging to student's well-being, there is very little research on the social involvement experiences of students with disabilities in higher education in Ireland.

As you can appreciate this research has real potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the social involvement experiences of students with disabilities.

**What will I be asked about?** During the interview / focus group the following themes may be covered:

- What you believe are the barriers and/or enablers to students with disabilities social involvement in higher education.
- Other themes covered during the discussion may include national and local policy and practice, funding of social involvement, roles and responsibilities, and existing research.

**What does taking part involve?** Participants are invited to take part in a focus group interview with the researcher. It should not last any longer than 50 minutes. The interview / focus group will be recorded using a Dictaphone, but no reference will be made to participants names in the dissertation. After transcription participants will be provided with a copy of their interview / focus group transcript and given the opportunity to clarify statements as appropriate.

**Research Assistant:** During the study the researcher may avail of the support of a research assistant. The research assistant is bound by the same ethical code as the researcher and is thus obliged to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

**Confidentiality:** Any information or data which you share during this research will be treated with full confidentiality and, if published, the data will not be identifiably linked to any individual. All of the data shared will be stored securely and will be destroyed in accordance with Irish Data Protection Legislation.

**Your Participation:** Your participation in this research is of vital importance. It will be entirely voluntary, and the interview / focus group will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner. You may choose to leave at any point during the research.

This is an opportunity for you to have your voice heard, and to have your say on a topic that is extremely important and has not been widely researched.

**Questions:** If you have any questions please don't hesitate to contact me on the contact details below.

Vivian Rath [rathv@tcd.ie](mailto:rathv@tcd.ie) / 0877730784

Ph.D. Researcher, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.



## Appendix Q: Phase Four-Student Invitation Email

From: [rathv@tcd.ie](mailto:rathv@tcd.ie)

Subject: Your social experiences in college

### What are your social experiences like in college?

Dear Student,

If you are interested in talking to me about your social experiences in college, I would like to hear from you. Your social participation experiences will form part of a doctoral study that I am conducting in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. There is very little research on this topic particularly in an Irish context. This research aims to address this gap. The aims of the study are:

1. To find out what students with disabilities social experiences are like in college,
2. To identify the barriers or what helped students with disabilities to be involved in the social side of college,
3. To understand how the social experiences of students with disabilities may be supported, and to develop strategies for meaningful inclusion in the social life of college.

If you agree to participate there are two things I would like you to do:

1) Email me,

2) I would like interview you about your social experiences. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes. If it is not possible to meet, a telephone or skype interview would also be helpful. You can let me know a time and day that suits you to meet on the registration form.

This research has ethical approval from the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. Any information or data which you share during this research will be treated with full confidentiality and, if published, the data will not be identifiably linked to any individual.

If you would like more information on this study, please don't hesitate to email me.

**Email:** [rathv@tcd.ie](mailto:rathv@tcd.ie)

I look forward to hearing from you,

Vivian Rath

[rathv@tcd.ie](mailto:rathv@tcd.ie) / 0877730784

School of Education, Trinity College Dublin

## Appendix R: Phase Four-Student Participant Information Sheet

### Participant Information Sheet

**Project title:** Investigating the social involvement experiences of students with disabilities in higher education.

**Purpose of the research:** This study is being undertaken by Vivian Rath as part of a PhD programme in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin under the supervision of Professor Michael Shevlin.

**Why is it being undertaken:** The main aim of this research is to identify the barriers and/or enablers to the social involvement of students with disabilities in higher education.

#### What will I be asked about?

- You will be asked about your thoughts on your college social involvement experiences.
- You will be asked, if you think there were barriers and/or enablers to your involvement in college life?
- You will be asked to give suggestions on how higher education could be improved to facilitate greater social involvement by students with disabilities.

**What does taking part involve?** Participants will be invited to take part in a one to one interview or a focus group with the researcher. This may last up to 50 minutes. The interview / focus group will be recorded using a Dictaphone, but no reference will be made to participants names. After transcription participants will be provided with a copy of their interview / focus group transcript and given the opportunity to add anything they may have forgotten.

**Research assistant:** During the study the researcher may avail of the support of a research assistant. The research assistant is bound by the same ethical code as the researcher and is thus obliged to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

**Your Participation:** Your participation in this research is of vital importance. It will be entirely voluntary, and the interview / focus group will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner. You may choose to leave at any point during the research. This is an opportunity for you to have your voice heard, and to have your say on a topic that is extremely important and has not been widely researched.

**Confidentiality:** Any information or data which you share during this research will be treated with full confidentiality and, if published, the data will not be identifiably linked to any individual. All of the data shared will be stored securely and will be destroyed in accordance with Irish Data Protection Legislation. For further information please see the attached Ethical Principles for the research.

**Questions:** If you have any questions please don't hesitate to contact me on the contact details below.

Vivian Rath [rathv@tcd.ie](mailto:rathv@tcd.ie) / 0877730784

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## Appendix S: Phase Four-Student Interview Questions

**Icebreaker-** How is college going for you? Tell me about it.

1. Arriving in your college for the first time, what stood out for you?  
Did you notice any other disabled people?  
Were you nervous before coming to college? What were your fears?
  2. What do you think are the most important elements of a good college experience for you?
  3. Many people talked about the importance of making friends in college.  
Is it easy to meet new people? What would help?  
How did you make friends in college?
  4. I noticed you mentioned / or didn't mention social involvement experiences.  
Tell me about your social experiences?  
Can you give me examples of how you are involved in college?  
Are you involved in clubs, societies, class groups, peer mentoring, student ambassador programs & SU?  
What level of involvement have you now?  
Do you hold any leadership positions in a student group, SU, clubs and societies?  
Is there a value in being socially involved in college? If so, how?
  5. Tell me about your social experiences before you came to college? Were you involved in local events, or clubs?
  6. Do you feel a part of the college community, do you feel like you belong?  
Was there ever a time or an incident when you didn't feel that sense of belonging?
  7. Some disabled people choose not to disclose their disability in college  
Is this identity important to you or do you think it matters?  
Was there ever an incident where you became more aware of your disability?
  8. Some disabled graduates mentioned a lack of disability awareness among the students in their class. What do you think?
  9. What people, or activities enable you to feel a part of college life/community?  
Did you require supports to help you socially engage?  
What supports do the college provide to help you join social activities in college?  
Should the college have a role in disabled students' social engagement?
  10. Did /does your college have any programmes or supports that helped you?
- Conclusion:** What tips would you give a student to get into college social life?  
If there was one wish that could be different for you in college what would that be?  
Would you like to add anything?

## Appendix T: Phase Four-Disability Support Staff Questions

**Icebreaker** - Tell me about your role in this college and the services in your institution?

1. Do you have inclusive policies in your institution? Can you tell me about them? Do you have specific policies in your college relating to disabled students? Do you think these policies work in practice? What are their strengths and limitations of these policies?
2. Can you tell me about the funding model used to support disabled students? Is this funding adequate?
3. A number of students experienced difficulties transitioning to college, especially during the first semester. Are there any supports in place in your college to support the transition of disabled students?
4. What do you think social engagement looks like in your college? How socially engaged do you feel disabled students are in your college? Do you think they're as socially engaged as students without impairments?
5. Students highlighted the many academic supports available to them and their importance. Do you have supports to assist students make the social transition? Can you tell me about them?
6. Do you know any disabled students in club, society, or student's union leadership roles in your institution? Does the current funding allow for supporting social engagement of disabled students?
7. Does your college have any student affinity organisations (Access Soc, Mature Student Soc), for disabled students? or peer mentoring programmes? How does your college support those organisations?
8. The literature reports students have experienced stigma surrounding their disability. Does your college run any awareness training for staff and students?
9. In terms of disabled students' social engagement, inclusion and sense of belonging, what is the role of the college, HEA or student support? Do you have someone with responsibility for supporting disabled students to engage in the social aspect of your college?
10. Do you think any disabled students have had negative experiences in your college? Does your college support student voice? Have you conducted exit surveys with disabled students?

**Conclusion:** Can you identify examples of best practice within your institution or outside facilitating the social experiences of disabled students? Anybody else I should speak to or is there anything else you would like to add?

## Appendix U: Phase Four-Students' Union Officers Questions

**Icebreaker-** What is your role in this college?

1. Do you have inclusive policies in your institution & organisation? Can you tell me about them? Do you think these policies work in practice? What are their strengths and limitations?

Various students reported difficulties transitioning to college, especially during semester one. What supports are in place in your college to support students transitioning?

2. How would you define social engagement? Do you think disabled students feel included in your institution? Do you think disabled students are as socially engaged as students without impairments?

Students talked often about the importance of inclusive spaces to socialise. Are all the spaces in your college fully inclusive?

3. Do you think there is a value in being socially involved in college? If so, how? Do you have supports to enable students to socially engage?

Do you think students are prepared for the social aspect of HE?

Are you aware of any students with impairments in club, society or student's union leadership roles in your institution?

Does your college have any student affinity organisations (Access Soc, Mature Student Soc) for disabled students? or peer mentoring programmes?

Do you feel the Student's Union, Clubs and Societies actively support/ promote inclusion of disabled students?

Does the SU or the college act to support student voice?

Students have shared experiences of feeling stigma surrounding their disability.

What do you think? Does your college, or the SU, run any awareness training for staff/students?

4. Do you think any of your disabled students have had negative experiences in your college? Can you tell me about this? What was done to support these students?

**Conclusion:** Can you identify examples of best practice within your institution or outside which facilitates the social experiences of disabled students?

Is there anybody else I should speak to in your college? anything you would like to add?