

## Chapter 24

# Identifying the Barriers and Enablers for Supporting Learners with Special Needs in Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter provides a systematic analysis of thirteen in-depth interviews of disabled students from both universities in Northern Ireland. Undertaken as part of the Uni4U initiative hosted within the University of Ulster, the findings presented describe barriers experienced by students with disabilities to participation in higher education across both universities. The students provided comments concerning their current support provisions, barriers they have experienced, and suggestions for improvements to the service. Examination of the findings leads to three recommendations: firstly, that a network of communication should exist that encourages dialogue between all parties with an interest in the well-being of the student, with the student at the heart of these discussions and involved in all decisions; secondly, that attention must be paid to staff development especially with regard to Mental Health Issues; and finally, that in the long term the aim of institutions should be to move away from individual “reasonable adjustments” to inclusive education for all.*

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## INTRODUCTION

For disabled students, inclusive education, widening participation and improving access to universities remain important issues both nationally and internationally (Harrison et al. 2009; UNESCO 1994). In the past 10 to 15 years, access to, and participation in third level education has improved in the UK. This can be attributed to international agreements and changes in national legislation, which have prompted organisations including universities into making 'reasonable adjustments' for students with special needs. In addition, there have been advancements in creating inclusive learning environments and improved funding for disabled students (the Disabled Student's Allowance). It is recognised that inclusivity should be a fundamental aspect throughout an individual's educational career not only for their own benefit but also the positive impact that integration has on society as a whole,

*...schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system. (UNESCO 1994, ix).*

In the context of Higher Education in Northern Ireland there has been a significant increase in participation of disabled students over the past seven years. In the academic year 2002/03, of the 24,806 full-time primary degree students who were enrolled in further and higher education institutions, only 425 (1.7%) were self-reported disabled. This compares with the 2009/10 academic year where, of the 28,770 Higher Education students, 995 (3.5%) of those were in receipt of Disabled Student's Allowance (Higher Education Statistics Agency). It should be noted that although Disabled Student's Allowance is only one indicator of par-

ticipation by students with disabilities in Higher Education, and students are not forced to inform the institution if they are receiving it, it provides a basis for judging the representation of disabled students in universities.

These figures suggest that participation in universities in Northern Ireland has improved, with the overall number of full-time students increasing by 16% and the number of self-reported disabled students increasing by 134%. The increased participation of disabled students is a significant improvement. However, these figures are not the full story and while encouraging, there is still a shortfall that needs to be addressed. 25% of adults in Northern Ireland report having a long-standing illness, which limits their activities (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency). Of these people, 12% are aged 16 - 44 years-old (Equality Research and Information 2010). Furthermore, of the 786 16-year olds in Northern Ireland that took part in the Young Life and Times 2010 survey (Access Research Knowledge), 8% classed themselves as either suffering from a long-standing illness or a disability, which could indicate that more young people with disabilities could be enabled to participate in Higher Education. Finally, it should be added that in the 2009/2010 academic year Northern Ireland had the lowest percentage disabled student participation in Universities (3.5%) when compared to the UK average (4.9%), England (4.9%), Wales (5.7%), and Scotland (4.1%) (Higher Education Statistics Agency), and Ireland (4%) (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability).

This chapter focuses on reviewing thirteen in-depth case studies with the intention of providing a clear depiction of the students' current model of provision in universities in Northern Ireland. It is very important for the voice of the students not only to be heard but also to be taken in the correct context. Therefore, where possible, the research story is punctuated with direct quotations from the interviewees. The interviews are described in the obstacles to participation section, when applicable,

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