Social engagement: Hearing the experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland

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Research on the experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland has focused primarily on barriers to their transition and academic experiences post entry. Their wider social engagement experiences have yet to be explored. Early and ongoing social engagement has been found to be particularly beneficial for non-traditional students leading to the creation of sense of belonging and greater student retention. There has been limited consideration of this area within Irish policy or research. As a disabled researcher with a human rights perspective. I adopted a qualitative framework which combined the transformative paradigm with the bio-ecological model. This approach enabled me to place the voice of the student at the center of the research whilst examining the system around them. The research upon which this article draws upon the findings of research carried out by a disabled researcher which brought together data from 65 participants, with representatives from 19 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the Republic of Ireland using a four-phased, sequential, and concurrent qualitative data collection methodology. This paper focuses on the disabled undergraduate student cohort from this research ($n = 23$) and the theme of social engagement. The key findings under the theme of social engagement included, (i) Social engagement was highly valued and recognized as being vital to the formation of connections that resulted in a sense of belonging. (ii) The majority of disabled students reported being socially engaged, yet almost all reported barriers to their social engagement. (iii) A lack of disability awareness, inaccessible physical infrastructure, peer, and staff attitudes, negatively impact upon students' sense of value, ability to maintain friendships, and develop a sense of belonging. (iv) There was little evidence of structures or a strategic approach to disabled students' social engagement. These findings resonate with international research which demonstrated that disabled students face a range of systemic barriers to their social engagement in higher education. The implications of this research point to a failure of national and institutional policy to adequately consider the social engagement opportunities of disabled students within higher education.

KEYWORDS

inclusive education, higher education, disability, social engagement, universal design for learning, social involvement, student voice, EDI

Introduction

Historically disabled people have faced a long-standing and systemic prejudice (Finkelstein, 1980) which has been characterized by their exclusion from all aspects of society including education (McDonnell, 2007). The higher education (HE) system is strongly integrated into society, thus it is difficult to expect equality in education without equality in the wider society (Lynch and Baker, 2005). Many disabled activists and researchers would argue that neoliberal approaches in contemporary HE (Croft, 2020) have resulted in a significant increase in enrollment that has largely acted to further entrench and exacerbate the exclusion of people with disabilities (Thompson, 2020) with limited resources being made available to support student engagement.

Transition to, and engagement in HE is seen as a major precondition for accessing employment, and correspondingly, to social inclusion (Ebersold, 2011). Historically the number of disabled students participating in HE in Ireland has been low (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability, 2019). This can be attributed to a combination of factors including, low expectations, poor secondary level academic attainment and a shortage of information culminating in a failure to qualify for HE (McCoy et al., 2014, 2020).

In recent years the number of disabled students attending HE in Ireland has increased (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability, 2019) in response to national policy promoting a widening participation agenda which looks to increase the transition, success and retention of disabled students, among other marginalized groups. Despite this increase, disabled students are still found to have lower participation rates in HE than their non-disabled peers (McCoy et al., 2014). Upon transitioning to HE they face a range of other challenges including attitudinal, structural, and academic barriers that their peers do not face (Shevlin et al., 2008), and as a result they are insufficiently exposed to and supported in developing an identity as knowledge producers including as researchers (Lillywhite and Wolbring, 2022).

Early and ongoing engagement of students has been identified as particularly beneficial for students least prepared, or those from under-represented groups in higher education (Trowler and Trowler, 2011). Increasing numbers of international higher education institutes (HEI) have made progress toward creating accessible academic programs and supports for disabled students. However, co-curricular aspects of college life have received significantly less attention (Quaye and 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 the class allows students to develop social and cultural capital (Strayhorn, 2010), graduate attributes (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019) and skills that will be essential both in

progression to employment and within the work environment (Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

Thomas (2012) broadly identified social engagement as creating a sense of belonging and offering informal support through interaction with friends and peers. Social engagement is seen to take place in the social sphere of the institution, including social spaces, clubs and societies, the students' union, in student accommodation, through shared living arrangements (p. 14) and in the academic environment. Those who feel they belong report higher levels of enjoyment and are more confident in engaging with learning activities (Furrer and Skinner, 2003). Internationally, disabled students have been found to face barriers to their social engagement (Papasotiriou and Windle, 2012; Croft, 2020) impacting upon their sense of belonging (Rath, 2020).

In Ireland, it is recognized that disabled people face barriers to their wider social participation (Watson and Nolan, 2011), and students face barriers to their transition to and participation on entering higher education (McGuckin et al., 2013). Despite the recognized 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.

Furthermore, disabled students may be at greater risk of disconnection resulting in a potential for non-completion of higher education (O'Keeffe, 2013). It has been identified that HE needs to hear the voice and lived experience of disabled students to promote a deeper knowledge and understanding of the barriers disabled students face (Barnes, 2007; Lane, 2017). Disabled people have not been active partners in research and much of what has been written about their lives originates from those in positions of power, medical or educational professionals, religious groups and the elite or the "experts" (McDonnell, 2007). These accounts are colored by the cultural and social norms of the time, and the voice of the lived experience of disabled people or disabled researchers has been noticeably absent (Borsay, 2002, p. 98).

This paper draws upon the findings of research carried out by a disabled researcher, first author, who captured the social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland. In this paper, the experiences of 23 undergraduate disabled students are examined.

Four main questions were addressed through the research:

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?

Methodology

The research upon which this paper is based examined data from 65 participants, with representatives from 19 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across Ireland using a four-phased, sequential, and concurrent qualitative data collection methodology (Rath, 2020). By capturing a diverse range of data from diverse sources (Walton, 2014), including current undergraduate disabled students, disabled graduates, students' union full time officers, senior managers, and disability support personnel, it provided the integral knowledge for transformational research (Mertens, 2017). A the same time it also allowed for viewing the many layers of the system within which the student was embedded (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

This paper will focus on one phase of this research design, namely *phase four* which captured the voice of disabled undergraduate students (*n* = 23). Before we seek to adapt and make the systems within our higher education institutions more inclusive we must recognize and understand the barriers and enablers that exist within the wider systems that surround the student. This can be done through hearing the lived experiences and inclusion of the voice of disabled students.

Research framework

As a disabled researcher with a human rights perspective the research was theoretically framed by combining a transformative approach (Mertens et al., 2011) with the bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

The transformative approach sees both the researcher and the participants working together for personal and social transformation. The main principle 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). It has a wide applicability to groups who face discrimination, oppression, or marginalization, allowing for the study of power structures that result in social inequality (Rath, 2020). The bio-ecological model offers a mechanism through which to explore how human development is influenced by the environment in which they are situated. It has been successfully adapted or used in combination with other frameworks (Williams et al., 2009), including examining inclusive education in schools (Anderson et al., 2014) and in higher education (Hewett et al., 2016).

A qualitative approach was considered critical for this research as it gives voice to the experiences of disabled students in higher education, a marginalized group who normally have little opportunity to have their voice heard (Fuller et al., 2004; Shah, 2006). Through this approach it acted to establish a dialogue between the researcher and the community members

(Mertens et al., 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 and Killeen, 2002). The exploration of the narratives of participants in this research facilitated the realization 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.

Participants

Following ethical approval, a purposive sampling strategy was used to capture the voice of disabled undergraduate students (*n* = 23) as part of phase four of the research. During phase four, four case example institutions were identified. 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 in their institution (Zucker, 2009). Institutions were chosen based on several variables: socioeconomic background, geographic location, number of disabled students and institution type (Institutes of Technology or Universities) (Bryman, 2012; Rose et al., 2015).

Participant recruitment was through a voluntary response to publicity of the research (McCarthy, 2013). An invitation to participate was sent to disability services in each of the four case example institutions for circulation to disabled students registered with their service.

A concerted effort was made to ensure the diversity of the undergraduate participant sample—see **Table 1** which provides the demographic information of participants. From the table it can be seen that there was a greater participation by participants who identified as female. However, for the purposes of this paper I am focusing on the overall student social engagement experience as opposed to any particular demographic detail. The type of disability, was based on the eligibility criteria and categories outlined by the Higher Education Authority (2018) under the *Fund for Students with Disabilities*.

TABLE 1 Demographic details of study participants.

Gender	Age	Year of study	Areas of study
Males (*n* = 8)	19–59 years (*n* = 23)	1st (*n* = 10)	Science, technology/ engineering, and mathematics, arts, humanities and social sciences, health sciences.
Females (*n* = 15)		2nd (*n* = 6)	
		3rd (*n* = 3)	
		4th (*n* = 4)	

A combination of semi structured interviews and a focus group were undertaken lasting approximately 45–60 min each. A total of 20 student interviews and one focus group of three student participants were conducted (n = 23). Voluntary, informed written and verbal consent was obtained from participants. To try to ensure participant anonymity, each participant was given a pseudonym in advance of participation.

To create a more inclusive research environment, participants were presented with multiple modes of engagement. This included remote and/or in person semistructured interviews or focus groups, choice of location and time, interview breaks, and questions in advance. Eleven students chose to participate in remote interviews with the others taking place face to face and the focus group took place in-person.

This methodology required a high degree of flexibility and adaptability and involved listening to and responding to the participants needs.

Analysis

Following transcription, and in order to check the validity of the data, participants were given a copy of their interview transcript and the opportunity to clarify their comments (Creswell and Miller, 2000). The data was analyzed by the researcher using a thematic approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This flexible, six-step approach offers a means of analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data and using these themes to address the research.

Through this inductive coding process four superordinate themes were identified: transitions, engagement, college climate and structures. Only one of these themes, Engagement, will be discussed in this paper, along with its sub-themes of:

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

The analysis and coding of data was undertaken by the researcher. A number of strategies were implemented to ensure the validity and reliability of the data; these included member checking, triangulation, and the reporting of disconfirming evidence (Bryman, 2012). Member checking was established by providing participants with a copy of their interview transcripts after the interviews and seeking additional comments or clarifications. To ensure reliability interview texts were read and re-read by the researcher. The researcher also approached an external individual with expertise in thematic analysis to review the coding process during the data analysis of this research.

Limitations

My position as an insider had the potential to act as a limiting factor in this research. I was aware that the closer ones subject matter is to ones 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 implemented a methodological and reflective process to combat such potential biases. It is recognized that to eradicate research of all sources of bias is to rid research of human life (Plummer, 1983).

Findings

For the purposes of this research social engagement was defined as identified by Thomas (2012). Most disabled students reported a positive social engagement experience. Students identified social engagement as being divided into two interconnected pieces "social" and "academic" and was seen as the everyday interactions with classmates, interacting with tutors, staff and feeling included within your department. It involved college life beyond lectures, meeting new people in societies and clubs, meeting friends from class for coffee, and having someone to share problems with. It was seen as contributing to the creation of a sense of belonging and supported community participation, which were both identified as very important for wider society.

Luke believed *"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 and who have different friends."*

Barriers and support for social engagement

The majority of students considered themselves to be socially engaged. Nevertheless, almost all reported facing barriers to their social engagement. Barriers included lack of accessible transport, financial difficulties, accommodation, family difficulties, medical concerns, college workload, type of events, timetabling of events outside college hours, students' age, negative attitudes, and structural issues/physical infrastructure on campus. Holly highlighted that it was often not one difficulty or inconvenience that created the barrier but when you *"step back and look at all of them together [. . .] they're actually quite a burden."* This view was reflected across the student interviews.

Students believed that more could be done to make student clubs, societies, students' union and college activities more inclusive. A few students felt excluded after joining such groups. This lack of inclusion was linked by the participants to the fact that the organizers *"weren't disability aware,"* *"were young"*

and needed to "*undertake inclusion awareness training.*" Luke reported being unaware of what was on offer for disabled students. He would have liked it if "*a member of the clubs could have put an arm around him and said we have something for everyone.*" Although students believed their institution could be doing more to promote inclusion in this area they felt that ultimately responsibility lay with the students to make their groups inclusive to everyone. Dawn believed that there were three reasons for this lack of support in clubs, societies, and students' unions, "*one they don't have the experience and are disorganized, two there is no structure in place to request support, and three, they're all friends with each other.*"

Accessing support for social engagement proved very difficult if not impossible for some. Jane wondered was this "*because there aren't many with a physical disability,*" she "*hadn't seen very many.*" In other instances, students highlighted how when reasonable accommodations were made, often without consultation, to allow them to attend events, this resulted in greater isolation. Students identified a need to put structures in place to request supports to engage. Luke's "*biggest request would be for the institution to provide supports to get students with disabilities involved.*"

Disclosure of a disability along with presenting medical documentation as a prerequisite of joining some clubs or societies created a high degree of anxiety. Students had reservations about sharing this documentation with other students who they did not know or classmates and expressed data protection concerns and trust issues. *Tracey worried that she "wouldn't be able to face her class, if something was let slip."*

Making new friends, acquaintances and maintaining these relationships was considered essential to creating connections that resulted in a sense of community, belonging, and for positive mental health. Barriers to maintaining friendships included disclosure of a disability, negative perceptions, and long absences from college due to ill health, mental health difficulties or physically being too unwell. There were very few identified supports to enable these students' social engagement, resulting in a sense of disconnection and isolation.

Disabled peer groups were seen to offer students a "safe space" to share their identity, be part of a family, engage socially, discuss strategies for academic success and management of a disability. Colleges where these were established seemed to have greater disability awareness. There was evidence of some institutional opposition to establishing peer groups in a minority of colleges. Students believed this to be as a result of a lack of awareness by the decision-making committees and staff within the colleges.

Students discussed a range of initiatives being organized within institutions to promote their social engagement. These initiatives are fragmented and inconsistent across the country and often run by one good member of staff or a very active and driven disabled students. Two programs which were well embedded were peer mentoring and disabled ambassador programs. Students identified the benefits of these programs as the opportunity to attend many events throughout the year, meeting many new people, confidence building, and developing a CV.

Social engagement through academic engagement

Students identified that important elements of a good academic experience were the right course choice, and a supportive department combined with making friends. A number of students spoke of how individual members of academic staff had been very supportive and were central to their student success.

Robert explained, "*academically I'm loving it because I'm doing a computer science degree. 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.*"

Students pointed to a range of academic and structural challenges that acted as a barrier to engaging socially through their academic work. Barriers included being prevented from recording lectures, fears of disability disclosure to academic staff, failure to provide lecture slides in advance, lack of awareness and use of universal design techniques among lecturers and tutors, and a failure to receive timely academic and social supports. These were compounded by physical infrastructural difficulties including difficulties getting to class due to timetabling, being unable to find accessible seating among classmates, overcrowded corridors, and broken elevators. Mary explained how this impacted her ability to make friends in class, "*I can't just go and have a cup of tea with my friends because I've so much extra tuition*"—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 receive the correct supports.*"

Group work formed an important part of students' academic and social engagement. However, students reported very mixed experiences. Mary believed that it was not "*a good environment in which to make friends*" because "*there can be a lot of arguing and pressure to make grades.*" Conversely, Luke was of the strong opinion that he "*would have never talked to anyone only for the group work.*" Participants highlighted how a lack of disability awareness among classmates impacted upon their group work experience. This lack of awareness also negatively impacted upon students' ability to disclose their disability to the group. Kate spoke of how her group always chose "*really loud venues,*" resulting in her being unable "*to follow anything.*" Overall group work was considered a useful way of making acquaintances which contributed to a sense of departmental community. Students recommended that group work should not be graded during the first semester to allow students to make friends.

It was evident that some were conflicted as to whether to prioritize their academic or social engagement. Most acknowledged that, they were there to learn and obtain a degree. Hilda believed that *"it is important to be socially involved, I think it's more important to get a degree. Having a friend supports academics, but academics doesn't really support having a lot of really busy social interactions."*

Student leadership and representation

The opportunity to engage in leadership positions and have your voice heard was deemed extremely important and contributed to a sense of identity and belonging. Students reported being very proud to see other disabled students whom they knew in leadership roles. Tracey noted that seeing her disabled friend running for a position challenged her and she felt that *"if [she] can do it, then she could too."*

Students demonstrated high levels of engagement with the Students' Union (SU), student government and college structures. Students considered the SU as *"advocating on their behalf"* and important to them. There were many benefits identified from being engaged in leadership roles such as building confidence, advocacy and public speaking skills, and it gave them a platform to share their lived experience. Diana felt, *"she wouldn't have been able to run for a position before coming to college and her self-esteem had improved"* as a result of socially engaging.

Not all students took up leadership positions through the students' union. Some were student ambassadors or chairs of clubs and societies, or members of their college access office committee. These college committees supported students to develop their leadership skills whilst giving the students the opportunity to share their views about how access programs were being delivered within the HEI.

Students who undertook representative positions admitted that these roles were very demanding. It was clear that students took these roles extremely seriously and were very proactive. Bernie explained how she had completed an *"accessibility audit of the college over a 2-year period"* and then presented it to senior management. However, students expressed frustration at having to constantly advocate for basic accessibility issues such as access to disabled toilets, parking, and broken elevators with many reporting activist exhaustion. Students reported that there was very little in the way of reasonable accommodations for those running for students' union positions or those who undertook class representative roles. This failure to provide supports also extended to college boards with no structure in place to request meeting accommodations or to cover the cost of disability. What was very noticeable from the research was that there were very few disabled students in senior leadership positions both at student level and among high level institutional management committees.

Discussion

Social engagement experiences

The findings indicate that most disabled students considered themselves to be socially engaged and to have a positive student experience. Social engagement was considered central to creating connections that result in a sense of belonging, that contribute to positive mental health, developing key graduate attributes, and developing social and cultural capital. Engaging in clubs, societies, the student's union, orientation activities, and other college and departmental activities made a positive contribution to students' social engagement. Students believed in the need for a wider "holistic experience." It is acknowledged that social engagement creates a sense of belonging and offers informal support through interaction with friends, peers and institutional staff (Thomas, 2012; Krause and Armitage, 2014). Furthermore when "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 and Armitage, 2014, p. 3). Equally there is now a greater recognition of the need to take cognizance of the students wider experience, such as the affective domains lived by the students (Coates, 2010; Solomonides, 2013) and the lived experience of these domains.

The students in this study viewed having friends as necessary to, chat about problems, share workload, and to have someone to go for coffee with. Students varied in the number of friends they had with some students having numerous connections and others only having one friend but they all considered having friends as extremely important to their social engagement. This resonates with previous research that having friends is an essential part of a positive students experience resulting in a reduction in social isolation, and a greater commitment to the institution (Thomas, 2012). Furthermore social and cultural capital are both centered around group membership, access to social structures that facilitate access and inclusion into the dominant society (Papasotiriou and Windle, 2012).

Barriers and support for social engagement

Despite the finding that the majority of disabled students reported a positive social engagement experience almost all reported barriers to their social engagement. These barriers were found to have had a negative impact on students' sense of value, sense of belonging, ability to maintain friendships, and engage in leadership opportunities (Rath, 2020). This is deeply concerning. An inability to maintain friendships, access leadership opportunities, and fully engage in all aspects of the college experience may negatively impact upon students' success. Those with significant ongoing disabilities, 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. Disabled students found this isolating and it impacted on their sense of belonging. Limited ability to socialize in college should be judged as one of the socially imposed restrictions affecting disabled people (Papasotiriou and Windle, 2012).

Research participants believed there was a lack of disability awareness, and structures to seek supports for social engagement among clubs, societies, and the students' union. The findings highlight the desire of disabled students to be "treated as an equal" in social circles and with friends, while some found that this did not always occur. Disabled students want to be treated like every other student and meet the common expectations of a traditional student (Hong, 2015). Non-disabled college students have been found to have 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 and Greenberg, 2017). There was an obvious lack of trust and disabled students were not willing to disclose their disabilities and thus did not join the student group. They expressed concerns about what the information would be used for, who else would access it, and where it would be stored. College assurances of confidentiality don't necessarily alleviate the concern around this stigma (Avellone and Scott, 2017).

Disabled peer groups were seen as an important way of meeting people, raising awareness, encouraging the institution to make changes. Students relished the opportunity to share their stories. Ultimately, the findings show that colleges with peer groups or sporting activities for disabled students were more disability aware. The development of peer groups within HEI act to enable students to build an identity, develop coping strategies, and advocate on their own behalf (Avellone and Scott, 2017; Evans et al., 2017). Not all students wanted to be associated with peer groups and we must be cognizant that students may prioritize different identities in different environment. Disabled people are not a homogenous group and must not be treated as so (Hong, 2015).

Social engagement through academic engagement

The findings clearly show that participants believed that academic engagement was an avenue to social engagement. This occurred through group work, laboratories, class social media groups and other class-based team activities. Previous research has focused solely on academic engagement taking place in the academic sphere only, rather than a more relational approach (Krause and Armitage, 2014, p. 16). It was evident that social and academic engagement were linked. This link was not always seen

as positive, and some participants struggled to find a balance. For some this balance was contingent on other factors beyond their control including class timetabling, access to accessible transport, accommodation, financial, structures within the clubs and societies, disability awareness, access to personal assistant services, and a failure by the institution to resource the necessary supports to enable them to engage.

Kate believed she "didn't get the opportunity to interact with her class mates as much as she would have liked because it was a large group in a large class that didn't have a hearing loop installed" and so she couldn't "hear people." Physical infrastructural difficulties also posed a significant barrier to full inclusion in all aspect of class activity from teaching to socially engaging with classmates and departments. This was compounded by a lack of awareness of these difficulties. Students wanted to have greater autonomy and control over how their supports were delivered. With students being forced to adapt to the institutions schedule of support availability as opposed to choosing to avail of these supports when it worked best for them. In a fully open and inclusive campus students will be able to "navigate bureaucracies easily," enjoy the benefits of being more academically and socially integrated, and have the opportunity to dive into the opportunities available within their college (Strange, 2003). The benefits of having a community inclusive of diversity has been identified as immense.

There were several other challenges associated with group work and class social engagement including a lack of disability awareness among tutors, academic staff, and especially peers, and a failure to use universal design (UD) techniques within teaching. Disabled students were very aware of universal design for learning (UDL) and were frustrated that the institutional staff that were not using these techniques to make the campus more inclusive.

Students worried about disclosing their disabilities to their peers. Disabled students have been found to protect their self-concept through their limited investment in peers (Papasotiriou and Windle, 2012). Teachers and tutors have an important role in promoting a more inclusive environment. Barriers in teaching methods and the environment can in part be bridged by the facilitation of equity and communication by teachers and tutors and can act to support an inclusive process (Forslund Frykedal and Hammar Chiriac, 2018). The development of a local relationship between the students and their tutors has been found to be central to student engagement (Carey, 2013; Coates and McCormick, 2014). The implementation of universal design approach offers all learners opportunities to engage. This must be implemented with an understanding of the needs within the class and the tutor/teacher must be prepared to support all students (Rath, 2020).

It emerged that many students had met acquaintances or friends through group work contributing to a sense of community. Group work helps students build team work and communication skills, enabling students build better

relationships and contributing to higher self-esteem (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). In contrast an equal number of students believed that group work was unsuitable to making friends due to the "pressure to make their grades." They felt that this put a strain on relationships. Students recommended that they should not be expected to undertake "graded" group work until the second semester of first year, or even second year.

Students struggled to manage the requirements of their disability with their academic demands. Although many students identified social engagement as important equally many highlighted that they were in college to "obtain a degree." The additional time spent by some disabled students on their college work detracted from time developing networks leading to increased isolation (Sachs and Schreuer, 2011). The sacrificing by students of the opportunity to develop relationships and the social capital that goes with them is concerning. Both in the short term through access to social groups but also in the long term development of economic and cultural capital (Papasotiriou and Windle, 2012).

Student leadership and civic engagement

The findings point to an absence of disabled student representation in the institutional decision-making process. Students expressed an interest in undertaking leadership roles and there was evidence of a number being actively engaged at lower levels of student leadership. In contrast there were very few students in senior leadership positions. Equally there were very few examples of supports being offered to disabled representatives to enable them to engage with decision-making boards. This research demonstrates that disabled students face a range of barriers to social engagement. As a result of these barriers student representatives may require support to e.g., physical resources, time, funding to enable them to engage with their role (May and Felsinger, 2010). These barriers and the failure to provide the necessary supports to overcome them negatively impact upon students' citizenship rights and ability to engage in active citizenship within their institution. This is even more concerning when we consider that decisions relating to disability and the widening participation or inclusive agenda are potentially being made in the absence of disabled students.

It was a source of significant pride to disabled students to be able to identify other disabled students who they knew were 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 previous studies showing that positive success stories of other disabled people in leadership positions can be empowering and may encourage students to work through challenging times they may encounter (May and Felsinger, 2010).

The findings from this research demonstrate that disabled students were generally aware of their rights and demonstrated leadership skills. This is in contrast to much of the literature which has reported that disabled students in higher education lack self-determination and self-advocacy skills (Greyling and Swart, 2011; Hong, 2015). Furthermore, there was evidence of disabled students engaging in self-advocacy but not having their "voice heard," or not having a position at the decision-making table within their institution. This was found to impact negatively on students' sense of belonging. Indeed engagement has been shown to be determined by the "relative power of the student" within that environment (Carey, 2013, p. vi) and student voice has been shown to have a transformative effect in HEI.

Moreover, students 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. Disabled students are expected to assert their rights far and above what is expected of the traditional student (Avellone and Scott, 2017). The findings would indicate a clear need for greater awareness among the institution and the student representative body of the models that promote disabled student independence and leadership. It has been found that self-determination and the full 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 and Morris, 2006; Greyling and Swart, 2011).

Conclusion

In sum, this study strongly suggests that to engage in "educationally beneficial" activities, disabled students must expend disproportionate amounts of time and personal effort to overcome a range of systemic barriers. This occurred to the detriment of their in college social engagement and their wider sense of belonging. Within higher education there is an expectation that institutions will be fully inclusive and present the necessary conditions for engagement. Yet the findings offer little evidence of a structure, policy and or resources being deployed within HEI to remove the barriers to disabled students' social engagement. Ultimately, the research findings support the findings of previous research highlighting the barriers faced by disabled students to their full inclusion in all aspects of higher education (Papasotiriou and Windle, 2012; McCarthy, 2013; Doyle, 2015). Within national policy in Ireland, 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. Challenging this inequitable situation requires radical change across the entire

system. In order to fully include disabled students in a socially just education systems there is a need to prioritize their lived experience in decision making and give voice to this difference (Greyling and Swart, 2011). It is necessary for institutions to move from a position whereby they problematize diversity to a position where they actively promote a culture that celebrates it. Recognizing that leadership exists in many forms at many different levels across the institution. 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 (Hurst, 1999). As the entire world pursues a transformative recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic and begins the Decade of Action for accelerating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we must focus on ensuring that disabled students have access to all elements of the student experience including social engagement.

Future research might involve a more in-depth and wider study of the social engagement and sense of belonging experiences of disabled students transitioning to and in higher education in Ireland. Such a research project needs to extend to include the entirety of the education system including, primary, secondary, further, and higher education.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because this data was collected as part of doctoral research in which all participants were assured anonymity. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to VR, rathv@tcd.ie.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Trinity College Dublin. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

VR contributed to the conception, design, analysis and write-up of the study, and prepared the manuscript from end to end.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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